

A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

M.Catherine de Zegher

Director Kanaal Art Foundation

The insights of metaphysics are "gained by analogy, not in the usual meaning of imperfect resemblance of two things, but of a perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things."

Hannah Arendt, quoting Kant¹

A deserted house stands in a sun-drenched and desolate sandy landscape. Just as Georg Simmel in his essay on ruins states that a common lot, the same air and the same light, all place a building and its surroundings under the same color denominator,² so too is my experience upon seeing the first photo by Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. Seemingly, it is a nostalgic representation of an imaginary world which, because of its degree of familiarity, causes me to become immediately involved in it and from it conjure up an idyllic reality.

Where, when and why? I notice that the house has stylistic features of the Art Nouveau architecture of the turn of the century and I suppose that, at one time, it was a splendid summer dwelling, somewhere in the dunes along the Belgian North-Sea coast or, maybe, somewhere in a sandy (coastal) region of Germany. The capacity to see and read resides indeed in the initial recognition. Yet, this short meeting with their photograph brings about an immediate distancing from its image, whereby fiction gives way to hard reality. The story or the constructions of significance are always, of necessity, fictions. "The understanding of the particular, or of history, is possible only to the — limited — degree in which that which takes place and happens to us, corresponds to an order which we imagine, to the — limited — degree in which that which really happens fits into a fiction. The 'real' appears, in its pure form, as that which falls outside the story and disturbs fiction. The 'real' is that which is 'left over' once order has been installed, that which cannot be integrated into it. The body, for instance — or also, more commonly, the prototype of what appears 'in the margin', breaks the meaning and reveals the fictional character of the construction of significance: the ordinary detail."³

Details which, at first sight, fit wonderfully well into the story of their picture, suddenly become disconnected. Very probably, the building

has been an elite residence in an exotic country and the dull sand belongs to a desert. Indeed, the shadows cast by the strong sunlight are too short for an European country and the surrounding bright blue sky makes it seem likely that there is an untouched expanse all around. The reversal which is triggered of by this detail, models my notion of reality and leads to a thoroughly different experience of the photo. And this is particularly the case when I am confronted with the whole series of photos *colonial remains*, taken in Africa by Robbins/Becher. At the exhibition, a short accompanying text fills in some open space between the pictures as well as provides answers to the unsolved questions regarding the location and the subject of the photos. Thus, I am informed that the residence dates from the beginning of the 20th century and once belonged to a German colonist, director of the Sinclair mine in Kolmanskop, where diamonds have been extracted since 1908. Their comments on the photos, written in an impersonal style, almost remind one of a neutral, informative text from some tourist brochure on Namibia, but nevertheless avoid veiled wording, such as shown in the following travel folder: "The historic town of Lüderitz with its quaint German-style architecture, the deep blue waters of the bay contrasted by rugged black rock, and the busy harbor where fishing boats ply their trade, evoke various images and memories. The name suggests yearning and nostalgia, but also hope for the future. In an age characterised by a world-wide desire to travel, the picturesque town and its unspoilt environs have much to offer to the discriminating tourist."⁴

It is precisely on that edge of the tourist brochure, the documentary magazine (cf. *National Geographic*) and the journalist's report — on that cutting edge — that the photographic work of Robbins/Becher develops. It is precisely in that area of exploration, where projection turns into a confused state of alienation, that the viewer experiences the total ambiguity and irony of their photographs. In the same way each press photo requires text, so too do both artists make constant use of captions, titles and specific frames, the design and color of which are selected with the utmost care. Often, they even have produced a set of postcards from each series of photos. Thus, the totality of the information is supported by two corresponding, yet differing texts: the linguistic text

which consists of words and the photographic text composed of lines, shades of color and surfaces.

What does their photographic message aim at or include? By definition, photography transmits the scene itself, the literal reality. Although there is always a reduction at work and although, of course, the image is not the reality, it is at least its perfect *analogon*⁵. Here the question of the particular status of the photographic image is raised: "it is a message without a code." It is the myth of the purely "denotative" status of the photograph, "the perfection and the plenitude of its analogy," in short its "objectivity," that is undermined by the very photography of Robbins/Becher. In their work, the artists affirm the hypothesis that each photo is connoted, for instance by exploring all potential formulations of press photography, which is supposed to display the highest form of objectivity. In this instance, the connotation is induced on the production level (composition, processing of the photo/text) and on the reception level by a reading public that is bound to a traditional stock of signs. Yet, the connotation is already constituted in the very subject of the photographic message.

