Double Exposure: Multiplexing of Signals and Time in the Photography of Thomas Struth

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Abstract:
As contemporary viewers of artworks both new and historical, how do we experience and perceive time in relation to art? How do we perceive art in relation to time? The works of photographer Thomas Struth, particularly his photographs of art and visitors in museums, add a new dimension to the discourse surrounding these questions. In analyzing Struth’s *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice* (1992) through the theoretical lenses presented by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, George Kubler, and other philosophers and critics, I argue for an “anachronic” reading of the work in question. With its layering of dates, contexts, and mediums, the work resists easy categorization amid the landscape of contemporary art and seems to defy attachment to any discrete period or place in time.

Keywords
Thomas Struth, anachronic, Veronese, contemporary photography

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No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made...at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a meaningful event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting.¹

-Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*

At the far end of the gallery, the imposing architecture of Veronese’s painted loggia looms majestically. Beyond the three ornate arches, which parse the canvas into a kind of triptych, Palladian structures recede into the slate-colored backdrop of the sky.² The long table painted in the midground of the scene is occupied by a string of seated guests, among whom the central figure is Christ; a jumbling of energetic revelers, many dressed in sixteenth-century finery, is depicted in the immediate foreground of the painting. Beyond the perimeter of this masterpiece’s protective railing, a few visitors stand serenely in seemingly contemplative postures, hands clasped behind backs or arms folded across chests as they face the canvas. The expansive space of the gallery hall, with its reflective, marbled floor and a few other Renaissance-era paintings peeking out from the left and right, is populated by a scattered group of contemporary museum-goers. These visitors, in the trappings of stereotypical (American) tourists—blue jeans, shorts, t-shirts, baseball caps, sneakers—stand in stark contrast to the figures depicted in the paintings they are observing; however, the bright, primary colors of the twentieth-

Figure 1. ©Thomas Struth. *Galleria dell’Accademia 1*, Venice, 1992.
century attire are surprisingly complementary to the palettes featured in the works of art. The fictional space of Veronese’s canvas seems to encroach on the actual space of the gallery—it is as if the museum patrons could be physically absorbed into the perspectival depth of the painting, or even as if the painted figures could step out of their frame into the space of the museum.

German photographer Thomas Struth took this photograph, titled *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice*, at the world-renowned Venetian institution in 1992. Like many of Struth’s works, such as his other photographs featuring paintings in museums, shots of panoramic landscapes, or black-and-white images of deserted city streets, this photograph toys with our perception of space and time. More specifically, however, and more significantly, *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice* distorts and expands our understanding of art’s relationship to time and history through its layering of dates, contexts, and mediums. In our current circumstance of increasingly digitized modes of communication, this kind of layering or “multiplexing” serves as a propitious analogy for the experience of Struth’s work: in the realm of computer networking, multiplexing is most simply understood as the sending of multiple signals or information streams via a single channel.3 As a work that resists easy categorization amid the landscape of contemporary art and seems to defy attachment to any discrete period or place in time, Struth’s photograph functions as a unique type of anachronic work. In *Anachronic Renaissance*, Nagel and Wood posit that when a work of art “is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future or an ideal,” it is anachronic.4 *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice* represents several of these instances of “anachronicity:” it repeats itself, through both the technological reproduction and reproducibility of photography and the self-reflexivity found in art about art; it remembers the past by featuring Veronese’s sixteenth-century painting, thereby referencing the historical depth therein; it proposes a new lens—literally and figuratively—through which contemporary and future viewers may consider art on both a personal and historical scale. In the words of Nagel and Wood, “To fix an image…in time is to reduce it to human proportions.”5 In this sense, an artwork may become relegated to a particular finite moment, one that continues to recede into the past with the onward flow of chronological time, rather than representing a duration that withstands the continuous transitions between past, present,
and future. By parsing apart the various layers of *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice*, we will examine it from multiple perspectives and within different contexts: first, as a photographic reproduction of Veronese’s *Feast in the House of Levi*; second, as a depiction of Veronese’s painting within the context of Venice’s Gallerie dell’Accademia; and finally, as a photograph in its own right, to be exhibited, appreciated, and analyzed as an integral work of art. The aim of this analysis is to disentangle and illuminate the variety of complex processes and theories that contribute to the anachronic characteristics of Struth’s photograph. Critics and curators engaged with Struth’s work find common ground in the belief that his museum photographs exist in and between multiple times and therefore potentially complicate our view of how they function in the present; while these notions may provoke difficult or unanswerable questions, it is perhaps this convoluted nebulousness that further contributes to and confirms the anachronicity of *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice*.

