

BERND & HILLA BECHER

BETON

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Concrete - in German lexically defined: "mixture of coarse-grained aggregates, [...] (mostly cement, but also lime, gypsum and asphalt) and water, which is deformable after mixing, sets after a certain time and [...] hardens. [...] The properties of cement concrete depend on the type and grade of cement and on the nature [...] of the aggregates [...]. With the spread of Portland cement since the middle of the 19th century and the introduction of reinforced and prestressed concrete, it found many uses." Mentioned Portland cement was an invention of the English mason and builder Joseph Aspdin, who registered the binder as a patent in 1824. To him, the material reminded him of the limestone cliffs on the Portland peninsula in southern England.

In view of the exhibition history of the artistic work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the title "Concrete" is an exciting indicator novelty alongside introduced headings such as "Anonymous Sculptures," "Industrial Buildings of the 19th and 20th Centuries," "Typologies," "Industrial Facades and Landscapes," or the naming of individual building types and designations of installations that are characteristic of Becher's work. So far, no building material has been made the focus of one of their presentations, despite the fact that the particular material of an industrial building that the artist couple included in their photographic archive has always been a central criterion of observation and classification. Thus, for example, their famous typologies of industrial constructions created since the 1970s, which form multi-part tableaus in arrangements of, for example, 9, 12, or 15 photographs of various winding towers, blast furnaces, water towers, or gas tanks, etc., are based, among other things, on the criterion of the materiality of the objects depicted. In addition to the geographic location, this substantially presupposes the typical construction form and appearance of the motif under consideration and provides clues to the economic and technical conditions of the time when the object was created.

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With 39 large-format individual images and two exemplary typologies, the current exhibition focuses on the famous industrial buildings photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher, which were built primarily of concrete. In this sense, it is not only the diversity of industrial forms that comes into play, which the artist couple has preserved in their admirable body of work. The enormous versatility and applicability of concrete also emerge, its effect and expressiveness having a wide range and associating both the enormous massiveness of medieval fortresses and bunkers as well as making open slender-structured tower and temple buildings possible.

Concrete, or rather reinforced concrete, as superior in strength and durability to the traditional building materials of natural stone and brick as well as wood and iron structures, depending on its use, was regarded in the early decades of the 20th century as a material reserved especially for purpose- and less style-oriented engineering architecture and road construction. However, it increasingly found its way into the construction of administrative and representative buildings, as well as housing. "The use of new materials or construction techniques was primarily driven by civil engineers and were not the subject of a style debate. An architectural debate that focused on concrete construction was [...] in fact only seriously conducted in the 1920s, when the use of reinforced concrete had already become widespread and established. The innovative [...] material promised to make a new architectural language possible, in which lightness became more important and detail took a back seat. Now a debate on style was really being conducted and driven forward by renowned architects who used a sometimes provocative avant-garde language [cf. Le Corbusier: *Vers une Architecture*, 1922]." Following the New Building, the Brutalist style was to further promote the emancipation of concrete as a building material, so that the anthracite iridescent, clearly geometric and large-scale forms could become more and more a matter of course in the cityscape as well.

Photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher are presented under the common denominator of the specific building material, showing exemplary motifs from the families of objects they compiled. The images include winding towers, water towers, cooling towers, coal bunkers, grain silos, and factory buildings that were created in Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and the USA between 1966 and 2012. In this way, they also roughly trace the radius of those countries in which the artist couple's photographic work took place over five decades. Given the time of their creation, the works also extend beyond the year of Bernd Becher's death and reaffirm how actively Hilla Becher held on to the shared concept and added something new. Therefore, the photographs of the water tower, taken ten years ago in Saint Aubin les Elbeuf in France, can be regarded as remarkable examples of their kind simply because of their authorship. Once again, the specific characteristic of the joint work of the artist couple is made clear in them, such as the withdrawal of the individual artistic signature - even if this specific feature was to turn into the opposite through the consistent adherence to their strictly objective method, and today we can speak of a Becher style.

The shape and volume of the colossal French water tower can be visually traced in a central position in the picture, slightly from below, exposed in front of an overcast sky.

