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The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher

Blake Stimson

Bernd and Hilla Becher first began their still-ongoing project of systematically photographing industrial structures – water towers, blast furnaces, gas tanks, mine heads, grain elevators and the like –in the late 1950s.[1] The seemingly objective and scientific character of their project was in part a polemical return to the 'straight' aesthetics and social themes of the 1920s and 1930s in response to the gooey and sentimental subjectivist photographic aesthetics that arose in the early post-war period. This latter position was epitomised in Germany by the entrepreneurial, beauty-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder humanism of Otto Steinert's *subjektive fotografie* – '"Subjective photography",' wrote Steinert in his founding manifesto, 'means humanised, individualised photography' – and globally by the one-world humanism of *The Family of Man*.[2] While many photographers followed Robert Frank's critical rejoinder and depicted the seamier, chauvinistic underbelly of the syrupy universalisms advocated for by Steichen and Steinert, the Bechers simply rejected it and returned to an older, pre-war paradigm (fig.1).

Fig.1
Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher
Pitheads 1974

That they were responding critically does not mean, however, that the Bechers were not working at the same crossroads between man and machine that had differently concerned Steichen, Steinert, Frank and many others at the time. 'The idea,' they said once, 'is to make families of objects,' or, on another occasion, 'to create families of motifs' – objects or motifs, that is, they continued, 'that become humanised and destroy one another, as in Nature where the older is devoured by the[3] newer.' Their brute oedipal definition of the family form aside, this is not so different from the relations established between Steichen's motifs – lovers, childbirth, mothers and children, children playing, disturbed children, fathers and sons, etc., etc. – nor, for that matter, is it all that different from the narrative relations established by Frank shooting from the hip as he did fleeing from one roadside encounter to another, from one flag or jukebox or political rally or civic parade to another and another and another.

Like these predecessors, the Bechers have been concerned from the beginning more with what Kevin Lynch called 'a pattern of sequential experiences,' that is with a process that connects one image or one encounter or one object to the next and the next and the next ('as in Nature,' they say), rather than using photography to exercise the analytical powers of isolation, definition and classification or even detailed description and understanding.[4] As much as we might want them to be, the photographs 'are not illustrations,' notes one observer flatly, but instead render their subject 'by means of the network of photographs;' when the images are viewed together they provide, he continued, 'an anatomy lesson,' that is an account of the relations between constituent parts.[5] Or, putting this idea of network or system or series or sequence in more historical terms, a more critical observer wrote of their project: 'The Bechers are interested in the character implicit in a façade, just the way Sander was in the character implicit in a face,' but then adds, indicating the crossroads we have already begun to consider here, 'I cannot help regarding these pictures as macabre monuments to human self-distortion in the name of social reason – all-too-human structures that are ridiculously social.'[6] It is only in viewing these structures in the serial form given by the Bechers that both the 'all-too-human' character, or the particularity of each, and the 'ridiculously social' conformity to their archival schema is revealed. Working objectivity against subjectivity, one comportment against the other and then back again, the Bechers have found the motor for their epic in an elastic liminal bearing that continually bounds between sides, between a cool, quasi-disembodied objectivity and a hot subjective comportment that speaks of its own history and desire in its bearing toward the world.

That said, their project did draw its original vitality from two prewar influences, and both would seem to locate their ambition elsewhere – that is, strictly on the side of what was once called the New Objectivity with nothing in common with the postwar subjectivist enterprises of Steichen or Steinert or Frank. The first of these prewar influences was the systematic, pseudo-scientific studies of Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, and, particularly, August Sander whose life-project making sociological portraits of Germans from all classes and occupations provided the methodological and affective structure for the Bechers' own typological procedure and a logical alternative to the affective load given alternately in the sentimental identification and scornful disidentification adopted by their humanist predecessors. The second major influence, the source for the distinctive subject matter they chose to apply Sander's system to, was the industrial iconography popular with many photographers and artists in the 1920s and 1930s. They might have had in mind one of the many well-known photographs by Renger-Patzsch, such as his *Intersecting Braces of a Truss Bridge* from 1928, for example, but it could have just as well been photography

by Charles Sheeler or Margaret Bourke-White or László Moholy-Nagy or many, many others equally and less well known.

Just to recall a key influence from a history that is well known to any student of the Bechers, scientific method, industrial subject matter and the mechanical advantage of photography – to varying degrees among their Machine Age forebears from around the industrialised world and across the political spectrum – all drew on and supported a challenge to the perceived anachronism of aestheticism and subjectivism and promised a new place and new importance for artists in the modern world. That ambition was developed in many places – for example by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1928 when he wrote: 'Art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and so long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deceptions . Every modern cultured man must make war against art as against opium.' The antidote to such decadent self-deception and weak-willed addiction, he concluded in a rather overwrought directive, was as simple as it was modern: 'Photograph and be photographed!' [7] Not all members of the once-labelled 'engineer generation' were as antipathetic to the older ideals as Rodchenko (Renger-Patzsch, for one, sought something more like reconciliation between modern life and art and set himself against such modernist polemics particularly as they were developed in Germany by Moholy-Nagy) but all did share in the claim for photography's machine-age advantage, responsibility and entitlement.[8] All agreed that representation needed to be mechanical if it was to be modern, all agreed that art needed to be somehow sober, objective, *sachlich*, at a remove from any simple expressiveness unto itself and at a remove from any claim that the art object might be a bearer of value in and of itself.

More broadly still, of course, this tension between art as an autonomous and self-contained value, on the one hand, and modern life, on the other, has regularly given definition and distinction to the social role played by photography throughout its history. From the beginning, photography was not only a passive product or sign or symptom of modernity but also worked actively as an engine of modernisation. Beginning already with its official, state-sponsored birth in 1839 both civic duty and marketplace opportunity alike were pinned to its capacity for bringing vision as an ideal and visual representation as a material resource into the workaday world of the masses, for bringing visual imagination up to speed with the ever-accelerating, ever-expanding industrial revolution and thereby modernizing the archaic, pseudo-religious, would-be aristocratic presumption of art in its new role as herald of the private life of the bourgeois subject.

