Two major museums committed to the most advanced European and American art of the sixties—the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach—exhibit the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, placing them at the forefront of an interest in Conceptual art and photography.

In 1957, Bernd (born 1931) and Hilla Becher (born 1934) initiated a photographic project that has continued to preoccupy them until the present day: the systematic recording of European industrial architecture, which at that time was under threat of imminent disappearance through neglect and decay. Like many photographic archives before them, from Charles Marville’s nineteenth-century topography of Parisian streets to Eugène Atget’s magisterial attempts slightly later to record the disappearance of Paris under the impact of modernization, the Bechers’ project has been marked from the very beginning by a particular dialectic: a struggle between, on the one hand, an almost obsessive will for an exhaustive record, a desire to make permanent, and, on the other, an equally deep sense of loss, the melancholic insight that the spatial and temporal disappearance of the object can never be arrested. (Anonymous Sculptures: A Typology of Technical Constructions) was written by Carl Andre, the central sculptor of Minimalism.

Some of the earliest photographs the Bechers produced were composite images of mining architecture, a strangely antiquated type of montage that resurrects the original photographic promise to supply the greatest quantity of empirically verifiable detail in the formation of a positivist record of the visible world. But these images were problematic for the couple, for they were disturbingly reminiscent of photomontage—the menacing political “other” to the latent conservatism of Neue Sachlichkeit photography that served as the Bechers’ primary historical resource. Furthermore, the tradition of photomontage had recently resurfaced in the postwar period in an American reincarnation, namely in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, a reference that the Bechers would have wanted to avoid altogether at that time.

This might explain why they soon replaced the composite photograph with a unique combination of two modernist photographic orders: the traditionally crafted, single-image print and the principle of the sequential or the serial image. From now on their photographs were displayed in two different formal arrangements: either in what the Bechers call a “typology” (generally a series of nine, twelve, or fifteen images of the same type of architectural structure, such as nine different lime kilns or fifteen different cooling towers [1]), or in what they identify as a “development,” (Abwicklung), that is, a series of single images in which one particular individual structure (for instance, a mining tower or a house) is presented in a sequence of rotating views [2].

The actual development of the Bechers’ work over this period is infinitely more complex, however, than this brief summary suggests, inasmuch as it could be identified as one of the few artistic projects in postwar Germany to establish a historical continuity with the Weimar avant-garde. This is in contradistinction to the majority of the postwar West German artists, such as Gerhard Richter, who explicitly situat...
Beyond this claim of continuity with Weimar, the Bechers also asserted a new credibility for photography itself, which under the impact of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of American and French painting of the fifties had been completely overshadowed in the reconstruction period in Germany. Quite clearly, then, they were working to establish a double continuity: first with an alternative Weimar culture; second with an alternate system of imaging practices as they had been fully developed within the context of the “historical avant-garde.”

Further, it is important to recognize that in its focus on industrial buildings, such as coal tipples, water towers, mine-entrance structures, the Bechers’ project also entered into an explicit dialogue with the rise of welded sculpture and its reception in Germany in the late fifties and early sixties. This work, by sculptors ranging from David Smith to Jean Tinguely and based on machine parts taken as industrial debris, had become central to the postwar redefinition of sculpture. By their own account, the key figure against which the Bechers defined themselves in the early sixties was the Swiss Nouveau Réaliste Tinguely with his junk sculpture aesthetic to which they opposed their own work both in its photographic dimension and in its use of an actual, historical foundation as industrial archaeology to combat the aestheticizing of industrial ruins. In opposition to the romanticization of industrial waste and to what they perceived to be a reductive understanding of the intersection between artistic and industrial practices, the Bechers explicitly wanted to put themselves in a relation to this type of architecture that would recognize its historical importance, its structural and functional probity, and its aesthetic status. A conservationist impulse therefore motivated their work to the same extent as did an artistic one. While these structures do not quite yet appear as ruins, they are certainly structures on the wane. Thus it is perhaps no surprise that the relatively new discipline of “industrial archaeology,” in which conservationists rescue selected examples of industrial architecture from their definitive disappearance, received some of its initial impulses from the work of the Bechers. And it is not surprising either that industrial archaeologists commissioned the pair on various occasions to assist in the scientific exploration and photographic documentation of industrial sites to ensure their archaeological preservation.
From seriality to site-specificity

