Blocked View and Impeded Vision

An Affective Response to the Photographs of Maria Hahnenkamp and Thomas Struth

Preamble

Once a year, on the last Sunday of the carnival season, my grandmother summoned our whole family to watch the local carnival parade from the tiny garden in her backyard. Grandmother's house bordered Market Street, one of the main streets in town where the procession of music groups, decorated wagons, etc. took place. The garden was fenced off by pointed iron bars and was about half a meter above street level so that one had a wonderful view of what was happening on the street. When grandmother invited the family to watch the parade with her, everyone understood that there was more at stake than just entertainment and fun: The idea was that the whole family should come together to perform.

On that occasion, grandmother's rather neglected backyard turned into our communal family stage. There we presented ourselves to the public and demonstrated the joy of "privileged vision." For one Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Dreher and her descendants turned into an elevated caste, indulging in an unrestricted view and the moral side effect of such a privilege, namely, to look like an intact family. We did not have to mingle with the masses, but were admitted to a kind of private loge from where the happenings on the street took on a special sense. To a child, it was clear that the carnival princes, riding on their various vehicles, reached particularly deep into their buckets filled with sweets when they saw us, and their generosity seemed to signal that we were alike – nobility of the same kind, who deserved a bigger share of everything.

On this one day, everything seemed fine until the regular crisis broke out and destroyed the precarious family equilibrium. It always started with an experience of a blocked view. Someone on the street took a child on his or her shoulders, or even dared to climb the low wall to our garden. In that instant, the photogenically arranged group of family members disintegrated into a desperate crowd of people craving, fighting, and groping for a glimpse of the events happening in the street. When the candies from the wagons no longer landed on our territory, but were confiscated by the spectators in front of us, the intricate link between unrestricted view as a treat and guaranteed candy supplies became obvious. When all these commoners,

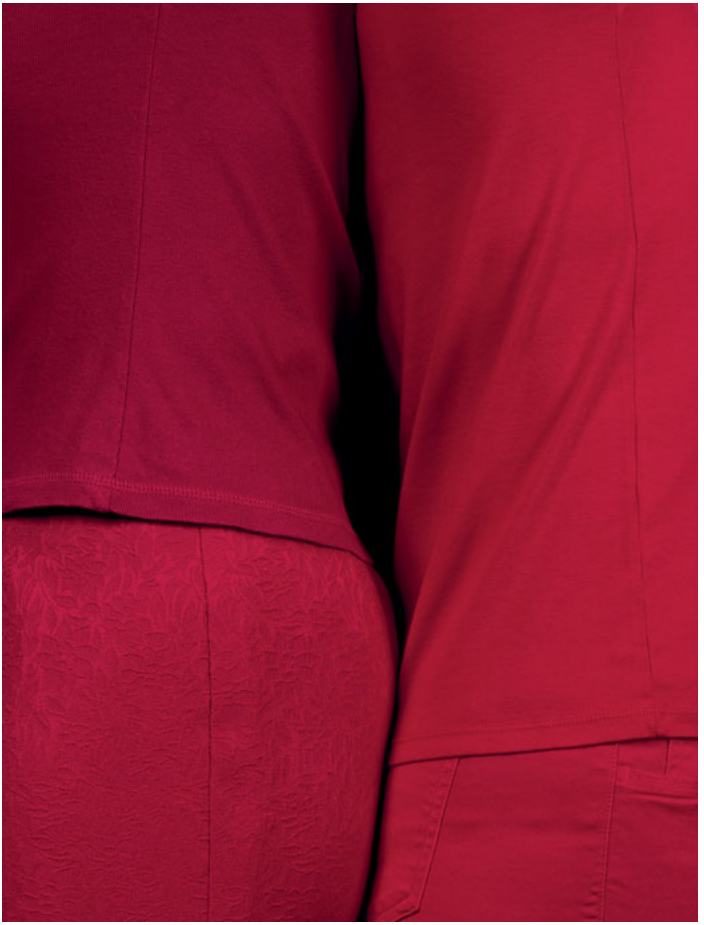
these ordinary street spectators, decided to simply ignore our quite obvious right to see, hostility and aggression got a hold on our formerly well contained and behaved group. All we could see was a highly fragmented and distorted version of the carnival procession, transmitted to us via slots left by the space between the spectators´ bodies. We always left this scenario as a defeated crowd, suffering from visual deprivation and the fact that our right to see unimpeded had again been ignored by others.

