

## Press Release

### **Bernd & Hilla Becher**

September 16–November 7, 2023

Public Reception: September 15, 6–9pm

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

**Sprüth Magers**

For over five decades, Bernd and Hilla Becher produced a remarkable oeuvre in the pursuit of a straightforward theme: variation within limits. Precision, fine detail and methodology mark the Bechers' work, which straddles several artistic categories. By systematically photographing commonplace industrial buildings across Europe and North America, they captured an architectural landscape in the process of disappearing. Approaching the structures with scientific interest, the artists classified, compared and contrasted their subjects in varying groups and "typologies," as they named their celebrated grids. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to announce Bernd and Hilla Becher's first solo exhibition at Sprüth Magers, Berlin. Showcasing the Bechers' iconic style and formal rigor will be several rarely seen works along with two typologies that allude to the cultural and social significance of the constructions the artists referred to as "anonymous sculptures."

The show outlines the career of the German artist couple who, from the 1960s onwards, began challenging the perceived gap between documentary and fine-art photography. Developing a precise visual lexicon, they chronicled the architecture of heavy industry in a uniform manner. With clarity and consistency, their compositions – which are photographed with tripod-mounted, large-format cameras and a vast range of lenses with varying focal lengths and filters – optically center their subjects and de-emphasize the surrounding landscape. Preferring few shadows, the Bechers optimized the light for each subject, arriving at the recognizable light skies that act as blank foils to the geometric forms. Focused on technical precision and letting the object speak for itself, the Bechers' work is informed by the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement of the 1920s and its drive towards a non-subjective style. Whilst recording the world as it is, they developed a visual code, a grammar of sorts, which strikes the balance between an objective and restrained gaze that is at the same time immediately identifiable and unique, even somewhat personal.

On view in the first gallery room are five groupings of works, each picturing a different structure. Photographed from both a frontal and a three-quarter perspective, *Winding Tower, Fosse Noeux No. 13, Sains en Gohelle, F (1972)* presents a headframe used in transporting workers and materials up and down underground mines. Placed in juxtaposition, a sequence of four images shows a vastly different iteration of the same kind of building from varying vantage points, taken in 1975 in Schuylkill County,

Pennsylvania, an area known to be home to the largest reserves of the hardest and purest coal in America. These so-called coal mine tipples – often erected and operated illegally by miners who had become unemployed during the Great Depression – were assembled with few and readily available materials. Seen through the artists' eyes, they become objects of anthropological observation that bear testament to regional socioeconomic developments: a section of the local economy evolved through the resourcefulness of a small group of people. Displayed alongside further seldom-seen groupings, these works allow viewers to walk around their subjects – a gravel plant, a gas cleaner and a gas cooler – emphasizing the sculptural attributes of the buildings.

In the second gallery room, one of the artists' characteristic formal arrangements, a typology, presents sixteen views of grain elevators showing the sculptural differences between functionally similar buildings. The different objects were photographed mainly in the USA – some in France and Germany – but their cylindrical shapes, built in differing sizes and materials, seem to merge in the black-and-white grid. Installed on the opposite wall of the gallery, twenty-four depictions of coal bunkers form a rare large-scale typology. *Coal Bunkers* (1966–93) functions as an example of how a typology's separate images work together with what the artists described as *Klang*, the “sound” or “rhythm” produced by the compositions and tonal values being in tune, each image finely calibrated to play in the orchestra of pictures. A study of “basic forms” is presented in a row of individual structures, again creating a rhythmic comparison of varying architectural shapes, whilst the sequence surveying cooling towers on the opposite wall highlights the possible variations within a given form.

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Bernd and Hilla Becher have had a major influence on our understanding of photography as a medium with which to document and catalogue our surroundings. Although their subjects appear to be deserted, and many of them have since vanished, the Bechers avoided nostalgia by preferring to portray active sites, the work going on inside or underground. An idiosyncrasy in their varying shapes, the photographs offer a view of these industrial-era constructions as individuals with character, lending them a peculiarly anthropomorphic quality. The artists' examination of the relationship between form and function has preserved the silent monuments of the biographies of generations of people whose lives were tied up in an arduous and gritty business. Anchoring the viewer in the present, the seminal works on display are a testament to the ways in which the Bechers have defined how we see and appreciate these sculptures that remain nameless but not faceless.

Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (1934–2015) lived and worked in Düsseldorf. Selected solo exhibitions include The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2022), which traveled to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2022), National Museum Cardiff, Wales (2019), Josef Albers Museum, Quadrat Bottrop (2018), Photographic Collection/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne (2016, 2013, 2010, 2006), Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2005), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2004), K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2003) and 44th Venice Biennale (1990). Group exhibitions include Barbican Art Gallery, London (2014), Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2014, 2004), Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013), Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010), Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2008), The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (2005), UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2004), Tate Modern, London (2004, 2003) and Documenta XI, VII, VI and V, Kassel (2002, 1982, 1977, 1972).

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