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UNCONSCIOUS PLACES: THOMAS STRUTH AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY

I will begin by thanking the convenors of the session for directing me towards a lecture given by Jacques Lacan in Baltimore in the late 60s: ‘When I prepared this little talk for you, it was early in the morning. I could see Baltimore through the window and it was a very interesting moment because it was not quite daylight and a neon sign indicated to me every minute the change of time, and naturally there was heavy traffic and I remarked to myself that exactly all that I could see, except for some trees in the distance, was the result of thoughts thinking themselves without knowing it, where the function played by the subjects was not completely obvious. ..... The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning.’

In a scene which will resonate with many jetlagged conference attendees, the early morning city becomes a convincing analogue for the unconscious. Much earlier, Freud had also used the urban view, in a somewhat different way, as a point of comparison. In his famous 1930 essay Civilization and its Discontents, he sought to explicate his assertion ‘that, in mental life, nothing that has once taken shape can be lost, that everything is somehow preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances’, by offering an analogy with how the past development of a city can be discerned in its current form. Taking Rome as his example, he asks us to imagine that, instead of having to be understood through prior knowledge and study, every phase of the city’s growth makes itself available to view, that ‘all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent’. Almost immediately Freud acknowledges the spatio-temporal difficulties, if not absurdities, inherent in this analogy: ‘if we wish to represent a historical sequence in spatial terms, we can do so only by juxtaposition in space, for the same space cannot accommodate different things.’ Accordingly, he dismisses the exercise as ‘an idle game: its sole justification ... to show how far we are from being able to illustrate the peculiarities of mental life by visual means.’

And yet, it is precisely this paradoxical combination of invisibility and enduring influence which proves the most compelling point of comparison between the unconscious and the urban past. Thus, the

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1 This intervention was published as Of Structure as the Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever, Jacques Lacan in The languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy

2 Freud, Civ etc 8-9
challenge of revealing the full extent and nature of the unconscious might find its equivalent in a project which seeks to discern and depict within the visible cityscape the hidden impulses and forces which have shaped it (from Freud’s analogy), as well as the ‘unthinking thoughts’ which animate it (from Lacan’s analogy). In this paper, I will argue that this is exactly what the German photographer Thomas Struth has set out to achieve with his epic series of photographs of urban settings, Unconscious Places.

Begun in Dusseldorf during Struth’s time studying there in the mid-seventies first with Gerhard Richter and then with Bernd and Hille Becher, the series reached a first peak of maturity in New York between 1977 and 1981 [Crosby Street etc], then extended to a number of European cities, to Japan and, following the artist’s embrace of colour photography in late eighties and early nineties, to an increasingly diverse selection of cities around the world, from Las Vegas to Lima. For all its internal variety and its longevity, the series is characterized by the overall consistency of its tone - a sort of preternatural calm - and the persistence of its aims.

The title Unconscious Places (which nodded to Stephen Shore’s seminal 1982 publication Uncommon Places) was conferred on the series when it was first exhibited and published in 1987. In 2012, a very substantial selection from the series was published under the same title by Schirmer/Mosel, with an accompanying essay by Richard Sennett. The relationship between Struth and Sennett, first evidenced in the Strangers and Friends monograph of 1993, for which Sennett wrote an essay, coupled with the photographer’s friendship with the architect David Chipperfield, led to a major selection of the work being exhibited in Chipperfield’s Venice Biennale exhibition of 2012, Common Ground.

The images were gathered in four groupings along the length of the Arsenale, such that they became a kind of recurring register, acting as interludes between the often more demonstrative and usually more three-dimensional architectural displays. If Struth’s usual pictorial strategy can be summarized as foregrounding background, then here those foregrounds were reduced once again to a kind of sober backdrop to the mechanics and motivations of architectural production. But were the scenes depicted, and the manner of their depiction, intended to act as a rejoinder to the excesses of architectural production? (Certainly, a suspicion of, if not antipathy
towards, the overly rational, instrumental approach of architects has been offered by Struth as among the initial motives behind the series.) Or were they merely a recurring reminder to pay attention to the given? Or a testament to the enduring presence of the architecture of the urban realm? I will return to these questions, but I want first to say a little more about the motivations and methods behind this great body of work, and the gathering of it under that spare, but ambiguous title – what are these Unconscious Places?

Two crucial early reference points for Struth in defining his approach to photography were Walter Benjamin’s essay Theses on the Philosophy of History and Wolfgang Kohler’s volume on Gestalt Psychology. From the former he took a commitment to historical materialism as method, to the idea of bearing witness, to understanding the larger historical trajectory as defined not only by events but also by places. From the latter, he took an interest in how, in perceptual terms, elements come together to form a coherent whole.

