The Sound of Art

An Interview with Thomas Struth

by Catherine Somzé

Fame in the visual arts comes with expectations of consistency about future work. A painter should paint, a sculptor should sculpt, and a photographer should, above all, take pictures. Despite the conceptual nature of contemporary art, forays into other media are risky. Established practitioners who go for experiments will still be judged according to previously-met criteria of excellence. This is why it might come as a surprise to hear that a giant of German contemporary photography such as Thomas Struth, remains bold in his attempt to stretch the boundaries of his own medium. He does so by weaving music into his pictures.

In the contemporary art world, Struth has been a household name for years. His lavish large-scale photographs directly contributed to the elevation of the medium to the status of art. Originally trained as a painter, he soon turned to photography on advice from his then mentor Gerhard Richter, the post-war German painting luminary. Struth's photography teachers were Hilla and Bernd Becher, celebrated for their scientific approach to photography, as well as for their influential mentorship. Other prominent contemporary German photographers like Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff took their classes. They are, together with Struth, often referred to as the "Düsseldorf School."

From the Bechers, Struth learned about the craft and the conceptual potential of photography, which he endowed with the best of the great tradition of the visual arts. When Struth pictured the empty streets of Düsseldorf and New York at the beginning of his career, he did not merely capture the physiognomy of these cities, but rather the collective psyche of their inhabitants. In a similar vein, he laid family dynamics bare in his celebrated *Family Portraits* (1987-1990) and aesthetic experience in his *Museum Photographs* (1989-2000).

Some of his new works focus on the contemporary fascination with technology and progress. His latest series is a gallery of naturally-deceased animals taken at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin. The animals were studied to understand the potential impact on their life of environmental changes caused by the Anthropocene. Shot right after death, Struth's still lifes show the creatures peacefully resting. It is as if their souls just left their mortal shell to go onto a journey to the afterlife.

Last spring, Struth was invited to contribute to the site-specific 'Parcours' program for Art Basel, which took place in the historic center of the city. In a former church, he hung photographs from his latest series of animal still lifes as if they were floating close to the ceiling. Breaking the rule of thumb that a photographer should stick to his own medium, he decided to curate a program of live music to accompany the prints in collaboration with classic guitarist Frank Bungarten. In exclusivity for *ZOO Magazine,* Struth talks music, its relation to life, and the significance of death at the height of his career.

Catherine Somzé: What gave you the idea to bring photography and music together?
Thomas Struth: One of the buildings on offer in Basel was a former Church of Christ Science. It appeared to me as very striking. Unlike in a regular church, there's no altar — just a wooden podium. Above the altar there is an organ with its old pipes, and I immediately felt it should be used. Music, or rather live music, could imbue a sense of life and therefore future in contrast to the references to death and mortality implied by both the animal still lifes and the potential loss of the striking harmony of the constitutive elements of the building and its interior due to their transformation for the exhibition. It was therefore an opportunity to bring together three different artistic passions of mine: architecture, art and music.

CS: Your passion for art and architecture is well documented, but what about music?
TS: Music has always been a very important part of my life. When I was young, in my teens and twenties in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the cool thing (but also the important thing) to do was to play in a band, which I did for many years between the ages of 14 and 22. Then I played in a band again in the 1980s in Düsseldorf for six years. Music taught me a lot about composition, truthfulness and the dynamics of experiencing a work of art in time. I've always had an extremely strong relationship with jazz and classical music in particular. There are many aspects to it that I find fascinating, such as the fact that with music, economic profit seems to not always be involved, which arguably couldn't be said of the visual arts. Music is always primarily about music itself — about its matter.

CS: Frank Bungarten has been a regular collaborator of yours since the mid-2000s. What is it about him in particular?
TS: We've been friends for 40 years or so now. We went to the same high school in Cologne and were part of the same band founded by our music teacher — a very inspiring figure. When I was 16, Frank was 12 and, at that time, this kind of age difference mattered so we only became friends when we met again years later at a high school reunion. We had both become artists and were both teachers as well, and we spoke a lot about teaching. We both asked ourselves questions like, 'what does it take to teach and to learn art?' and, 'what does it take to create it?' In 2005, I decided to film Frank while he

"Music, or rather live music, could imbue a sense of life and therefore future in contrast to the references to death and mortality."

was teaching guitar. The two-channel video projection called *Read It Like Seeing It for the First Time* features five 45-minute lessons each, unedited. You can see the concentration drawn on the face of the pupils. You can see them, literally, learn.

