BERND BECHER TRAINED AS A PAINTER AND illustrator, and first depicted the factories that he and his wife, Hilla, would later photograph in neat and tidy watercolors and lithographs, almost as literal as architects’ renderings or, indeed, photographs. Hilla Becher (who died last October at the age of 81) had already trained and worked as a photographer, and it’s as if by joining forces with her in 1959, Bernd simply found a sharper pencil for recording the local landscape. Can it be that the impulses behind the early sketches and the famous photographs were the same—merely to document, as the couple told interviewers again and again, industrial architecture that was then disappearing from the part of Rhineland Germany where Bernd had grown up? I find myself wondering if his sketches and paintings, pursued for a few decades, might have gone in some unexpected direction, departing from representation entirely.

IN THAT SCENARIO, WOULD HILLA’S PHOTOGRAPHIC CAREER ALSO BE A SURPRISE? IMAGINE HER AS THE LOUISE BOURGEOIS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPRESSIONISM. OBVIOUSLY NOT. ONE OF THE

Shaft Towers; Forderturme, 1966–79, by Bernd and Hilla Becher.

Jana Prikryl’s first book of poems, The After Party (Tim Duggan Books), has just been published.
creations of her and Bernd’s artistic partnership was the seemingly perfect fusion of their visions. “No, there is no division of labor,” they told an interviewer in 1989, in a conversation that pointedly doesn’t designate which of them is speaking. “Outsiders cannot tell who has taken a particular photo and we also often forget ourselves. It simply is not important.” In 1968, Hilla had hinted at a more traditional arrangement, saying that she mainly developed and printed the photographs, while Bernd drove “into the Siegen and Ruhr areas and to Belgium on his ancient motorcycle” to take them. And after Bernd’s death in 2007, Hilla suggested that she had enabled his indifference to everything but their work. For their big retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in 2004, for example, she “hung the images and thought he’d show up for the opening. But he didn’t. He didn’t feel like it.” Most of the time, they granted no public access to the shared space where they conceived their pictures and agreed to continue, for nearly 50 years, to pursue their one method: making large-scale black-and-white portraits of industrial architecture, sorted into “typologies” and arranged into towering grids of six, nine, 12, 15, or 24 photographs. Theirs was the artistic expression of Stanley Cavell’s insight regarding the screwball comedies of remarriage: A successful partnership involves daily reaffirmation of the union, daily agreement that divorce—or some new stylistic departure—is not an option (because divorce, at least, has been for the last hundred years).

MANY MODERNISTS ASPIRED TO THIS UNSWERVING, LONG-TERM PURSUIT OF A SINGLE STYLE. The paintings of Fernand Léger, Otto Dix, and Edward Hopper (to take three almost at random) seem to distill the traditional expectation that an artistic calling will produce a recognizable manner, and the even tighter focus of later artists like Agnes Martin and Richard Serra has added to the prestige of the unwavering pursuit of one style. This cult of authenticity explains why it can take decades for artists whose approach is more restless, like Richard Serra has added to the prestige of the unwavering pursuit of one style. For their big retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in 2004, for example, she “hung the images and thought he’d show up for the opening. But he didn’t. He didn’t feel like it.” Most of the time, they granted no public access to the shared space where they conceived their pictures and agreed to continue, for nearly 50 years, to pursue their one method: making large-scale black-and-white portraits of industrial architecture, sorted into “typologies” and arranged into towering grids of six, nine, 12, 15, or 24 photographs. Theirs was the artistic expression of Stanley Cavell’s insight regarding the screwball comedies of remarriage: A successful partnership involves daily reaffirmation of the union, daily agreement that divorce—or some new stylistic departure—is not an option (because divorce, at least, has been for the last hundred years).

COMPARISON, OR JUXTAPOSITION, IS THE DYNAMIC THAT POWERS THEIR WORK. Individually, their photographs of water towers, lime kilns, mine pitheads, and blast furnaces (plus structures not strictly industrial, like workers’ houses and factory halls) are colossal and nearly brutal in their centered compositions. But 12 water towers of similar design or typology, arranged in a grid, announce their many points of distinction and thus the local constraints and whims that went into their making. A project that had seemed literal and descriptive becomes almost comic and subversive. “The humor is a very important factor for us,” Bernd once said, adding that they hoped to capture the tenacity of local people “who have to come to practical terms with instructions issued from farther up and then give free rein to their fantasy.” Seen as part of a grid, each structure’s design choice gains a voice of its own and asks questions of all the different choices around it. In the 1990s Hilla said that when the couple had started out, they “considered showing single images” of each structure, but then “there was a particular moment when we placed several cooling towers alongside each other and something happened.” Bernd adds: “A kind of music.”

