



**Bernd & Hilla Becher: Coal Mines. Steel Mills.**  
**22.3.2012 – 3.6.2012**

This unique representative collection of 95 black-and-white photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher focuses on so-called “Industrial Landscapes” – a term the artists themselves use to describe a particular type of image, which does not seek to portray individual works of architecture as such, but rather the situation of heavy industry plants within their urban and landscape context. The project Coal Mines. Steel Mills. is based on works created in the Ruhr Valley (Ruhrgebiet). From as far back as the early 1960s, the mining facilities and surrounding steel mills of the area have provided both artists with a major theme for their work, one they have followed to the most minute details in their records of entire industrial zones, such as the mines *Hannover* in Bochum, *Zollern II* in Dortmund, or *Concordia* in Oberhausen. Photographs from the Ruhr Valley are accompanied by images from the area around Siegen in North Rhine-Westphalia as well as from the UK, France and the United States in such a way – in keeping with the artists’ intent – as to draw comparison between the language of industrial architecture as it has evolved over the course of the previous century, regardless of regional or national borders.

**Bernd and Hilla Becher** rank among the most prominent representatives of post-war German photography, not only due to their monumental oeuvre, but also the exceptional degree of international success of the various adherents of the Düsseldorf School of Photography, which they founded. As pioneers of conceptual photography, they directly influenced several generations of German photographers. The collaboration between Bernd and Hilla Becher dates to 1957. The initial impulse for their work was their shared fascination with the peculiar form of technical structures and buildings. Their historiographic approach, defined by an effort to preserve these vanishing forms in terms of a collective memory, did not evolve until later. Revisiting the pre-war tradition, the Bechers found inspiration, among other things, in the social themes of photography in the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly the inter-war avant-garde tendency of “New Objectivity” (Neue Sachlichkeit). These influences include the studies of Karl Blossfeldt, and especially August Sander, whose lifelong project was a collection of social portraits of Germans drawn from across all social classes. Another seminal impulse for the Bechers was the industrial iconography of the 1920s and 30s (Albert Renger-Patzsch, Margaret Bourke-White, László Moholy-Nagy), to which they then applied the Sander system, creating photographs of industrial monuments – that in many cases have subsequently become non-existent. This work gave rise to an inventory of the industrial heritage of Western civilization. Frontally depicted industrial buildings, which the Bechers succeed in elevating to the status of autonomous aesthetic objects, are reminiscent of the façades of medieval cathedrals. This sense is further enhanced by the characteristic austerity and detached documentary nature of the photographs themselves. Dispassionate restraint and scientific detachment are the fundamental principle of this objectivist approach to the given theme, where individual style is suppressed, giving way to an effort to create the most comprehensive and objective testimony possible. The main aim of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s lifelong project is to create a typological system based on a set of precise rules, thus qualifying the composition of a series of objects and motifs. The artists place individual photographic works of similar texture next to one another, thus creating a sort of matrix which accentuates the unique individual elements possessed by buildings with the same function. The following testimony attests to the enthusiasm with which the Bechers realized this concept: “The excitement which the subject represents to us lies in the fact that buildings with what is in principle an identical function exist in such a variety of diverse forms.”

**Bernd Becher** (1931, Siegen - 2007, Rostock)

Bernd Becher started out drawing and painting industrial subjects in the vicinity of his native Siegen. The demolition of the buildings he sought to capture, however, proceeded far too quickly, which prompted the decision to document the industrial surroundings of his native city through the means of photography, in order to obtain source material for his paintings. In the years 1953-1956 he studied painting and drawing at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart, and from 1959-1961 he studied typography at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. While in Düsseldorf, he began working for the Troost Advertising Agency. In the years 1976-1996 he worked as professor of photography at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, where photography had hitherto been taught only as part of the curriculum of the department of painting. During his tenure there, a loosely linked collective art group known as the Düsseldorf School of Photography emerged,

which produced a number of the most prominent photographers of the late 20th century (e.g. Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Elger Esser, and Axel Hütte).

**Hilla Becher** (\* 1934, Potsdam)

Hilla Becher, née Wobeser, was introduced to photography by her mother, who was also a photographer. Hilla gained early experiences in photography in the years 1951-1953, when she apprenticed with Walter Eichgrun, the curator of the photographic archive of Schloss Sanssouci. In 1954 she left for what was then West Germany, where she met Bernd Becher in 1957 at the Troost Advertising Agency; the couple married in 1961. In the years 1958-1961 she studied at the Düsseldorfer Kunstakademie. Together with Bernd Becher, she undertook to systematically document the industrial surroundings of Düsseldorf and the Ruhr Valley. This was the beginning of a lifelong collaboration which only concluded with the death of Bernd Becher in 2007.

**Images with labels**

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**Opening time**

Tu – We, Fr – Su: 10:00 – 18:00

TH: 10:00 – 20:00

**Tickets**

Full CZK 120

Reduced CZK 70

Ticket from the exhibition is valid for one re-entry to the accompanying program.

**Contact**

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