Maria Hahnenkamp

Maria Hahnenkamp's works do the same thing to me. They evoke the same anger and frustration about not being able to see. They relate the issue of invisibility to pictorial traditions and power-playing in general. During the whole process of investigation of Hahnenkamp's works, I keep telling myself: Keep track of your anger and pinpoint the shame and assault of blocked vision; Stick to your subject, resist the temptation to bury the strongly sensed insult under layers and layers of scholarly findings; be disciplined, remain emotional.

In this respect, Maria Hahnenkamp´s photo series "two women," from 2001 is especially telling. The two female protagonists of these images, both dressed in red, came together to bounce off the viewer´s gaze and to deny vision. They act as red guards. Their mission is radical and non-compromising – namely, to occupy pictorial space in a way that will leave nothing visible. To keep the gaze out and to launch their assault on the viewer, they form a phalanx of bodies, positioned right in the foreground of the pictures. This setting has something highly aggressive and confrontational about it, and the response it creates is frustration. (Fig. 1)

For this series, the artist placed the female bodies behind a glass plate right in front of the camera. Due to this glass barrier, the bodies look flat and compressed. Paradoxically, the denial of vision goes hand in hand with an abundance of visual information. There are folds and curves, patterns and textures the viewer can concentrate on, but still, the overall impression is a lack of visibility. Due to this situation of visual castration, the viewer becomes inventive and counter-balances the deprivation by referring to the in-between spaces. The gaze creeps into folds and behind slightly lifted clothes in search of a dimension beyond the surface of the image. Between the bodies, gaps and slits open up and carry a promise of depth and a full view. These spatial intervals, which, at first sight, look like indeterminable, abstract forms turn out to be suggestive of vaginal forms and ultimately refer the viewer back to his or her scopic desires. (Fig. 2)



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Maria Hahnenkamp, *Body Discourses*
2005, C-Prints, 93cm x 123 cm

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Maria Hahnenkamp, Landesgalerie at the *Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum*, Linz, 2002

As Linda Hentschel (2001) pointed out, scopic desire is intricately linked with the construction of pictorial space in the early Modern period. Implied in this spatial concept is the promise of pure vision, of a potentially unrestricted view of even concealed and hidden things. Due to this promise, the act of viewing becomes libidinally charged and ultimately informed by gender issues. "Vision cannot be separated from the construction of space, which in turn cannot be separated from the constructions of gender upon which sexuality is mapped, usually violently."(Wiley, 1992, p. 364) As no act of viewing is ever neutral, gender aspects flow into this seemingly mathematical model inherent to Western representation. This leads to what Hentschel calls a "feminization of pictorial space." (2001, p.13) The viewer originally designed as a rational, autonomous, centered and mostly male subject, ideally positions himself in front of this space, ready to penetrate the represented area with his visual acts. The eye as visual agent subjects the space that opens up in front of him to the regime and power of the gaze. In a metonymical shift and process of replacement, the desire for the female body depicted in the picture gets projected onto pictorial space as such. Feminized pictorial space becomes the other of the male gaze, the other that is open to appropriation, conquest, and subordination.

