

THE ARCHITECTURAL UNCANNY IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS
OF ANDREA ROBBINS AND MAX BECHER

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*"But beyond this largely theatrical role, architecture reveals the deep structure of the uncanny in a more than analogical way, demonstrating a disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitely unhomely. As articulated by Freud the uncanny or **unheimlich** is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the **heimlich** thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis."*

Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*

Photography and architecture have been strangely intertwined since 1839, serving each other in the construction and the commemoration of mythical and real social spaces. Since photography as a medium and as a technique promised collective access to the subject condition of the author and the social practices of representation, it seemed also — from its beginnings — more qualified than painting to record the public dimensions of social life, present and articulated in architecturally constructed sites. It seemingly guaranteed the unmediated experience of collective existence that architecture had once announced.

The architectural photographs of Charles Marville remain a vivid example: he received the official commission to document the vanishing medieval architecture of Paris in photographic records from the very agencies who implemented the city's demolition. Once the photographs had been taken, these agencies would organize the archival collection and exhibition of Marville's 'documents' of the historical city that they had recently destroyed.

In the present the alliance between photography and architecture has produced even more peculiar hybrids: if *Reklamearchitektur* in Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union of the 1920 could still open an exciting prospect of radicalizing the experience of public space in the fusion of the semiotic with the architectural dimension, by now that fusion has become a commonplace of contemporary architectural

production. Postmodern architecture has in fact embraced its reduction to the semiotic, yet what claims to be the universal 'legibility' of its historical and discursive quotations and references amounts hardly ever to anything more than architecture's total submission to the laws of spectacle culture in the face of its rapidly disappearing competence to address social space and public use value. Advanced postmodern architects seem to calculate the photographic dimension of their architectural constructions already at the design stage: the façades and interior spaces are drawn with an eye towards their eventual photographic reproduceability (for example in magazines such as *Global Architecture*). Or they direct their design towards a newly found ability of architectural masses, materials and spaces to yield to the laws of the photographic surface in an endless process of transforming the tectonic and the spatial into the specular.

Traditional definitions of architecture had perceived it as being constituted more than any other artistic production in accordance with the needs of social functions and public space. Traditional definitions of photography considered it as a representational system more reliable than any other to render exact spatial and temporal information about the 'real': both assumptions — if not already profoundly flawed at their inception — have been thrown into crisis in recent years and this mutual erosion has led to both, a general doubt about photographic representation as well as an increasing awareness of architecture's inextricable entanglement with ideological interest.

The crisis of photographic truth-claims culminates currently in the realization that with the emergence of digital and electronic image production, even the last residual confidence in photography's privileged access to the 'real' has vanished. It can not surprise us that certain artists place themselves in the forefront of a movement that — in tandem with the industries — achieves the final liberation from the old fetters of referentiality with which photography — in spite of photomontage's earlier successes within advertising and political propaganda — had still remained entangled through the conventions of documentary photography and the object ethos of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

The work of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, emerging from both the traditions of American documentary photography of the thirties and forties (especially the work of Walker Evans) and the redefinition of the photographic legacies of Weimar Germany¹, seeks to position itself not only in a critical dialogue with these photographic conventions, but also exactly between the crisis of photography and the crisis of architecture, generating insight from within the conflicts in both disciplinary formations.

When the photographs of Robbins/Becher deploy the traditions of photographic '*new objectivity*' and focus on architectural structure and detail, their approach yields neither the effect of conciliation nor the redemption typical of the conserving impulse of *Neue Sachlichkeit* that either monumentalizes or fetishizes the architectural object: they treat the apparent muteness of architecture (vernacular or officious) as an open semiological system, one that is at all times manifestly invested with interest and power, entangled with the functions of domination and ideology.

When Robbins/Becher deploy the photographic conventions of the *documentary*, that tradition's capacity to witness and report, they deliberately fail to provide the pathos of a morally declamatory or accusatory narrative. Documentary photography in their hands appears as an always already precarious practice, one whose assertive truth-claims have to be framed continuously in doubt: not just because of its discursive shortcomings of a depoliticizing decontextualization and its compensatory functions. But perhaps even more so because the truth-claims of documentary photography are continuously threatened by the infinitely more powerful assertions and convictions which the advanced time based media can convey.

