Bechers and Beyond

The exhibition, which presents a selection of photographs from the Bank of America Collection, sheds light on the history and development of the medium from the 1850s to the present day. The photographs that I will discuss in this text, however, are from the Düsseldorf School of Photography, which emerged between 1976 and 1997 at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The term has become synonymous primarily with photographers who studied under Bernd and Hilla Becher – such as Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer. This school was not only important within Germany, but has also had a wider impact on contemporary photography in general. This essay will trace the photographic movements that influenced the Bechers and ultimately informed their students. The photographic language that has emerged from the Bechers' school not only has its own distinctive aesthetic, but also engages with contemporary artistic discourse. It addresses the viewer, engages in institutional critique (and with the idea of creating an archive) and provides a conceptual framework in which photography can be understood. Their teaching encouraged what could be called a 'rigorous continuity' in the treatment of subjects – a concept best exemplified in their own series of photographs documenting a single type of building (such as water towers) using the same perspective and lighting, a technique that highlighted the formal continuities between the various buildings. They also encouraged the use of display formats that would highlight this continuity (as the Bechers themselves achieved in their famous grid style of displaying images). The social and political connotations of the Bechers' work is also significant – it not only provides an archive of key developments in the period in which it was created, but also offers a commentary on our globalised society.

To understand the development of the Düsseldorf School that emerged under the influence of the Bechers' teaching, one has to trace the Bechers' own photographic influences. Their photography was a return to the 'straight' aesthetics of photographers associated with the New Objectivity movement and to the social and political preoccupations of photographers working in the 1920s and the 1930s.

In a response to the New Objectivity aesthetic in Germany, a subjectivist photography emerged that became popular in the early post-war period. The Subjektive Fotografie movement was founded by Dr. Otto Steinert, who defined it as 'humanised and indivualised photography' whose intention was 'to capture from the individual object a picture compounding to its nature'[1] and to move away from the Modernist objectivist photography of the 1920s. However, the Bechers re-embraced the functional form of New Objectivity, rejecting the subjectivist humanist approach that was prevalent amongst their contemporaries. New Objectivity was methodological in its approach, as exemplified by August Sander's systematic photographic portraits of Germans from all classes and occupations. This methodology was adopted by the Bechers and is best seen in their typological documentation of the vernacular industrialised architecture of Western Europe and North America. This systematic approach was integral to their photographs and had an enduring influence on their students.

Objectivist photographers such as Albert Renger-Patzsch and László Moholy-Nagy shared the modernist preoccupation with progress and were strong advocates of the integration of technology and industry into the arts. They were linked to the Bauhaus School, which was founded by Walter Gropius and was the leading exponent of Modernist architecture and design. However, the objectivist approach was not universally welcomed. Walter Benjamin, whose texts such as *The Author as Producer* had an important impact on how photography was perceived, attributed the fashion of reportage to New Objectivity,[2] of which he was critical, saying 'it had succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment'[3], citing Renger-Patzsch's well known book, *The World Is Beautiful*, as an example. Renger-Patzsch's publication, a collection of one hundred photographs of natural forms, industrial subjects and mass-produced objects presented with the clarity of scientific illustrations exemplified the movement's aesthetic. Benjamin viewed this objectification as not having a revolutionary value as it separated itself from experiencing solidarity with the proletariat. The 1920s

and 1930s saw the use of photography as a powerful tool of political propaganda, a development that led to suspicion and criticism of it as a genuine pictorial form.

The political aspect of New Objectivity is not what interested the Bechers; it was the formal and aesthetic continuity among the images they created that was paramount to their approach. The pattern of sequential experience that connected one image to the next was reflected in how they exhibited their photographs – the works were not displayed in isolation but in blocks that created a relationship between the constituent parts of each photograph. By grouping the photographs together, the uniformity of the objects is revealed. The series on water towers featured in the *Conversations* exhibition (*Water Tower, Verviers, Belgium,* 1983 and *Water Tower, Trier-Ehrang, Germany*, 1982) demonstrates this uniformity – not only of the objects themselves but also of the photographs' central perspective. Both photographs are shot in black and white; the water towers in each are shot using central perspective and are in the foreground. The surrounding landscape is desolate and devoid of any human activity. Although both images highlight the formal uniformity of the water towers, the periods in which they were built differ: the Verviers water tower is a feat of modern engineering, whilst the Trier-Ehrang tower has a more archaic form.

