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**Fragments and traces:
an ecocritical analysis
of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography**

**(Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd and Hilla Becher,
and Beate Gütschow)**

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As a journey comes to its end, it often happens to reflect on what it has imparted to us. In this case, I believe that this thesis represents more than just the culmination of my Master's in Environmental Humanities. It serves rather as the *fil rouge* weaving together various areas of interest that have influenced me, both within and outside of my academic path, which have been positively shaped by many people I wish to acknowledge.

This thesis, undoubtedly, encompasses environmental awareness, the need to better grasp the origins of contemporary environmental challenges, and the pursuit of alternative narratives and solutions, which led me to choose this pioneering Master's program in Italy.

Yet, this research work also reflects my background as a student of German and French literature and culture. It is during my Erasmus semester in Cologne in the winter of 2018/19, that I encountered the term "ecocriticism" for the first time while attending the French literature seminar "George Sand - Bohémianisme und Landschaft" led by Professor Sidonia-Ria Bauer. Additionally, during that period, I witnessed a profound commitment to environmental preservation, particularly in the protection of the Hambach Forest near Cologne, prompting me to ask profound questions. Reflections that became more acute after experiencing the exceptional high water that hit Venice in November 2019, on the heels of my bachelor's degree.

Then, my fascination with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, although initially related to painting rather than photography, traces back to a Georg Grosz painting I saw at the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart during a school trip in 2015. Already during high school, I became so passionate about this art movement because of its classification as *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art) by the Nazi regime. The paradoxical historical context of 20th-century Germany, which has been a hub of incredible intellectual and artistic activity and also the birthplace of one of the most dramatic events of recent History, formed the core of my dissertation, which compared the works of Jorge Semprun and Primo Levi.

Then, Germany holds a special place in my heart due to firsthand experiences. Following the already mentioned Erasmus exchange in Cologne, last year I also spent another semester at the Georg August University in Göttingen. Shortly thereafter, I had the honor of exhibiting twenty of my photographs at the “Das ist [nicht] Venedig” (This is [not] Venice) exhibition organized by the Italien Zentrum of the Dresden University of Technology. This achievement followed a previous exhibit of one of my photos at the Casa dei Tre Oci in 2020. My passion for photography, which I have long desired to study more deeply, extends beyond mere interest; it serves as a medium for personal expression. Briefly for all these reasons, I enthusiastically embraced the research theme suggested by my mentor, Cristina Baldacci.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my family for its unwavering support, lifelong friends, and all those who, in various capacities, have contributed to my academic journey and personal growth over these years of life.

While my bachelor thesis acknowledgments concluded with a mention to Venice, a place I described as “lieu qui m’a permis de grandir et de mûrir et dont le souvenir trouvera toujours place dans mon cœur” (a place that allowed me to grow and mature, and whose memory will always hold a special place in my heart), I now wish to renew this my gratitude to this city and extend it to Cologne, which when I return there makes me also feel at home. In closing, I express my hope for a future filled with continuous inspirations in all the places where I will possibly live, while always preserving my roots.

ABSTRACT

The present work builds on an ecocritical analysis of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, characterized by clarity of the subject, strict image composition and absolute sharpness, which far to be confined to the period in which it developed, namely that of the Weimar Republic, also contributed to inspire documentary photographers of the second half of the 20th century and still resonate in more contemporary experiences. In this regard I will consider the work of the German photographers Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd and Hilla Becher and finally of Beate Gütschow. Doing so, not only the features and developments of this style will be taken into account, but using the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, which assumes “a more probing and pointedly ethical integration of visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and environmental history” (Braddock & Ater, 2014: 5), issues of environmental interconnects will be stressed. Reading selected works in connection with the current debate on the Anthropocene, this thesis aims thus to be a contribution towards an ecocritical history of photography.

