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Thomas Struth in the light of documentary photography :

How might Struth's acknowledgement of the documentary tradition in photography inform our way of seeing and reading his work? What kinds of viewing does the documentary form encourage?

American photographer Ansel Adams said about photographs, "When words become unclear, I shall focus with photographs"; as if images produced by the camera enunciate an unquestionable truth; they convey an unaltered reality of higher clarity, that no other art media could be trusted to communicate. The realm of documentary photography is seen to be such, bridging the gap between intention and effect, unfurling a single slice of real-time.

Following a similar strait, Bechers' objective approach, assisted by homogeneity in angles, viewing distance, lighting levels and contrast encourage perpetual comparisons between photographs. Their work was heavily influenced by *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) which presented itself as 'unsentimental realism' with a bubbling need to expose the truth. Therefore, Bechers' works inflict a directness on to their audience by considering photography as a medium to set forth a certain kind of candour. Rejecting, by all means, the personality of the photographer and muting what is around the primary subject. The black and white art of Bernd and Hilla Becher portray a factual image rather than a didactic one. Images devoid of *parti pris*; the viewer sees no glorification, judgement or opinion of the subject but rather solely, the subject in focus. They photograph disappearing industrial architecture around Europe and the USA, using a rigorous archival method, calling their work 'anonymous sculptures'. The subject choice of vanishing structures, not only allows the Bechers to be documenting a wearing part of cultural history but also politicises the capture, perceiving it as a critique of modernism and techno-utopianism. Directly relating it to Marcel Duchamp's concept of 'readymades' as they photographed existing objects, they recognise their work as sculptures rather than photographs. Bechers' intended to offer 'a grammar' to empathise with the structures being photographed. For their language to be understood they explained, "the objects must be isolated from their context and freed from all association." Hence, they adopted an unchanging, tiresome process of documentation of industrial structures.

Drawing from the Becher lineage, the work of Thomas Struth sees *some* correlation to the same 'truthfulness' of his Düsseldorf school teachers, documentary photographers. Firstly, although an apparatus of the past and an uncommon pick amongst his now-famous Düsseldorf colleagues-Gursky, Ruff, Höfer and Demand; his frequently used weapon of choice is an analogue camera. In current times, digital modes surpass analogue exponentially. Struth admits the reason for him to turn towards analogue is mere habit, in addition to the singularity or uniqueness, of a moment in space and time. Secondly, the unprejudiced nature of his images. Comparing Struth to his contemporaries Jeff Wall or Stephen Shore, it is seen that Struth turns away from their much dramatic approach to capturing images. Wall and Shore have a tendency to oscillate towards creating images with a dream-like demeanour; passing over to an audience, a fictional narrative. Whereas, Struth focuses on grounding (even more so) reality - metaphorically and with peculiar calm, questioning the identity of the subject in focus and its place in the world, without contextual aberrations. This unprejudiced characteristic seems to link him steadily to the ideology of the Bechers. Identical to his teachers, he groups his works into series which may run over the years. This trait follows him

from the beginning till his later images of NASA and Kennedy Space Centre at Cape Canaveral in Florida (2008-09) ¹.

Likewise, his initial work including streetscapes of Düsseldorf and New York can undoubtedly, be sieved as a correlation to the detached images taken by the Bechers; especially considering the central focus of a stagnant angle, the monochromatic quality of images and a direct inheritance of subject matter i.e architecture.

For example, if one examines his work, 58th Street at 7th Avenue, Midtown, New York (1978). A typical New York roadway is banked by tall skyscrapers. With minimal intrusion to the streetscape, there is a sense of emptiness, which is highly atypical of the city. The grounds may be familiar but the site-specific activity is not. Struth tags its personality as “a monumental emotional package of an overwhelming experience.” This particular piece of work also draws direct correlation to a pioneer of French, documentary photography Eugène Atget. Atget with his captures of Parisian architecture, landscape and artefacts were interested in making ‘documents’ of the city, which is similar to the purpose of Struth’s streetscape photographs. Atget, besides, would also shoot images of unpopulated sections of public spaces, which seem to deviate from the natural existence of the urban context. For instance, Beauvais, Impasse Beauregard (1910) has an explicitly abandoned quality to it, much like other Atget photographs. As if he wanted to shoot repercussions of, perhaps, the great flood of France which was a major devastation at the time. Struth, too, was responding to the bygone devastation of the second world war, which plays a major impact on the way his personality shaped itself.

Regardless of these similarities, anyone who scrutinises Struth, would agree that his genre can not be classified as *chaste* documentary photography ². Traditional documentary photography may have served as the foundation to Struth’s work, but ultimately he took a gradual turn in a novel direction, to make a niche of his own. It is of utmost importance to recognise that images by Struth are not results of unadulterated captures. In an interview with Luisa Buck for the Art Newspaper, Struth states how while shooting at Rijksmuseum, for his museum series, he altered the setting ³. He did so by asking people to stand in a particular way, intruding and retooling the existing instance and possibly, tampering with postures and positioning of the people within the setting. Therefore, deviating from what the very definition of documentary photography which condemns the embellishment of reality. His process speaks to the contemporary ideology of Alex Danchev’s of what documentary photographs *may* be, that is “instruments of the imagination, tools for morals”. Struth admits and states how it is essential for him to have a clear language of (his) own; stating, “a photographer must reflect his or her own attitudes towards their subject”. Struth’s photographs are unquestionably, identifiable as ‘Struth photographs’— a stark divergence from the ‘erasing of photographer’s sensibilities’, which was the core of Becher photography. Struth seems to be

¹ In the text, ‘Expanding Spaces’ by Mark Prince, his technological image series is seen as a political one. It states the series to be a facet tool to form an equation between technology image and a modern world. If it is assumed to be rightly stated, on further examining the text ‘the Politics of Documentary Photography’, one can say his work pertains to the first of three caveats of methodology which is ‘he does not seek to influence politics directly’, which he clearly states in his interviews. Through this series, he has done so intentionally; therefore, making him the second (out of three) kind of documentary photographer i.e a photographer as an advocate.