The Bechers' photographs are often characterised as "industrial archaeology" or seen as "a contribution to the social history of industrial work". However, the Bechers reject this functionalist classification of their photographs and refer to them instead as "anonymous sculptures" or "basic forms", highlighting the aesthetic aspect of their work. They use a conceptual framework when discussing their work, viewing photography as a framing or recording device for the Duchampian 'found' image in the world.[4] When photographing the structures, the Bechers ensure that there is a consistency in their framing, centrally locating the viewpoint and creating uniform lighting in each photograph. The format of each photograph is also repeated. The buildings or objects are in the forefront and are sharply focused, leaving the other details or human elements to fade in the background, allowing the viewer to focus on the subject. There is a 'democratic' approach to the display

of the images, in that no photograph is given precedence over another. The singularity of this approach had a strong influence on their students at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

A central perspective, regulating the viewer's response to the image, initially determined Thomas Struth's vision. There is a similar strategy for each series that he pursues, clearly demonstrating the influence of the Bechers. The repetition of motifs throughout his work gives his sequences the essence of an archive. Struth's earlier work concentrated on postwar urban reconstructions; the street squares, residential towers and transportation hubs serve as a commentary on the social devastation of the National Socialist period in Germany, the pieces' aesthetic reflecting on the politics of that era and the state of mind of its inhabitants. Remarkably, Struth highlighted the desolation of this period through the documentation of its public spaces, which, in the photographs, are devoid of a public.

Also included in the Bank of America Collection is Struth's *Musée du Louvre, Paris*, 1989, which shows a museum audience viewing Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. The viewers echo the composition of the shipwrecked figures on the raft, thereby becoming an extension of the painting itself. There is an irony in how this painting has become fetishised despite the fact that it depicts desperate survivors about to resort to cannibalism. Struth incorporates the painting's very traditional art historical subject matter and dramatic composition into his own work, his intention in the museum series being to "retrieve masterpieces from the fate of fame, to recover them from their status as iconic paintings, to remind us that these were works which were created in a contemporary moment, by artists who had everyday lives."[5] *Audience 4*, 2004, shows a view of the interior of Florence's Galleria dell' Accademia, where a museum audience gathers to view Michelangelo's *David*. The statue itself is out of view, but the facial expressions captured by Struth offer a meditation on the dividing line between awareness and actual seeing. The photographs act as a document of the viewers' response to works encountered. What separates his work from the objective approach in this series is the fact that "he must repeatedly train

his view camera on the same configuration of space. In the authorial role that he adopts, as opposed to the 'objective' tradition, his selection process lays emphasis on the photographic construction of reality; the above mentioned ideal is identifiable as an aesthetic product while at the same time it reflects the social attitudes towards art."[6] Struth has reversed the role of subject and object in this series – as viewers we are presented with a construct that illustrates not only the social dynamics of public spaces, but also how society responds to a work of art.

The monumental scale of the photographic works is consistent throughout this series, and replicates somewhat the scale of the paintings that the viewer beholds. One could view this as a means to posit photography within the same realm as painting, which had previously dominated museums and public institutions. This monumentality is also found in the works of Andreas Gursky. Both photographers have addressed themes that could be described as post-urban, and the repetition of motifs within their work is typical of the Düsseldorf School. Gursky, like Struth, has used as his subject matter paintings and the interiors of museums, such as his piece *Untitled VI*, 1997, a documentation of Jackson Pollock's painting in MoMA, New York. What distinguishes Gursky is that he was one of the first photographers to employ digital technology to create his imagery. This manipulation of images, which is now commonplace, was revolutionary in the way it altered our perception of photographs. Images can now be made with composites or made from scratch through digital media. The piece in the exhibition entitled *Centre Georges Pompidou*, 1995, a panoramic image of the interior of the museum, is an example of Gursky's digital streamlining. In it we see a scattered audience bent over trestle tables that provide a platform for the exhibition of the plans and models of the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. Gursky plays with scale and structure to obscure the subject of the exhibition. Here, the grid-like structure of the minimalist interior of the building and the trestle tables recalls minimalist paintings and Modernist architecture.

Thomas Ruff was also one of the first photographers to use digital techniques, beginning in 1989 to excise unwanted distractions from his pictures of buildings.[7] In 1998, Ruff was invited by Julian Heynen of the Kunstmuseum Krefeld to document villas by architect Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe built between 1927 and 1930. However, as some of these villas could not be photographed by him, he digitally processed existing pictures of them. The resulting images are out of focus and it is difficult to decipher what the subject matter is, as can be seen in the photograph *d.p.b 08*, 2000 that is included in the catalogue. For Ruff and Gursky, the use of digital technology is consistent with the fluidity of the medium of photography and its continuing mutation in the digital age. Photography has become an essential part of how our perception of reality is mediated. As consumers of images, the general populace is quite sophisticated in terms of how such pictures are deconstructed. Today, we approach images with a heightened scepticism, and an unquestioned link between photography and truth is no longer assumed.