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INTRODUCTION

This work builds upon an ecocritical analysis of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) photography, a style emerged in Germany in the 1920s and characterized by its clarity of subject, strict image composition, and absolute sharpness. While *Neue Sachlichkeit* developed during the Weimar Republic, this study goes beyond its historical boundaries to explore its enduring influence on documentary photographers of the second half of the 20th century and its formal resonance in more contemporary experiences. Specifically, the works of German photographers Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897 - 1966), Bernd (1931 - 2007) and Hilla Becher (1934 - 2015), and Beate Gütschow (1970) will be examined, shedding light on the features and developments of this style. If the connection between the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch, as well as those of other two protagonists of *Neue Sachlichkeit* such as August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt, and that of the Bechers has been by now strengthened by critics and by the photographers couple themselves, the originality of this study has to be found in the adopted investigation approach. Thanks to ecocriticism, environmental concerns will be in fact unpacked in their photographs. By approaching the case studies, a chronological perspective will be followed to draw a line of continuity between the photographic experiences accrued during the Weimar Republic and the developments in documentary photography in the following decades. But also to gain insight into how the environment was quickly transformed by industrialisation, which in Germany was strongly linked to heavy industry and coal mining, and had its hotspot in the Ruhr region, which was relentlessly documented by both Renger Patzsch and the Bechers. Although for decades industrialisation was associated with positive sentiments of modernisation and development, nowadays, because of the evidence of our “limits to growth”, it has become impossible to overlook negative associations of extractivism to images of environmental disasters and climate change subsequent to carbon dioxide emissions, degradation of the planet’s biosphere and future extinctions scenarios. In the light of the current environmental crisis, contemporary artist Beate Gütschow has been selected as the third case study, as an example of the maturing of a new environmental consciousness in art and photography. Although the environment is at

the core of many of her works, here the focus will lay mostly on her series *S*¹ due to its formal echoes with “objective” photography in her pictures compositions. This will also lead to the introduction of a different conception and use of the photographic medium than documentary photography. Indeed her images, instead of highlighting physical reality, are on the contrary realized by arranging together pictures of modernist architecture, which have been previously shot in different locations.

For what concerns the title, the words *fragments* and *traces* have been chosen respectively in reference to the formal characteristics of the images taken under consideration and to the thematic insights explored within the study. More particularly, the first term refers to the documentary fragments and peculiar close-ups of the New Objectivity, especially in the quasi-manifesto volume *Die Welt ist schön* (The World is Beautiful). After its success, at some point Albert Renger-Patzsch would begin to be criticized for the book’s fragmented vision, which he tried then to overcome through the widening of the plane, often resorting to landscape. Instead, the Bechers - aligning themselves with the New Objectivity - systematically adopted the series as a solution. By doing so, they seek to keep track of structures of industrial facilities destined for demolition, highlighting the formal characteristics of these “anonymous sculptures”, which are conceived as almost rooted in the ground and “linked to a certain mechanism and to a landscape, to people working there and to a social network”². Furthermore, despite the fact that continuous technological and industrial developments reshape the outside of the so-called *Technosphere*, there remains an enduring trace of invisible waste, including industrially emitted carbon dioxide. Scientists now assume that humankind has become a geologically impacting force on the planet, leading to the proposal of the term *Anthropocene* to denote a new geological era, wherein human activities play a dominant role in shaping the planet’s ecological systems. Therefore, the term *traces* in the title can also be understood in

¹ Beate Gütschow’s *S* was nominated among the concurrent works for the seventh cycle of the Prix Pictet for sustainability, whose theme was *Space*. See: <https://prix.pictet.com/cycles/space>. Additionally the scholar Karla McManus devotes the sixth chapter of her PhD Thesis “Eco-Photography: Picturing the Global Environmental Imaginary in Space and Time” to this international photographic prize. See: Karla McManus, “Eco-Photography: Picturing the Global Environmental Imaginary in Space and Time” (PhD thesis, Concordia University 2014), 195-206.