Thomas Struth was born in 1954 and was raised in Nordrhein-Westphalia, Germany. Beginning in 1973, Struth studied at the Kunstkademie in Düsseldorf, where he was a student of the painter Gerhard Richter; later, he moved away from painting and began working in photography exclusively, as encouraged by Richter, under the tutelage of Bernd and Hilla Becher. In describing this transition, Struth explains, “I’m not interested in the painting process. I’m interested in making pictures…the photograph already shows what I want to show. So why make a painting that takes me five months to finish and then it looks like a photograph?” One of Struth’s earliest exhibitions was a successful student show in 1976, which featured 49 black-and-white prints of desolate streets in Düsseldorf. Since then, Struth’s subject matter has expanded to include similar shots of New York City, Peruvian rainforests, dizzyingly detailed portraits of technological equipment at the Kennedy Space Center, Tokyo skyscrapers, and the museum photographs, shot in venues around the world, for which Struth is perhaps best known. In a 2007 interview with writer and fellow photographer Gil Blank, Struth indicates that he is “interested in the relationship of the individual to the larger historical time span into which he’s born,” and that his “intent is to address something that has a larger scale, a larger value, than the specific details or location shown.” These sentiments appear particularly applicable to and identifiable in *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice*. 
The Auratic Work of Art: Historicity, Authenticity, Originality, Accessibility

The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.  

-Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”

The most immediately striking and prominent feature of Struth’s Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice is the view of Paolo Veronese’s Feast in the House of Levi, which appears to fill nearly the entire far wall of the gallery. The work, considered a masterpiece of Veronese’s oeuvre, was painted in 1573; originally conceived and commissioned as a depiction of the Last Supper, Veronese renamed the work the Feast in the House of Levi due to objections surrounding the inclusion of drunken carousers and “dwarfs” amid the sacred imagery and figures. What is most compelling about this painting’s presence in Struth’s photograph is its function as a sixteenth-century work of art within the context of a twentieth-century work of art, specifically a photograph. As a point of departure, let us consider the perceived anachronicity of Veronese’s own painting, independent from its role within Struth’s photograph. According to Nagel and Wood, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were characterized by a new kind of artistic self-awareness, an increased contemplation of and attention to the relationship between the function of art and its existence in time, particularly with regard to religious subjects:

On the one hand, art with its multiple temporalities offered a picture of a meaningful cosmos woven together by invisible threads, of an order hidden behind the mere illusory sequence of lived moments. On the other hand, the references back to the meaning-conferring origin points…threatened to collapse into their own historicity.

