

# Nature & Politics



## Thomas Struth Nature & Politics

This catalogue accompanies a touring museum exhibition of the work of celebrated German photographer, Thomas Struth. Struth is renowned for his practice of creating singular images, each within strictly segregated subject fields: architecture, portraiture, landscape and, most recently, sites of technological and scientific research. *Nature & Politics* explores in depth various of these diverse strands of Struth's enquiry, whilst also elaborating the interstices between them, to present the most significant recent monograph of the artist's work.

In recent years technology and the constructed landscape have become overarching subjects for Struth. Photographing at sites of techno-industrial and scientific research, including physics institutes, pharmaceutical plants, space stations, dockyards, nuclear facilities and operating theatres – he has focused on machines which are some of the transformative instruments of our contemporary world, and edifices of technological production where the heights of human knowledge are enacted, debated and advanced. These works explore the aesthetics of innovation and experimentation through the recording of structural complexities and allude to the hidden structures of control, power and influence exerted by advanced technologies.

Struth seeks, in his own words, “to open the doors to what our minds have materialised and transformed into sculpture and to scrutinise what our contemporary world has created in places which are not accessible to most people.” His images penetrate and report on the material spaces of the human imagination, and they are born from an accelerated moment when technology and the image industry have brought physical reality and the imagination closer together.

## **Thomas Struth**

Thomas Struth is internationally recognised for his wide-ranging work, which includes photographs of urban views and architecture, landscapes, portraits, museums and places of worship. He trained at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (1973–80), and, during that time, he was the first artist in residence at the P.S.1 Studios in Long Island City.

From 1993 to 1996 he was the first Professor of Photography at the newly founded Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe. He has exhibited all over the world, and a large number of monographs have been published of his oeuvre, including *Thomas Struth* (MACK, 2014), and *Thomas Struth: Unconscious Places* (Schirmer/Mosel, 2012).

## **Tobia Bezzola**

Tobia Bezzola studied at the University of Berne and in 1990 became Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Zurich. In 1993, he completed his doctorate on Kant, Fichte and Hegel. From 2001, Bezzola was the Senior Curator/Head of Exhibition Department at Kunsthaus Zurich until his appointment as Director of the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany.

## **D. Graham Burnett**

D. Graham Burnett is based in New York City. He writes and makes things. Burnett trained in History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge University, and teaches at Princeton. He is an editor at the Brooklyn-based *Cabinet* magazine, and a member of the research collective ESTAR(SER): [www.estarser.net](http://www.estarser.net).

## **Dirk Baecker**

Professor Dr. Dirk Baecker is a sociologist who teaches cultural theory and management at the University of Witten/Herdecke. Recent publications include *Beobachter unter sich: Eine Kulturtheorie* (Suhrkamp, 2013), *Neurosoziologie: Ein Versuch* (edition unseld, 2014), *Kulturkalkül* (Merve, 2014).

**D. Graham Burnett**

**Three Theories of Psychotic Sight:  
On Looking at the Photographs of Thomas Struth**



I.

In fall of 1989 (I was 19), on account of a very unfortunate and unexpected drug overdose, I spent several days working to return to myself as I had known me, and the world as I had known it. This was a confusing period. Most memorable in the terror-storm (the word-jumble, the blank hours, the empty faces) was a languorous, bright morning spent emerging from a dead sleep in a comfortable bed beneath east-facing windows. In one sense, I was waking up—many times in succession. In another sense, however, the work of those hours was infinitely stranger than a mere regaining of consciousness. For I was not I when the first dawn rays opened those eyes. I was, quite unaccountably, *the Brooklyn Bridge*. Very simple, really. I was the bridge. The bridge was I. My being and its being had become fused in the course of addled dreams and an unsteady inwardness with the poetry of Hart Crane. Yes, my worried girlfriend had walked me back from Brooklyn (trembling, trembling) the previous evening. She did not mean to leave me there, midway. Nor had I meant to absorb the span, limping to her shelter as an ungainly harp of soaring steel cables strung taut between stone towers.

Slow work, the separation. The recovery of “me” from “it.” A process, initially, of discerning, and then collating, the incongruities: nearest my eye, a white cotton pillowcase (not the cold slosh of the East River’s mouth); around me, indoor air (which was impossible to square with my sense of myself as part of the skyline); even seeing itself—this whole business of visual awareness—seemed totally wrong (to an eyeless suspension of masonry and carbon-alloy iron like myself). And then, most disconcerting of all, there was the business of my palpably compact nature. The body (into an awareness of which I found myself coming) permitted no whistling of the sea breeze through its guy lines and cable stays. In fact, there appeared to be overwhelming evidence (as I reconnoitered my own architecture via the motionless introspection of pure coenesthetic awareness) that I found myself in a sort of corpse-like lump of modest dimensions—pulpy, dense, linking no shores.