THEY OFTEN MENTIONED A QUARTET OF PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO WERE IMPORTANT TO THEM: August Sander, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, and Albert Renger-Patzsch. Hilla said that discovering Sander was “a fantastic revelation” because of how “he portrayed people, in the same way that we would portray objects. Sander encouraged them to perform their role.” People as objects: From their earliest photographs, the Bechers gravitated toward the most anti-Romantic quadrant of modernist photography (though Evans’s inclusion here strikes me as some kind of misunderstanding). Their typologies are carefully, soberly emptied of any social or political implications. Thomas Struth, one of their most successful students, has noted that when the Bechers formulated their cold aesthetic 60 years ago, its apolitical rigor was precisely what lent it political overtones: Germans “didn’t want to look at reality, because what you saw in Germany in the fifties was destruction and the Holocaust. It was all a terrible reality, so precise looking was not a widespread impulse.” But this understanding of the Bechers’ aesthetic, with the implication that in the 1950s and ’60s their photographs represented a reckoning with the past, tends to fall away when you peer at their pictures now in light of their own statements. The Bechers once said, “We want to offer the audience a point of view, or rather a grammar”—note the self-edit toward greater abstraction—in order to “compare the different structures.... To do so, the objects must be isolated from their context and freed from all association.” How different this is from Sander’s series “The Persecuted,” from his People of the Twentieth Century, portraying Jews who were, at best, under threat in 1930s Germany. If he “encouraged them to perform their role,” it was a deeply social and defiantly individual one; in a sense, it was all association. But the Bechers tended to see their heroes as they did their winding towers and blast furnaces: as vessels of formal information, to the exclusion of all else.

HILLA ONCE SAID THAT HER AIM, EVEN AS AN APPRENTICE PHOTOGRAPHER, HAD BEEN TO CAPTURE “SILENT OBJECTS.” Bernd was born in 1931 and Hilla in ’34, so they were children during the war, a time they rarely if ever discussed on the record. After Bernd’s death, Hilla was interviewed by two German journalists, Tobias Haberl and Dominik Wichmann, and told them: “It’s true, we both got roughed up a lot by the war. I remember how I thought after the war: God, my parents have such sentimental ideals of landscapes, beauty, music.” Without specifying how her family suffered, she suggests that it freed her from older ways of looking: “The idea of a bourgeois life was gone, I didn’t take those things that seriously any longer. That way, I was open for an independent way to view things.” When Haberl and Wichmann challenge the political detachment of the Bechers’ photographs, which they note contain “no Cold War, no student movement, no re-unification,” Hilla replies: “That we did on purpose. We always said: We cannot comment. We never took sides during a strike. You can’t criticize when you want to photographically conclude some-
thing.” And yet she adds: “What matters is whether the blast furnace produces hospital beds [or] steel for bombs.” “Were accusations made against you?” the journalists ask. “Of course! We were accused of making something look beautiful that could be used…” They assist: “…to kill people.” “Exactly.”

**THE BECHERS ONCE TRIED TO COLLABORATE WITH HISTORIANS**—a project that was abandoned because their collaborators intended to “write a text, and garnish their text with our photos,” Bernd recalled in 2002. “They couldn’t imagine that photographers could stand on their own.” And Hilla added: “Working with them, we felt for the first time that we weren’t free.” The most generous interpretation of their refusal to discuss the past (or garnish their photos with texts) is to see it as a formal decision, a theoretical counterpart to the way the images evoke absolute emotional restraint, whether about the photographers’ backgrounds or the objects’ uses. This recalls the lifelong self-erasure of the Japanese painter On Kawara—another late modernist who died quite recently and whose 50-year career of painting nothing but the day’s date, day after day, was married to the abstract placeholder of date—is withheld from the past, and, like Bernd, routine avoidance of his own openings) that it passes through morbid withdrawal into a kind of sublime expressiveness by dint of its consistency and its departure from common practice. About the same age as the Bechers, On Kawara was a child during Japan’s adventure as an Axis power, a high-school student during the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He later said his wartime experiences made him doubt “everything.” Everything—every grain of narrative information, aside from the abstract placeholder of date—is withheld from his pictures in a negative capability that is similar to the little we know about what we see in the Bechers’ photographs. Could this distrust of making assertions be a response to the trauma of growing up in one of the aggressor nations during World War II? Yet other painters of the same generation (I think again of Richter and Polke) discovered themselves precisely by confronting the historical taboos of German culture in the 1960s.