² Michael Fried, *Why Photography matters as Art as never before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 322.

the sense of anthropogenic impact and carbon footprint, outlining environmental issues that intertwine between the local and global scale. In the case of Beate Gütschow, the word *fragments* allude also to photographs that the artist digitally recomposes to create their seemingly modernist scenarios. While formally resembling an “objective” style, they are in fact a mere construction, where the artist inserts visual clues or traces that invite the observer to question not only the truthfulness of the images, but also to doubt the value of the ideology behind these architectures.

More generally, the chosen title is finally also meant as an invitation *to trace* the environmental implications behind each image, since as underlined by Braddock and Ater “art need not have an overt ‘green’ agenda to be worthy of ecocritical study, since every creative artifact has environmental implications of some sort, intentionally or otherwise.”³ Indeed, with the present study, an attempt has been made to contribute to an ecocritical reading of the history of photography, in the knowledge that the analysis of all possible environmental entanglements cannot be exhausted in the course of this single research study, and that more hidden meanings and “histories” could be unveiled. As current ecological imperatives require us to think beyond traditional disciplinary borders, Environmental Humanities aims to bridge this gap as “a means by which fundamental concerns within the humanities... can be brought to bear on questions of the environment through the deployment of humanities modes of enquiry”⁴.

To offer a general overview, this dissertation is structured into three chapters organized in three subchapters each. The first two focus respectively on origins and developments of ecocriticism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, while the third one delves into the ecocritical analysis of the case studies.

The primary focus of the opening chapter is to provide context for the perspective adopted in this thesis, namely ecocriticism. This first part attempts to trace its development in the 1990s within English and American literature departments in the United States, placing it within the broader context of the environmental awareness

³ Alan C. Braddock and Renée Ater, “Art in the Anthropocene”, *American Art* 28, no. 3 (2014): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679693>.

⁴ Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg and Johan Hedrén, “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene”, *Ethics and the Environment* 20, no. 1 (2015): 69. <https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.20.1.67>.

that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequently, it delves into the formal recognition of ecocriticism within art history, exploring why art historians and critics took considerable time to embrace this approach, while emphasizing its potential within their field. To bridge this gap, recent decades have witnessed efforts to align art history with contemporary issues and integrate it into the ongoing discourse surrounding the Anthropocene. Given the expansive and intricate nature of the current debate, this chapter seeks to navigate it by examining a few significant contributions. Finally, particular attention will be given to the role of photography. Here it is suggested the occurrence of the pretty same developments observable within the field of literature. In fact, it is possible to observe a shift from the photographic representation of nature with a capital N, which contributed to spreading the concept of *wilderness*, to the ever increasing awareness of the ubiquity of human impact, of which the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975) is a cornerstone.

The second chapter consists instead of a general theoretical historical framework aiming at contextualizing the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography, exploring its origins, essential features, and impact. Emerged in response to the dominant pictorialist tendency, this quasi-movement regarded photography as a means of achieving a reproduction of reality, which should be as objective, exact and impersonal as possible; excluding any artistic interventions and manipulations a posteriori. Beyond the variety of subjects covered, the works of those identified by critics as its main protagonists - namely Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, and Karl Blossfeld - will be outlined to highlight common formal characteristics. Additionally, this chapter examines *Neue Sachlichkeit's* reception fluctuations over time, from its decline during the 1930s and 1950s to its resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Indeed the photographer revived New Objectivity during a period in which photography was dominated by subjectivity. Their role as educators, which is connected with the transmission of objectivity principles, will be also briefly explored towards illustrative works of notable photographers associated with the so-called "Becher School" or "Düsseldorf School".

Finally, each of the three subchapters of the third and final chapter is devoted to the ecocritical analysis of a specific case study.