This mantle trumpeted by the Machine Age photographers and regularly assumed by photography generally is carried forward in the Bechers' work, albeit complexly. While their career has been almost exclusively a function of the international art market and art publishing industry and the German art education system, their photographic studies regularly have been characterised as'industrial archaeology' or 'a contribution to the social history of industrial work' and are routinely assumed to support such extra-artistic ambitions and accomplishments. These assumptions are misleading, however: their photographs offer little social-historical or archaeological interpretation and they do not detail the particulars of design, operation and social function that might be useful for such areas of study.[9] They are completely upfront about this: 'Things which can be interesting for technical historians, certain machines for example, are not visually interesting for us.'[10] Indeed, they often go to great lengths to ensure the absence of the sort of detail that would be of interest to technical historians or social historians or historians of any sort really: 'We want to offer the audience a point of view, or rather a grammar, to understand and compare the different structures,' they have said, 'Through photography, we try to arrange these shapes and render them comparable. To do so, the objects must be isolated from their context and freed from all association.'[11] When

they have tried collaborating with historians, for example, it hasn't worked out at all: 'They wanted to write a text, and garnish their text with our photos,' complained Bernd about their experimentation with such a role in the late 1960s. 'They couldn't imagine that photographs could stand on their own. They wanted to give it a scientific basis,' objected Hilla. 'It was quite dreadful,' continued Bernd. 'It was a bad experience,' Hilla agreed, 'Working with them, we felt for the first time that we weren't free.'[12]

   They do employ a method, like much historical or archaeological analysis, that is strict in its consistency and pure in its sense of purpose but that purpose avoids'context' and 'association' by design and thus has little to offer understanding in the manner traditionally given by such extra-artistic, analytically-minded aims that are the province of historians and archaeologists. Their more properly artistic characterisations of the structures they photograph – 'anonymous sculptures,' as they termed it in 1969, for example, and 'basic forms' or 'Grundformen,' in 1999 – suggest a more useful understanding of their project by drawing us away from the simpler, more transparent notion of representation assumed in such archaeological and social historical characterisations and throwing us into the murkier waters of the aesthetic.

Fig.2
Andreas Gursky
Centre Georges Pompidou 1995
Tate. Presented by Herzog and de Meuron, architects of Tate Modern 2000
© DACS, 2002
⊞ View in Tate Collection

   The Bechers have emerged as a leading influence in postwar art history, not only for their own work and its interweaving with other artistic developments such as Minimalism and Conceptual Art, but also, particularly in the last decade, for the extension of their project by a string of extraordinarily successful students. (see fig.2) [13] Indeed, the 'point of view' or 'grammar' developed by the Bechers has gained a significant measure of dominance within contemporary art practice. My effort here will be to read that 'grammar' as embodied expression, as a form of 'comportment' or bearing toward the world, and as such as a sign or symptom of a social relation. The distinctive orientation and determination of that photographic body language or photographic comportment, which in the Becher scholarship is sometimes said to be found midway 'between distance and proximity,' has taken on imposing proportions in the epic continuity of their own work and in the stilled grandeur seemingly discovered anew by their students again and again and again in settings ranging from the properly grand all the way down the food chain of discrimination to the properly banal. Indeed, comporting oneself to see the world in this way – to see it grandly without caring about that grandeur – may be said to be their legacy. 'Mr. Struth operates from a chilly peak, where the air is thin,' writes one critic about the best known of the Becher students. 'Standing before the

photographs of museums and churches and mobs of tourists, we can become absorbed by the chaos of culture, sacred places made profane. In the forest, we acquiesce to the spiritual pleasure of solitude. We turn inward, breathing slowly.'[14]

Considering the strong debt of this comportment to various artistic developments of the 1920s and 1930s, its powerfully disciplined elaboration as a form by the Bechers themselves in the 1950s and 1960s and its artworld success in the work of their students in 1980s and 1990s, I shall be asking how it has been able to, 'at a stroke,' in the words of one philosopher of comportment, 'incorporate the past into the present and weld that present to a future.'[15] Such an inquiry, it can be said, is the task of the historian generally, or perhaps it should be – that is, 'not to moralizse about remembering and forgetting' – this is Anson Rabinbach writing about the question of postwar Germans coming to terms with their recent history in order to consider historical method more broadly – 'but to identify the ways that certain metaphoric pasts can be cathected to contemporary events.'[16] The Bechers have taken up a particular past and rearticulated it with a new and different force in the present; they have, as Rabinbach puts it, cathected a politically and morally charged myth of the past to contemporary events. Framing the problem more narrowly around photography, we can ask how the Bechers have conveyed its Enlightenment promise of rigor and transparency and progress, its grand bid to 'make war against art as against opium,' as Rodchenko put it, into the present. One answer to this question that we need to consider in order to get at the characteristic bearing in their work and the legacy of that bearing in the work of their students is whether the Enlightenment promise long assumed to be the distinctive charter of photography has been inverted or returned to its homeland category of art, that is, to the same category it had originally taken as its adversary or other.

In order to flesh out the details of this bearing or comportment I shall be working between three separate attitudes that each can be said to be driving the Becher project: *commitment* or faithfulness to a project or position, first of all, *delight* or simple pleasure taken in the world, secondly, and then, third, *enlightenment* or the appeal to a universal human standard such as reason. Each of these attitudes or perspectives is given its own section in what follows but the goal in the end will be to bring all three together into a common understanding of the conviction or pleasure or truth that endows their work with its forceful and compelling sense of purpose.

Commitment

The most obvious feature of the Bechers' project is its disciplined commitment to a singular vision – a commitment that has been consistent over nearly half a century's duration, consistent across many different countries and regions, and consistent from each to the next of many thousands of photographs. As one critic has put it, the pattern of 'rhythms and repetitions' established between the individual pictures (and, we might add, between individual series as well) is 'very much the idea of the work.'[17] Such, the artists have admitted, is their goal – 'to produce a more or less perfect chain of different forms and shapes' – and, indeed, something like this 'perfect chain' or pattern of serial rhythms and repetitions is the initial impression given to the beholder when facing a Becher installation or book for the first time or when moving from one to the next of any of their twelve books – from *Water Towers* to *Framework Houses* to *Gas Tanks* to *Industrial Landscapes*, for example – or in and between any of the numerable exhibition catalogues.[18]

