



An Interview with artist Hilla Becher
Dusseldorf, Germany
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Hi, I'm Virginia Heckert, a curator of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

For almost 50 years, Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed aging industrial buildings and workers' housing in Western Europe. They arranged their photographs—whether on gallery walls or in books—into grids and sequences they called “typologies.” This approach of visually cataloging and classifying has influenced subsequent generations of artists.

We spoke with Hilla Becher about her life's work, focusing on examples within the Getty Museum collection.

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Bernd was always fascinated with the industrial structures of Germany's Siegen region, where he grew up. Can you explain why?

It's basically about preserving his childhood, in a way. He grew up in an old industrial area, all his family members—grandfather, uncles—they all worked in either iron ore mines or in blast furnace plants. This area is a very old, industrial area. In the '50s, '60s it was the end of it, they didn't have a waterway, so finally the industry collapsed.

When did *you* first notice these industrial plants?

When I came to the Ruhr district for other reasons—I got a job here in Düsseldorf—I was very impressed by the industry in the Ruhr. Even driving through, it was a fantastic impression. “The pot was still cooking.” And at that point I already thought, “This is fantastic to be photographed,” because metal, especially steel, is a wonderful medium for black-and-white photography.

After you and Bernd met, how did you go about this project of photographing industrial structures?

Bernd was already at the move to give up drawings and etchings because he wasn't fast enough. And in the meantime, they closed the plants and they tore them down. Then he bought a small camera from a friend and started taking little pictures to memorize. Then later on he decided that probably photography would do this much better than he could draw it.

We started in the Siegen area because it was inexpensive to go there and to stay there with his parents. And the houses they belong to the miners, and they belong to the landscape. So we photographed the houses from different angles and within the environment as much as possible.

Was that your first project, or were you doing that along with the industrial structures?

Simultaneously, with the blast furnaces, the preparation plants, and the winding towers.

You would photograph one building from different points of view. Did you fall into this pattern after awhile, or was it more calculated?

Like a house, you can photograph from eight different angles and they all make sense, it's logical. You have four frontal views, you have four corner views.

Did you discover the same approach with the industrial buildings at the same time?

If you mention what we call “typologies” then you compare different buildings with each other; different buildings sorted for their special kind. Depending how complex one building is, you can photograph it from many different views to grasp it, to get it, or you can compare buildings with each other. There are some objects that don't need different views. For instance, all concentric or symmetrical objects, like water towers. One view is ok, that's all you need. But more complex buildings like breakers or blast furnaces need more views to be understood.

What were some of the earliest decisions you and Bernd made as you began grouping images?

We once took—I think altogether it was three only—cooling towers and we put the images on the floor; we had a white floor then. And then something happened. They started to dance, and something happened seeing them side-by-side. And that was actually the beginning of grouping them, somehow. But of course everybody who collects something groups—whether you collect beer mugs, or butterflies, or bugs. So you can group these very difficult to understand industrial buildings

How did you think about images in terms of sequencing versus grids? Was it in relation to whether you would present them in a book versus on the wall?

We grouped them differently according to the space. Of course in a book you go page for page and put them together, depending on similarities and differences. And you can do that by a sequence, by a long line, by group of nine. So you have even the diagonal possibility of comparing.

Was it a surprise when you came upon a strategy to group images, or were there other artists doing anything similar?



Actually, the first ones to do this was nineteenth-century books that show animals, flowers, biological comparisons.

Photography seems particularly suited to that kind of classification system.

Yes, to be able to compare photographs, they have to be free from moods. They have to be as neutral as possible. That makes it possible to compare them. That means no bright sunshine, no snow, no moonlight. And then you can compare anything that's taken from a similar angle.

Were you doing that very early on?

Yes, but that is nineteenth-century photography. They tried to get some sky, but normally they wouldn't get any sky.

Because of the type of film—the emulsion?

The film overreacted to blue and so the sky was always white.

But you had the possibility to create a mood.

Yes, of course we had the possibility, but we didn't want that because then you have a sky and the sky is another subject. We wanted to have a kind of clarity.

When you and Bernd started out, what type of camera did you use?

In the very early days, we used a wooden camera, it was a 5x7, a really nineteenth-century camera, with old lenses. We didn't have money to buy good, modern lenses. So we used that for quite a long time, for years. And then we couldn't get the parts anymore, especially the film holders. I can't remember exactly, but we had probably only four film holders for this camera.

Has the discipline of architecture influenced your work?

Of course we were interested in architecture. But what you call architecture is probably designed architecture. We both were interested in this difference. The principle "form follows function" is rather not in architecture but in industrial buildings.

How do you see the relationship between form and function?

That is a very interesting relationship, especially in these buildings. The water towers sometimes are a little bit decorated. But other than that, it's really pure function. Be visually interested first, and then ask why.

They have a very short life span these buildings. Once they are built they last for 20 years and then they have to go.

You named one of your books “Anonymous Sculptures,” and that certainly captures exactly what these buildings are about.

It happens once in a while that you have a name, but in general they were built by teams. A team of people, sometimes working together, sometimes one after the other, and then things changed in time. So like a blast furnace, you attach another pipe; or it's like a stove that needs a new pipe and then it looks different. It's not from the beginning a designed creature.