In other words, the layering of different temporalities within a single work of art, and the blurring of boundaries between past
and present, could be interpreted as imbuing the work with a sense of timelessness, of detachment from the mortal experience of chronological time, which in turn enables the work to demonstrate some transcendent, universal truth as opposed to simply a fixed moment of reality or creative inspiration. The overlapping of time periods is even visually apparent in Veronese’s *Feast in the House of Levi* through the artist’s insertion of Christ into a sixteenth-century setting, representing a system of anachronisms that, in a sense, validates the painting’s anachronic quality. In this way, its mere presence within *Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice* serves to compound the experience of multiple temporalities in Struth’s work. Furthermore, what effect does this kind of photographic reproduction have on the painting’s aura, on the message that it transmits to viewers, on its perceived historicity? Walter Benjamin, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” one of his most celebrated and repeatedly referenced essays, writes, “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject.” For Benjamin, these marks of history, the evidence of the accumulation of time, are only truly present in the original work. While Benjamin is potentially referring here to a more typical photographic reproduction—such as a duplication in a newspaper or other type of publication—his assertions regarding time and history remain relevant. The image of the *Feast in the House of Levi* within Struth’s photograph can be viewed as depreciating this “unique existence,” or the authenticity, of the painting itself; to see Veronese’s work, we no longer need to stand before the original in Venice. As Benjamin puts it, “Above all, [the reproduction] enables the original to meet the recipient halfway…The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium…is enjoyed in a private room.” The modern transmissibility and proliferation of images is, for this reason, a welcomed development in certain respects; however, the ability to view a copy of Veronese’s painting while sitting in an apartment in New York means we may believe we *know* the work, its story, its inspiration, its colors, while the details of its uniqueness are not so easily accessible. For many contemporary admirers of art and history, one of the great joys of viewing, in person, a historical work (or, in Alois Riegl’s view, a work or object possessing “age-value”) is the opportunity to
witness the passage of hundreds of years on the work itself, to see the details of the paint’s application, the marks of the artist’s own hand, to feel a kind of thrilling metaphysical communion with and direct connection to the artist, and by extension, the past itself—the impression, as Nagel and Wood describe it, “of time folding over on itself, the doubling of the fabric of experience.” Benjamin would argue that these experiences are simply not fully perceivable through a reproduction, that they are linked to the work’s aura and are part of what make the original unique and authentic. Moreover, according to Benjamin, the modern reproducibility of works is inextricably related to their dissemination and availability on a large-scale, universal level, both indicating and increasing “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things.” And, fittingly, this same concept is at the heart of Struth’s work as he documents the function of art in the public realm. By including in his shots historically significant auratic works, already familiar to many contemporary viewers through the existence of reproductions, Struth adeptly produces direct references to well-known paintings without making this aspect the primary focus of his photographs. In the words of curator Charles Wylie, Struth’s technique enables works like Veronese’s painting to function “as both agent and backdrop for the human dramas enacted in front of them.” In spite of the diminished aura, the lack of the genuine “here and now,” do we still receive the “signal” transmitted by Veronese’s Renaissance masterpiece through the veil of Struth’s Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice?

**Transmission of Information: Artistic Signals and Relays**

However fragmentary its condition, any work of art is actually a portion of arrested happening, or an emanation of past time.

-George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*

The influence of Benjaminian theory is found not only in Struth’s exploration of reproduced images in the public sphere, but also in his artistic attention to questions of history and the past. Benjamin’s 1940 essay, “On the Concept of History,” in which he utilizes poetic imagery and the lens of Marx’s concept of historical materialism to analyze the human experience of history and time, was a revelatory text for Struth during his days...
as a student. Benjamin regards our view of humankind’s progress throughout history as a kind of myth, and describes this “progress” as a storm, accompanied by a pile-up of dross and ruins, that forces us (symbolized by the “angel of history”), unseeing, into the future. This essay, in which Benjamin emphasizes the necessity for understanding the timeline of history, materialistically and conceptually, in order to effectively understand and function in the present, inspired Struth to maintain in his work a sense of “critical engagement with the past instead of ignoring or suppressing it in denial.”

This theme of grasping moments and objects that are chronologically of the past, yet endure and echo into the present and future, is of primary concern in George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time*. Kubler describes events and works of art as issuing a variety of signals that then serve to “recreate” the event, relay that signal again, and repeatedly transmit it for historians and future generations to catalog, interpret, and utilize. Paintings, in particular, send not only self-signals, via the characteristics unique to the medium, but also adherent signals, in the form of decipherable figures and iconography. The painting’s self-signal exists in its formation of textures and pigments on a canvas, which signifies it as a painting, while the adherent signals are expressed through representational forms and recognizable symbols. By reproducing the image of the *Feast in the House of Levi* and including it in his own photographic work, Struth contributes to the cycle of relaying the initial signal of Veronese’s work. Struth is, in this context, both a sender and a recipient of that signal: “Since the receiver of a signal becomes its sender in the normal course of historical transmission (e.g. the discoverer of a document usually is its editor), we may treat receivers and senders together under the heading of relays.” While Struth is, of course, not the “discoverer” in any literal sense of Veronese’s painting, by appropriating the *Feast in the House of Levi*, he functions as an “editor” of sorts. As described by Nagel and Wood, “The author does not simply deliver a preexisting packet of information but generates something that did not exist before.” One of the many features that make Struth’s museum photographs truly remarkable is the artist’s unique authorial role, through which he both delivers previously-generated signals and creates new ones. In Struth’s own words, one of his goals in the project of museum photographs was “to make a reproduction of a painted image and at the same time produce a new image in which real persons of today are shown.” What is the nature of the signal of Veronese’s painting as we receive it via Struth and
his photograph? It is significant that because of its status as a Renaissance masterpiece and its endurance through time, Veronese’s painting occupies its privileged position in the Gallerie dell’Accademia, and was therefore able to be included in Struth’s photograph. Despite the notion that the details of its historicity may not be legible via this reproduced image, the Veronese of Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice broadcasts certain meaningful signals nonetheless. For viewers who recognize and identify the specific painting in Struth’s photograph, it may conjure details regarding Veronese himself, the narrative of the depicted scene, the history of the work, the period of its creation, and so on. But even for those unfamiliar with the Feast in the House of Levi in particular, it is discernible to many that the displayed work is a painting, it is of the Renaissance, and it bears resemblance to scenes of the Last Supper. According to Kubler, the “existential value” of a painting is found in the relationship between both its self-signals and the adherent signals. Unlike Benjamin’s aura, these signals are not necessarily diminished by technological reproduction of the work of art; in fact, it could be argued that reproduction and dissemination of images of an artwork strengthen these signals, and perhaps even constitute a separate, additional signal. The image of the Feast in the House of Levi in Struth’s photographic semaphore emits perceivable signals that point to the past, convey a sense of historical value, and amplify the impression of the bending or folding of time. As previously argued, Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice is not simply a photo-replication of Veronese’s painting; as the title itself indicates, Struth’s photograph depicts the work within the context of its exhibition amid museum visitors at the Gallerie dell’Accademia, which carries a separate yet equally substantial set of implications and signals.