The work's iconography ranges from the seemingly innocuous domestic architecture of German colonialist history in Africa to the ostentatious bank and business architecture of American imperialist history in Cuba; from the contraptions of the tourist industry in the Cherokee capital of Tahlequah, Oklahoma and the Dutch American town of Holland, Michigan to the architectural simulacra of the Western in the movie sets of Arizona. These shifting geo-political sites (Namibia and Zimbabwe; Havana, Cuba; Holland, Michigan; Old Tucson, Arizona) confront us immediately with a first question concerning the 'actual' subject within the photographic investigations of Robbins/Becher and their conception of the 'real'.

The diversity of locations and architectural types should caution us against any premature conclusion regarding their involvement in a project of photographic documentation of architectural history just as much as it should make us hesitate to foreground their commitment to a singular political project, even though their work on Namibia and Zimbabwe and their investigation of the history of Germany's colonialist destruction of African people and their resources seems to suggest such an activist position.

Thus, it is important to recognize that one dimension of their investigations is articulated precisely in the continual shifting of photographic subjects, a dimension that is more than simply the unfolding of a diverse iconographic program. In fact, it is the method and the principle of the photographic approach itself that is scrutinized in these shifts: they are addressing both the limitations and the potential scope of a project which uses still-photography for the construction of a critical-historical and analytical narrative, in order to oppose the principle of a mere accumulation and to avoid a silent archival collection of serialized images, as achieved by most of their precursors in the reactivated tradition of photographic *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Yet it is evident that the construction of the narrative sequence in their work is understood to be fraught with as many contradictions and fallacies as is the archival accumulation and the structuring principle of the series.

In a recent letter accompanying a grant application Robbins/Becher stated that they are interested in "... the intersection of tourism and colonial history."² This definition positions their photographic venture itself between the conventions of the travel-logue and the tourist snapshot on the one hand, and on the other hand, within the context of politically motivated documentary photography in the tradition of "concerned" photography and activist photojournalism.³

By merely comparing the subject matter of the Robbins/Becher projects with that of their generational precursors (such as Thomas Struth or that of Max Becher's parents, Bernd and Hilla Becher) and identifying the professional role definitions inherently given in each artist's work, one can gain important insights into the structural transformation of photographic production in the last thirty years. When the Bechers reintroduced certain aspects of the Weimar traditions of architectural photography in their continuing exploration of the industrial architecture of the late 19th and early 20th century, their role could justifiably be — and has in fact been — compared to the practices of

the archaeologist and the historian (their work having in fact contributed in an essential manner to the founding of a discipline of industrial archaeology). Already in the work of the next generation of artist/photographers such as Thomas Struth a different motivation dominated the approach to the urban contexts, that he made the subject of the first ten years of his work.

Responding to the recognition of a rapidly disappearing experience of public urban spaces and the social experience embedded in them, the role definition inherent in Struth's photographs drew ultimately on the traditions of the Baudelairean *flâneur* and the resources of melancholia that had already motivated Marville and Atget. While his peregrinations through a vast variety of urban textures and geopolitical sites inevitably made him acquire some of the more contemporary features of the global tourist, it was first of all the emphasis on skill and craft in Struth's photographs that protected his work from any such association. Moreover Struth's work maintained its critical difference from the industries of tourism and amateur photography in its restriction to the classical conventions of black and white photography (increasingly gaining a dimension of extreme artifice and historical self-consciousness) as the solely adequate medium to record lost public life and the architecture that had sustained it.