Has your interest in these subjects changed over time?

How we photographed didn't change, because that worked out very well. But of course we learned a lot while we did it. It's a constant learning procedure, especially you learn why it looks like that and how come it has a certain shape. And then you learn about the function. And you learn it from the people working there and you learn it from books and you learn it from a general interest and you learn it from history.

From a visual standpoint, was it a creative process?

Yes, of course, especially working with a large camera. You have to make decisions, and you have to have some experience to make pictures that make sense; especially, for instance, to fill the format. We made mistakes in the beginning to photograph very thin chimneys. That's something that we disagreed about. Bernd wanted to photograph a series of chimneys and I said “don't do it, they look like a pencil in the landscape. They are so skinny. They don't fill the image.” And finally we had to give it up.

Any other examples? Did any discovery surprise you?

My favorite subject is a blast furnace because they are so crazy. And in the beginning I thought, “We can't do it.” I even said to Bernd, “Let's give it up. I'll never find a way to get some order in the chaos.” But we went on and then we learned; if there is a front, a back, a side view. You find ways of inventing your own way of looking at things. But you have to do it long enough and then finally, you get it.

It's like photographing an octopus. You have to learn: “Is there a front? Is there a back? How would you photograph a horse? Would you photograph it from the front? No, you wouldn't. You would photograph it from the side. And all these things you learn by doing.

Can you describe how you and Bernd worked together? You just gave an example of where you might disagree, but how did you collaborate?

Most of the time we traveled together, especially the longer trips. And as soon as possible, we had two cameras. And once we got permission to get into a plant, it was necessary to use the time. So each of us would photograph something and we would talk about: “You do this, I do this, and how about” or “I help you climbing up on the blast furnaces and then you help me



attaching the tripod to something.” So we worked as a team; we helped each other. And ideally we would photograph our own favorite views.

And then when you looked at the prints, how did you work together?

I did most of the printing, most of the time. Bernd wasn't quite as patient! And then we would lay them out and *say*: “*This* is no good.” Or we had different opinions about the point where to photograph it from. Sometimes it turned out that it changed around totally; that I liked Bernd's and he liked mine.

Before we had our first shows, we had already accumulated a lot. So that was probably the reason to finally end up in “typologies.”

Your methodology, like you said, is similar to collecting, to classifying, to encyclopedic ways of looking at the world.

Yes, to work like scientists work. And for me, the differences between art, science, and all kinds of creative doings are not very relevant. So if you do what you're really interested in, then nothing can go wrong. You have to stick to your interest. And the deeper you go into it, the more efficient you are because you learn constantly. If you just photograph around a little here and little there, you don't learn anything.

So persistence and trusting your instincts?

Trusting your own interests, yes; and not being afraid of not surviving. As for us, it was complicated to go on for a long time without really making money; to follow a profession and to stick to your job. We didn't have good equipment for a long time. And that's the only thing that I regret!

Were you aware of August Sander's photographic portraits from a generation earlier, and his attempts at grouping them into categories?

Not then, no. Bernd found the first book in an antiquarian bookstore. That must have been in the '50s. It was really impressive. And then there was an article in the Swiss magazine, “DU.” We had already started to work in this encyclopedic way. But of course we admired him enormously. And Bernd once visited him.

Were there similarities between what Sander was doing versus your approach?

Oh yes. It was a very closely related point of view. Yes, we admired him a lot. We thought: he is a fantastic photographer and he did a very good job. What we admired was his consequent doing, and that he had found a way to get some order in his collection.

When you first looked at August Sander's work, did it have any influence on yours?

Probably not any more. But what do you call this—it backs you up? It makes you feel good; it wasn't really an influence. It was such a different subject. But of course there were several very good photographers that we admired: [Albert] Renger-Patzsch, Walker Evans.

Let's talk about your photographs of framework houses.

The framework houses are workers' houses. Most all of them are built in the nineteenth-century, very often by the miners themselves—very inexpensive, prefabricated, small houses. In this area even today, people see them as poor people's houses. They're inexpensive, not very prestigious. The people who would try to make them look a little better would slate them. So very often they are slated from the street side or the weather side.

It was a very puritan society there. The framework houses show the puritan point of view: saving, working, no ornament. There was even a law using as little wood as possible, only as much as they really needed, and that was an aesthetic principle.

How did you put creativity into those groupings—beyond a “form follows function” approach?

In this case, if you come from the visual similarity, you have it already. So the ones with the slated gable go together. The ones that are all framework are grouped together. The street-side slated ones are grouped together; the un-slated ones are grouped together. So the visual beauty also shows the technical reason. It goes together very, very easily.

As you scan the images, you notice their geometric patterns. And the sequencing itself creates rhythm.

Yes, of course. The typologies they are always put together for a reason, too. It has to have a certain rhythm, yeah, that's true. That's for all typologies.

In that sense, it seems very creative. It's enjoyable just to look at them.

Yeah, it's a little bit like music. It has to swing. It has to work together in an almost dancing way.