Accordingly, in his photographs, Struth became interested in discovering and revealing the coherence within a given urban location, and then allowing that discovered coherence to assume a socio-historical significance. His early series of New York streets, all organized around a central vanishing point, can be seen to give real order and moment to what might otherwise go unnoticed, or at least undernoticed. In an early and typically perceptive review of the series, Peter Schejldahl describes how, ‘as with most of Struth’s cityscapes, there is an initial disorientation, a compound of absolute specificity of place and seeming arbitrariness in point of view. It is as if we were walking with a companion who abruptly stopped at a spot with nothing obviously special about it, facing ostensibly nothing much. Following his gaze, we slowly register that we are seeing, for lack of a better word, everything.’

Part of the process which produces that sensation of seeing everything is the choice of point of view and of equipment. Having alighted upon a seemingly non-descript location, in this case West 44th Street, Struth establishes his large-format camera, not at a spot corresponding to the viewpoint of passers-by, but directly in the

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3 cited in lecture in Dublin, November 2013, also noted in Maria Morris Hambourg and Douglas Eklund, The Space of History, Thomas Struth 1977 – 2002, 156
4 Schjeldahl on Struth – googlebooks, ref
middle of the roadway. There, for up to an hour, Struth balances the elements of the scene on the gridded ground glass. The decision-making is painstaking and deliberate – 35 years after this image was made, Struth remembers dwelling on how much of Yul Brynner to keep within the frame. To something previously overlooked, untoward attention is being paid.\(^5\)

While it is easy to take the strongly symmetrical, perspectival nature of this image and others from this period as formal and objectifying, analogous to the Bechers’ uniform approach to the documentation of industrial and vernacular forms, more persuasive and relevant is the term used by Armin Zwiene in his analysis, ‘lateral inclusion’. Here is a slightly disembodied and yet generic viewpoint from which the scene in all the particularities of its form can be revealed, both sides of the street extending deep into the distance, detail intact.

In *Gestalt Psychology*, Wolfgang Kohler develops at length his theory of sensory organization, taking issue with William James’s assertion that ‘original sensory experience is uniformly continuous, and that all cuts and boundaries are later introduced into the field for pragmatic reasons’ and arguing instead that the sensory field is composed of sensory units (constellations in a starry sky is the example he gives) which are immediately identified in relation to each other. Thus the parts are, and remain, distinct within the whole they come together to form. Fritz Perls called this coherent whole the ‘ultimate experiential unit’, and focused his Gestalt therapy on assisting patients in attaining a clear view of this ‘ultimate unit.’

Although the unconscious does play a part in Gestalt psychology, it is considered more as something physiological than psychological – that is, it is raw sensation not yet registered as experience. It follows that the attaining of a coherent view is simply a matter of bringing to attention that which previously has escaped it. (Freud would have maintained that, for the most part, the unconscious actively resisted being brought to light – it’s not just what we have not yet thought about). We might consider Struth’s process in these terms – bringing

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\(^5\) Stephen Shore talks about how the use of large format camera changes how the picture is composed: ‘In the field, outside the controlled confines of a studio, a photographer is confronted with a complex web of visual juxtapositions that realign themselves with each step the photographer takes. Take one step and something hidden comes into view; take another and an object in the front now presses up against one in the distance. Take one step and the description of deep space is clarified; take another and it is obscured. In bringing order to this situation, a photographer solves a picture more than composes one.’ Stephen Shore, interview with Lynn Tillmann, *Uncommon Places*, Aperture, 2004
a view to attention, translating sensation into experience, by rendering it pictorially.

Perls was equally concerned with the temporality of consciousness: ‘Nothing exists except in the here and now. The now is present, is the phenomenon, is what you are aware of, is that moment in which you carry your so-called memories and your so-called anticipation with you. Whether you remember or anticipate, you do it now. The past is no more. The future is not yet...........Nothing can possibly exist except the now.’ 6 The challenge, then, is to somehow abstract this ‘now’ from the continuum of time and assert its significance.