The first subchapter delves into the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch. Starting from the criticism raised against *Die Welt ist schön* by intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, and in the light of relevant environmental history, the focus will be on understanding why the photography of this German artist can be characterized as “an aesthetic of purification”. Importance will be then given also to the works that the photographer realized without commission, in contrast to many of those which flew into *Die Welt ist schön* and others which were commissioned to him in the wake of its success. *Sylt. Bild einer Insel* (1936) and *Ruhrgebiet Landschaften 1927-1935* (1982) will be taken as examples of a formal evolution marked by a widening of the plane and recontextualization of subjects, accompanied by the willingness to document a changing environment.

The second case study concerns the art duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, renowned for their focus on documenting obsolete industrial structures destined to disappear. The inherent documentary value of their work will be highlighted, while also shedding light on a shifting perception of landscape appreciation, particularly related to the iconic exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered*, in which they participated as the only two Europeans out of ten artists. Consideration will be given to how their photographs contributed to the development of industrial archaeology in the Ruhr. But their *modus operandi* will also be related to another disciplinary field: that of the natural sciences. Indeed, in their works, the same principles used in herbaria and biology books are translated from the biosphere to the technosphere.

The third case study centers finally on the work of contemporary German artist Beate Gütschow, specifically on her series *S*, due to its formal continuity with Becher's work and more in general with the features of New Objectivity, which have been highlighted along this research. However, since Gütschow's images are a form of photographic fiction, a reflection will be conducted upon the use of manipulation in engaging viewers in deeper reflections, especially in our contemporary era saturated with images depicting environmental crises. In addition, it will be taken into account that *S* also aims to criticize modernist architecture and the failure of its underlying ideas. The similarity between Gütschow's images to the utopian city of Brasilia will

open avenues for broader discussions on topics such as colonization, violence against indigenous peoples, and the land, further deepened through Paulo Tavares' writings and curatorial projects.

The theoretical framework of this research is structured around an interdisciplinary study of authors from photography theory, history of photography which a specific focus on documentary photography (such as Lugon), art history and visual culture with a special focus on ecology (Braddock, Demos, Mirzoeff, Patrizio among others) and Environmental Humanities (such as Iovino). Several hints have been in fact drawn upon environmental history, environmental law, environmental economics and biology. This interdisciplinary framework and the ecocritical approach are aimed to connect photography to a broader environmental discourse and explore how photography can contribute to environmental understanding.

For what concerns the choice of visual cultural products, in addition to single images and milestone books, attention has also been paid to exhibitions, which - as well as other forms of mediation - naturally contribute to creating narratives. Of course, historical exhibitions such as *FiFo* (Stuttgart, 1929), which brought about the birth of modern photography, or *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, 1975), which enshrined a key step in the evolution of landscape representation, have been acknowledged. Yet, it was deemed necessary to include more current exhibitions. Some of them emphasize and validate the proximity between the authors covered, as in the case of *Produktpolitik* (Braunschweig, 2011), which bridges the works of Gutschow and Renger-Patzsch; or *After Photoshop: Manipulated Photography in the Digital Age* (New York, 2012) featuring photographs of both Gutschow and Fontcuberta, who in turn draws on Blossfeldt for his series *Herbarium*; or again the *IV FOTO/INDUSTRIA* (Bologna, 2019), which places Renger-Patzsch and Edward Burtynsky within the context of the Technosphere. This latter exhibition also emphasizes the growing significance of narratives marked by greater understanding of various environmental interconnections, such as *Emscher. Pictorial History of a River* (Essen, 2023), which offers an insight on the industrial history of the Ruhr through a narration based on one of the two rivers crossing the area. Lastly, prominence was also given to the *The Laboratory of the Future*, the 18th International Architecture Exhibition (Venice,

2023), which awarded the Brazilian Pavilion the golden lion “for a research exhibition and architectural intervention that center the philosophies and imaginaries of indigenous and black population towards modes of reparation”⁵.