It is impossible to convey how bizarre it felt to discern oneself (squinting, slowly) coming into view in this fashion. It is extremely difficult to articulate in language (which has built into its grammar at a very deep level both subject-position and object-status) how it could feel so odd to discover that one was, in some sense, in fact, *oneself*. How could I have been so sure I was something so utterly different? How could I have been so exceedingly misinformed?

When one has experienced being so certain about something that subsequently seems so wrong, both the category “certain” and the category “wrong” never quite recover. Nor, frankly, do the categories subject and object.

I pried myself from that angelic lyre. It took several hours. But the work got done. Since then, I think, I’ve managed to be quite normal—no psychotic episodes, no relapses requiring intervention, no notable incidents of failure to self-cognize. It should be said, however, that I have retained an inexpugnable sense of body-intimacy where the Brooklyn Bridge is concerned. I pass it (aboard the ferry, in a cab on the FDR, on a plane arcing towards JFK) with some of the strange complex of awkwardness and off-cast sensuality (averted eyes, decorous rectitude, a tremor of sublated longing) as I imagine must have attended a provincial French nun of the seventeenth century obliged to walk past the carriage of an amoral baron with whom she enjoyed a youthful indiscretion.

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Which is to say, I experience a number of Thomas Struth photographs like flashbacks. *Semi Submersible Rig, DSME Shipyard, Geogje Island 2007*, for instance, documents, to my eye, the slow work by which we must, on occasion, extricate ourselves (if imperfectly) from the objects with which, now and then, we find ourselves unsettlingly annealed.

## II.

Meningitis produces high fevers. High enough in my case that I was returned to one of my earliest memories: being held in my mother's arms as a helicopter, to which I found myself tethered by a long line, attempted to sever us by means of a slow and remote retreat. A hallucination, of course—I must have been a boy of four or five, and ill. The sense then, as in the hospital bed again (awaiting a spinal tap), was one of being pulled as much from myself as from another. Though the distinction was perhaps not as clear as one might like. The helicopter, anyway, was again surprisingly real—and with its apparition came, again, a peculiar sense that I might be flying it, even as it tugged at me from afar.

Imagine, then, my surprise, on later reading the following account, penned jointly by a pair of Portuguese explorers traversing, in the late 1870s, the regions we now know as Angola and Mozambique:

On this occasion we both of us experienced a sensation so extraordinary that we cannot refrain from putting it on record. During the time we were under the influence of the fever, and particularly when it was at its greatest height, it seemed to us as if our individuality was composed of two distinct entities. We imagined another person was lying with us on the same bed, and we were taking note of the progress of the malady in each of these separate beings, so that our lips, echoing our thought, would murmur, "How that fellow on the right is sweating!" or, as the case might be, "I think our friend on the left is a good deal worse!"

It could not be considered a complete hallucination of mind, because, on collecting our ideas (though with difficulty), we found ourselves on various occasions muttering—

"Come, decidedly I must begin to *undouble myself*."

Be it observed, however, that this species of dualism was subjective, inasmuch as, with relation to external objects, we never fancied any such *undoubling* to be necessary.

The authors are Hermingildo Capelo and Roberto ("of the devil") Ivens, writing in the narrative of their expedition *From Benguella to the Territory of Yacca* (1882). Putting aside the compounding/confounding strangeness of reading a first-person-plural account of so idiosyncratic a tale of self-sundering, one is immediately inclined to note the insistence, in the passage, that this is no instance of "double vision" (where the objects of the world are arrayed beside their ghostly seconds), but rather of "double visualization" (in which the seer sequentially experiences a displacement of self into one or the other locus of his twinned-ness). Either you are flying the helicopter, or you are attached to the end of that long rope. But there is one helicopter. (Although perhaps not).

Messieurs Capelo and Ivens went on to describe a little post-fever work on whole matter. Their rationale for electing, ultimately, to bracket the investigation is affecting:

The recollection of this curious and unnatural state often recurred to our minds when in perfect health, and gave us food for serious meditation with a view, if possible, to explain it.