In his essay Understanding a Photograph, John Berger describes the expectation of revelation as ‘a human constant ... a constituent of the relation between the human capacity to perceive and the coherence of appearances.’ It is precisely to the degree that it lends coherence to appearances that the photograph has the potential to be revelatory. Berger argues that it is an event’s development in time which allows its meaning to be perceived and felt. If this movement is taken as an arrow, then normally the photograph cuts across this arrow, disrupting the event’s development and confusing, or refusing, its meaning. Instead, Berger proposes that the significant photograph might be better understood as an expanded cross-section through the event – thus the photograph achieves something equivalent to duration by ‘enlarging the circle beyond the dimension of instantaneous information.’ (we might think back here to Freud’s desire to somehow incorporate temporal flow into spatial representations)

‘A photograph which achieves expressiveness thus works dialectically’ concludes Berger: ‘it preserves the particularity of the event recorded, and it chooses an instant when the correspondences of those particular appearances articulate a general idea.’7 In Struth’s case, he is looking for those locations which can express the city’s inherent structure, its ‘emblematic character’, as he terms it.8 Hence the particular is prevented from being merely anecdotal [anathema to Struth!] and becomes generic, in the sense that it typifies something (archetypal might be too loaded a word to use here..).

[St Petersburg image]

6 Perls, 1969, p. 41 – this quote could go to footnotes
7 Berger, Understanding the Photograph...
8 Thomas Struth, whitechapel publication, 186 (notes on New York series)
In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin contends that the ‘historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not in a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history.’ I think this explains that peculiar quality that, once noticed, can be discerned again and again within the Unconscious Places series – a quality by means of which, paradoxically, a heightened sense of stillness, of things in arrest, makes evident the longer passage of time which has led to this particular configuration of urban artefacts being here at this particular moment. Each image is simultaneously a faithful record of a place and a moment, and something much larger.

In his analysis of a well-known and beautiful image made in Dallas in preparation for the 2002 retrospective at the County Museum there, Armin Zwiene contends that the picture gains its power precisely by virtue of the difference between what Struth sees (we might say, how Struth sees) and what confronts the Dallas motorist looking for a parking spot on a morning, after rain.

[or me, two days ago]

How, from this bland and ungainly conglomeration of skyscrapers, has Struth managed to conjure such formal and tonal coherence, producing an image which is, to borrow John Szarkowski’s phrase ‘clear and lively’ across its height and breadth? The by-now familiar quality of crystalline lucidity and calmness are there. But more than this, there is a feeling that the buildings and structures gathered within the frame are, in some sense, animate - that they are holding still for the camera, posing.

Indeed in the catalogue for that 2002 show, Maria Morris Hambourg described how ‘like relatives posing for a group portrait, each structure in the street seems possessed of the same paradoxical mix of autonomy and interdependence’. (Itself an interesting take on the American downtown) Struth himself often refers to his urban scenes as portraits, connecting them to another body of work which he has been making since the late eighties, the family portraits.\(^9\) It is not difficult to find significant correspondences between the two series. Look at the way in which built forms arrange themselves before the camera in this image of Shinjuku from 1986, and the photographs of

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\(^9\) it is a relatively small body of work, numbering about 35 images in total by the mid 2000s. Written about extensively by Buchloh, Bryson, Fried etc
the Shimada family from 1986 or of the Smith family from 1989. The terms by which Struth judges the portraits - ‘My idea of a successful photo is that it be readable, that everyone enters and plays his or her role, according to their momentary self-understanding. I believe that quite a bit can be read and is visible’ – would apply equally to the cityscapes.\(^{10}\)

Struth explains how the portraits are made: ‘I described the spatial limits and encouraged them to select their own place and position within the frame.’\(^{11}\) He stands beside the large-format camera, allow the sitters to become conscious of being photographed. In so doing (another paradox) they become less conscious of their demeanour and of how they dispose themselves within the space of the frame. Struth is ultimately interested is this arrangement of selves (thought of as animate bodies) in space. The series has its origins in a collaboration with the psychoanalyst Ingo Hartmann in the early eighties, in which they examined photos of family life contributed by a group of participants to see what they might reveal: ‘What may be deduced from them about the dynamics of the group? Can one see anything at all?’\(^{12}\) (I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest that all is not well in the Richter household...)

As Michael Fried notes in his detailed analysis of the series, each image combines a lateral axis of familial relationships which extends across the pictorial space with a perpendicular axis which extends out of it towards the viewer (in his terms, a combination of absorption on the one hand, and theatricality on the other).\(^{13}\) It is not coincidental, I think, that it is when Struth begins making these portraits that he abandons the ‘photographic uniform’, as he terms it, of centralized perspective used in the early works in Unconscious Places. He starts to allow the scene and the relationship between its elements determine the viewpoint, the point from which the parts best cohere as a whole. The urban scene starts to acquire a greater sense of agency (a sense accentuated by the unavoidable inclusion of people in many of the images made in China and Japan around this time). It is also, determinedly, considered as a grouping, or gathering – a collective construct.