Maria Hahnenkamp´s figures act as a "task force" against this sexualized use of space: It is a tight and crammed space. But, despite their closeness, these females do not get together to snuggle up to each other. Instead, they demonstrate solidarity and pursue a shared strategy of generating a lack of visibility. At the same time, these images hold a promise of vision and allude to a dimension of increased visibility beyond the surface. The bodies themselves do not justify any sexual projections. They have something high-necked, analytic and straight about them. The fully covered female bodies cannot be held accountable for the explicit erotic appeal of these images. The scandal of the intimate resides in the splits and the slits between the bodies, which create a kind of penetrating reflex with the viewer. It seems as if the gaze wants to take up the impulse to enter via these gaps and folds in order to regain the gratification of a full and unrestricted view. One also cannot but sense the fantasies of violence, which seem to be located in these in-between spaces that would have to be stretched, widened, torn open to achieve a better view. The chaste red models play with the desires of the spectator, but the offer that they propose is less immoral than deeply disillusioning. Which viewer, comfortably at home in Western representational systems, would want to find satisfaction in the anteroom of the foreground before his or her scopic desire, which is geared towards the depth of space, could build up its full phallic power? (Fig. 3)

In Hahnenkamp´s series "Body Discourses" from 2005, the bodies are shown in a different position. They are arranged in a horizontal order and seem to be float-

ing through pictorial space. This new orientation of the models has wide reaching consequences for viewers by throwing them off their empowered vertical position. In addition, the foil ribbons with text tied around the bodies can only be read by twisting the head sideways and by rearranging, repositioning oneself. These ribbons carry quotations from Judith Butler's "Psyche der Macht. Das Subjekt der Unterwerfung."[1] Important in our context is that with this particular work by Hahnenkamp, created three years after the series "two women", the bodies still block space, but this time it feels less frustrating and annoying: The viewer seems to be forced into a less confrontational setting. Everything is in motion and, therefore, up for negotiation. Power relations are addressed in the text fragments and are quite outspoken, which makes it possible to relate to them more readily. Here is no longer the same stalemate situation where the desire to see increases in proportion to the denial of a view. Still, Hahnenkamp´s agitated troops are easily recognizable. They again fill the medial space negligently – inconsiderate of the viewer's age-old right to see beyond and across. The reading keeps the viewer in the foreground and the gentle flow of the bodies distracts the viewer from his/her obsession with depth. Instead of depth, there is flatness. Hips and thighs are not spread out, but are depicted in an elegant, aerodynamic form. There is something highly utopian about this renouncement of the drama of depth. Hahnenkamp´s females are testing new grounds and demonstrate the ease and relief of gliding alongside the surface, instead of making their toilsome way into the distance.

Thomas Struth

Similarly, in Struth´s photographs, I recognize an obsession I can relate to. From 1977 on, he focuses on black and white photographs of streets and townscapes, and basically employs the same pictorial scheme over and over again. The photos work with a strong perspectival order, which is subsequently abolished by buildings that come in the way and block the view into the distance. There is a sense of destruction and aggression at work. It is directed against the expectations and perceptual habits of the viewer, but also entails some kind of auto-aggression against himself as the photographer and the photographic craft in general. As it turns out on closer inspection, Struth is a master of a kind of gentle art of aggression, which underpins his photographs and which, so far, has gone almost unnoticed. Practiced over years, his rebuff of the viewer comes in a

[1] The artist used quotes from the German edition of : Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection.*

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Maria Hahnenkamp, O.T. (*from the Series "Two Women"*)
2001, C-Prints, 93cm x 73 cm

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Thomas Struth, *6th Avenue at 50th Street, Midtown, New York 1978*
Silver Gelatin Print, 66cm x 84cm

homeopathic dose. His type of viewer is someone who needs ongoing visual proof of something that is a theoretical given. With Struth, to understand the conditions of "the old prison"[2] of perspectival order means to represent it again and again.

With images like "6th Avenue at 50th Street," taken in New York in 1978, Struth defines a standard scenario of photographic interest. The New York street is depicted as an avenue of escape, dynamically leading into the distance. As Annette Emde (2008) pointed out in her comprehensive study of Thomas Struth´s city and street photographs, the photo displays a high field of focus (p. 75). The horizon in the image is relatively low, so that the objects at the far end are disproportionally small, which increases the perspectival pull into the distance. This orientation towards the horizon is counteracted by minutiae of architectural structures, textures, commercial signs, parked cars etc. (Fig. 5)