Candida Höfer's work runs counter to this movement towards digital manipulation, in that her photographs are direct documentations of the interiors of public buildings. The photographs are naturally lit and although the composition is not centrally located, there is a consistency in her aesthetic and formal approach. Two of her photographs are included in the *Conversations* exhibition. *Museo Civico Vicenza II*, 1988, which is part of her museum series, documents an exhibition space within the museum that is devoid of a public. It reveals the classical nature of the interior architecture, a feature that is often obscured by the paintings exhibited in the space. There is a painterly quality to the piece. The natural light from the windows is reflected on the polished floor and strikes a painting. *Museum Folkwang Essen*, 1982 documents the interior of a museum that is quite modernist in its layout and its furnishings, in contrast to the classical interior of the *Museo Civico Vicenza*. The photographs act as an architectural archive as well as a social archive of locations of public interaction. The importance of these spaces to public life is highlighted by the historical significance of the architecture of the museums – in addition to their function as purveyors of cultural history and knowledge. Höfer's photographs move beyond the documentary approach

and are indicative of what has been called 'post-documentary', a term which both Struth and Gursky have also been associated with.

While these photographers are generally associated with the Düsseldorf School, they also have their own, very individual, framework. For example, they have moved away from established notions of mechanical reproduction and rejected strict parameters in terms of consistency in lighting or perspective. And with the advent of digitisation, all limitations on photography have been removed. What truly sets these photographers apart is their use of large-format photography, a development that began in the 1980s and persists to this day. These large-format photographs are frequently seen in museums and public arenas and are made specifically for this purpose.

The importance of the photographers that followed in the Bechers' wake is that they have become the archivists of Western capitalism and its technological developments. The photographs are a record of a time that also will pass – as with the work of the Bechers, whose photographs documented post-industrial decay. The photographs of contemporary cityscapes, architecture and technological progress will also look archaic to a future audience. They will become the subject of nostalgic reminiscences of a time that has passed, a document of the pinnacle of late capitalism and its ultimate collapse. These photographs will become signifiers of a historical moment. The empty glass towers, apartment blocks and deserted estates that have become part of our everyday experience will become the ruins of the future. These photographs are inherently political in that they provide the beholder with a means to be one step removed and have an objective view of the spaces we inhabit on macro and micro scales, allowing us to sense our own historical relevance in a contemporary moment.
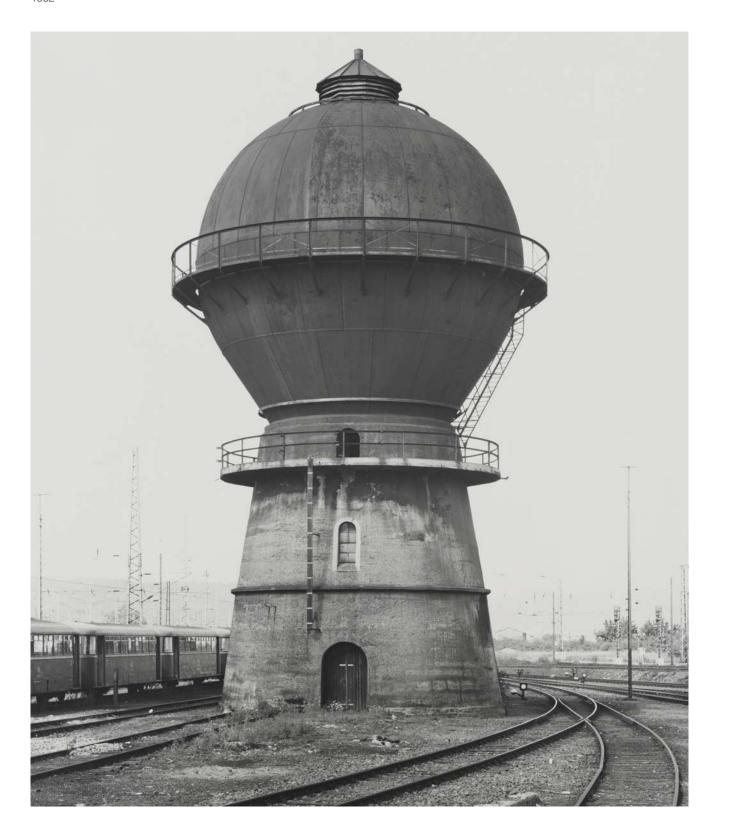
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[1] **As quoted by Allan Porter in "Subjective Photography 4",** *Camera*, **July 1975: p.5.**
[2] **Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", in** *Art in Theory 1900–2000,* **edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.496.**
[3] **ibid.**
[4] **Edward Welch, Andrea Noble, JJ long (eds),** *Photography: Theoretical snapshots*, **(New York: Routledge, 2009) p.101.**
[5] **Annette Kruszynski Tobia Bezzola and James Lingwood (eds),** *Thomas Struth,* **(New York: Monacelli Press, 2010) p.198.**
[6] **Stefan Gronent,** *The Düsseldorf School of Photography*, **(London: Thames & Hudson, 2009) p.37.**
[7] **Peter Galassi,** *Andreas Gursky,* **(New York: The Museum Of Modern Art, 2001) p.39.**

Bernd and Hilla Becher
Water Tower, Trier-Ehrang, Germany,
1982