Their system is based on a rigorous set of procedural rules: a standardised format and ratio of figure to ground, a uniformly level, full-frontal view, near-identical flat lighting conditions or the approximation of such conditions in the photographic processing, a consistent lack of human presence, a consistent use of the restricted chromatic spectrum offered by black and white

photography rather than the broad range given by colour, precise uniformity in print quality, sizing, framing and presentation, and a shared function for all the structures photographed for a given series. There is another obvious rule too, although one their project might be said to systematically ignore – their industrial history is exclusively and resolutely a history of the west. We need make only the most rudimentary comparisons to see that theirs is a project about modernisation not globalisation and so does not detail, or even allude to, the geopolitical ambitions and conflicts that drive the process.[19] (fig.3) They do not, for example, group the images by geographic or historical categories, which would bring a more detailed historical consciousness to bear on the material at hand, nor do they depict or, generally, otherwise consider the workers and others involved with the structures they represent, nor, even, do they arrange the pictures in a manner that would chronicle the development of their project. The term they generally use to describe their method is'typological' and they freely state that it has'much to do with the 19th century,' that is, they say, with 'the encyclopaedic approach' used, for example, in botany or zoology or, we might add, psychology and criminology.[20] Indeed, we might say more broadly, their system is based precisely on the principle of the archive – its 'dry compartmentalisation', as Allan Sekula has put it – that so concerned Michel Foucault.
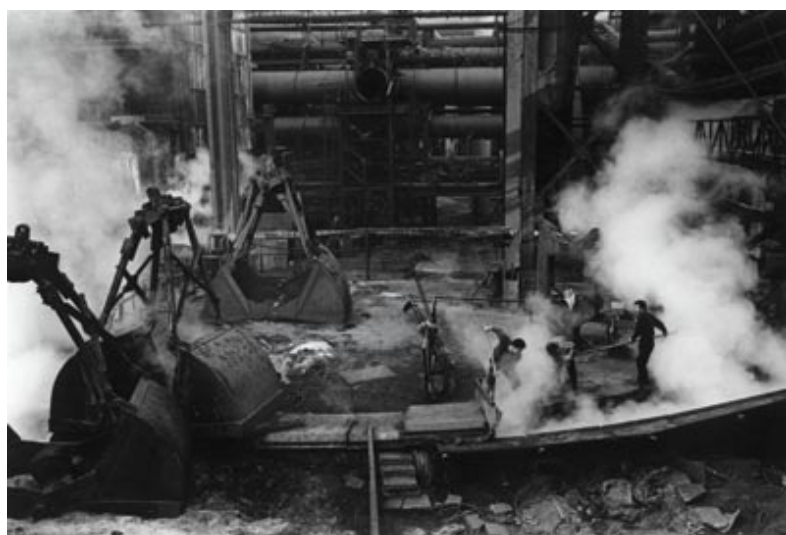

Fig.3
Hai Zhou
Beijing China, 1997
This photograph shows an outlet for flushing waste materials from an iron-smelting furnace at the Capital Steel factory, Beijing. Three workers, migrants from rural areas, are retrieving waste iron using a magnet on the end of a bamboo pole. None is employed as a full-time member of staff at this factory.

While an individual Becher photograph seen on its own without attribution could be mistaken easily as the sort of transparent illustration used in trade journals or annual reports, for example, or in books on the history or design of industrial architecture, the same photograph seen in its intended setting alongside tens or hundreds of nearly identical others could not support any similar instrumental goal. While it is true that it is'only through their participation in a system of presentation, under the model of the archive, that the single images gain a significance which is larger than their particular instances,' as one observer puts it, the kind of significance given by this systematisation is different.[21] Unlike similar approaches used in botany or zoology, for example, the cumulative effect of the typological method as it is applied in the Bechers' life-project does not provide greater knowledge of the processes or history of their subject. Instead, the use of rhythm and repetition endows the buildings they photograph with the 'anonymity' or abstract form they seek rather than with scientific specificity (by divorcing meaning from original purpose and everyday social function) and, in turn, allows us to read them ahistorically and extra-socially and appreciate them as autonomous aesthetic objects or 'sculpture.'

This distinctive method of cultivating aesthetic response is consistent with the 1920s and 1930s project of aesthetic appropriation of scientific or systemic method, but it is also different. Perhaps the most significant measure of difference between the Bechers and their forebears is artistic ambition. I am going to briefly review the well-known aims circulating through much of the prewar work to establish a backdrop for my discussion of how the Bechers have helped to both uphold and transform that heritage.

At those moments when it was most full of itself, the 'New Vision' (as it was called in the pre-eminent artistic slogan of the day) was to render intelligible and help propagate a new social order based on mass production, mass politics and mass media. This mission offered artists a sense of social significance that the profession had not enjoyed since its days in the court. Suddenly, as one memoirist has recounted in a conventional piece of critical wisdom from the period, 'the artist was deprived not of his social acceptance but of his isolation. This social isolation had been a by-product of the Industrial Revolution, as typical and pernicious as slums, mechanisation and unemployment. . Montmartre, Schwabing, Bloomsbury, and Greenwich Village were expressions as typical of nineteenth-century mentality as Wall Street, Lloyds of London, La Bourse, and Das kaiserliche Berlin.'[22] At its grandest, artists of the industrializing world in the 1920s and 1930s believed that by taking up photography as a medium, industry as a theme, and science as a method they were abandoning the bohemian ghettos and would, once again, occupy positions at the centre of social life by working as designers and propagandists for the emerging political class.

What gave artists renewed confidence and ambition was a new understanding of patronage that had been made possible by the revolutions of the 1910s. Instead of decorating the private mansions of individual bankers or businessmen, artists were hired by revolutionary governments in Russia and Mexico and patronised by communist parties in much of the rest of the industrialised world to make art that spoke about and addressed itself to the working masses. This vision took root in the 1920s with artists fancying themselves as Taylorist engineers or planners and was gradually retooled by the 1930s for duties on the other side of the labour/management divide as artists came to see themselves in the figure of the industrial worker. This new sense of significance and anticipation of an emerging audience and market quickly impressed itself upon most of the developing movements of the period regardless of whether the political conditions existed to actually support such ambition. At the heart of this transformed self-consciousness was the assumption that the world was being remade through mass production and mass politics and artists, as the engineers and labourers of visual form, were to be key players developing the mass culture that would drive both fronts of modernisation.