"Crosby Street," from 1978, represents another attempt to feed reality into a pre-existing pictorial grid in order to reveal something about the grid itself, but also about our mode of perceiving photographs. As one can see, Crosby Street used to be a street in the poorer environment of Soho. Like all the other street photos by Struth, it is emptied of people. Struth subtly plays with the promises of a central perspective. He simultaneously enforces and denies its principles. The car parked on the right throws the whole composition off balance. At the end of the alley of buildings, a slightly blurred high-rise structure appears like a phantom. Tellingly, the street sign in the image says "stop," hold your gaze, it will be blocked at the end of the street. (Fig. 6)

Struth is testing this same setting over and over again by, for instance, focusing on streets in Germany with their post-war architecture, or on ordinary residential streets in Scotland. In his 1985 photograph of "Prince Regent Street," taken in Edinburgh, the church at the end of the street turns the perspectivally organized space, with its inherent promise of depth, into an enclosed area. As the gaze is kept from roaming into the distance, it basically circulates in the confined space. By creating a trapped view situation, Struth is able to tame the gaze and divert its course. Instead of moving into depth, the viewer scans the facades, glides over the dilapidated pavement, counts the chimneys, and checks the condition of the front yards. (Fig. 7) The street setting turns into a kind of interior, an almost domestic space where the potentially expanding gaze comes to a halt and discovers the sensations of the foreground. Here, it becomes modest and attentive to details. Under the spell of the pull, exercised by depth, viewers tend to overlook and ignore things that would divert their

[2] This term refers to a panoramic photograph by Jeff Wall of the same title.The image depicts an old prison building but also reflects upon the principles inherent in photographic imagery.

5

Thomas Struth, *Crosby Street, Soho, New York 1978*
Silver Gelatin Print, 66cm x 84cm

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Thomas Struth, *Prince Regent Street, Edinburgh 1985*
Silver Gelatin Print, 66cm x 84cm

7

Thomas Struth, *Le Lignon, Geneva 1989*
Silver Gelatin Print, 66cm x 84cm

gaze. In fact, staying home and resisting the alluring distance is rewarded by a mass of interesting visual sensations, even with a site of such banality as an average street. And, Thomas Struth continues to put up obstacles for the viewer. He shifts viewpoints and moves around architecture in a prefigured setting with clear coordinates.

With the photographs taken in Naples, Struth takes his experiments another step further. In "Corso Vittorio Emanuele" from1989, massive, vertical building blocks ridicule any attempt to view depth. The gaze slams into a wall of solid barriers that unequivocally tell the viewer that there is nothing to see except buildings – buildings that are piled up in front of the viewer, buildings that appear insurmountable and that won't give way to the gaze. With the full authority of the factual, these buildings counteract the gesture of welcome expressed in the foreground of the image. The dynamic curve of the low wall, the foreshortened line of the parked cars, the indicators of "wild nature" behind the wall, everything speaks of a journey into the open. The small balconies in front of the windows act as additional barriers that ward off any attempt to protrude through the openings of the windows. (Fig. 8)

Subsequently, Struth continues with his investigation by introducing a new variation to the game. He depicts building blocks that cut through space like a diagonal. In 1989, he takes a photograph of "Le Lignon," an apartment building in Geneva. The gaze of the viewer glides along the façade, speeding up on its way into the distance, only to find itself trapped again in a dead-end scenario. There, in the deeper reaches, a misty, blurred building block emerges like an insuperable obstacle in a nightmare, phantasmatic and unquestionably real at the same time. All the viewer can do is take the retour path or, since the buildings´s façade resembles a film strip, play the film backwards and assume the pole position again. (Fig. 9)

From 1998 on, Thomas Struth works on a series of photographs which seem to have nothing in common with his early street photographs. The series, which consists of 25 images, deals with forests and jungles in Australia, Japan, China, and California. (Fig.10) All the photographs feature seemingly impenetrable views of "allover" nature (Struth, 2002, para. 1). Some of the images look like heavily overgrown green curtains which conceal whatever may lie behind them. Any sociocultural context is missing; instead the viewer is confronted with a dense thicket of trees, trunks, branches, and foliage. There is no perceivable order in these jungle close-ups and no indication that a human being would be particularly welcome there or capable of surviving in these worlds.