Roland Barthes describes the photographic paradox as the coexistence of two messages: "one without a code (this would be the photographic analogue) and the other with a code (this would be the "art," or the treatment, or the "writing" or the rhetoric of the photograph). Structurally, the paradox is not of course the collusion of a denoted and a connoted message; the paradox is that the connoted (or coded) message develops here from a message without a code." It seems as if Robbins/Becher succeed in turning the entanglement of the "objective" message and the "invested" message into one inseparable whole and even posit them as being interchangeable. Moreover, they emphasize the most important procedures of connotation of the image: text, frame, title, caption ... And here too, a reversal is at work. In those instances when the text connotes, it seems to function as a new informative, objective or denoted message in a language which therefore sounds "neutral." At the same time however, this perhaps reveals a restriction in their work, since "the text burdens the image, neutralizes the imagination and since each clarification in words acts selectively and focuses only on some signs instead of on the iconic totality." Does the caption have a repressive function? Is it the moral of the story? However, it is also possible that the caption next to the photo, by participating in the denotation, leads to an amplification of the connotation, and that the innocence of their image becomes confused with the innocence of their caption.

The ambiguity as to the denotation and the connotation in their work, is mainly a result of the choice of the photographed locations and the manner in which the reading is conditioned. The capture on film of architecture as representing both the materialisation of 'place' and the realisation of 'décor' — in the figurative sense of 'a construction standing for something' (prestige, identity, nationality ...) and in the literal sense of 'a stage construction by which the place of action is represented' (in recreation parks ...) — is a central feature of their work. The photographed subjects are historical, i.e. they refer to places with a historic background, and "the reading of the photograph is historical," i.e. dependent on the viewer's knowledge and cultural situation. In the end, it becomes clear that Robbins/Becher wish to explore in depth the hypothesis that "each perception of photography instantly leads to its verbalization and that the image actually has no denoted state." This approach makes handy use of a "cognitive" connotation, "whose signifiers would be selected, localised in certain parts of the *analogon*." Yet, at the time of recognition, the viewer is somehow outwitted and he/she loses track and is forced into a questioning, into an inquiry and into growing awareness that he/she is watching a 'stage'.

If I am led to think that certain city views of the series *colonial remains* must be German because of their imperial architecture and a publicity sign that reads 'Lüderitz-Spar-Foodmarket', yet at the same time notice a tropical climate and the dubious conservation of the street name 'Göring-Strasse', I become doubtful and uncertain because different fields of my so-called knowledge come into conflict with each other. Given that the repressive aspect of memory functions selectively, it is quite annoying to find that it has escaped my mind that this European façade is the result of decades of colonialism in Africa, during which properties, traditions and even 'places' were simply put into place. This misplaced act did not only result in the universal distribution of European-like cities, but gave also rise to a hypocritical ideology of permanence as opposed to 'nomadic' movement. The perceptual behavior of the viewer is even very clearly worded in a letter written by Andrea Robbins and Max Becher: "All of our subjects appear at first to be one thing, as in the case of *Wall Street in Cuba* it seems formal studies of columns on neo-classical architecture. But when the photos are looked at individually, elements like the decayed condition of the buildings, the mother and child living in the Stock Exchange of Havana, the portrait of Fidel Castro in the Johnson Pharmacy, or clothes drying from the windows of the Trust Company disprove the original assumptions about location and subject. It is the moment when this flip

occurs that we are most interested in. The viewer might then ask: Where is this? Why is this? While the text then provides a brief information background for the continuation of these questions, the images can become vessels for the new meanings.” And almost evidently, all connotations in their turn lead to the “ideological” or “ethical” connotation, “that introduces reasons or values into the reading of the image.”

Thus, their work examines the notion of ‘place’ in many possible combinations of fact and fiction, in an ongoing history of colonialism and migration within the context of a policy of economic expansion. In order to do this, they focus their attention on transient myths of national identity, mass communication and the recent exploitation of tourism. In this sense, a link with that impressive book *The Accumulation of Capital* by Rosa Luxemburg can easily be made. Her central thesis postulates that, since capitalism shows no signs of collapse “under the weight of its economic contradictions,” the cause for its continued existence and growth must be looked for outside itself. Rosa Luxemburg found this cause in the so-called ‘third-man theory’, “that is, in the fact that the process of growth was not merely the consequence of innate laws ruling capitalist production but of the continued existence of pre-capitalist sectors in the country which “capitalism” captured and brought into its sphere of influence. Once this process had spread to the whole national territory, capitalists were forced to look to other parts of the earth, to pre-capitalist lands, to draw them into the process of capital accumulation, which, as it were, fed on whatever was outside itself. In other words, Marx’s “original accumulation of capital” was not, like original sin, a single event, a unique deed of expropriation by the nascent bourgeoisie, setting off a process of accumulation that would then follow “with iron necessity” its own inherent law up to the final collapse. On the contrary, expropriation had to be repeated time and again to keep the system in motion. Hence, capitalism was not a closed system that generated its own contradictions and was “pregnant with revolution”; it fed on outside factors, and its *automatic* collapse could occur, if at all, only when the whole surface of the earth was conquered and had been devoured ... Her careful “description of the torture of Negroes in South Africa” also was clearly “non-Marxist,” but who would deny today that it belonged in a book on imperialism?”⁶