In order to conduct this research, from the outset it has been realized that it was necessary to see and study the work of the photographers taken under consideration first-hand. A week of research has therefore been conducted at the library of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, where I had the opportunity to have a more comprehensive view of the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Beate Gütschow, as well as to examine additional sources, both written in German and English. Because of logistical reasons, I was instead unable to visit the Ann und Jürgen Wilde Foundation in Munich, which owns Renger-Patzsch and Blossfeldt’s archives and which is a point of reference for scholars dealing with the New Objectivity, whose writings were valuable for my study. In fact, thanks to the extensive material produced on this topic, satisfactory research was nevertheless conducted. Moreover, during my stay in Cologne I had the chance to visit the opening of the exhibition *The End / Not the End?* realized by the students of Gütschow’s seminar at the Kunsthochschule für Medien. It was fascinating to observe that ecological concerns are not only central to her artistic work but also her role as a educator, as the exhibition “reflect[ed] on the ongoing destruction of our planet and the resulting need for action”⁶. While there, I also attempted to conduct an interview with the artist, but unfortunately - despite her willingness - this was not possible due to health reasons. Therefore, the research has been conducted through the analysis of existing literature. Additional material - in the form of books, catalogs, essays, newspaper and magazine articles - was also found in Venice, in the university libraries of Ca' Foscari and IUAV, as well as online. My study was then enriched through participation in seminars, such as “The Place and The Planet: Art and Ecology” held by Olga Smith in collaboration with The New Institute Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE). The decision to include Beate Gütschow as a third case study comes in fact on the advice of the lecturer, whose research focuses

⁵ La Biennale di Venezia, “The awards of the Biennale Architettura 2023”, accessed 25 September, 2023. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/awards-biennale-architettura-2023>.

⁶ Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln, “The End / Not the End?”, accessed 25 September, 2023. <https://en.khm.de/termine/news.5493.the-end-not-the-end/>.

on the articulations of nature, ecology and the environment in visual art, particularly with regard to the representation of landscape. Finally, visiting several exhibitions such as the Biennale in Venice confirmed how in the art world at large, themes such as environmental justice, decolonization and reconciliation with nature are more central than ever.

CHAPTER 1. The ecocritical gaze: roots and possibilities

1.1 Origins and methods of ecocriticism

THE RISE OF ECOCRITICISM FROM LITERARY STUDIES

The term *ecocriticism* was coined in 1978 by American writer and literature educator William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: an experiment in Ecocriticism”. The ecological literary criticism had equally emerged earlier in the book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, published in 1972 by Joseph Meeker. However, it wasn’t till the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s that *ecocriticism* extensively developed in the United States, making entry into the Literature departments. It came to light ultimately from the initiative of some English and American Literature scholars, such as Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty, Scott Slovic, Glen Love, Patrick Murphy and Lawrence Buell. As arose from the definitions of its seminal texts, *ecocriticism* is “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works and the application of ecology and ecological concepts to literature, as well as the study of the role literature plays in the ecology of the human species”⁷.

Its development, albeit somewhat belatedly, can be traced back to the new environmental awareness that developed in the 1970s. The take of consciousness of the ecological problem is often associated with a specific date: April 22, 1970, or the first celebration of the Earth Day in the United States (**FIG. 1**). This event marked a monumental display of public support for environmental preservation, inspiring and mobilizing 10% of the entire country’s population. After a century characterized by industrialization, urbanization, population growth and globalization, during which pollution was tolerated and widely seen as a sign of economic prosperity, environmental concerns started to be put on the front page.⁸ Of course, the ecological

⁷ Jerry Keir and Corey Lewis, “The Continuing Evolution of Literary Ecology: Interdisciplinary Methods from the Field.” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41206992>.