² Gregory Harris, curator of photography at the High Museum of Art clarifies documentary photography to be based on truth, accurately portraying reality’ in the podcast by Brain-fuzz called, ‘Geometric Dislocation’. Similarly, in the text, ‘History of the mass media in the United States’ would define the act to be “attempting to candidly capture the subject”.

³ Although in the interview with Luisa Buck for the Art Newspaper, he confesses to altering the initial setting, in Miranda Baxter’s (2014) *Seeing for the First and Last Time in Thomas Struth’s Museum Photographs*, it is said that museum photographs of 1989-2005, were largely dedicated by chance, which may be misleading while understanding his process and its final resultant.

Socratic. Struth questions himself, in turn prompting the audience to critically think and draw out an intention and underlying presuppositions.

In his Düsseldorf images, such as *Wilhelm-Tell-Strasse* or *Friedrich-Ebert-Strasse* (1979), one can see glimpses of uneasiness with his past. His documentation equivalent to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, meaning coming to terms with the past. Struth's father served in Wehrmacht from 1937 to 1945 and ever since he heard stories which he found hard to make peace with.⁴

According to Fatema Ahmed's *Close Looking*, The Israel/West Bank photos can be looked at as a summary of Struth's career. In this series, he captures Tel Aviv, the Golan Heights, Ramallah and Nazareth over the course of five years; explaining the impact of pre and post-war cities on him. The withered, multiplicity of skins of the built environment was something he was attracted to. Such as the piece *OffAl- Shuhado Street 1* (2009) which found refuge in the Marian Goodman Gallery, the visual hierarchy of the several, vertical and horizontal layers are captured in centrality. Struth emphasises on his repulsion for plugging these images with the term 'nostalgia'. He insists "it's what is in the pictures and how it came to be there-that matters"; in some ways archiving destroyed 'places of people', as an act of repentance. Making photographs his way of attempting to, gradually, letting go of haunting foregone.

While viewing Struth photographs, one must ask themselves, what makes a Struth photograph?

Beyond the documentary genealogy, there is a persona of a painting.

His work obviously strays from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* way of making, rather to explore literary concepts of 'Simulacrum' as laid out Jean Baudrillard. A simulacrum is 'likeness or similarity' to a person or thing, a representation rather than truly authentic. Urban fabric as shown in Struth photograph called *West Broadway, New York* (1978) will see unpopulated streets solely in times of extremity. Especially, by equating the identity of the photograph with the name of the place (in this case, West Broadway), the photograph acts as a representation that distorts reality to a significant extent. As a portrayal of hyperreality, it glorifies the built environment, just as Victorian painter John A Grimshaw.⁵

Another reason Struth photographs can be looked through the same lens as when critiquing painting is the large print formats that have been adopted by the New German photographers of the Düsseldorf school. Prior to Struth's generation of photographers, the history of documentary photography had not seen size as big; allowing this mode of expression to have complexity and grandeur of detail.

In his family portrait series, which started as a note of gratitude to the people he met on his way during his expeditions, can be seen as a shift to high art. Example being *The Hirose family, Hiroshima* (1987) evokes a traditionalist approach with an esoteric quality. At first glance what is a family saga, soon turns to curiosities tending to relationships and hierarchies, breaking free from photography as an artisanal tool.

⁴ Struth reveals in his interview with Janet Malcolm of New Yorker, "If you want to know what formed me, this is the big thing: the culture of guilt that I was born into and that surrounded me in my childhood." He refers the Holocaust and the Nazi past to be a major influence in his work.

⁵ John Atkinson Grimshaw's paintings of Liverpool and Hull showcase urban cities, usually bustling with people and activity, as a romanticised image. For instance his work, *Liverpool docks*. Its representation strays away from the industrial, port-like nature of the place. Hence acting as a Simulacrum. The Disney land images of Struth are particularly and rightly, scrutinised by C. Herd as "perfect models of entangled orders of simulation" in the article, 'Dynamic Composition' of *Aesthetica* magazine.

Struth labels his work as visual testing of a hypothesis. He is not interested in the architectural quality of spaces, per se. Inspecting both, the natural and man-made, it is as if Struth constantly struggles to empathise with the alienation we create for ourselves, as human beings. Probing into matters like how the complexity of the man-made, even when a replica of natural landscapes can feel inhuman while nature, on the other hand, he recognises as serene. In totality documenting, interrogating, expressing - all at once. Alternatively, his interests incline to energies that *follow* the communities who occupy within those spaces that have the power to alter spatial temperament. To illustrate if Paradise 1 snapped at Daintree, Australia (1998) is considered. It would not have been the same if the inhabiting communities, mammal or not, would've found space within the frame. The meditateness of the image would have been diluted. Definitely then, the image moving further away from the idea of Paradise.

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