CS: The history of art, which you often take inspiration from, is riddled with references to death. Yet, you had never touched the subject matter in such a direct way before. Can you explain this choice at this point in your life and career?
TS: Some of the photographs I took dealing with the medical field come close to death, such as the one depicting a woman about to undergo cranial surgery. My interest in death probably has to partly do with getting older. More and more people around me are passing away, and I am not getting younger either. But then there are also many developments lately that I find worrisome, such as the glorification of technology above concerns for others, and the wellbeing of our communities. And then, there has been Brexit, Turkey and Trump. They all made me feel like doing something really serious. We've been fairly spoiled in the post-war period; it's time we reconsider the negative theater that's been going on lately!

CS: Despite their seemingly macabre subject matter, the photographs are beautiful. Why is it so important to dignify death?
TS: From a psychological perspective, a general quality of obsession is tension, a tense state of mind, with devastating consequences in politics, which we are sadly, dramatically witnessing today. I was looking for a pictorial equivalent of the opposite of tension. Death is coming down, giving in, letting go, surrendering to the fact that we have to die. Respect for life, as I see it, is part of it as well and requests, it seemed to me, a dignified form.

CS: Are you confronted with a lot of tension in your life and work?
TS: Well, tension, according to psychology, is a natural state of mind, so it's a common thing to all people. But, let's say, I know what pressure is and I'm very aware of that kind of energy when it happens, when I see it in situations and in other people. I know it can become a masquerade. For instance, think about the people who orchestrated Brexit. As soon as they got what they wanted, they dropped out. They were extremely obsessed with their own strategy and instrumentalized lies. But then, when it was done, they dropped out instead of taking responsibility. That is scandalous! It shows you the destructive nature of obsession.

CS: Most of your work deals with what remains invisible to the eye and therefore to the camera. You thematize the process of learning, as well as the religious and aesthetic experience.

“They all made me feel like doing something really serious. We've been fairly spoiled in the post-war period; it's time we reconsider the negative theater that's been going on lately!”

What draws you to these topics?
TS: That's a central question in the arts and for human beings in general. It's always been fascinating to me when you look at a work of art or read a book: why do certain creations speak very strongly and others don't? What causes the discharge? [Laughs.] Why does Bach or Coltrane's music, for instance, mean so much to so many people even today, including myself? The making of great art depends on many factors, but it's never about the surface. It's always about the most inner energy, language and message that keep it alive. That's the most beautiful thing about human existence, and that's why you talk to me, and I talk to you. That's why people talk to each other! [Laughs.]

CS: Your exhibition was held in a former church. Does religion bring you solace?
TS: I grew up Catholic — my family, my sister, brother and myself. We all went to church, and I did until I was 15. Then I decided to stop and officially left the church when I was 22 or so. I was a quite active child, but I did sit there and meditate on philosophical questions. I might then have been a believer, but I never set foot in a religious building afterwards — at least not to worship God. I can go to a Japanese temple, though, and somehow feel why people believe. I guess it helps against existential anxiety — of us being tiny units compared to the planet around us, and all the things that we can't control. To survive or to feel less lost in a way, maybe. But I personally never needed religion to develop morals or an attitude.

CS: But you have photography.
TS: I've had the privilege that I didn't have to make a choice when I was growing up. Art was a *Berufung,* a calling, something I always enjoyed doing. It was special, like a gift. Once you're able to locate it, you have to make it flourish, to make it expand. It's something positive, and I know that from other people as well. Take music for instance: I could not practice countless hours a day by myself like Frank does. But I could do that in the darkroom, developing my prints. Then I am relentless. That's my score!

A selection of Thomas Struth's animal photographs will be on display until 13 October at the Andriesse-Eyck Gallery in Amsterdam.

www.andriesse-eyck.com
www.thomasstruth32.com

Thomas Struth
Zebra (Equus grevyi),
Leibniz IZW, Berlin, 2017
Inkjet print
160,5 cm x 223,5 cm
© Thomas Struth

Goliathreiher
(Ardea goliath),
Leibniz IZW, Berlin, 2017
Inkjet print
116,3 cm x 91,0 cm
© Thomas Struth

First spread
Thomas Struth
Weißohrturako
(Turaco leucotis),
Leibniz IZW, Berlin, 2017
Inkjet print
80,5 cm x 109,1 cm
© Thomas Struth

Third spread
Thomas Struth
Kreishornschaf (Ovis
vignei cycloceros),
Leibniz IZW, Berlin, 2016
Inkjet print
55,3 cm x 71,0 cm
© Thomas Struth