⁸ EARTHDAY.ORG, “The History of Earth Day”, accessed 27 September, 2023, <https://www.earthday.org/history/>.

crisis is a much older phenomenon than its social awareness, but until the Earth Day, which provided a stronger voice to this emerging environmental responsiveness, the carrying capacity of the Earth had not yet been questioned.⁹ An

important step for change was the publication of Rachel Carson's

bestseller *Silent Spring* in 1962. Mainly concerned with the sea during her life, Carson (1907-1964)

was a marine biologist working for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries and was quite advanced in age when she published this book. It took her four

years to complete this work, in which she shed light about humans interfering with natural processes and health. She conclusively

demonstrated that pesticides and in particular DDT (dichloro - diphenyl - trichloroethane) irreparably harmed animals and contaminated the global food supply. She painstakingly detailed how DDT infiltrated the food chain, accumulating in the fatty tissues of various animals, including humans, causing cancer and genetic damage. She also reported that a single DDT crop application killed insects for weeks and months, impacting not only targeted insects but also many others, and that - even when diluted by rainwater - this pollutant remains toxic in the environment. In "A



FIG. 1 Headline and photo on the front-page announcing the first Earth Day celebration, *New York Times*, 23 April, 1970.



FIG. 2 John M. Lee, "‘Silent Spring’ is Now Noisy Summer," *New York Times*, 22 July 1962, 86.

⁹ Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza* (Milano: Edizioni Ambiente, 2019), 33.

Fable for Tomorrow”, perhaps the book’s most famous chapter, Carson lyrically depicted an unnamed American town where “a shadow of death”¹⁰ was menacing all life. Birds in particular had been silenced by DDT’s insidious effects, resulting in a “strange stillness”¹¹ and “a spring without voices”¹². The book provoked strong controversies because pesticides were very welcomed at that time. Since their introduction after WWII, they were in fact also responsible for positive returns such as the fight against malaria, typhus, and the other insect-borne human diseases among civilian and military populations.¹³ In the face of substantial efforts by the pesticide industry to undermine Carson’s credibility, *Silent Spring* sparked a significant public outcry regarding the risks associated with improper pesticide usage and the urgency for better controls, catalyzing policy changes (**FIG. 2**). This landmark book underscores the profound influence that well-crafted literature can have in shaping society’s values and spurring transformative social change. *Silent Spring* became then a subject of ecocriticism, serving as a milestone for the field. It prompted further explorations of literature’s role in environmental discourse, emphasizing literature’s dual role in reflecting and molding our comprehension of ecological concerns, ultimately fostering a more sustainable relationship between humanity and the environment.

Returning to the outbreak of ecocriticism, given the evidence of human impact’s repercussions on the environment, Literary Studies scholars had then also wondered how they could actively contribute to the health of the environment through their field of expertise. Through the analysis of literary texts, they aimed for a practical involvement of culture in the crisis of the environment. Indeed, ecocriticism does not want to limit its scope to theory, but to pose as a kind of cultural activism. It takes the form of militant criticism, which seeks in culture a tool to sharpen our awareness of ecological issues.¹⁴ This attempt to combine together pedagogical ethical intent, environmental activism and literary criticism results in a multiplicity of views and readings. It is worthy to point out that such heterogeneity is however not perceived as

¹⁰ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 1.

¹¹ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1.

¹² Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1.

¹³ United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “DDT - A Brief History and Status” accessed 27 September, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/ingredients-used-pesticide-products/ddt-brief-history-and-status>.

¹⁴ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 16-17.

a limitation, but as richness, which - as highlighted by Serenella Iovino - is manifested as a symbol of human and at the same time ecological diversity.¹⁵

Over the three decades since its emergence as a quasi-movement, ecocriticism has generated in fact a plurality of interpretations with differing views on its core principles, whether focused on bios, nature, environment, place, earth, or land¹⁶; and whether nature has to be intended as a genre or as an issue¹⁷. Notably, the most frequently cited definition, as provided by Cheryl Glotfelty in the introduction to the *Ecocriticism Reader*, simply defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”¹⁸ Then, as underlined by Buell, despite this diversity of perspectives, it is possible to outline the evolution and current objectives of ecocriticism and make reasonable predictions about its future directions.

