

Bernd and Hilla Becher

German, born 1931, 1934

The art of the architect and the craft of the builder are not easily separated in the modern era. "Form follows function" was the credo of modernist architecture, and this belief pushed those who professed it far into the field of operations that at an earlier time was generally overseen by the engineers and designers of the industrial revolution's infrastructure. Not that the plants, warehouses, water towers, derricks, and housing stock erected under pressure of economic expansion were without their own aesthetic; even the strictest utilitarian demands or the most rigid vernacular conventions make allowance for formal invention. Within each basic prototype, there is room for differences based on the particularities of the site, the available materials, alternative methods of fabrication, and, not least, the taste of the blueprint draftsman, construction chief, or client.

For the most part, however, the monuments of modern builders have been passed over by both expert and amateur enthusiasts of modern architecture. The efforts made to protect masterpieces by Frank Lloyd Wright, Erich Mendelsohn, or Walter Gropius have not been matched in the case of obsolete depots or gas tanks. And when photographers have looked away from the dramatic contours of skyscrapers or showcase homes and gazed on such commonplace structures, it has usually been with an eye for their narrative interest, or for the ways in which they lend themselves to formal recomposition in the camera lens.

Into this gap stepped the husband-and-wife team of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Bernd Becher's earliest photographs, from the 1950s, were arrestingly deadpan descriptions of mineheads and similar facilities. In the late part of that decade, after he had joined forces with Hilla Becher, the couple together began to arrange such images in series according to functional category, and by the mid-1960s they were ordering them in uniform formats, so that each picture was aligned with the others in the sequence or block, and could easily be compared with them. The nine separate frames in *Water Towers* (1988) invite just this sort of scrutiny, each of the towers being unique unto itself but demonstrably similar in overall configuration to its neighbors.

Locking their pictures into grids in the manner of the experimental motion-photographer Eadweard Muybridge, the Bechers nevertheless use such coordinates to emphasize the static presence of their generally ignored subjects, which

they might almost have marshaled into blocklike close formation to slow the hasty viewer down. Yet in emphasizing subtle and not-so-subtle variations in shape, these systematic layouts may, in a quick glance along any given axis, take on a strange metamorphic quality, as if one were watching the gradual evolution of an organic species.

The Bechers' obsession with structural morphologies recalls the Zola-esque sociological classifications of the German photographer August Sander, whose work was a major influence on them. Sander's seminal project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Citizens of the twentieth century) — published in an abbreviated album in 1929 as *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of our time) — documented people of every social stratum in the same way that the Bechers portray their built environment. With keen eyes for the revealing feature, the Bechers are in effect physiognomists of vernacular architecture.

At the same time, though, their devotion to systemic analysis parallels that of Minimal and Post-Minimal artists for whom questions of mathematical set theory and of the variability of related modules were central, form-generating issues. Taken together, the Bechers' formalist methodology and strictly factual orientation toward the individual objects of their attention — not to mention their pervasive influence on the host of younger artists they have taught (see the discussions here of Andreas Gursky, p. 68, and Thomas Struth, p. 128) — have earned them a unique status among their contemporaries, while placing them in a special position where the distinct concerns of architecture, traditional photography, programmatic abstraction, and conceptual art meet.

Bernd and Hilla Becher. *Water Towers*. 1988. Unique work comprising nine gelatin-silver prints, each 15¹³/₁₆ x 12¹/₈" (40.5 x 30.8 cm). Fractional gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser

