

BERND BECHER GERMAN, 1931–2007

HILLA BECHER GERMAN, BORN 1934

In 1957, Bernd Becher began taking photographs of industrial buildings in West Germany with a small camera, intending to use the snapshots as a basis for drawings and paintings. That same year, he met Hilla Wobeser, a trained photographer who had defected from East Germany as a teenager; Hilla, too, had spent time documenting industrial areas, particularly Hamburg's harbor. The two, who would eventually marry, began to collaborate. For their first series, they photographed traditional workers' houses, focusing on the pale exterior walls patterned with dark webs of timber support beams, each facade presenting a unique, irregular grid. The couple soon realized that many of the industrial sites that fascinated them would not survive the impending collapse of Germany's coal and steel markets, and so they endeavored to preserve them in photographs, first working in Siegerland and in the Ruhr district north of Düsseldorf and eventually extending their project to the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and beyond. The Bechers used a large-format camera to capture in great detail the buildings used in heavy industry and agriculture—winding towers, blast furnaces, grain elevators, water towers, and the like—so that a viewer would be able to “see every screw” in the resulting gelatin silver prints.¹

The artists deliberately photographed on cloudy days to achieve neutral lighting and never included people in their compositions, carefully avoiding the presence of the workers who would normally animate such scenes with their labor. The orthogonal perspective of each shot is nearly identical, and the structures—no matter their actual size—are reduced to one unvarying scale. Grouping the resulting prints by building type in orderly grids, the Bechers were able to reveal subtle differences within each architectural category. As Bernd once commented, “The workers' houses



Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher. *Winding Towers*. 1966–1997
 Nine gelatin silver prints, overall 68¼ × 56¼" (173.4 × 142.9 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art. Acquired in honor of Marie-Josée Kravis
 through the generosity of Robert B. Menschel

THE BECHERS

or the winding towers (for hoisting) look very similar, and you could think that they came from a production series, like cars. Only when you put them beside each other do you see their individuality.”² In the Bechers’ work, each series or grouping is a subset of a larger category of building, or typology, and each typology expanded over time to form an archive of subtly varied architectural designs that the artists termed “anonymous sculptures.”

The Bechers’ first solo gallery exhibition in North America was held in 1972 at Sonnabend in New York. For that exhibition, they presented several series of Winding Towers in sets of nine—each metal tower holding aloft a circular drum hoist used to maneuver equipment into the mine shaft below—as well as photographs of water towers, silos, and gas storage tanks. As the artist Carl Andre observed, the Bechers “record the transient existence of purely functional structures and reveal the degree to which form is determined by the invariant requirements of function.”³ Other commentators marveled at the unexpected subjectivity underlying the Bechers’ presentation of such “transient” forms. When the Bechers presented a second show at Sonnabend, in 1974, one art critic, pondering how many buildings of any particular type the artists must have seen, wrote, “The selection of this particular nine may be one of the most idiosyncratic events I’ve ever encountered.”⁴ C.L.

1. Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, “The Bechers’ Industrial Lexicon,” *Art in America*, June 2002, p. 98.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

3. Carl Andre, “A Note on Bernhard and Hilla Becher,” *Artforum*, December 1972, p. 59.

4. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, “Bernd and Hilla Becher, Sonnabend Gallery,” *Artforum*, June 1974, p. 71.



Bernd and Hilla Becher exhibition, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1972

Most people enjoy things that they already know, or things that can at least be associated with existing patterns. Ileana Sonnabend was clearly different. She was particularly interested when something seemed to be enigmatic and difficult to understand and had a great curiosity that was not necessarily limited to the arts. This could explain the extraordinary variety visible in her gallery program. Ileana was far more than just an art dealer: she encouraged and supported her artists in a most generous way.

Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem first visited us in Düsseldorf in 1971. In 1972 our first solo exhibition in the newly opened gallery in New York took place, and a year later in the Paris gallery. In the following years Bernd and I worked intensely in the United States; these journeys would not have been so productive and lengthy without Ileana's help. My favorite memories of Ileana are the many adventurous trips the four of us took together. Antonio, with his enormous knowledge of European art history, guided us to the best places in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany. Thanks for the wonderful times. H.B.