Intellectual accounts of the evolution of ecocriticism have been approximately put forth using a “wave paradigm”¹⁹, which is almost widely accepted²⁰. In this model, a primarily national perspective, often marked by a narrow viewpoint in English and American Studies, is seen as giving rise to the “first wave” of ecocriticism. It developed around two partially connected and overlapping core areas: British Romanticism, with a specific emphasis on poetry within this tradition, including its later influences in the 20th century Anglo-American context; and American nature writing, with a particular focus on the legacy of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).²¹ In contrast, “second-wave ecocriticism” aligned more closely with public health environmentalism, focusing on urban and industrial transformations rather than on country or *wilderness*.²² Instead of Thoreau, whose retreat in the woods was envisioned as rejection of the societal values of his time, more significant for second-stage ecocritics were authors like Charles Dickens, who was deeply involved

¹⁵ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 18.

¹⁶ Lawrence Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 88. <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0087>.

¹⁷ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 18.

¹⁸ Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, 88.

¹⁹ Joni Adamson, “We Have Never Been Anthropos. From Environmental Justice to Cosmopolitics”, in *Environmental Humanities. Voices from the Anthropocene*, eds. Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017), 157.

²⁰ Adamson, “We Have Never Been Anthropos. From Environmental Justice to Cosmopolitics”; Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”; Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*.

²¹ Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, 94.

²² Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends”, 94.

in the public health environmentalism of the Victorian-era, or Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.²³

Furthermore, subsequent developments in ecocriticism included ecofeminism, postcolonial ecologies, queer ecologies, and environmental justice. In particular the shift towards environmental justice has been regarded as a pivotal aspect in the development of the environmental humanities²⁴. Social imbalances within the same society, as in the relations between rich and poor countries, are seen in fact as prolific cultural terrain for environmental exploitation policies.²⁵ Indeed, more and more studies are related to these thematic intersections. The term "intersectionality", which is highly relevant within the Environmental Humanities, had been precisely coined by feminist civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to make explicit that "issues of race, gender, sexuality, economics, ability, and age are not seen as separable, and therefore must be addressed simultaneously."²⁶

Among other aspects, it is also interesting to note that in recent years literary ecocritical studies have also sprung up in linguistic and literary contexts other than Anglo-American (where American initially narrowly coincided with the United States), enriching the plurality of approaches.

Finally it is important to take in mind that a sharp distinction between the first wave and individual person/experience orientation versus the second wave and sociocentric or collective orientation would risk creating artificial partitions. Indeed the thematic germinations related to the second wave were already present in the first wave, and that without the latter, ecocriticism would not have originated. Then, following Iovino, venturing beyond categorizing literature by genres to discover authors who aren't explicitly associated with environmentalist themes, the scope of ecocriticism significantly broadens, as well as the viewpoints in which it unfolds. In line with Scott Slovic's perspective, it becomes in fact evident that virtually any piece of literature can be subjected to an ecocritical analysis.²⁷

²³ Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends", 95.

²⁴ Adamson, "We Have Never Been Anthropos. From Environmental Justice to Cosmopolitics", 157.

²⁵ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 33.

²⁶ Greta Gaard, "Where is Feminism in the Environmental Humanities?", in *Environmental Humanities. Voices from the Anthropocene*, eds. Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017), 90.

²⁷ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 19.