A rich sense of this anticipated social role was given in a series of statements by the Russian-born, Berlin-trained, New York-based, Precisionist-turned-Social Realist Louis Lozowick on the changing status of the artist in the Soviet Union. 'To say that art has been encouraged in the Soviet Union is to make a true but tame statement about the actual situation,' he reported in 1936 to his peers at the First American Artists' Congress in New York. 'Of course art has been encouraged,' he continued. 'Artists are considered part of the vast army of workers, physical and mental and as such an indispensable factor in the socialist reconstruction of the country. Full members in trade unions, the artists carry insurance against sickness, accident and unemployment. They are consulted on every issue that vitally affects the country. When we read, for example, of such vast projects as the ten year plan for the complete rebuilding of Moscow, the most gigantic scheme of city planning in history, we are not surprised to find artists actively cooperating.'[23]

Still today the Bechers' work (and its legacy in the art of their successful students) makes reference to this phantasm from the prewar past. Unlike their artist-cum-engineer-cum-worker

predecessors, however, the Bechers' sensibility relies on melancholy rather than innovation or allegiance to make its point: tied to the loss of an idealised past, their work gains its emotional power, its expressive force as art, from the extent to which it conveys that sense of loss to the beholder. Their photographs present us with a transformed image of the avant-garde ambitions of the 1920s and 1930s: in their view, the great industrial structures that served as monuments to the 'gigantic schemes' of collective life, monuments to technological, social and political modernisation, have aged and are now empty of all but memory of the ambition they once housed. Likewise, their postwar rehashing of the 'New Vision' is now drained of all but memory of the heroic affect that went along with artists' sense of their own 'indispensable' contribution. They have stated their position outright: 'We don't agree with the depiction of buildings in the 20s and 1930s. Things were seen either from above or below which tended to monumentalise the object. This was exploited in terms of a socialistic view – a fresh view of the world, a new man, a new beginning.'[24]

This postwar critique of the New Vision and related artistic ambitions of the prewar past is generally consistent across an entire generation of artists and intellectuals whose historically distinct form of criticality continues to serve as a foundation for the range of critical perspectives available to us today. We do not have to go far for such testimony – witness, for example, Michel Foucault in one of his most-cited essays: we 'know from experience,' he writes, 'that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions . . . to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.'[25] The Bechers, like many of their contemporaries, have made an obsession of this disagreement with the past. By returning to those views again and again and again for nearly half a century with even greater sobriety, even greater assiduousness, even greater industry than the *Neue Sachlichkeit* that inspired them, by shooting the grand icons of the Machine Age 'straight-on' so they do not, they have claimed, 'hide or exaggerate or depict anything in an untrue fashion,' by committing themselves to an ethic of representation free of bogus political elevation or degradation, they realise one leg of their generation's postmodern affect.[26] In so doing, the Bechers' commitment sits wedged between a passionate, trance-like fascination with the great progressive democratic ambitions of modernism and an equally ardent renunciation.

Such is the Bechers' burden, their ethic: a dogmatic commitment to a form of representation that is somehow free of ideology, free of a 'socialistic view' or the view of any other doctrine or ism. But commitment is really only one part of what is given by their strong sense of order, by the 'rhythms and repetitions' that form their project and so now we turn to the second part, that is, to the evident delight taken by their work in the play of form.

Delight

The promise of the aesthetic as a realm of experience separate from the instrumental thinking of daily life has served many different purposes over the years since it was first elaborated by the Enlightenment philosophers. It has given rise, for example, to the ideal of 'publicness' – in German, *Öffentlichkeit* – or a public sphere of proto-political discourse independent of undue influence from church, state and, later, the marketplace. 'It provided the training ground for critical public reflection' is how Habermas once described it; art and the experience it provided were 'claimed as a serviceable topic of discussion through which a [newly] publicly-oriented subjectivity communicated with itself' rather than achieving its political being only 'in the service of a patron.'[27] So too, the aesthetic has long given rise to the contrary ideal of a bohemian preserve where a delicately cultivated aristocratic balance of taste and tastelessness, convention and transgression,

suffers the brute indifference and smug naiveté of its bourgeois audience.

The Bechers' transformation of the iconography and methodology of social ambition from the 1920s and 1930s into 'anonymous sculptures' relies just as much as their forebears on this counterpoint between aesthetic and instrumental world views, but they do so oppositely. Theirs is no war against the opiate of the elite, as Rodchenko had advocated. They have made themselves and their audience into connoisseurs of an industrial past providing us all with opportunity for unexpected visual delectation, with opportunity to delight in the play of fine distinctions and subtle variations between the appearances of many different structures that all perform the same instrumental function. [28] They offer their audience the opportunity, as one viewer has testified, for example, to delight in 'differences in composition, rhythm and formal solutions where an ordinarily distracted eye would see only indifference and standardisation.' 'I love Bernd and Hilla Becher's work,' he says, 'this is genuinely great art, the kind that has no need to have its name protected by being placed in a museum, because it already belongs to our collective memory.'[29] Collectively, in other words, there work constitutes a masterpiece. In the words of another viewer, the Bechers' work is said to allow us 'to regard a single line of rivets as equally significant a marking as a full-blown mannerist conceit.'[30] In so doing, they revitalise the claims of taste and tastelessness by exercising those claims on the turf of instrumental reason, that is, by making art out of industry.

One interpretation of their contribution, one that has deep roots in modernist critical theory, might argue that such connoisseurship represents nothing more than the aestheticisation of politics, nothing more than the transformation of a publicly oriented sensibility into a rarefied product aimed at an elite market that ambivalently and obsessively draws succor from an earlier, more political moment for its legitimation. 'Their work is a fraud,' a certain school of critic might once have alleged, 'a mere *neo*-avantgarde.' Andreas Huyssen, for example, has made a broader statement that might be torn from its original circumstance and retrofitted to this concern, particularly if we grant the Bechers nothing more than their disaffected pastiche of the past: 'The obsessive attempts to give utopia a bad name,' he writes, 'remain fundamentally ideological and locked in a discursive battle with residual and emerging utopian thinking in the here and now.'[31] Another, more openhanded interpretation, however, might see that same act of aestheticisation as in its own way liberating, as both cathartic and invigorating, as an attempt to serve equally two pressing and contradictory concerns: to both remember and let go of a failed political program and failed attempt to upgrade artists' social status in the name of the possibility for other, more viable investments. As such, the unexpected finery afforded by the Bechers, the part of their work that declares itself to be art in the most conventional decorative or ornamental sense, the systemic delight in the play of form, might well be valued (even, perhaps, by that group one critic has labelled 'the last partisans of the avant-garde') as something more than mere decadence or self-indulgence or anti-utopianism: that is, as a refuge from political cynicism for an age in which such refuge is often unavailable.[32]