Clearly, the intersections in the work of the Bechers become yet more complex as one reads them against the various historical strands on which they depended, from Sander and Renger-Patzsch, to Le Corbusier, who in 1928, in his journal *L’Esprit Nouveau*, had published a manifesto to launch an aesthetic based on industrial structures (such as grain silos) as examples of the formal strength of anonymous engineering design. This aesthetic not only argued that form should be nothing more than the pure articulation of function, but also it implied an early (psychological) critique of authorship, as well as an early (sociopolitical) emphasis on the collective participation in social production. Le Corbusier was opposed to the *auteur* aesthetic of the modernist architect on the same grounds as were the Bechers, when in *Anonymous Sculptures* they argued that the anonymity of industrial design deserves to be taken as seriously as authorial claims for individuality. Thus at the moment of 1968, a lineage within modernism could be traced from Le Corbusier through Neue Sachlichkeit to the Bechers, for which collectivity, anonymity, and functionalism are seen as key artistic values.

In his enthusiastic response to *Anonymous Sculptures*, Andre read their work as though it were primarily defined by its compulsive attention to serial repetition. This reading, which immediately brought the Bechers into the context of Minimalist and Post-minimalist aesthetics, was made possible by the way the Bechers arrange their images as pristine, gridlike taxonomies by which to present the minute structural differences between each of their examples. This emphasis on repetition, seriality, minute inspection, and structural differentiation is obviously what attracted Andre’s attention, engendering his Minimalist reception of the work and its canonization within the context of Minimalist and Postminimalist sculpture. But there were other aspects that helped to locate the Bechers within the dialogue on sculpture that was developing in the late sixties. One was their work’s stress on anonymity, the other was its obvious foregrounding of the issues of site. Andre in particular had developed an internal logic for sculpture in which it would cease to be defined as constructed object and would instead be understood as place, as a node at the intersection of architecture and environment.

Another quality that placed the Bechers within the context not only of Minimalism but also of emerging Conceptualism was the
replacement of material structures by the photographic document, particularly as it was accumulated in their work in serial alignments. From Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham onward, serial, systematic photography figured crucially within the rise of Conceptual art. What distinguishes the Bechers’ work, however, from all of Conceptual art is their emphasis on skill. If Conceptual photography is defined by deskilling, the Bechers’ work is focused on reskilling: they emphatically resuscitate the ambition to produce the highest quality black-and-white photography they can possibly achieve, in the same way that photographers of the Neue Sachlichkeit context, such as Sander and Renger-Patzsch, insisted on the highest artisanal accomplishment of the photographic project. The Bechers go to great lengths to produce the right photograph, framed at the right height and taken, without shadows, on the right day in order to get the right light and thereby to obtain the most minute gradations of tonal values; further, they insist on the most immaculate presentation of the object. Insofar as it then appears to be unmediated by any authorial perception, this is in line with the legacy of Neue Sachlichkeit that the Bechers push to a new threshold of ambition.

This insistence on continuity with the Weimar culture of Neue Sachlichkeit, in its refusal to allow German neo-avant-garde production to be mediated in its entirety through postwar American art, parallels Georg Baselitz’s exactly contemporaneous attempt to resuscitate German Expressionism. Such claims for continuity are problematic, however, on two fronts at once. Insofar as artistic practices and strategies are in and of themselves historically circumscribed and thus perpetually surpassed and devalorized, the idea of a valid model of “new objectivity” photography that could be transplanted from the twenties to the sixties is questionable. Further, in a situation such as the German one, the political and historical caesura of World War II blocks access to an unproblematic relation to the idea of the nation state as the basis for the subject’s identity, and thus the project of trying to construct artistic identity on such conventional models becomes ever more difficult. The other side of the effort to create an artistic practice that transcends the chasm of the historical rupture opened by World War II and the Holocaust is, then, an attempt to blind oneself to the degree to which all cultural practices after 1946 were deeply affected by that caesura and would have had to
take it into account. This is the additional dimension of the Bechers’ problematic claim for historical continuity which needs to be contrasted with other practices in Germany of the same period, such as Gerhard Richter’s, where no such assertion is being made.