The work of Robbins/Becher quite obviously differs in many ways from these essential restrictions governing the photographs of the two preceding generations. First of all, in its emphatic and — for the time being — exclusive usage of color photography: it is important to recognize how the deployment of color in their work not only withdraws the resources of an aesthetic of melancholia that had been so integral to the projects of the Bechers and of Struth, but more importantly how their deployment of color also manages to successfully avoid the complacency and affirmative indulgence of color photographers like William Eggleston. Color for Robbins/Becher seems to function as the implementation of the actually available technical tools of photography to avoid the aestheticization of traditionalist skillful black and white photography.

Second, and perhaps more relevant, their work introduces dimensions of a time based narrative through its formal organization around the order of the sequence rather than that of the serial structure: after all, seriality had systematically ordered the material of the previous generations within the modernist scheme of the grid. In fact, one could

argue that the pictorial grid is the spatial equivalence to the conceptual and institutional order of the archive. Thirdly, their work allows for the frequent — and not merely accidental — appearance of inhabitants of buildings or of pedestrians in the streets as opposed to the almost phobic exclusion of any and all of the agents within the industrial structures of the Bechers or the inhabitants within Struth's urban sites. Yet at the same time their work is extremely conscious of the fallacies of photographing individuals and social groups, and Robbins/Becher never cross over into the entrapments of "concerned" documentary photography whose delight in visual anecdote does not exceed the voyeuristic impulse of depicting the victim.

One could argue in fact that the work of Robbins/Becher engages in a continuous and careful negotiation within this problematic opposition: on the one hand the limitations of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* whose object-fixed approaches to photography prevented it from addressing historical structure, narrative and context. On the other hand the problematic promises of "concerned" photography which claimed to cope with the complexity of the constructions of the 'real' in its narrative, but failed to reflect on the compensatory usages (e.g. concerned photographs instead of concerned policies), and the discursive and institutional frameworks within which it was placed.

Yet another major departure becomes evident if one realizes that Robbins/Becher do not allow the viewer/reader the same liberal range of disengaged interpretations as their precursors, but they focus — in as subtle as much as a confrontational manner — on the actual conditions of history surfacing within the architectural structures recorded. Lastly, as especially apparent within the most recent series on *Old Tucson*, Robbins/Becher operate along and sometimes traverse one boundary that the previous generations would not even have considered: the understanding that both photographic and architectural claims for a privileged access to the 'real' have become precarious by comparison to the fictions of mass cultural 'spaces', such as film and advanced electronic media, and their impact on the formation of what is collectively perceived as the 'real'. Thus, the architecture of an entire city of movie sets is of importance to Robbins/Becher not only as a Baudrillardian example of advanced simulation, an architecture whose actual 'reality' — its function and mythical power — only begins on the level of image reproduction and media dissemination, but also as the allegory of an architectural

and photographic aesthetic that could still take the innate link of its representations and objects to material reality as certainty.

It appears then on the grounds of these differences alone that the work of Robbins/Becher operates at the opposite end of both, foundational concepts of purely functional architecture and the claims for a purely photographic object representation.⁴

In engaging with the logic of the sequence and its inherent opening towards emerging forms of narrative, the work of Robbins/Becher seems to avoid those fallacies that some of the students of the Bechers as much as other 'object' photographers had still embraced. These had insisted on the compatibility of their photographs with modernist formal principles in painting and sculpture: those of the Ready Made, those of non-compositional order. The corresponding photographic practices had all shared the prohibition on pictorial or photographic narrative — be that the random anomic accumulation of disparate images as in the work of Ruscha or Richter, or be that the organization of the photographic accumulation within the institutional and discursive order of the archive as that of the Bechers and Struth.

While the photographs of Robbins/Becher inevitably invite us to reflect on this prohibition of narrative structures within the photographs of the two previous generations, their work seems to specifically pose the question concerning the 'limits' of historical representation: the peculiar logic of admission and repression that had governed the work of the previous generations and the complicated relationship between selective disavowal and memory in photography in general.