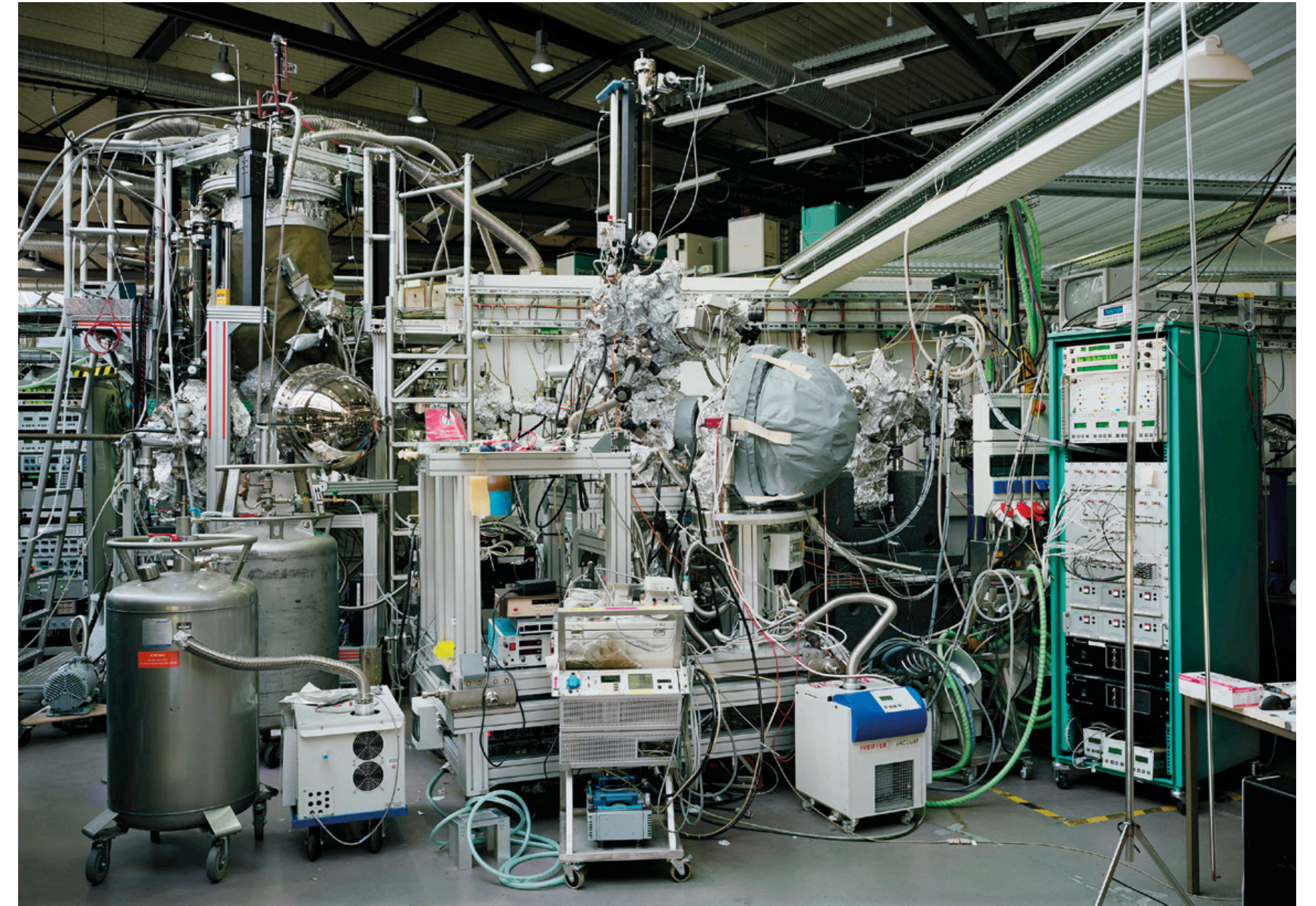
Second spread
Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
The Consolandi Family, Mailand, 1996
Chromogenic print
148 cm x 170,8 cm
© Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
The Hirose Family, Hiroshima, 1987
Silver gelatin print
68 cm x 84 cm
© Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
Pergamon Museum 2, Berlin, 2001
Chromogenic print
179,4 cm x 225 cm
© Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
Semi Submersible Rig,
DSME Shipyard, Geoje Island, 2007
Chromogenic print
279,5 cm x 349 cm
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Research Vehicle,
Armstrong Flight Research Center,
Edwards, 2014
Inkjet print
145,8 cm x 196,7 cm
© Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
Measuring, Helmholtz-Zentrum, Berlin, 2012
Chromogenic print
241,9 cm x 336,7 cm
© Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth
Samsung Apartments, Seoul, 2007
Chromogenic print
178,5 cm x 222,8 cm
© Thomas Struth