Precisely in its attempt to bypass the questions of historical mourning, the work displays the symptoms of a repressive apparatus; it is not accidental in that sense that the melancholia hovering over the Bechers’ work is generated by the almost phobic prohibition of the subject within the photographs’ exclusive focus on industrial ruins (that applies even to the category of mid-nineteenth-century rural housing, a series that is also presented solely for the type’s structural beauty, rather than for any sociological dimension). For the melancholic contemplation of the past to be effective, then, the social and historical context has to be excised from their work in order to make the architectural the undisturbed object of attention. With the major exception of August Sander, this move to dehistoricize had, of course, been a defining characteristic of the original Neue Sachlichkeit photography as well, given its perpetual endeavor to aestheticize the object.

From concepts to color

The second generation of artists to emerge from the Bechers’ “school”—Bernd Becher taught at the Düsseldorf Academy from the mid-sixties onward—was a group of photographer-artists that included Thomas Struth (born 1954) [3], Thomas Ruff (born 1958) [4], Candida Höfer (born 1944) [5], and Andreas Gursky (born 1955) [6]. All of them picked up from the Bechers’ point of departure and extended it, also extending some of the predicaments inherent to their approach. For example, in the photographs of Struth and Ruff, the emphasis on the absence of human agency is as compulsively enacted as it is in the Bechers’ own work.

Beginning by photographing empty streets in Düsseldorf in 1976, Struth replaced the pure industrial object with the pure urban, structural fabric. Yet, as had been the case with the Bechers, the capacity to skirt actual historical questions operates in the way Struth systematically found urban sites where the absence of human activity allowed for a melancholic reading of the city. But with the transformation from architectural to urban archaeology that took him on incessant travels through urban centers—ranging from small towns in Belgium, Germany, England, and the United States to large cities such as Tokyo—Struth recorded a peculiar type of public urban space. And in retrospect this appears as a systematic accounting of the actual experience of the disappearance of public urban space in a parallel with the vanishing landscape preserved only in the photographic archive the Bechers have produced.

In Struth’s and Ruff’s early work, the insistence on black-and-white photography—doubly obsolete in its dimension as material support and as vehicle of artisanal skills—brings to the foreground the question of whether and to what extent an antimodernist impulse is operative here, one that could best be compared to the lineage of Giorgio de Chirico in painting. It is an antimodernism that greets the present through the lens of melancholia, that is manifestly disconnected from the model of an avant-garde and its necessary link with advancing scientific and technological means of production, and that positions itself with regard to the question of the reconstruction of memory under the conditions of loss, a question that is important in the postwar period.

There is a later phase of this development when color suddenly makes its appearance in the work of Ruff, Struth, Gursky, and Höfer as though it has been released from a prohibition. Yet this introduction of color, and along with it the admission of human agency and social context in great quantities and detail, does not resolve the historical limitations of Struth’s or Ruff’s photographic practice. Quite the opposite would be true, in fact, for the large and continuing series of photographic portraits that Ruff produced from the late eighties onward, which resuscitates the traditional model of the portrait as it had been practiced in
Weimar Neue Sachlichkeit. This places Ruff at the center of a counterconceptual approach—the portrait having been the object of explicit deconstruction by the Conceptualists who regarded it as a historically obsolete model through which false claims for an accessible physiognomic depiction of subjectivity and identity were made. With Ruff’s reconstitution of the genre of photographic portraiture, one such countermodernist impulse thus reaches its apogee and points toward the radicality of photogrammar.

FURTHER READING
Carl Andre, “A Note on Bernhard and Hilla Becher,” Artforum, vol. 11, no. 5, December 1972

5 • Candida Höfer, BNF Paris VII, 1998
Chromogenic color print, 85 x 85 (33 1/2 x 33 1/2)

6 • Andreas Gursky, Salerno, 1990
Chromogenic color print, 198 x 226 (74 x 89)