

# Water Towers

Bernd and Hilla Becher

"We wanted to provide a viewpoint or rather a grammar for people to understand and compare different structures."

— Bernd Becher

Rebecca Shulman Herz

## About the Artists

Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla (b. 1934) Becher have been photographing industrial structures—such as water towers, silos, cooling towers, blast furnaces, and grain elevators—since the late 1950s. Bernd Becher began his art career as a painter, and was drawn to these structures in part because of his childhood in Siegen, Germany, where he recalls that "practically in the middle of the town, we had a small blast furnace. That's completely unimaginable today.... All the grime spread through the old town center. I could see, hear, and smell the smelter from our window." Becher began photographing industrial structures by 1956, but these initial works were intended as study images for prints, sketches, and paintings.

Hilla Wobeser was born and raised in East Germany. Unlike Bernd, she began her career as a photographer. In 1954 she escaped to West

Germany, and met Bernd Becher at the Dusseldorf Academy of Art. Together, they began photographing the many industrial structures of Germany, later exploring those of Europe and the United States as well.

The Bechers, who married in 1961, explain that these structures "tell the story of the time before World War I, the steel boom." They documented industrial sites at a time when they were disappearing; "if we didn't photograph these structures right then," says Bernd Becher, "they would be lost."

The Bechers are important both because of their art, and because of their roles as teachers and mentors to a younger generation of artists. Bernd Becher taught at Dusseldorf Academy of Art from 1976 until 1996, and many of his students from that era are now important artists in their own right, including Candida Höfer, Andras Gursky, and Thomas Struth.



Bernd and Hilla Becher. *Water Towers* (detail), 1980. Black and white photographs mounted on board, 61 1/4 x 49 1/8" (157 x 126.7 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Purchased with funds contributed by Donald Jonas, 81 2793.

## About the Art

*Water Towers* is a grid of nine black-and-white photographs of water towers. In each image the structures are cylindrical and are raised off the ground by long supports. Looking closely at the nine images, differences start to emerge: the shapes of the water tanks vary, as do the metal features ringing the tanks, the design of the supports, and the environment in which each structure stands.

The Bechers often present their photographs in groups of similar structures, which they call *typologies*. Early in their collaborative work, they noticed that these groupings help to emphasize the individual features of each structure. Bernd Becher describes this process: "What we do is to create families of objects, to create a sort of alphabet." They see this process as being akin to the work of the scientist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), who catalogued different natural science species: "Our idea of showing the material has much more to do with the nineteenth century, with the encyclopedic approach used in botany or zoology.... It became more and more clear to us that there are definite varieties, species, and subspecies of the structures we were photographing." These typologies invite us to examine and understand the industrial structures in new ways.

The Bechers' interest in water towers is related to the role of these structures as artifacts of nineteenth-century industrial society. Most water towers were built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many have been functionally replaced by modern pump systems. The Bechers say that "you can still learn a lot about the way of thinking of people living in [the twentieth] century from looking at a steel factory or a gas refinery." By photographing the many types of water towers still in existence, they hope to help us better understand the industrial era.

The Bechers are very specific about their photographic techniques in capturing these structures. They take their pictures only on cloudy

days, which eliminates the effects of light and shadow. They place the camera on scaffolding or ladders, halfway up the structure they are looking at, in order to capture the subject head-on; this allows them to take photographs of different structures from the same perspective for their typologies.

## Discussion Questions

Look closely at the nine photographs that make up *Water Towers*. How are the images similar? What are some interesting differences? What do nine images tell us that one would not?

What can you learn about water towers by looking at this photograph? What are you curious about? Research water towers (one resource is the How Stuff Works website, at [people.howstuffworks.com/water.htm](http://people.howstuffworks.com/water.htm)). What more do you notice in the photographs after learning more about water towers?

Art historians have suggested that the Bechers' work can be seen as documentation as well as art. Come up with a list of reasons to view *Water Towers* as art, and a list of reasons to see it as documentation of a historical era.

## Resources

Becher, Bernd and Hilla. *Water Towers*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988.  
Ziegler, Ulf Erdmann. "The Bechers' Industrial Lexicon." *Art in America*, 2002, vol. 90, number 6, pp. 92–101, 140–143.

## WEB LINK

[www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum/lessons/movpics\\_becher.php](http://www.guggenheim.org/artscurriculum/lessons/movpics_becher.php)

## Classroom Activities

### Elementary

Have students work together to select an object of interest to the entire class, or to a smaller group of four-to-six students. Ask each student to draw the object, either from life or from their imagination. How are the drawings similar? How are they different? What does looking at all of the drawings together reveal about the object?

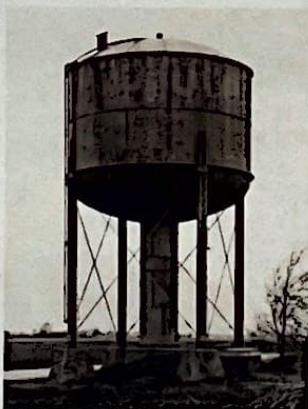
### Middle School

Research how water towers function. As a class, find out how your school or home is provided with water, heat, electricity, or gas. Individually or in groups, create a diagram or illustration documenting all or part of this system. Before creating the final pieces, discuss with the students what choices the Bechers made in creating their art, and what artistic choices the students can make in their own documentation pieces.

### High School

Ask each student to create an artwork that uses an object or structure from contemporary culture as its subject. Before they begin work, discuss whether or not they will use multiples. What are the strengths of a single image? What are the strengths of multiples? How do these strengths relate to the objects or ideas in their art?





*Bernd and Hilla Becher. Water Towers, 1980. Black-and-white photographs mounted on board, 61 1/8 x 49 1/8" (157 x 126.7 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Purchased with funds contributed by Donald Jonas, 81 2793.*