

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on October 2

Thomas Struth

Thomas Struth

- October 2, 2019 – January 19, 2020
 - Curators: Thomas Weski, Curator, Berlin; and Lucía Agirre, Curator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
 - Exhibition organized by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
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- Struth's images seek to raise the public's awareness of the relevance of public space, family ties, nature, culture, and the limits of new technologies.
 - The relations between these works highlight Struth's ability to combine analysis with photographic creation in multiple subjects and mediums.
 - Thomas Struth's artistic evolution is marked by social concerns: the fragility of existence, the effects of globalization, and the instability of social structures are just some of the topics he captures with formal elegance.
 - The exhibition houses Struth's only self-portrait, from 2000, in which he is viewing Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* from the year 1500.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is presenting the exhibition entitled *Thomas Struth*, a complete journey through five decades of one of the most influential European post-war photographers, whose evolution as an artist has been marked by social concerns.

The images of Thomas Struth (b. 1954, Geldern, Germany) receive their signature character from the questions they raise about the relevance of public space, family ties, nature, culture, and the limits of new technologies. Thus, Struth addresses essential questions like the instability of social structures and the fragility of human existence through images whose formal elegance prompts the audience's participation and empathy towards these topics.

This exhibition connects Struth's initial concepts—seen in the archival material that the artist has collected over the years—to his well-defined groups of finished works, such as *Unconscious Places*, *Family Portraits*, *Audience*, *Museum Photographs*, *New Pictures from Paradise*, and *This Place*.

These, in turn, establish a dialogue with other works, such as *Berlin Project (Berlin Projekt)*, a video conceived in 1997 in collaboration with media artist Klaus vom Bruch, with other more recent groups like *Nature & Politics*, *Animals*, and with the landscape and flower photographs created for the wards of Lindberg hospital.

The relationships among these works highlight Struth's ability to combine analysis with photographic creation in multiple subjects and mediums, resulting in powerful photographic images.

EXHIBITION TOUR

Gallery 205

While Thomas Struth was studying at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1973–1980, he began photographing the streets of the city, first using a 35-mm camera, then a large-format plate camera. The next year, during a nine-month stay in New York, he photographed the streets of that city's neighborhoods, capturing their characteristics and atmosphere. Thus, *Dey Street*, *Crosby Street*, and *West Broadway* are portrayed with the same symmetrical perspective, taken in the middle of the street.

Over time, as he travelled to other cities, Struth abandoned this central perspective, and on streets like *Veddeler Brückenstrasse, Hamburg 1986*, the urban landscape shows the concentrated social and economic development. The leveling aspects of globalization, the structural results of fast-growing late-twentieth-century economies, and the effects of an increasing world population are the subjects of the photographs in the series *Unconscious Places*, a title that refers to the visible traces of the unconscious social processes that have been inscribed in urban structures.

In this same gallery, visitors can also view the family structures that Thomas Struth began to photograph in the early 1980s. *Family Portraits* started when Struth worked with a psychoanalyst friend from Düsseldorf, Ingo Hartmann, who asks his patients to bring pictures of their families as part of their therapy. In a joint project, Hartmann and Struth selected sixty of these images, and Struth reproduced and enlarged them into uniform black-and-white prints. This visual research project later became the basis for Struth's series of family portraits, which emerged in the mid-1980s as a way to thank the people who had hosted him on his stays in Edinburgh and Yamaguchi, Japan.

These portraits, like the one of *The Hirose Family, Hiroshima 1987*, or the more recent one portraying *The Iglesias Family, San Sebastián 2015*, are the result of formal sessions, during which the models became familiar with the camera. The images allow for different interpretations, showing both the family members' physical likenesses and their social context. Struth succeeds in capturing each of his subjects as an individual and also as part of a family structure.

Gallery 206

This gallery is dominated by Thomas Struth's archive which is rarely exhibited, this one being the second time to be shown ever. The archive consists of work materials, index cards, sketches, invitations, and posters, and installation photographs of his exhibitions, as well as early drawings, montages, paintings, photographic studies, notebooks, research materials, readings, and audios, and correspondence with curators and other artists.

The selection of archival materials included in the exhibition offers a comprehensive chronological insight into the artist's working processes and shows the development of his work. Along with the archive, several spectacular photographs taken in recent decades are shown, such as *Pergamon Museum 1, Berlin 2001*, and *Aquarium, Atlanta 2013*.

