

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN SHORE

SUSANNE LANGE

SUSANNE LANGE: In 1994 Heinz Liesbrock published a very interesting and informative interview with Bernd and Hilla Becher in the catalogue for your Münster exhibition (*Stephen Shore. Fotografien 1973 bis 1993*, Schirmer/Mosel). In it, he asked them about your work and your role in the more recent history of photography.

The interview shows how much Bernd and Hilla respect and esteem your photographs. For example the way you confront specific urban situations that on the one hand are typical for America, and on the other define a particular period. How these places look may change radically within the space of a few month or years.

In this connection Bernd Becher drew parallels between your work and that of Atget in Paris. There is also a definite link here to what motivated him and Hilla to begin documenting anonymous industrial architecture at a time when that kind of topic was basically unpopular. Do you see yourself in this tradition, and would you say Bernd and Hilla's work has had a special impact on yours?

STEPHEN SHORE: I would definitely say that my work is in the tradition of Atget and Walker Evans.

Many years ago I was struck by a quote from *Hamlet*. A group of actors comes to Elsinore Castle and Hamlet gives them what amounts to an acting lesson. In it he tells them that the purpose of acting is "to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Now, photography may not be as adept as theatre at showing virtue and scorn, but it can show "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." This phrase was often in my head as I worked in the 1970s.

My first encounter with the Bechers' work was 1970 at the very latest, when Wittenborn published the American edition of *Anonyme Skulpturen*. It may have been a bit earlier. I remember having a small catalogue of photographs with oil tanks. I've looked through my library, but I can't find it. As I recall, it was published in England. Both the Bechers and Ed Ruscha (whose work I first saw in 1967 or 1968) impacted my thinking.

S.L.: The connection to Ed Ruscha is obvious, and I know that Bernd and Hilla Becher regard early works of his very highly – for example *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) and *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967). The purist way he recorded everyday, unpopular (in the art world)

motifs and made serial inventories must have caused great irritation at the time. However, in contrast to Bernd and Hilla Becher's work, Ruscha looked on the picture more as a means towards demonstrating an idea or a method. Where, in your opinion, is the common ground? What aspects of Ruscha's and the Bechers' work were particularly important for you?

SHORE: Ruscha's work may have caused irritation in some parts of the art world, but for me and my friends his books were a delight. At the time I was very interested in working in series. I had just worked for the previous three years at Andy Warhol's factory. Also, I recall a book, *Serial Imagery*, by John Coplans (1968), making an impression on me.

The similarities between the Bechers and Ruscha are pretty much those you stated. They both worked in series. Their work had an intellectual underpinning. They examined the everyday, neglected, built environment. And, they did it in a rather deadpan way: avoiding "artistic" inflection. The uninflectedness of the Bechers' work shows itself in their straightforward, formal rigour. For Ruscha, it's in the work's offhandedness. They are everyday photos (some not even taken by him) of the everyday world. The Bechers' work, on the other hand, is elegant in its clarity. In this aspect, Ruscha's images may relate to the work of "Conceptual" artists and "Earth" artists of the time (Richard Long, Dennis Oppenheim, Peter Hutchinson, Douglas Huebler, et al.). They used photographs to document their work. Their photographs were often stylistically "dumb", intentionally visually inarticulate. I believe the underlying notion of this "dumbness" was that the photograph was not the work of art, it was just a matter-of-fact record of the real work, which was an idea or an earthwork.

It may have been Oscar Wilde who wrote that naturalness is just another posture. Similarly, visual casualness is another style. Ruscha's images referenced everyday photographs (e.g. the photos one sees in the windows of real estate agents).

Another distinction between the Bechers' and Ruscha's work is that Ruscha doesn't ask us to examine or reassess the aesthetic merit of the gas stations, apartment buildings and parking lots he photographs. When I look at work by the Bechers, I see the structures with a new appreciation of them. I see differences in style, period and culture. And this understanding is intensified by the taxonomy of the presentation.

In the late 1960s I was interested in producing images that were generated by a conceptual framework but, at the same time, allowed for visual articulateness, and even visual poetry.

S.L.: Robert Smithson is another artist we should definitely mention in connection with the “Conceptual” and “Earth” artists. In 1968 he was in the Ruhr District with Bernd and Hilla Becher, and he visited the Concordia colliery and the nearby Gutehoffnungshütte steelworks in Oberhausen. He did a piece on this area (see Robert Smithson, exhibition catalogue, *Photoworks*, Los Angeles County Museum, 1993).

There is also a great portrait series by Douglas Huebler (*Variable Piece #101*, 1973) in which Bernd Becher appears in a kind of roleplay. Each of the shots shows him with a different facial expression, in keeping with the characters Huebler specified – for example a policeman or a criminal. The pictures were later renumbered, and Becher was asked to redistribute the titles.

But to get back to your own work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was then that you began to photograph in colour. At the same time you started recording your everyday impressions on a journey through America, photographically, in the manner of a diary. You entitled this series *American Surfaces* (1972). Apart from its poetic quality, does this title express something of what you generally hold concerning photography and about America as well?

SHORE: Yes. This was the title I gave the project when it was exhibited in 1972 at Light Gallery in New York City. I was thinking that photography dealt primarily with the surfaces of things. Photographs [“straight” photographs] may imply more, but only see the surface. There is an Arab saying: “The apparent is the bridge to the real.”

S.L.: You are an artist who also deals intensively with the history of photography as well as its potentials and role as a medium. We see this in your long-term activity as a teacher in the field. What role does Bernd and Hilla’s work play in the history of art and photography for you? Is it an integral part of your teaching work? How do your students respond to it? Has it influenced your own approach to photography?

SHORE: At Bard College we have a small library in our classroom (we have a huge collection of photography books in Bard’s main library). Our classroom collection includes *Framework Houses* and *Water Towers*. I refer to them frequently and use them as teaching tools. The students I teach are eighteen to twenty-two and just beginning to work as artists. They come with many preconceptions. Most of them think of photographs as single objects that are taken as a result of seeing something “photographic”. Seeing the Bechers’ work helps them break down these preconceptions. They see that they have the possibility to think of a body of work. They see that their work can stem from intentionality.

In the early 1970s, Hilla and I had a conversation in New York City that clarified for me what my intentions were for my work. She suggested that I just photograph main streets across America. My reaction was that that wasn't right for me. Thinking about her suggestion made me realize that what I was after was not a study of main streets (or gas stations, suburban houses, shopping centers, etc.), but the quintessential main street.