In her interview with Struth, conducted by Annette Emde (2008), she refers to the concept of his catalogue published in connection with the retrospective of his work in the US. In the exhibitions in New York and Chicago, Struth´s photographs were grouped according to themes and motifs, whereas the catalogue breaks up this rig-

id order and juxtaposes works from different periods (p. 284). Emde wonders about the arrangement of a jungle image next to a post-war street photograph. Struth´s terse answer is that catalogues function differently than exhibitions. From the point of view of this paper, such an arrangement makes perfect sense, represents a strong statement and proves that, irrespective of their various topics, Struth´s images are invested with a strong, paradoxically "unconscious" media-analytical interest.

In a talk in "Art Forum," Struth (2002, para.1) explicitly draws a connection between the jungle series and his photographs of street scenarios:

> *[…] I´m just beginning to understand. Intuition is an old word, but many things sprout from inner processes and needs and then take on a form. My approach to the jungle pictures might be said to be new, in that my initial impulses were pictorial and emotional, rather than theoretical. They are `unconscious places´ and thus seem to follow my early city pictures.*

This statement shows that Struth approaches his subject intuitively and embarks on his projects in an almost somnambulant and unconscious manner, obviously spurred on by a challenge he may not be able to name or to ground theoretically. In fact, his labeling of the cityscapes as "unconscious places" was never really compatible with the reception of these street views as architectural or post-war, archival, or documentary photography. As the quote above indicates, the jungle scenarios qualify as "unconscious places" and therefore owe their existence to a blind spot in the artist´s production process. He had to take photos of the jungles, although he could not entirely account for their curious attraction. The same was the case with the cityscapes. My argument is that both series are part of the same investigation about the nature of the photographic medium and its relation to perspectival order.

As Struth (2002, para.2) exemplifies further: "In some of the photographs, the picture stands like a screen in front of another, invisible image, dissolving the vanishing point that photography usually puts into focus." For him (Struth, 2002), the jungle views are "membranes of meditation." (para.1) They keep the viewer out. Membranes are ephemeral boundaries that despite their near immaterial condition, are not meant to be traversed. You hold, tame the gaze, and meditate in front of the empty and silent picture surface that ultimately refers you back to yourself.

All of the 25 jungle and forest images go by the title "Paradise." Struth´s unorthodox rendering of "Paradise" has nothing to do with the idyllic places of Christian mythology. On a surface level, Struth´s chaotic and immersive versions of paradise do not seem compatible with the common understanding of this term,

8

Thomas Struth, *Le Lignon, Geneva 1989*
Silver Gelatin Print, 66cm x 84cm

but interestingly enough, they create a particular mind set in the spectator. These images spare the viewers the effort to imagine themselves elsewhere. Whereas in a Christian understanding "paradise" is an experience that lies ahead of us, is projected into the far distance, and is something to be postponed, Struth´s jungle photographs provide an "experience of proximity."(Struth, 2002, para.4) The viewers confronted with these close-ups of untamed nature turn into arrivistes. Their scopic desire is no longer geared towards the far distance, but comes to a halt and concentrates on the here and now of the visual information available. Struth´s paradise has nothing to do with all the imaginary spots put up by a perspectival order. His jungle images deny a particular Western pictorial tradition and its inherent logic based on the hubristic promise of full and pure vision. It may be no coincidence that many of these jungle photos were taken in Asian countries. In the interview mentioned earlier, Struth (2002) explicitly refers to the time he spent in these countries and how the Asian experience informed his artistic work.

Coda

Maybe we, the family in grandmother´s yard, should have taken full pleasure in the split-up version of the carnival event and should have focused on the intimate details available to us –in the form of the hairline of the people in front of us, on the skin tones of their necks, the arrangement of their collars, and texture of their coats.

9

Thomas Struth, *Paradise 01, Daintree, Australia 1998*
Silver Gelatin Print, 232,7cm x 185cm