This question about the place of the aesthetic in the Bechers' work can also be phrased in more general terms: how is it that we move beyond the critical negation of failed political attachments from the past? How can old commitments – the old 'socialistic views,' for example – be rendered sympathetic beyond their inadequacy, heroic beyond their failing, forward looking beyond their obsolescence, cherished beyond not being believed?[33] The issue here thus is one of political memory, of a 'talking cure' for false consciousness, of how the political past is negotiated within our sense of the present and how that settlement inhabits the realm of the aesthetic. In light of such a question, the Bechers' mastery of their craft and the obsessiveness of their fascination – their tight, standardised formal rigor and their fixed commitment to a gruelling, life-long study – might be prized precisely for the way the aesthetic appeal of its form can serve to dislodge an earlier political

ideal from its place under the weight of protracted repression and anxiety in the present in order to be re-seated in a position of simpler, less-freighted distinction in the past. The distinguishing beauty of their work, thus, would not be found in the way it shares our period's still-vital critical distance from the old utopianisms, the old 'programs for a new man' and the like – at least not on its own – but instead in its seemingly indefatigable preservationist impulse, in its attempt to hold on to and find delight in the great beleaguered promise of the modernist past over and above the critique of that past that is still vital in the present.

It is the fantasy life of this work, its capacity to take delight in an opening in the past that leads forward into the future, then, that might be said to have sustained it and driven its rhythm and repetition onwards, maintaining its commitment to producing nearly the same picture over and over and over again for almost half a century. Bernd Becher was clear about his fascination in a 1969 interview: 'These things are so full of fantasy there is absolutely no sense in trying to paint them; I realised that no artist could have made them better,' he said, 'This is purely economic architecture. They throw it up, they use it, they misuse it, they throw it away.' [34] A term the artists return to periodically is 'nomadic architecture:' the structures are 'not like the pyramids,' they have said, they are not 'for eternity.' [35] Their vision is of an architecture free of the burden of culture, free of the burden of identity: 'An Italian gasometer does not look Italian and a Chinese blast furnace does not look Chinese,' they have said, and it is this form of looking that is so appealing; it is this form of looking that delights. [36]

The strongest reference for identity-thinking for anyone growing up in Germany during the war, of course, would be the construction of Germanness and its others and this was formative for the Bechers: 'the industrial world is completely divorced from' such identity thinking, from Nazism, Bernd has said, 'It has absolutely nothing to do with ideology. It corresponds more to the pragmatic English way of thinking.' As the artists note, their nineteenth-century approach itself, like the structures they photograph, is drawn from 'the soul of industrial thought.' Method and subject matter, form and content, serve as reciprocal homologous support for each other: just as with industry, so photography in their hands is assumed to be 'by its very nature free of ideology.' [37] This sense of freedom, this delight in the industrial as an alternative to ideology, is the engine sustaining their distinctive photographic comportment.

All the end-of-ideology claims that developed in the 1950s like the Bechers' were born of similar assumptions. Each arose with a theory of ideology based on the principle of identity – as in Nazi ideology, for example, or Communist ideology – and any cultural development that weakened or diluted identity was understood to do so as well to the ideology that sustained that identity. As Raymond Aron put it the same year the Bechers embarked on their project, for example, ideology was supposed to draw its authority from 'the longing for a purpose, for communion with the people, for something controlled by an idea or a will.' [38] This identity-thesis was embraced across a wide political spectrum from Aron leftward and in many respects it continues to form our own moment now. But it is important for our purposes to recall how this model of ideology was different from that first developed by Marx, which, after all, was the model that subtended the ambitions of the engineer generation and that, in principle, was returned to in the postwar critical rejoinder of the Bechers.

What the modernists of the 1920s and 1930s had wanted was a kind of materialist foothold that would sustain the progressive development of identity – in social planning, in the machine, in their productivism itself – and that could hold its own against the vagaries of taste in a world increasingly dominated by consumerism. Such consumerism was a big part of the modernity of artists like Rodchenko, Moholy, Renger-Patzsch and others, of course, but as a group they had no aspiration

for an anti-aesthetic per se (as would later be the case with Pop Art and other developments in the 1960s, for example), no aspiration to abandon the claims of science, no aspiration for negation that rested on its own laurels. In the Marxian schema that they had inherited, the very moment that ideology in its identity-based sense is said to be negated is itself the turning point into ideology proper or the moment when, as the Communist Manifesto put it famously, 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned' and identity is given over to process, social relations are given over to relations between things and politics is given over to economics: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.'[39]

This type of ideology is given not by propagandists and ideologists – in an important sense there can be no such thing as a capitalist Goebbels – but is given instead always already right in the technology. 'Modern Industry never views or treats the existing form of production process as the definitive one,' Marx wrote. That is, it can never be established as doctrine. As such, he continued, it is 'revolutionary' and opposed to all earlier modes of production: 'By means of machinery, chemical processes and other methods, it is continually transforming not only in the technical basis of production, but also the functions of the worker and the social combinations of the labor process.. [It] incessantly throws masses of capital and of workers from one branch of production to another.'[40] This movement is the 'nomadic' quality of modern industry that the Bechers rely on to make their point – it is this, they say, that is 'like nature' – and their ambitious project speaks equally to Marx's account of industry as progressive social change as it does to his account of it as bearer of false consciousness, alienation and exploitation.[41]