The Museum as Anachronic Heterotopia

In his essay “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault describes museums as “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time,” places that continuously acquire knowledge, things, and histories but are themselves “outside of time.” In this sense, the space of the museum itself could be described as anachronic. The institutional archive procures objects while striving to shield them from their own inherent vice, from the inevitable alteration and deterioration that occurs throughout
time. What is the experience of viewing a work of art (in our case, Veronese’s work) in the context of the museum, and how does Struth capture and convey that experience? In the words of Martin Heidegger, “[T]he works themselves stand and hang in collections and exhibitions. But are they here in themselves as the works they themselves are, or are they not rather here as objects of the art industry?”32 To return to Benjamin’s argument regarding aura, in the setting of the Gallerie dell’Accademia, visitors are able to view the painting and experience many of the work’s indelible marks of history and authenticity.33 To return to Benjamin’s argument regarding aura, in the setting of the Gallerie dell’Accademia, visitors are able to view the painting and experience many of the work’s indelible marks of history and authenticity.33 On one hand, Struth’s photograph could be viewed as a kind of documentation of the painting’s “exhibition value” superseding its “cult value,” described by Benjamin, between private, devotional appreciation of ritualistic art objects and their public consumption by the general population, which relates to Heidegger’s ruminative questions about the existence of artworks in exhibitions. On the other hand, to recall Kubler, the collector or curator acts, like Struth, as a relay for the painting’s signals: by appropriating the work into the archival space of the museum, its signal can be transmitted again and again. And while Veronese did not envision or intend this specific setting for his work upon its creation, that fact is itself a signal that is issued by way of the painting and its history. In this sense, Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice emits a kind of double-signal on behalf of Veronese: the photograph records the recipients of the signal who are themselves in the Gallerie dell’Accademia, while we, as viewers of Struth’s work, receive that signal, perhaps somewhat mediated, through the lens of the artist’s camera. By asking us to consider the role of the museum space, not just the objects within it, Struth offers a unique photographic contribution to the discourse of institutional critique, placing himself in the company of modern and postmodern artists engaged with the processes by which the “art industry” defines art and its parameters. Furthermore, the photograph allows us to identify with those visitors in the gallery—we can imagine the smell of that unique, nostalgic musk associated with museums and libraries and almost feel the chill within the overly air-conditioned space; we can imagine the awe of realizing that perhaps Veronese once stood in the very same relation to the painting as he surveyed his finished work. These sensations of potential “real” experience are inexpressible via a typical reproduction of Veronese’s painting, as it might appear in a book or elsewhere. As Roland Barthes writes in Camera Lucida, “[I]n Photography I can never deny that the
thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (emphasis Barthes’s).