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This large industrial device with its cylindrical water reservoir, which in this case resembles a cogwheel, is even presented from different perspectives in three views. Through such a multi-part mode of representation, which the Bechers often used for their motifs and described as unwinding, the object was once again presented more plausibly in its three-dimensionality. The static and oversized object seems to have been made manageable and is visualised on several sides as if standing on a turntable. The proximity to the analytical approach of a natural scientist is a fitting comparison. For the Bechers' work was certainly inspired by scientific, lexically pictographic, historical views and illustrations of a technical as well as profane nature. Their systematic reading comes to bear especially in the typologies of water towers and factory buildings shown in the exhibition. Through the juxtapositions they challenge the comparative view of the individual building forms, which are similar due to their functionality and yet can be gradually distinguished according to the respective technical and economic possibilities as well as the contemporary taste of their builders.

Specific to the Bechers' photographic work is not only the stringent methodical realisation of each individual motif, but also the consistently high quality of the individual photographs. For the most part, they photographed with a large-format camera and used primarily 13 x 18 cm black-and-white negatives, which enabled them to convey their motifs in an almost tangible materiality in their prints, richly detailed and true to reality. The surface of the concrete, its rugged and, from a distance, mostly monochrome uniformity, gains in the case of the selected exhibits an almost prominent, sensually cool and haptic quality. This is particularly evident in the larger print formats, whereby the artist couple since the 1980s - and this applies decisively to their so-called basic forms and landscapes - committed themselves to the dimension ca. 50 x 60 cm and for each view occurring in typologies usually chose the image dimension ca. 30 x 40 cm.

With a few exceptions, the construction forms shown in the exhibition can be found in the Bechers' monographic artist's books and also provide a representative overview. The headframes, all of which are reproduced in frontal standing profile and whose silhouette is given either with an unobstructed view of the conveyor wheels or of boxy conversions of the conveyor construction, refer to typical building forms in Great Britain, Belgium, and France. Particularly in England and Wales, where Bechers enjoyed an extended working stay as early as 1966, they registered a purely functionalist conception of the conveyor frames in the mines, while in France a conception influenced by historical representative buildings made its influence perceptible in the industrial as well.

The fact that industrial and engineering construction was subject to the influences of representational and residential architecture, as well as to the ideas of monument design, is also evident in the structural forms of the water towers, which can likewise assume a landmark function in the landscape within industrial plants, but also along railroad sections, for example, and sometimes seem to "abandon" the towering form of a tower in favour of more compact forms.

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Coal bunkers, cement silos and grain silos have a similar function, since bulk material of various types is collected in them for export. Nevertheless, the coal bunkers found in mines and coking plants differ in particular in their cubist-looking nested form, which was often found in combination with a quenching tower largely built from wood.

Furthermore, special attention is paid to the monumental grain silos that Bernd and Hilla Becher portrayed in the USA. These are among the most gigantic structures in terms of their dimensions and capacity that Bechers have recorded. The book, published in 2006, provides the following background information: "In the 19th century, industrial farming methods had caused grain production to skyrocket to such an extent that the conventional means of transport by water and land soon became insufficient. The first large silos were built in Buffalo, the transshipment point for bulk goods from all over America. From 1900 onwards, reinforced concrete buildings constructed using sliding formwork increasingly replaced the traditional, more rural timber construction method. [...] [They] provided the ideal conditions for cool, dry, and germ-free storage [of grain]."

The factory halls documented by Bechers, which they present solely in frontal views of the facades with a view of the gable sides, are also closed buildings in the shape of a house, in the case of the halls built in concrete likewise in a special size. Here, however, in addition to the filling of the skeletal structures, the entrances, entrance gates, glass and window fillings, and roof shapes prove to be characteristic. Moreover, the storage and transport of the materials potentially located there, as can also be seen in the layout of the facades, takes place on a horizontal plane, while in the silos vertical processes are of use. However, the specific functional context of the halls, especially taken in mines and metallurgical plants, but also at ports and in various other industrial areas, can only be read to a limited extent. Due to the concentration in the photographs on the two-dimensionality of the building facades, on the materiality of the outer shell of the buildings - comparable to reproduced surface images - they are among the most puristic views that the Bechers created, focussing on the building substance and structure.

The cooling towers, some more than a hundred meters high, constructed of reinforced concrete and photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher in Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg at mines and coking plants, can often be seen from a distance in the landscape outside the cities. The giant funnels, if in operation, can be recognised by far-reaching plumes of steam signalling the active cooling of heated water. Nevertheless, we do not find the latter situations reproduced in the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher. They preferred the view of the passive state of these giants, which clearly illustrates the construction form without atmospheric effects. The concrete cooling towers are the youngest of their kind in the line of development of functional construction. Initially, cooling towers were built in a smaller size in wood, then in a combination of a steel frame and corrugated sheet metal or waveternit until the advantages of concrete as a building material were exploited, which has a high resistance and allows a particular size and cooling capacity.