The Bechers work this boundary between promise and threat differently, however: their project provides a systematic manner of viewing the world that wagers its own system of value, and thereby its distinctive form of autonomy, against its architectural subject: where the architecture promises pure instrumentality, they provide a purity of aesthetic form. As such, while their work makes its own claim to be free of ideology, its own claim to being apolitical, it does so differently than does the industry they photograph. Their method as artists is to pit one modern form against another, to pit the nomadism of aesthetic delight against the nomadism of industry, to pit the (idealistic, German) soul of aesthetic experience against the (pragmatic, English) 'soul of industrial thought.' In so doing they have produced a full-blown nineteenth-century archive exactly in the manner that Foucault would describe. It is an archive not of bodies but of machines, however, not of the formal, physiognomic variations of deviance but of industriousness, not of those discarded by modernity but of that modernity has shed of itself.[42] The delight offered by their art – in its machinic rhythms and repetitions, in the play of form across the registers of its objectivity and systematicity – is therefore realised only *against* the revolutionary promise of the modern industry it depicts. It is a view of industrial history as if it were nature, as if it were an organic process unto itself, as if it were a slide show or a picture book flipping from one image to the next and the next and the next. The structures 'come and go almost like nature,' they have said, 'This was interesting for us.'[43]

Enlightenment

Art and industry, thus, stand opposed in the Bechers' work in a manner different from, even contrary to, their Machine-Age forebears: put schematically, their project is one of aestheticizing industry rather than industrialising art. This, it might be said, is the other leg of postmodernism in their work, the way in which it engages in the play of signification with diminished concern for its attachment to some properly material reality. This is also the way in which it plays with and

transforms the *Neue Sachlichkeit* legacy of documentary photography with its 'socialistic view,' its core critical materialist mandate of author-as-producer reportage.
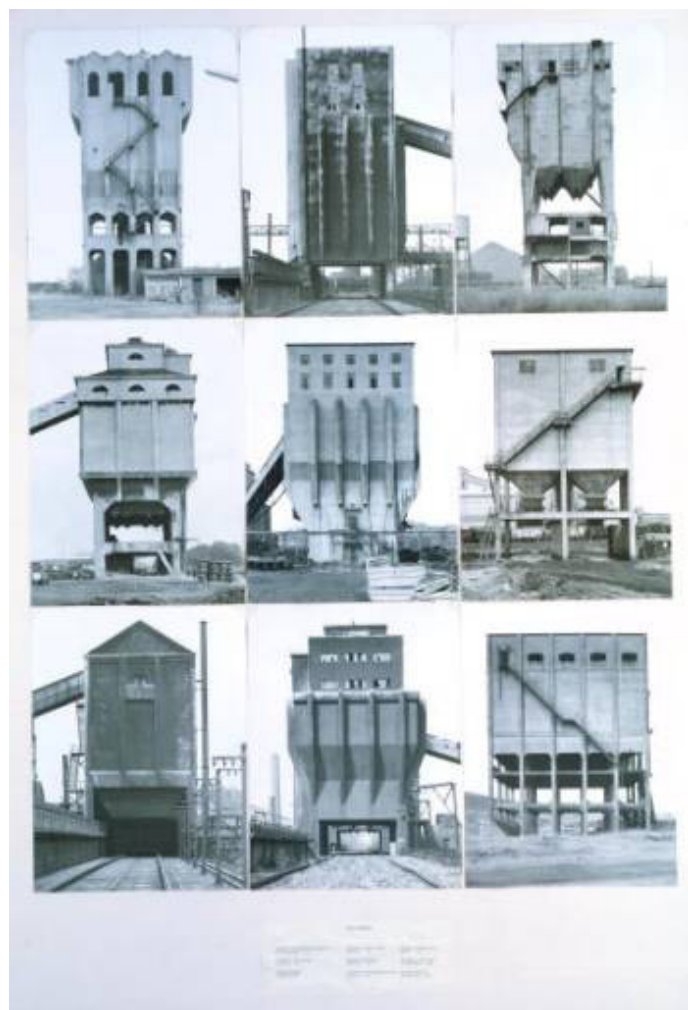

Fig.4
Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher
Coal Bunkers 1974
Tate. Purchased 1974
© Bernd & Hilla Becher
⊞ View in Tate Collection

But this turn away from modernism's politicised vision of industry is in no way the whole story. Art and industry also rely on a common foundation in the Bechers' work, and it is this that can be said to be its continued embrace of modernism, its faith in the power of representation to reveal and comprehend the hidden material conditions of the world it addresses, its faith in the project of Enlightenment. Even though the Bechers' work distances itself from most of the affective attachments of the engineer-cum-worker ideal of their forebears, it does share with that ideal (in a manner that is fully modern) faith in the more abstract aim of *system*. (fig.4) Their work cares little for the mimicking of the consumer world and the consumer's vision that emerged as a program side-by-side with theirs in the various pre-Pop and Pop movements of the 1950s and early 1960s. In this way they are very different from their contemporary Gerhard Richter, for example, with whom they are often compared (fig.5). Like Richter, theirs is a cool vision, detached from maudlin sentiments of all kinds, political or otherwise, but, unlike Richer, that detachment is not founded on irony and the pleasure taken in their project is not the consumer's pleasure of expenditure without return, of process without aim. Indeed, it might be said, if there is one thing the Becher project is more than anything else, one thing that distinguishes it from the core critical motif of their pop-culturalist contemporaries, it is the apparent earnestness with which it embraces systematicity, the way in which it holds onto modernism's seriousness of purpose and concentration of aim even as

it abandons the purpose or aim itself.

Fig.5
Gerhard Richter
Elizabeth 1966
Tate. Purchased 1988
© Gerhard Richter
⊞ View in Tate Collection

What then has this residual modernist ideal of systematicity meant for the Bechers and their audiences, and what might it mean for us now? What, in the end, is the value of their archive? What is the value of their old-fashioned artist-cum-engineer modernism? Certainly it has taken on the form and weight of the ethical principle of commitment, as argued above. Certainly, too, it has provided occasion for aesthetic experience or delight. But these standards on their own are abstract forms and empty of historical content, empty of any claim for why such an ethic or such an aesthetic might appeal or serve its constituency and its time. The historical promise of systemic form had been clear enough for their machine-age forebears: it was to carry the new vision, the society planned by artists; it was to be scientific management raised to the level of social engineering through its visual forms. Its promise, in short, was that it would produce, as the Bechers have said disapprovingly, 'a socialistic view – a fresh view of the world, a new man, a new beginning.'