**IF ON KAWARA CARRIED HIS DOUBT TO ITS ULTIMATE CONCLUSION,** emptying his canvases of all but code, the Bechers never lost faith in the plain old that-which-can-be-seen. Their unquenchable attraction to industrial forms has a real innocence about it. In 2008, Hilla was asked, “But why furnaces and conveyor belts?” She replied: “Because they are honest. They are functional, and they reflect what they do—that is what we liked. A person always is what s/he wants to be, never what s/he is. Even an animal usually plays a role in front of the camera.” Is there not some innocence, too, in the notion that the massive buildings and equipment of any given industry play no rhetorical role in suggesting the power of their masters? When Hilla is asked whether they “never got bored of blast furnaces, not once in forty years?,” she replies, “Never. We studied this anonymous architecture, object after object, until we understood the enormous variety of the subject…. We learned how blast furnaces worked, how they were constructed, what parts they had.” It seems they were curious only about the mechanics of each structure, a bit like children learning about fire stations. “And then it was easier to find out whether there was a front and back. At some stage we asked ourselves: Does a blast furnace have a face?” But the next question—if so, wouldn’t a blast furnace also “play a role in front of the camera”?—remains unspoken.

**ALTHOUGH HILLA NOTED THAT THEIR PHOTOGRAPHS WERE CRITICIZED FOR AESTHETICIZING INSTRUMENTS OF INJUSTICE OR WORSE,** it’s hard to find examples of such challenges in commentaries on their work. Yet it’s an old argument, endemic both to the style and to certain lush forms of photojournalism. In 1931, Walter Benjamin used it against their hero Renger-Patzsch and the machine-age neutrality of his photos, which Benjamin accused of a “posture…that can endow any soup-can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists.” Susan Sontag and John Berger wrestled with the ethics of war photography and how it beautifies suffering (though stylistic restraint is hardly one of its hallmarks). As in those cases, it tends to be writers who demand that this startup documentary medium, photography, find a route to moral worth that parallels the way prose achieves it. Silence, though, can prompt speech, and abstraction can draw thought into the unspoken darkrooms of a subject. However shallow the Bechers’ own stated ideas about industrial forms, the images—precisely by their renunciation of narrative—seem to demand the question “What happened here?” The melancholy force of the Bechers’ work has become a critical truism, but the sense of loss you feel studying their photographs is a mourning not so much for each individual demolished object as for prewar optimism itself, all the old beliefs in monumental structures, programs, political solutions.

**SKEPTICISM ABOUT MODERNIZING SYSTEMS** and progressive agendas remains locked in amber in Central Europe, a result of the long (50-year) Second World War. Hilla came of age in that atmosphere, lived through the transition to East Germany, and was already 20 when she fled to the West with her mother. In North America, this kind of political-intellectual austerity—the stoic notion that one had best concentrate on one’s private life and leave questions of civic well-being to the idiot experts, who will foul things up no matter what you do—is less in vogue now than ever, and readers and moviegoers and people who frequent galleries all expect a sense of social engagement to underpin even the most formally exquisite works. It is in this light that the Bechers’ radically neutral vision, so influential to a generation of photographers as well as painters and filmmakers, has acquired its own nostalgic patina. In 2004, Hilla told an interviewer: “I was interested in representing the object precisely, whereby anything, even a face, could be considered an object…. The nineteenth-century stance overflowing with ideas relating to photojournalism…was not my thing.” Their photographs have been exhibited in Ileana Sonnabend’s galleries since 1971 and have been understood at least since then through the lens of conceptual art, so it’s entirely conventional to segregate their body of work from “ideas relating to photojournalism.” The odd thing is how stubbornly those ideas reassert themselves.

**THE BECHERS’ EARLIEST PHOTOGRAPHS** were taken in the Ruhr region, which happened to be crucial to Hitler’s war machine (see, for example, the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Battle of the Ruhr, etc.). As the art historian Kathleen James-Chakraborty notes in *Beyond Berlin*, a book of essays about Nazi architecture, the Zeche Germania plant in the Rhineland, the Battle of the Ruhr, etc.). As the art historian Kathleen James-Chakraborty notes in *Beyond Berlin*, a book of essays about Nazi architecture, the Zeche Germania plant in Dortmund in 1971 was built between 1939 and ’44. This fact is included in their own documentation of the image but nowhere that I know of in critical writings on their work. The photographer and writer Ian Wiblin, in the recent volume *Camera Constructs*, points out that the iron produced by the equipment we see in the Bechers’ *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961* could have both supported the German military during World War I and been the product of slave labor during World
War II. Some of the Bechers’ typologies show structures particular to a given country (such as *Winding Towers, Germany, 1972–1983*), in which case it may occur to a viewer to ask what all that coal (hauled up via the winding towers) wound up fueling, and when. But visual analogies governing the logic of a grid often nullify any historical distinctions among the photographs. See, for instance, the small-intestinal kinship of *Blast Furnaces, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, 1963–1995*. Its wide range of dates and places neutralizes the question of local conditions and histories; function matters only to the extent that it dictates form. The best we have from the Bechers on this point is something Hilla once said: She and Bernd “very quickly agreed on a fundamental conviction, namely that technology does not need to be interpreted, it interprets itself.” Alas, history is different.