Gallery 207

In the late 1980s, Thomas Struth began his *Museum Photographs*, which allowed him to combine his former passion for painting with photography. Past and present meet in these images, which explore the relationship between historical works of art and their viewers. Thus, in these works, the public at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao can see visitors at the Art Institute of Chicago viewing in 1990 the work by Gustave Caillebotte *Paris Street; Rainy Day (Rue de Paris, temps de pluie)*, 1877.

The gallery also contains Struth's only self-portrait, from 2000, in which he is viewing Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* (1500) in Munich's Alte Pinakothek, after he recommenced the *Museum Photographs* theme in 1999. This time, the images from the series include other approaches and perspectives, and works like *Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo 1999*, show Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People (La Liberté guidant le peuple, 1830)* in one of its handful of exhibitions outside of France, where the work was presented with a *mise-en-scène* which was an uncanny reflection of late twentieth-century spectacle culture—the movie theater—, where the crowd passively absorbs images on a glowing screen as if it were an unknown historical-cultural object.

In 2004, Franca Falletti, director of the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, invited Thomas Struth and other artists to create a work of art as an homage to Michelangelo's *David* on the occasion of the sculpture's 500th anniversary. The work that Struth developed shows the gallery's visitors as they contemplate the sculpture, which, however, does not appear in the scene. This shift in perspective compared to his previous *Museum Photographs* places the focus on the audience's reactions actually showing timeless value of the *David* and the effect it still has on the public. These works are included in the *Audience* group.

Struth continued this project with a series of works based on close-ups of people looking at Leonardo da Vinci's *Benois Madonna* (1478-1480) at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and in the galleries containing paintings by Diego Velázquez at the Prado Museum in Madrid. The exhibition displays some of the images taken in Florence, as well as some taken in Madrid.

Gallery 209

In 1998, Thomas Struth photographed the tropical rainforest in northeast Australia. Afterwards, the artist captured woodlands, rain forests, and jungles in places such as China, Japan, Germany, Brazil, Peru, and the United States. With *New Pictures from Paradise*, which Struth himself considers his most intuitive works, he seeks a purely sensory-based perception process which goes beyond the identification or classification of the sites in place and time.

Gallery 203

In 2009, French photographer Frédéric Brenner invited Thomas Struth to participate in the project *This Place*, which sought to explore the complexity of Israel and the West Bank as a place and metaphor through the eyes of twelve international photographers.

The undertaking gave Struth the opportunity to use his images taken over the course of several trips to develop a multilayered portrait of the living conditions in the region and its inhabitants. Examples of these

photographs are *The Faez Family, Rehovot 2009* and *Shuafat Refugee Camp East Jerusalem 2009, Mount Bental, Golan Heights 2011* and *Outskirts of Ramallah, Ramallah 2011*.

In 1997, together with media artist Klaus vom Bruch, Thomas Struth created *Berlin Project 1997* (*Berlin Projekt 1997*), for which the two artists filmed scenes independently at different locations around the world and then edited their material together. Because the scenes were filmed using stationary cameras, the individual practically disappears in sequences with large crowds, or is only fleetingly perceived. Four projections with original sound depict everyday scenarios from different cultures, along with the attendant phenomena of the big-city, such as speed and random juxtapositions and encounters. This work also addresses the easy accessibility of exotic locations and travel in general in an era of mass tourism and the accompanying flood of holiday photos as a socially relevant phenomenon.

Gallery 202

In the early 1990s, Thomas Struth was invited by the director of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Dieter Schwarz, to furnish new patients' rooms at the city's Lindberg Hospital with photographs. Over several visits, Struth came to empathize with people subjected to lengthy periods of hospitalization. He photographed local landscapes and flowers and hung these photographs opposite the hospital beds, so that patients could look at them. At the head of each bed, Struth hung a close-up of a plant which depicted its individuality, beauty, and vulnerability, thereby becoming a metaphor for the patient's own situation. The 2001 publication *Dandelion Room* compiles the images from this project.

This gallery also shows a series of artificial landscapes built by humans, such as Disney's first amusement park in Anaheim, the only one that was designed by Walt Disney himself, inspired by the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. In his six panoramic photos of these archetypal places for dreaming, Struth includes no recognizable icons but instead focuses on the landscapes: their mountains, the rides, etc. These photographs are part of a larger series, *Nature & Politics*, which explores the limits of progress, globalization, and technology.