From our latter-day perspective, it is important to remember that this critique is really a product of the generation of the Bechers and Foucault and did not emerge immediately after the war but instead only arose in the 1950s. In the earlier postwar period the old prewar project for a new man was actually revitalised and given a new mission, if only for a moment. Against the fluctuating political passions aroused by the emerging anti-communist bunker culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s, many public intellectuals came to approach the question of political subjectivity with a

renewed sense of urgency and purpose. Much discussed statements such as 'Modern Man is Obsolete' by *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins and 'The Real Problem is in the Hearts of Men' by leading world government advocate Albert Einstein set the tone in the United States and paralleled the more immediately pressing self-scrutiny in Germany institutionalised in the re-education program and developed in a more philosophical manner by intellectuals such as Karl Jaspers: 'Brainwork is not all this requires,' Jaspers wrote in his lecture 'The Question of German Guilt': 'The intellect must put the heart to work, arouse it to an inner activity which in turn carries the brainwork.'[44] 'Our poisoned hearts must be cured', is how Camus put it; we must 'remake our political mentality.'[45]

Photographers once again assumed a special role for this reconstruction, this production of a new, new vision and new, new man. Such was the mission adopted programmatically by Edward Steichen for *The Family of Man*, for example, and it was the mandate assumed by Otto Steinert for his *Subjektive Fotografie*: 'As the most widely-spread vehicle of expression up to the present day,' he wrote, 'photography is called upon to mould the visual consciousness of our age. And as the pictorial technique most generally comprehensible and most easily accessible to lay hands on, it is particularly fitted to promote the mutual understanding of the nations.'[46] Like Steichen's aim to illustrate common human experience in an iconography of joy and suffering, loss and gain, etc., so Steinert sought a discursive means to represent human commonality by invoking a subjectivised experience of vision, even when industry was the subject at hand.

In a significant sense the search for a 'visual consciousness of our age' promoted by Steichen and Steinert, like the heart-work called for by Cousins, Einstein, Jaspers, and Camus was similar to that of the war consciousness that it promised to move beyond, at least structurally. In both cases – in the wartime German *Volk*, for example, and in the postwar *Family of Man* – the primary ideological goal was to produce a powerful and passionate sense of belonging, to produce the affective experience of nation. The structure of the social bond, in both cases, thus, was based on the principle of identity or passionate attachment to a shared sense of self, even if the later attachment was to be built around shared guilt. It was a social form generated through ideological means of the first, identity-driven variety discussed above rather than by the second, Marxian account. The structural correspondence of wartime and postwar approaches to political subjectivity was an insight not lost on the Bechers' generation and one that motivated their rejection of the one-world, hearts-of-men model.

There are, of course, other possible levers for generating a 'visual consciousness of our age' than that of the passionate attachments of one-world nationalism, like that of Steichen, or the passionate indulgences of a sentimental one-world subjectivism, like that of Otto Steinert. On the idealistic end of the spectrum, for example, there is the old philosopher's dream of collectively generated enlightenment or communicative reason developed through the search for shared interest and the principle of common human reason. More soberly, perhaps, and far closer to our own experience now, there is the capitalist's dreamworld of individual interest, or a fluid collective economy of individual wagers, risks, investments, losses and gains brought into commerce through the market-logic of exchange. As discussed above, however, the Bechers' own practice and the model of sociality it promises is not vested in either of these systems. Neither collectivist nor individualist, they work the principle of systematicity with equal passion, equal commitment and delight, to their own alternative 'rhythms and repetitions,' that is, to their own distinctive aesthetic ends.

Through this differential setting of form against content, aesthetic against instrumental aims, the Bechers deploy the original Enlightenment promise of the aesthetic, one lost on any simple account of the delight given in their work that would see it as unexpected beauty without philosophy, as

delight without reason. That promise, in Kant's formula, is the development of 'the faculty for judging an object . *without any interest*.'[47] Judgment, in the Bechers' work, assumes the abstract form of a concept which allows for aesthetic response to take place in a manner similar to cognition but through which, as Kant says, 'no thing is actually cognized.'[48] The experience of their work is thus realised as satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) in the object without any specific individual aim or instrumental purpose being satisfied (or frustrated), without any notion of individual interest or collective will. The experience produced, the delight that conveys satisfaction, thus, is generalised and endowed with the presumption of universality or, in Kant's terms, 'common sense.' [49]

It is this experience of universality that the Bechers' project courts and posits as its systemic aim; it is this experience that serves as an alternative 'visual consciousness of our age' different from either the collective passions of political identification or the individual interests of the consumer. The key to their system, to the particular form of social value they produce, lies in the fact that the objects they photograph are 'anonymous.' The Bechers present modern industry in a manner that disavows its social, political and economic value to the beholder and, in so doing, makes it available anew via an alternative category – aesthetic value or value '*without any interest*.' This is a particular form of delight, philosophically distinct from other sorts of visual pleasure, and it conjures up a particular form of commitment, one that carries with it both the promise and the burden of social consequence. By creating the circumstances for such experience using aging industrial structures still resonant with the memory of all their great modern ambitions, the Bechers create a powerful sense of that disavowal of instrumental value, that purposiveness without purpose, as Kant named it, as *loss*, as the experience of *no interest* where interest was once housed, of *no passion* where passion once resided. In so doing they give us a fully elaborated neo-Kantian judgment made melancholy, a fully developed archive structured around an absent ideal, and the great promise of Enlightenment is again recovered in all of its original glory but now on the foundation of its own lost materialist soul. As such there is no question that they have successfully incorporated "the past into the present and weld[ed] that present to a future," and have done so, "at a stroke," as Merleau-Ponty put it, that is, in and through their bearing toward the world, through their standpoint between distance and proximity, their gaze that looks neither up nor down but instead "straight-on" so it does not "hide or exaggerate or depict anything in an untrue fashion." The final question – the one that only we can evaluate – concerns the ongoing vitality of this comportment now, the ongoing meaningfulness of the past it carries forward into our future.

Notes

1. For an account of the early development of their project, see Virginia Ann Heckert, 'A Photographic Archive of Industrial Architecture: The Work of Bernd and Hilla Becher', M.A. thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 1987, pp.9–12.
2. Steinert, subjective fotografie, 1952; quoted in Manfred Schmalriede, '"subjektive fotografie" and its relation to the twenties,' in *Subjektive Fotografie: Images of the 50s*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Folkwang, Essen 1984, p.22.
3. Bernd Becher in conversation with Jean-Francois Chevrier, James Lingwood, Thomas Struth, in *Another Objectivity: June 10–July 17 1988*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1988, p.57. Bernd and Hilla Becher quoted in an exhibition statement for 'Distance And Proximity (Germany), Bernd & Hilla Becher / Andreas Gursky / Candida Hofer / Axel Hutte / Simone Nieweg / Thomas Ruff / Jorg Sasse / Tomas Struth / Petra Wunderlich', http://www.photosynkyria.gr/98/ex /ex48_en.html.
4. Beyond, at least, their minimalist typological schemata of water towers, mineheads etc.

