

P r e s s R e l e a s e



Bernd and Hilla Becher

to be awarded the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography, 2004

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation has selected German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher to receive the 2004 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography. The prize, consisting of SEK 500,000 and a gold medal, will be presented at a ceremony held in Göteborg, Sweden, on November 20, 2004. A new exhibition of Bernd and Hilla Bechers' work, curated and organized by the Hasselblad Center, will be opened in conjunction with the ceremony.

The Foundation's decision to award the 2004 prize to Bernd and Hilla Becher was motivated with the following statement:

Bernd and Hilla Becher are among the most influential artists of our time. For more than forty years they have been recording the heritage of an industrial past. Their systematic photography of functionalist architecture, often organizing their pictures in grids, brought them recognition as conceptual artists as well as photographers. As the founders of what has come to be known as the 'Becher school' they have brought their influence in a unique way to bear on generations of documentary photographers and artists.

This year's prize committee, which submitted its proposal to the Foundation's board of directors, comprised:

Mr. Filippo Maggia (chairman), Curator, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy, Mr. Daniel Birnbaum, Professor and Rector, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt, Germany, Ms. Sandra S. Phillips, Senior Curator of Photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA, Ms. Gilane Tawadros, Director, Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), London, United Kingdom and Mr. Bas Vroege, Director, Paradox, Edam, The Netherlands.

Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten ('Anonymous sculptures: a typology of technical constructions') was the title of an early, 1970 publication of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The main subject matter of their photography, then and now, is the industrial heritage of a past era. They record a period in history where heavy industry was the predominant factor of economic development and in which the architectural structure of a building revealed its specific function.

Their work is rooted in the new photography of the nineteen twenties and thirties that liberated photography from the tradition of painting. August Sander, a photographer belonging to this movement, was a very significant figure for them. As a portrait photographer, Sander respected his subjects and their roles, and depicted them with a formal distance, like phenomena. The Bechers do the same today, when they shoot houses or water towers or the coal mines of Pennsylvania, thus granting status to the anonymous constructions of the fading past.

In time, the Bechers developed a simple yet effective way of presenting their images by arranging them in grids that combine functionally and architecturally related structures, resulting in what has often been referred to as typologies. Thanks to its conceptual qualities, their work was adopted by the visual arts in the seventies rather than by photography. Closer examination of the individual images however, reveals their superb technical craftsmanship and the carefully chosen vantage point of each.

Almost without exception, their pictures are shot in slightly overcast weather, resulting in a neutral light grey sky and a maximum of detail in the 'skin' of the architectural subject matter. The somewhat higher vantage point, positions the viewer ideally in front of the building thus avoiding distortion of the perspective. The combination of these qualities contributes to the meticulous, documentary nature of their undertaking.

Their first books included information concerning the constructions, dates and places. The later books only include information concerning place and the year the pictures were taken. Never a word from themselves about the pictures; the Bechers only speak about the subject matter, unmistakably positioning their work as *Gegenstandsfotografie*.

In *Framework Houses* (1977) the Bechers document a project they began in the 1960s in the region of Siegen. Here, in one of Germany's oldest industrial areas, they shot a series of pictures of residential architecture built between 1870 and 1914. The pictures show wooden houses without ornaments (built under stringent rules to prevent excessive use of wood) and a functional framing with neoclassical proportions. The model was also used for churches, shops, farms and schools. In these rationally organized series of photographs the graphic rendering of shingle siding or dark stucco is surprisingly lyrical.

In *Pennsylvania Coal Mine Tipples* (1991), the Bechers show us the structures positioned at the entrance of the mines in Western Pennsylvania (USA). *Gas Tanks* (1993), was shot in Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and the United States between 1963 and 1992. The work consists of 140 carefully organized photographs of gas containers.

Whereas their previously published works concentrated on isolated industrial objects, *Industriellandschaften* ('Industrial Landscapes', 2002) shows huge industrial sites in their natural surroundings. This makes the images slightly more narrative and interpretive. Although the photographs were taken over the past forty years, they were published here for the first time. Both in the book as well as their exhibitions, this meant the introduction of larger, individually presented prints alongside the characteristic grids of images.

The combination of extreme photographic sensitivity and skills with conceptual qualities in documentary photographic practice also characterizes the approach of their former pupils at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. Here, under the leadership of professor Bernd Becher (with Hilla Becher playing a role in the background that must not be underestimated), a generation of highly successful artists including Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer and others was trained. No other photographers in the second half of the past century played an equally significant role in shaping a new generation of artistic photographers as the Bechers.

Bernd Becher was born in 1931 in Siegen, Germany. He studied painting and lithography in Stuttgart, 1953-1956, and typography in Düsseldorf, 1957-1961. There he met **Hilla Wobeser**, a student of photography and his future wife. Hilla was born in 1934 in Potsdam, Germany. The two artists began collaboration in 1959, and their first exhibition took place in 1963, at the Ruth Nohl Gallery in Siegen. Since 1968 many exhibitions including their works have been organized in the United States and Europe. They participated in Documenta in Kassel, 1972, 1977, 1982 and 2002 and in the Sao Paulo Biennial 1977. They won the Leone d'Oro (Golden Lion) for sculpture at the Venice Biennial (1990) and the Goslar Kaiserring (1995) and in 2002 they received the Erasmus Prize, which honours achievements in society and culture.

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation

The Erna and Victor Hasselblad Foundation was instituted by a bequest from Erna and Victor Hasselblad. The purpose of the Foundation is to promote scientific education and research in the natural sciences and photography. A number of projects are granted funds annually, amounting to approximately SEK 15 million. One of the awards, the annual international award for outstanding achievement in photography, which is being given this year to Bernd and Hilla Becher, has come to attract a great deal of media attention.

In 1989, the Foundation opened the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Photographic Center (the Hasselblad Center) in Göteborg, Sweden. The Center maintains an ongoing exhibition and lecture program. In January 1996, the new exhibition hall housed at the Göteborg Museum of Art was inaugurated. A photographic research and reference library, open to researchers and students, is being established, as is a collection of photographs including photos by all the Hasselblad Award winners and others. The exhibit of Bernd and Hilla Bechers' work to be opened on the occasion of the award ceremony on November 20, 2004 will be organized by the Hasselblad Center.

Göteborg, March 9, 2004.

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