The fact of the non-existence of delirium, and the being able, with a certain effort, to collect our ideas, proved to us that this tendency, most certainly arising from cerebral anaemia, was due to some cause that is not common to a delirious state; but as the phenomenon was difficult of explanation, we at length gave up attempting to find one, *under the apprehension that we should be doubling and undoubling when we were in our right senses* [emphasis added].

Yes. Best, perhaps, to give the matter no further thought.

Writing in 1885, the one-eyed Irish surgeon-philosopher William Wotherspoon Ireland (who had been shot through the skull at the battle of Najafgarh) used Capelo and Ivens' account of their bifurcated delirium to argue that split personality disorders might arise from delayed sensory responses in one or the other of the cerebral hemispheres. By contrast, great German anthropologist Johannes Fabian, in his brilliant essay on the epistemological and ethnographic significance of insanity (*Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*, 2000) used the same passage in support of the exquisitely queer proposition that trying to be objective (i.e. specifying the nature of things from a perspective other than our own) under exigent conditions of embodiment and intersubjectivity (illness, colonialism, being held by one's mother) can easily tip us out onto the open plains of total derangement.

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Which is to say, I experience a number of Thomas Struth photographs like flashbacks. *Figure II, Charité, Berlin 2013* for instance, maneuvers me, disconcertingly, into the position of that helicopter pilot, as I slowly back away from a body to which I find myself linked by an unwelcome umbilicus.

III.

In a Bombay hotel of decidedly faded grandeur (strong odor of mildew in the long halls; crimson curtain sagging), I found myself accosted by a tall American with close-cropped white hair and the gangly gate of a confirmed walker. He had questions. The first, innocuous enough, pertained to my camera: Was I happy with the lens?

Sure. Yes. It did the trick. (The tone: anodyne banter; the null-neutral retrenchment of phatic speech).

Something perhaps excessively solicitous in his manner produced an immediate unease. Also, he came closer. I stood in the endless corridor, my key in my hand, poised before the door of my lonely room. Suddenly, I felt extremely exposed—even vulnerable. This was my room. I had nowhere else to go. And this person, now, very definitely knew where I would sleep.

And my shirt? Had I purchased it in the bazaar? Or had I brought it with me?

He was absolutely affable, and exuded the friendly charm (and imperturbably inaccessible courtesy) of a Yankee parson, obligingly stooped to compensate for the altitude of his large ears. I may have looked alarmed, or he may have been a familiar problem among the staff, for I noticed, on the architectural horizon line, a small bellboy (in risible livery) pause inquisitively and regard us for a moment as he passed between two rooms. He held a stack of towels in his hands, and felt like a speck at the vanishing point of parallel baseboards receding to the limits of sight.

I had gotten the shirt in Kanpur, I explained—there being, as yet, no sufficiently urgent grounds for breaking the frame of ordinary sociable chitchat with a stranger. But that was just it: there was nothing *actionable* in his concerted insinuation into my solitude and autonomy; and yet something was very much *not right* in everything that was happening. He took a half step closer (friendly, friendly), and, bringing his thumb and forefinger thoughtfully to his chin, asked if I found anything at all *strange* in the quality of the lighting in our shared hotel.

His eyes rolled up as if perusing an absent chandelier.

He was now very close.

I did not step away, but raised my left hand between us. “I do not know you,” I said firmly, and loud enough that my voice carried down the infinite corridor. “Are you unwell?” I asked. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Standoff.

The measure of his insanity was given by his greeting my kinetic wariness and strident queries with perfect complacency. He was unmoved. And unmoving. Indeed, it was as if I had said absolutely nothing at all. He continued contemplating the ceiling with a critical mien. But the register of my voice had brought the bellboy back out into the hall, and he now looked on as an actual spectator—stock-still and towel-less. The three of us stood like that for a moment, until my unwelcome interlocutor broke the silence. Wheeling on our audience of one, the madman called down the hall reassuringly: “Nothing to be concerned with here—just a conversation. This man and I are having a *conversation*. A conversation—in *English*.”

And then, turning back to me, he offered, in a helpful and condescendingly clarificatory tone: “I am speaking to him in Hindi, *a language you don’t even understand*.”

For a very unsettling moment, I wasn’t sure what language I spoke.

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Which is to say, I experience a number of Thomas Struth photographs like flashbacks. In *Hushniya, Golan Heights 2011* for instance, the scene solicits me unsteadily, and holds me in awkward parley for a moment, only to wheel on me, shaply, and declare: “I am speaking to this camera in the language of light—a *language you don’t even understand*.”