5. R.H. Fuchs, 'Bernd and Hilla Becher,' in *Bernd und Hilla Becher*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven 1981, n. p.

6. Donald Kuspit, review, *Artforum*, vol. 28, April 1990, p.170.

7. Alexander Rodchenko, 'Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot', in Christopher Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings*, 1913–1940, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1989, p.241.

8. Werner Graeff, 'Es kommt der neue Ingenier,' G 1, 1923, n.p.

9. Asked why they their work exists in an art context rather than being made available in public archives for research purposes, they responded, 'We did offer it to the government but they weren't interested. The work is about visual considerations, therefore it was only natural to show it in art galleries.' See Angela Grauerholz and Anne Ramsden, 'Photographing Industrial Architecture: An Interview with Hilla and Bernd Becher,' *Parachute* 22, 1981, p.18.

10. Bernd Becher in Another Objectivity, p.61.

11. Liliane Touraine, 'Bernd and Hilla Becher: The Function doesn't make the Form,' *Artefactum*, April/May 1989, p.9.

12. Bernd and Hilla Becher interviewed in Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, 'The Bechers' Industrial Lexicon,' *Art in America*, June 2002, p.98.

13. E.g., Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, and Andreas Gursky, now sometimes collectively known as 'Struffsky'.

14. Michael Kimmelman, 'Where Truth Dare Not Meet Your Gaze,' *The New York Times*, 7 February 2003.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, New York 1962, p.392.

16. Anson Rabinbach, 'Response to Karen Brecht, 'In the Aftermath of Nazi Germany: Alexander Mitscherlich and Psychoanalysis – Legend and Legacy', *American Imago*, 52,.3, 1995, pp.322–3.

17. Robert A Sobieszek, 'Two Books of Ultra-Topography,' *Image*, 14, 1971, p.12.

18. Bernd and Hilla Becher, 'Anonymous Sculpture,' *Art and Artists*, 5, 1970, p.56.

19. Here is how they dealt with this issue in an interview: Q: 'If you got a tip-off now about a certain industry in Korea, would you get in a plane and go photograph there?' B: 'Its not a case of photographing everything in the world, but of proving that there is a form of architecture that consist in essence of apparatus, that has nothing to do with design, and nothing to do with architecture either.' H: 'The question can also be answered by restricting oneself – if one must restrict oneself – primarily to the early industrialised countries, so that the whole historical span can be seen. Certain things are found in England, because that goes back the furthest, and in Belgium, France and Germany, up to a certain point even Italy.' B: 'And the USA.' H: 'Of course, there especially one finds things that are highly interesting – for example, the grain elevators. You can't do without them. But you don't necessarily have to have grain elevators in Korea.' (Bernd and Hilla Becher interviewed in Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, 'The Bechers' Industrial Lexicon,' *Art in America*, June 2002, p.140.)

20. Erdmann, 'Industrial Lexicon,' p.97.

21. Gregorio Magnani, 'Ordering Procedures: Photography in Recent German Art', *Arts Magazine*, volume 64, March 1990, pp.81–2.

22. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, second edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1969 [1950], p.2..

23. Louis Lozowick, 'Status of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.', *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, New Brunswick 1986, pp.162–3.

24. Grauerholz, 'Photographing Industrial Architecture,' p.18.

25. Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York 1984, p 46.

26. Grauerholz, 'Photographing Industrial Architecture', p.18.

27. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1989, pp.29, 33–4, translation modified.

28. For an extended analysis using this character of the Bechers' work to argue for the redemption of 'the name of art' in the wake of the anti-aestheticism and politicisation of functionalism, see Thierry de Duve, *Basic Forms*, New York 1999.

29. de Duve, *Basic Forms*, pp.15, 9.

30. Luc Sante, *The New Republic*, 213:1, 3 July 1995, p.29.

31. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York 1995, p.86.

32. Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1996, p.455.

33. Among other attempts to take up this enterprise, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, New Haven 2002

34. 'Beauty in the Awful', *Time*, 5 September 1969, p.69.

35. Glenn Zorpette, 'Dynamic Duos: How Artist Teams Work', *Art News*, Summer 1994, p.166.

36. Lynda Morris, *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1974, n.p.

37. Ziegler, 'Industrial Lexicon', p.143.

38. Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, New York 1957, p.46.

39. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, London 1998, p.38.

40. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume 1, New York 1992, p.617.

41. *Another Objectivity*, pp 60–61

42. As with modern industry, we know best from Foucault that modern thought has realised its social power by being similarly nomadic. Earlier, pre-modern modes were essentially conservative while modern 'systems of dispersion' or *discourses* and the epistemological architecture they produce – *archives* – are inherently revolutionary by being based on 'neither a configuration, nor a form' (that is, on neither structural nor mimetic representation of the object of study), but instead on a process or 'a group of rules that are immanent in a practice' (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, 37, 46). Foucault's three introductory examples of this modern form of knowledge-as-system were sexuality, 'penality,' and art (41). The Becher archive is just such a discourse in its 'densest and most complex,' self-instituting form ('History, Discourse, Discontinuity', 241). That is, it is what Foucault called an 'art with its own normativity', a procedure of discursive organisation that develops its own autonomous standards of valorisation separate from the objects it organises and maintains its value as a group of rules immanent in a practice rather than as a configuration or form (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York 1976, p.41.

43. Hilla Becher in *Another Objectivity*, p.57.

44. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York 1947, p.16.

45. Albert Camus, 'Defense of Intelligence', *Resistance Rebellion and Death*, New York 1961, p.61.

46. Otto Steinert, *Subjektive Fotografie; ein Bildband moderner europaïscher Fotografie*, Bonn 1952, p.5.

47. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, New York 2000, p.96.

48. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p.57.

49. Ibid., pp.122–3.

Acknowledgements

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