It has occurred more often in history that iconic representation was put at the service of imperialist thinking; as was the case for 15th to 17th century Flemish painting’s participation in the *conquista* of South-America⁷; the same may also be said of 19th and 20th century

photography’s role in African colonialism. “Ironically, in a time in which photography is still analysed according to conventions of painting, and while films still follow most of the conventions of theater and literature, many famous and not so famous actual, physical and notoriously ‘authentic’ locations around the world are being reshaped under the pervasive influence of color photography, as well as print and audiovisual media.”⁸ Using the mechanical registration of that connection between (photographic) text and significance, which occurs only in photography, Robbins/Becher handle images as mythographies: on the one hand, the myth of the purely “denotative” status of the photograph, on the other hand — and complementary — the mythology of the photographed subject. “The place in the photograph is there, but is no longer there since now its place is here.” The places are not only displaced in a cultural and narrative manner, but also literally in a physical manner. “Even the new relation space/time — i.e. the experience of the immediately local and the temporally anterior — that is produced by photography,”⁹ is apparently consolidated by both artists while carrying out their photographic work: the notions of ‘here’ and ‘past time’ are realized in the medium itself, but also in the object of the architectural ‘décor’¹⁰. This not only brings about an understanding of the real irreality of photography as a medium, but also the unreal reality of the locations depicted. And this, in its turn, causes the viewer being less inclined to project him/herself into the image.

Finally I come to mention the third series of photos, which is considered in this catalogue: *Holland, Michigan*. In clear terms Max Becher writes the following about this series: “America, anxious to invent a history of picturesque sameness, destroyed much of its real history of diversity. Now that much of this evidence of diversity is a rarity, these emulations help to support the practice of ‘All American’ tourists visiting little artificial packages of cultural otherness. The notion of ‘America’ is thus defined, not as ‘diversity united’ but as a contrast against the severed roots. It is a destruction of memory deemed patriotic ... The more the living history is destroyed, the more can be framed as revival — places first have to be obsolete or gone in order to boom.” To conclude, it seems to me that the photographic work of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher confirms, once again, that it is more than clear that photography develops in the form of a paradox: “the paradox which makes an inert object into a language and which transforms the non-culture of a ‘mechanical’ art into the most social of institutions.”¹¹

translated by Catherine Thys and Peter Flynn

N O T E S

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt, New York, 1981, p. 104.
2. Georg Simmel, *Die Ruine*, in *Philosophische Kultur*, Wagenbach, Berlin, 1983, pp. 106–112.
3. Bart Verschaffel, *De Glans der Dingen. Studies en kritieken over kunst en cultuur*, Mechelen, 1989, pp. 129–139.
4. Tourist brochure: Lüderitzbucht, Tussen Diamantwoestyn en Oseaan; Zwischen Diamantfeldern und Meer; Between Diamond Dunes and Ocean.
5. Roland Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus, Essais critiques III. 1. L'écriture du visible. Le message photographique*, Paris, 1982, pp. 9–24. As my observations are largely based on this essay, the quotations, unless otherwise indicated, refer to his text.
6. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times. Rosa Luxemburg: 1871–1919*, Harcourt, New York, 1983, pp. 33–56.
7. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and M.Catherine de Zegher, 'Ver América. A written exchange', in *América. Bride of the Sun; 500 years Latin America and the Low Countries*, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 1992.
8. Max Becher, *The Transportation of Place. Geographic Memory in the First/New World*. A thesis submitted to the Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.
9. Roland Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus, Essais critiques III. 1. L'écriture du visible. Rhétorique de l'image*, Paris, 1982, pp. 25–42.
10. This theme is, as it were, carried out to its limit in their *Old Tucson* series of photos (1993): "Old Tucson, a Hollywood stageset/tourist park outside of Tucson, Arizona, is neither 'old' nor 'Tucson', but it is a very real space in the worlds created by Cowboy/Western films." (Andrea Robbins and Max Becher)
11. Roland Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 24.