If we look at the photographs in the exhibition, the designation of their motifs as "Anonymous Sculptures" still proves to be convincing. Sculptors such as Wilhelm

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Lehmbruck, Brancusi, Picasso, and many others have cast sculptures in concrete right up to the present day. In Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs, however, these are juxtaposed with sculptures of a completely different kind. It is the everyday, industrially shaped utility and functional buildings that the artist couple recognised and valued as sculptural creations already present in reality. Constructions based on a purposeful collaboration of working people, thus on the knowledge, creativity and skill of engineers, technicians, craftsmen and workers, and ultimately expressed not only in their considerable function, but equally in their significant quality of form. The brilliant artistic transfer into concisely timeless images and picture compositions has thereby parted the way to recognise these profane buildings as works of art. However, the photographic results are not only readable from the perspective of visual arts. From many different perspectives of numerous fields of knowledge, the precise and historical images of Bernd and Hilla Becher prove to be great reading and - as shown here - especially impressive when the buildings under consideration are made of concrete.

Bernd Becher (Siegen 1931 - Rostock 2007) and Hilla Becher, née Wobeser (Potsdam 1934 - Düsseldorf 2015) worked in a partnership from 1959 until the end of their lives. Both studied, among other things, at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, which they left in the year of their marriage in 1961. Since that time, they have jointly devoted themselves to documenting industrial buildings, primarily in heavy industry. By the mid-1960s, they had developed their chosen range of motifs as well as their basic methodological approach in a groundbreaking way, enabling them to perfect their artistic concept in the years to come. On countless working trips to Germany, the Benelux countries, Great Britain, France, and the USA, they searched for "their" objects, always on the trail of further variations. They recorded these in documentary, factual photographs and thus created a collection that grew steadily into an incomparably important fund and body of work. Their eye for the typical and typological is unique in the history of photography and once again opened the door to the visual arts for the medium. Around 20 monographic books alone refer to their oeuvre, as well as countless publications and exhibitions in important and prominent institutions and museums around the world. Currently, a retrospective is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which will have a follow-up stop at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The studio of Bernd and Hilla Becher is continued by the artist Max Becher, the son of the artist couple, in Düsseldorf-Kaiserswerth.

The artist couple Bernd and Hilla Becher shared a lifelong history of friendship and collaboration with Konrad Fischer Galerie, which began in the turbulent period of upheaval in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As early as 1969, Rolf Wedewer and Konrad Fischer included works by the artist couple in the then highly innovative group exhibition "Konzeption Conception" at the Städtisches Museum Schloss Morsbroich in Leverkusen, which at the same time paved the way for the photographic documentary work to become part of minimal and conceptual art. This was followed in 1970 by the Bechers' first solo exhibition at the Konrad Fischer Galerie, entitled "Vergleiche technischer Konzeptionen und Einzelfotos technischer Konstruktionen" (Comparisons of Technical Concepts and Individual Photographs of Technical Constructions). And two years later, the artistic connection was strengthened by Bernd and Hilla Becher's participation in documenta 5,

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for which Harald Szeemann had won over curators Konrad Fischer and Klaus Honnef to conceive the section "Idea + Idea/Light." This was the secure foundation for further collaboration and for an ongoing exchange between Fischer and the Bechers.

*Gabriele Conrath-Scholl*

[1] Meyers Grosses Taschenlexikon, hrsg. u. bearb. von der Lexikonredaktion des Bibliographischen Instituts, Mannheim, Wien, Zürich, 1981, 3. Bd. S. 197 f .

[2] <https://www.baustoffwissen.de/baustoffe/baustoffknowhow/grundstoffe-des-bauens/portlandzement-definition-geschichte-joseph-aspdin-isaac-charles-johnson-zement-klinker-din-en-197-1-portlandkompositzement-hochofenzement/>

[3] Jörg Rehm: *Eisenbeton im Hochbau bis 1918, Dokumentation und Analyse realisierter Bauwerke im Raum München*, TUM, University Press, 2019, S. 31.

[4] Bernd und Hilla Becher: *Getreidesilos*, München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006, Klappentext.