Looking at aspects of the series *colonial remains* (1991) which was photographed by Robbins/Becher in the former German colony of Namibia might enable us to clarify this point. The series focuses on the remaining traces of German buildings within the geographical and political context of a recently reconstituted African state. Every detail of the colonialist architecture now appears as a manifestation of historical oppression: even the intensity of the blue sky behind the innocuous 'Northern' neo-classical structures instantly betrays that the normative displacement of one culture's shared beliefs and behavior onto a different geo-political context amounts merely to a process of the destruction and the domination of another culture. Every feature of the seemingly benign architecture now reads like a missionary tale: the neo-classical vernacular (ornamented and scaled in the manner of provincial German

schoolhouses of the late 19th and early 20th century) with its false promises of universal enlightenment, civility and egalitarian education, now speaks as the primary testimony of the barbarism of colonialist rule.

Neo-classicism as an official language of colonialist conceits is especially evident in the photographs of the ruins of ruling class villas (the former homes of German colonialist supervisors of the exploitation of the Namibian mines such as *Managers' Residence at Sinclair Diamond Mine*) where the façade of civility, its German emphasis on measure and order, on propriety and property, imposed at one point and now derelict in the desert, become haunting allegorical images of the ideology of cultural identity constituted in the nation state.

But it is the sudden appearance of a name in one of the photographs, on one of those quaint blue and white (and still common) German enamel street signs that initiates the viewer fully into the dimension of the uncanny operative throughout the photographs of Robbins/Becher: *One Göring Street*.⁵ This image not only succeeds in retrieving a document that explicitly connects Germany's brutal colonial history with the history of Nazi Fascism through the mediation of a name and by establishing a generational link between father and son. Moreover, it inevitably draws us initially into a reflection on a deeper continuity between the patriotic ideologies of Nation states and their colonialist oppression directed at 'Others' during the phase of imperialist expansion, only to point further to the subsequent unfolding and violent enactment of those ideologies within the Nation state itself, when persecution and annihilation is directed at those who were constructed as the 'Other' within its own boundaries.

At the same time this photograph induces another reflection, perhaps more subtle, but no less important than the the explicitly historical and political one, yet by no means less efficient in the viewer's mind: if this name reappears here in a different geo-political context from the one within which it is generally 'known' to most viewers/readers, it inevitably raises not only the question of a return of the historically repressed and the question of genocidal politics within the history of a family as well as that of a nation. More than that, it also raises the question as to why the photographs of the previous two generations (that of Gurski, Ruff and Struth and that of the Bechers themselves) could not ever afford to let the name "Göring" (or any other metonymic reference to the specificity of that German history or to the specificity of *any* explicit historical-political phenomenon) enter

their photographic records. Or put differently, why it took three generations of artists before the photographic conventions of a 'new' and 'other objectivity' could finally confront political and historical realities such as the intertwining of the legacies of colonialism and of National Socialism.⁶

In their second major series *Wall Street in Cuba*, photographed in Cuba in 1993, numerous questions encountered in the Namibia project, persist and are rephrased: specifically to what degree architecture can be analyzed as a historical narrative telling the stories of imposed and constructed identities under colonialist rule. As in the Namibia series the photographs taken by Robbins/Becher chose a variety of architectural structures where the various historical phases intersect. Once again — and certainly not in an accidental fashion — the predominant architectural idiom is that of neo-classicism which seems to have functioned in almost every geo-political context as the sign system of domination disguised as enlightenment. Was it the benign neo-classical quotations of German schoolhouse architecture and its pedagogical pretense that uncannily revealed the conceits and the (self-)deception of German colonialist rule, it is the grandiloquent and ostentatious version of neo-classicism that the business and bank buildings in Cuba (as in every other place) considered most adequate for their mission and enterprise of control and domination. The photograph that Robbins/Becher took of a group of Corinthian columns supporting the façade of the Bank of Nova Scotia in Havana makes this point in an almost comical manner since the fluting of the columns is extended and reiterated in the linear filament of the steel gates that ornate and protect the windows of the bank building like prison bars.

The photograph of the current inhabitants of the Havana Stock Exchange generates an even more revelatory shock of sudden dialectical recognition, since the photograph points backward to the betrayal of the promises of radical equality and civility with which neo-classical architecture had been originally associated in the French and the American revolutions, and simultaneously forward into the present where the literal social inhabitation of these emptied architectural and ideological structures relieves us of their universal claim to validity and conviction.