In Struth’s photograph, there is a “there” there, so to speak: not only a sense of reality as understood by the photo’s indexicality, but also a sense of space and time and tangibility that serves as a unique and meaningful context for the Feast in the House of Levi.

The Test of Time: Duration of Signals through ‘A Bundle of Durations’

My goal has always been to address something more generalized than a specific historical moment. I would consider it a disadvantage if people looking at my street photographs were to think, “Oh, right, that’s a car from the eighties,” for example. I’m always more interested in making a picture the central image of which is still valid in 50 years.

-Thomas Struth, in conversation with Gil Blank

Unlike Veronese’s sixteenth-century masterpiece, Struth’s Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice was most likely conceived and executed with the intention that it would adorn the walls of a museum or gallery. Struth began the project of the museum photographs in the late 1980s, and the experience since then of observing them as independent works of art has inspired an absorbing and animated discourse. During Struth’s already lengthy and prolific career, he and his work have been the subject of numerous exhibitions, reviews, and interviews. While it is reasonable to claim that what is truly at stake in Struth’s work is, to a certain extent, open to interpretation, scholars and curators agree that his museum photos represent an unusual and manifold relation to time and history. As Maria Morris Hambourg and Douglas Eklund see it, Galleria dell’Accademia 1, Venice “shuttles back and forth” between 1573, 1992, and “the perpetual present of the viewer,” and this in turn avers the claim that the museum photos “bridge the gulf between present and past, self and world.” In a review of the exhibition “Thomas Struth: 1977-2002,” Charles W. Haxthausen writes that Struth’s images depict “contemporary subjects contemplating painted representations of earlier cultures, and are intended to provoke our reflection on our own process as historically determined viewers.”

Haxthausen, too, references George Kubler, in
describing Struth's works as “a bundle of durations.” In addition to the multiple signals and time-traveling at work in *Galleria dell'Accademia 1, Venice*, there exists a seemingly more personal aspect, as Charles Wylie describes Struth as able “to communicate the complexities of our present moment of perpetual change,” and to capture “viewers in search of what they feel art can bring them.”

In an essay devoted expressly to Struth’s museum photographs, Hans Belting poses some thought-provoking questions regarding our perception of these works:

As we now stand in front of Struth’s large-format photographs we are repeating the same behavioral patterns as the people in front of the paintings. Do we perceive the photos only as works in their own genre and as works of a famous photographer, or do we attempt to solve the riddle of perception that lies concealed within the ambiguity of picture and viewer?

Identifying potential solutions to this riddle may be a lengthy and circuitous process, but it is nevertheless rewarding—after all, many would agree that this kind of contemplation is one of the primary pleasures in the study of art. A final question to consider: what might be the effect of yet another artist photographing (or even filming) Struth’s photos, as he photographed paintings? The resulting artwork would undoubtedly further complicate the already convoluted dialogue between times, places, and mediums, creating a kind of visual and temporal *mise-en-abyme*, or a Russian-doll arrangement of self-reflexive works; however, it is difficult to imagine that such a piece would match the level of enterprising creativity found in Struth’s own photographs.

Thomas Struth’s anachronic work represents a rather elaborate stratification of space and time, and the transmission of multiple signals that originate at different points in history. The references to and echoes of specific moments, and the complexity of their organization, prevent *Galleria dell'Accademia 1, Venice* from remaining anchored to one particular date or period. Ultimately, however, what we as viewers and recipients can gain from Struth’s innovative, inspiring images and his earnest artistic objectives is the opportunity to witness the undeniable, arresting power of art, and to experience that power for ourselves.
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Endnotes

4 Nagel and Wood, 13.
5 Ibid., 8.
7 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 9.


14 Nagel and Wood, 9.


16 Ibid., 21-22.


18 Nagel and Wood, 9.


20 See Wylie, 152.

21 Ibid.


25 Morris Hambourg and Eklund, 159.

26 See Kubler, 24-25.

27 Ibid., 21.

28 Nagel and Wood, 15.


30 Kubler, 25.


Ibid., 25.


Blank and Struth, 15.

Wylie, 152.

Morris Hambourg and Eklund, 157. This idea was originally used to describe Thomas Struth’s *Louvre IV, Paris*, photographed in 1989 and depicting Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, painted in 1819.

Ibid., 156.


Ibid., 587.

Wylie, 155.

Ibid., 152.


**Works Cited**