The center of the gallery is occupied by *Read This Like Seeing It for the First Time, Frank Bungarten and his guitar class at the Lucerne School of Music, Bern 2003* (*Read This Like Seeing It for the First Time, Frank Bungarten mit seiner Gitarrenklasse an der Hochschule Luzern, Bern 2003*) a video installation by Thomas Struth created in 2003 for the Bern Biennial. The video shows five lessons, one hour each, of celebrated German musician Frank Bungarten's guitar classes at the Lucerne School of Music filmed with two cameras simultaneously. The work shows a condensed view of the intensity of the learning process and the teacher-student relationship within the context of artistic development. Projected onto separate screens, the two recordings show different perspectives and ways of seeing.

Gallery 204

In 2007, Thomas Struth visited NASA's Space Museum and this experience prompted him to try to gain access to and photograph areas within the space agency that were usually off-limits. After photographing at NASA locations in 2008 and 2013, in 2017 he managed to take pictures of the neutral buoyancy pool used to train space crews with life-sized models reproducing conditions in space. This gallery houses three of these impressive photographs.

Gallery 208

The series *Nature & Politics*, begun in 2007, comprises images of advanced technological developments in international companies and research laboratories. Aerospace, energy production, medical research, artificial intelligence, and robotics are among the technologies of the future that interest Struth. Works like *Semi Submersible Rig*, *DSME Shipyards*, *Geoje Island 2007* and *Z-Pinch Plasma Laboratory, Weizmann Institute, Rehovot 2011* explore the boundaries—and representability—of progress, globalization, and technology. The shots are often dense metaphors of a development in which technology is no longer clearly or palpably communicable, but rather only understandable in its complexity by highly specialized experts.

Finally, the gallery also shows the artist's latest work, *Animals*, a group of still lifes which the artist started to work on in 2016, in which dead animals (birds and mammals) are the focal point. The artist portrays these animals, taken to the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin after dying of natural causes, with extraordinary sensitivity, in a new and surprising way. In presenting specimens of earthly mortality, Struth touches on the dignity of life itself, our humanist tradition, and evolutionary questions: "I tried to depict the animals in a beautiful, dignified fashion. I'm interested in the idea of surrender: once you die, all the circus, the theater, that you proactively create comes to a full stop. These pictures should be like punches, the memento of death as a wake-up call."

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a profusely illustrated volume containing texts by Thomas Weski, Jana-Maria Hartmann and Ulrich Wilmes, along with an interview of Thomas Struth by Okwui Enwezor, which sheds light on his career, creative approach and world of ideas.

Cover image:

Thomas Struth

Eleonor and Giles Robertson, Edinburgh 1987

Inkjet print

66 x 84 cm

© Thomas Struth

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Thomas Struth
Crosby Street, Soho, New York 1978
Inkjet print
66 x 84 cm
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Hannah Erdrich-Hartmann and Jana-Maria Hartmann, Düsseldorf 1987 (Hannah Erdrich-Hartmann und Jana-Maria Hartmann, Düsseldorf 1987)
Gelatin silver print
66 x 84 cm
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Kyoko and Tomoharu Murakami, Tokyo 1991
Inkjet print
151 x 187 cm
© Thomas Struth
Thomas Struth



Bright sunflowers – No. 1, Winterthur 1991 (Helle Sonnenblumen– Nr 1, Winterthur 1991)

Chromogenic print

84 x 66 cm

Viehof Collection

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth

San Zaccaria, Venice 1995 (San Zaccaria, Venedig 1995)

Chromogenic print

182 x 230.5 cm

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth

Pergamon Museum 1, Berlin 2001

Chromogenic print

197.4 x 248.6 cm

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth

Paradise 26, Palpa, Peru 2003

Chromogenic print

211.5 x 168.6 cm

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth

Pasaje de 27 Setiembre, Lima 2003

Inkjet print

72 x 84 cm

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth

Audience 07, Florence 2004 (Audience 07, Florenz 2004)

Chromogenic print

179.5 x 288.3 cm

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Chemistry Fume Cabinet, The University of Edinburgh 2010
Chromogenic print
120.5 x 166 cm
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Mount Bental, Golan Heights 2011
Inkjet print
129.2 x 161.5 cm
Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris | London
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Mountain, Anaheim 2014
Chromogenic print
212.1 x 332.4 cm
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Full-scale Mock-up 2, JSC, Houston 2017
Inkjet print
208.1 x 148.5 cm
MAST Foundation Collection
© Thomas Struth



Thomas Struth
Grévy's zebra (Equus grevyi), Leibniz IZW, Berlin 2017 [Zebra (Equus grevyi), Leibniz IZW, Berlin 2017]
Inkjet print
160.5 x 223.5 cm
Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris | London
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