It is difficult to grasp how Robbins/Becher actually succeed in reintroducing historical subjects into their photographic investigations

without even approaching the threat of anecdote. Certainly the inconspicuous appearance of the figures, their fleeting presence protects them from the photojournalist gaze that spectacularizes or victimizes each individual subject once it has been trapped by the camera image. This becomes instantly evident if one looks at the numerous images that are edited out by Robbins/Becher in the preparation of a finite series.⁷

Sustained in the fleeting moment of an accidental encounter, yet part of a larger historical argument, the mother holding her child, seemingly waving to the photographer from the *Bolsa de la Habana*, makes the viewer discover that the allegorical fascination with ruins, which is clearly operating throughout the work of Robbins/Becher, does not necessarily emerge from a melancholic contemplation and commemoration of loss. Quite the opposite: the ruins of colonialism in Namibia just as much as those of imperialism in Cuba can also be perceived in a utopian perspective: as a promise of the possibility of the departure of power and the actual potential for historical change.

N O T E S

1. This would already be evident on the grounds of their familial ties and their educational experiences: Max Becher is the son of Bernd and Hilla Becher and has spent most of his adolescent and early adult life studying in the United States. Both Andrea Robbins and Max Becher studied with Hans Haacke at the Cooper Union in New York and his personal example as much as his methods and principles defining artistic practice have certainly contributed to the formation of the positions articulated now in their work. Furthermore it should be noted that Max Becher completed his graduate studies at Rutgers University with Martha Rosler who is not only an artist who has worked extensively on the critical approaches to photography but who is also one of the foremost writers and critics of photography.
2. Letter by Andrea Robbins and Max Becher to the Lightwork Foundation, dated November 3, 1992. Courtesy of the artists.
3. One of the best critical discussions of the problematic status of the venerable tradition of "concerned" documentary photography remains Martha Rosler's essay 'In, around and afterthoughts on documentary photography' (1981) in: Martha Rosler, *Three Works*, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1981. Reprinted in: Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 1989, pp.303-342.
4. An earlier example of this change can be seen in an important project developed by Max Becher before he started his exclusive collaboration with Andrea Robbins. Becher took photographs from his television set, collecting all the lead-in images of television shows that used houses or homes, places and sites as their "establishing shots." Thus he not only linked the electronic media as the sole definition of current public space with the mere simulacra of architecture as reminders of its past functions to provide sites of subject formation, but he also pointed to the fact that the very mass cultural framework that systematically coordinates the loss of site specific experience and enforces mythical unanimity and global assimilation, needs the images of architecturally defined 'places' in order to regain credibility. See: Max Becher, *Network Landmarks: Establishing Shots from TV Series (Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Star Trek, The Jeffersons, Dallas et al.)*, color photos shot from television, 1988. For a partial reproduction of the work see Martha Rosler, *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory and Social Activism*, Discussions in Contemporary Culture vol.6, edited by Brian Wallis, DIA Art Foundation, New York, Bay Press Seattle, 1991, pp.100-101.
5. The street sign 'commemorates' Heinrich Göring, the initiator of the concentration camps for the Hereros of the German colonies in Africa before 1918, who happened to be the father of Hermann Göring who, as the Nazi military leader and one of the key figures of the Nazi regime would become integrally responsible for the Holocaust.
6. The closest that the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher ever came to incorporate this dimension explicitly into their archaeological investigations was in their series of photographs of post-war domestic architecture in Germany. Here the German refusal, the 'inability to mourn' had been directly and unconsciously articulated in the self effacement of post-war buildings, their fusion between an innocuous meekness and a monstrous repression.
7. This is especially true for the Havana photographs where a large number of conventionally seductive documentary images (seductive in their exotic iconography, their luscious coloration and the exact correspondence to the high moments of the documentary tradition) were excluded from the final selection of the series.

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