**THERE IS A TENSION, IN THE BECHERS’ photographs and in their statements, between the urge to document a vanishing industrial landscape and the desire to create a whole new vocabulary of images.** It tends to be Bernd who returns to the idea of preservation; he first came to photography for practical reasons, after the industrial architecture near his hometown began to be demolished at a pace that his painting and drawing couldn’t keep up with. He needed a faster technique to preserve his favorite industrial forms. Hilla once explained that “he was plagued by the fear that one day it might disappear and for that reason insisted on photographing it.” A hint of disapproval crept into her tone: “When there was a danger of something disappearing, Bernd always responded intensely, maybe even a little hysterically.” For Bernd, the style of supreme detachment appeared to serve his need for a kind of one-to-one realism, the kind of (magic) realism that quite literally reproduces its subject: “Because this type of world decays,” he said, “what we wished for was not just to illustrate it but somehow to retain it.” This is perilously close to sounding (Hilla might say) like a Romantic impulse.

**SHE WAS MORE INTERESTED IN THE AESTHETIC payoffs of the forms they captured, though this pleasure was expressed in an almost comical passion for systems. “The system is in our system,” Hilla said, “it’s in everybody’s system. It is a central way in which our culture has organized information and knowledge since the Enlightenment.” She sometimes hinted at her own dissent from the documentary nature of their project: “No, preservation wasn’t the motivation, it was a side effect.” After Bernd died, she went so far as to say: “Actually, he was never interested in photography”—meaning that for him it was merely the means to a purely archival end. Hilla was born in Potsdam, to a mother who’d trained as a photographer, and by the age of 13 she was taking her own pictures and later using a darkroom left to her by an uncle. She once said that “having fled Pomerania we had no possessions…. I simply photographed everything, at random. Aimlessly and incessantly.” Hilla’s instincts were acquisitive and formal, those of a collector: “We undertook this work for the sheer visual pleasure we knew it would bring us, pleasure from remarkable shapes…which existed primarily and originally for nonaesthetic, nonvisual reasons. We wanted to discover such shapes and, with the help of photography, to collect them.” Asked why they traveled to the United States to photograph a set of structures there, Hilla replied: “America and its plants were lacking in our collections.”

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At some point in the slow history of a sensibility, a dim, barely perceptible shift takes place between two adjacent ideas. Think, for example, of the transition from silent cinema, once prized as the purest and noblest expression of the medium, to talkies. And the shift, coming as it does when one traditionally very powerful type of experience is felt to be inadequate to the needs of the time, often feels like an ordeal. Suddenly, every leading idea, in order to remain valuable, demands continuous, imperishable care.

In the arts, the results are typically mutually reinforcing, so that whatever no longer seems definitive or central to a particular form nonetheless retains some of its initial attraction and power. But in our time, it’s not an expanded or a refurbished form but a neglected idea—a tiny, disesteemed thing, pulled from circulation—that accounts for one of the chief realignments of taste in the visual arts: the transition from art, long vaunted as a special, and autonomous, area of sensuous intelligence, to creativity, to which art can only ever be superficially related. And the catchphrase of those cheering on the transition is a meager lexical scrap, drawn partly from commercial advertising and applied unreflectively to painting, photography, cinema, and the theater: the “look.”

Looks are easily seen without being sought out. They are familiar to anyone who has taken and enhanced a picture with a mobile phone stocked with Instagram filters; or who has used a popular program named, appropriately enough, Magic Bullet Looks, with “over 200 brand-new Look presets, designed to match your favorite movies and TV shows”; or who has watched movies conspicuously shot on 16-millimeter film (Young Bodies Heal Quickly, Listen Up Philip, L for Leisure) or with

BERND WAS SO FIXATED ON HIS AND HILLA’S work that the family (in 1964 they had a son, Max) never took a real holiday, a fact that Hilla mentioned after he died. Yet she relished their nomadic existence, roaming from country to country and site to site: “I love the feeling not only of setting off somewhere new but also of having no fixed abode.” For all the asceticism of their lifestyle and strict silences about history, the Bechers did indulge in one form of extravagance: the fiction that arises from any collaborative project. The Bechers’ story about themselves was consistently so basic that it tends to appear disarmingly transparent; yet it changed from decade to decade, and after Bernd’s death Hilla seemed to feel freer to talk about the past. Although Bernd was the documentary obsessive, he never bothered with family photos or portraits of any kind. After he died, Hilla revealed that this had been her job: “I always had a small camera on me. It was important for me, to keep memories.”

On “Looks”  
by Ricky D’Ambrose

“It’s not judgment, but it’s taste. You have to have a certain amount of taste to decide what to do.”
—Kevin Systrom, cofounder of Instagram

“I can’t really have a signature style or be bound to a medium. It’s very hard because there’s a style that emerges anyway, or maybe it’s more a feeling than a style.”
—Parker Ito, artist

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