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\(^{10}\) Interview with Buchloh, Portraits, Marion Goodman Gallery, 1990
\(^{11}\) Ibid, 29
\(^{12}\) Interview with Buchloh
\(^{13}\) Michael Fried, Why Photography matters as Art as never before, Chapter 7
In his emphasis on social space, and on an internal dynamic of historical formation, Struth recalls Victor Hugo’s famous assertion that ‘the greatest products of architecture are not so much individual as they are social works; rather the children of nations in labor than the inspired efforts of men of genius; the legacy of a race; the accumulated wealth of centuries, the residuum of the successive evaporations of human society – in short, a species of formation.’ These lines are used by Aldo Rossi in The Architecture of the City as a means of developing his ‘idea of the locus – a relationship between a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it.’ For Rossi, the locus might be considered equivalent to what ‘Henri Focillon speaks of [as] psychological places, places without which the spirit of an environment would be opaque or elusive…

Whereas elsewhere in the book, Rossi attempts to understand the process of urban development in as ‘scientific’ a manner as possible, he concedes that the city is always more than an accumulation of empirically verifiable acts and artefacts: ‘With time, the city grows upon itself; it acquires a consciousnesss and memory.’ *The Architecture of the City* oscillates between ascribing these properties of consciousness and memory to the built artifact of the city in and of itself and to the urban population. (In passing, it is worth noting that the passage from Freud with which I began is quoted by Peter Eisenman in his introduction to the English translation of the book.) *The Architecture of the City* equally oscillates between a regard for the autonomy of architecture, and an emphasis on the social processes of urban formation. It’s for reason I think that Rossi’s work resonates both with Struth’s work and with the concerns of the 2012 Biennale, where his spirit was consciously (and unconsciously) invoked.

While the theme *Common Ground* was primarily interpreted as referring to the shared culture and practices of the discipline itself, Chipperfield was at pains to extend its remit to include ‘a more engaged collaboration between the vision of architects and the

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14 Rossi, City, 102
15 Rossi played his part in this, through an exhibition of his 1985 Biennale which had sought design responses to the city of Venice. Chipperfield gave a lecture at the opening event
expectations of society'. The shared public realm became a particular focal point. In this context, Struth’s series might be seen as a kind of affirmation of the larger aspirations of the Biennale - an extended meditation on the true nature of the common ground with which architecture must engage. In reality, given that the exhibition seemed largely content to allow architecture talk to itself, the pictures acted more as a necessary corrective, a reminder of what lay beyond the comforts of that conversation.

But to return finally to that title - *Unconscious Places*: are we to understand it as referring to the way buildings and spaces get built without being consciously thought about – places as unconscious products? (Palermo)

Or are we to think that these are locations which are not, for the most part, the subject of our conscious attention, which are absorbed unthinkingly by the inhabitants of the city – places as unconsciously experienced? (Coenties)

Or are we to suppose that the very fabric itself is animate, imbued with latent selfhood, but not with awareness, and hence, to see these as places which are themselves unconscious? (Times Square)

Or should we understand the visible fabric as a shared reservoir of meaning and memory – a collective unconscious? (Campo de Fiori)

Or, finally, should we consider that in this exchange, it is in fact the camera which operates automatically - in other words, that these, ultimately, are pictures produced unconsciously.

In closing I come back to Struth, standing alone in the early morning in the middle of 6th Avenue, hunched under the black cloth, looking at the city scene, inverted in the gridded glass of the viewfinder, the analyst and his subject, seeing, for lack of a better word, everything.

CODA
That was then. This is now. Here is Struth’s very recent publication *Walking*, in which the large-format camera has been replaced by the handheld digital, in which the corner and the doorway have replaced the wider view, in which the small and anecdotal supplants the large and archetypal, in which, as the title suggests, he’s shooting on the move rather than surveying from a static standpoint, and in which, we might conclude, the divide between analyst and subject has finally been breached.

HC
In closing, think back to the survey v the walk (we might even think of de Certeau two experiences of the city) – look at how Struth interrupted his walk to make that image.
Now becoming less ‘analytical’ in his view, more engaged – Walking..
A new kind of equilibrium

FURTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER:
How come the scene is always so calm, almost unnaturally so – it is as if the conscious activity has been stilled, so we see what underlies it – but by other readings, the unconscious itself is a maelstrom of the unformed and inchoate – of impulses and desires. What we have here is the silent, stilled trace of that...

Also, the cut, the cross-section as the device – the shutter slices through the scene – this connects to Berger’s idea of the picture as a small interruption, but also to older conceptions of the urban scene – think of Serlio, for instance (and think of that image of Canaletto)

Maybe it was always also bound up with walking, what strikes one.
Or – an alternative ending. Loop back to Struth in the Fairmont Hotel, strolling down to set up the show at the Dallas Museum, encountering on his way this scene, which strikes him..
The unconscious city, espied from the hotel window....