ANTHROPOCENE: THE HUMAN EPOCH

The growing urgency of environmental concerns, from which ecocriticism was born, has been galvanized since the 2000s by the term Anthropocene. Coined in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stroemer, the term suggests that humanity has transitioned from the Holocene, the warmer geological epoch spanning the last 13,000 years since the last Ice Age, which allowed the emergence of humankind, to a new era: the Anthropocene. As written by Crutzen in a short contribution for the journal *Nature* in 2002, this shift is due to humans' profound alteration of the Earth, resulting in a discernible impact and lasting mark on the planet's geological record.²⁸ There the Dutch chemist and meteorologist suggests the Industrial Revolution as the Anthropocene's starting point, since - a few years after the invention of James Watt's steam engine - greenhouse gas production began to steadily rise. However, other propositions have been made about its beginning, each one entailing a set of philosophic consequences. For example another viewpoint places the commencement at 1945, coinciding with the onset of the "great acceleration", during which atomic bomb testing may have left traces in the Earth's geological record. Some proponents argue instead for an even earlier start, dating back to the Neolithic era when agriculture and the domestication of plants and animals led to significant changes in biodiversity. However, as acknowledged by Telmo Pievani, this evolutionary view faces harder challenges, since to determine epoch boundaries geologists require precise geological markers, known as "golden spikes", which are not readily available for the Neolithic period.²⁹

Very recently, on 11th July 2023, scientists and researchers have made a step forward to the definition of the "human epoch", by selecting the Crawford Lake in Ontario as the site, which would mark the beginning of the Anthropocene as epoch with a base dated at 1950 (**FIG. 3**). The bottom sediments of the small Canadian lake have been in fact observed to hold one of the most precise pieces of evidence of human alteration

²⁸ Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind", *Nature* 451 (1 Jan, 2002): 23.

²⁹ Telmo Pievani, "Noi cambiamo il mondo e il mondo cambia noi: per una visione evolutiva della sostenibilità". (Seminar held at *Sustainability Talks: Ideas on sustainability for a new humanism*, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 15 November 2023). <https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/8/56790>.

of the planet Earth. Such records include “upticks in plutonium from nuclear weapons testing, ash from burning fossil fuels as well as heavy metals and microplastics.”³⁰

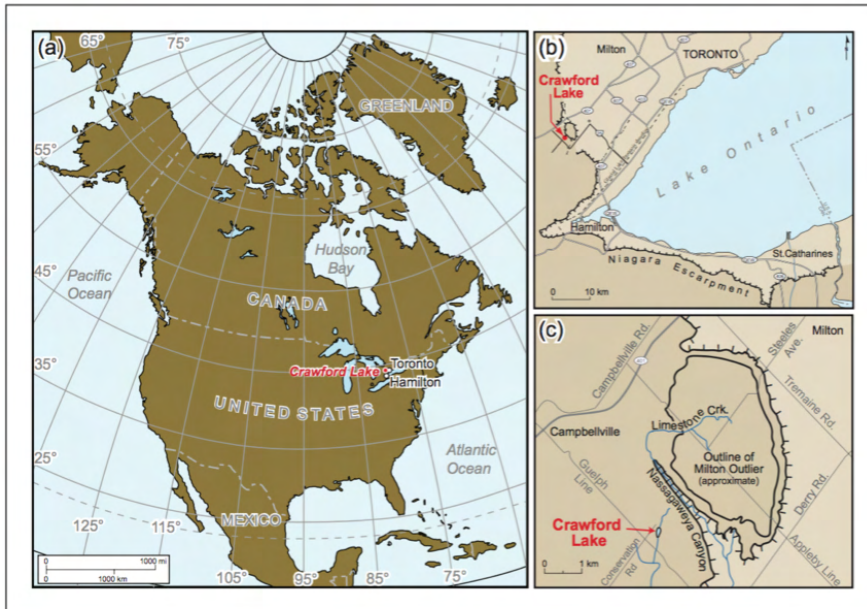


FIG. 3 Geographic setting of Crawford Lake.

Although initially framed in terms of geology and still awaiting formal recognition in that discipline, the notion of the Anthropocene has quickly disseminated across various other domains. It has gained significant currency in publications, conferences, and exhibitions as a concise way to describe a profound shift in humanity’s interaction with the natural world, which ultimately escapes the *nature/culture* divide. Despite geologists continuing to grapple with the question of whether the available evidence truly justifies this alteration in nomenclature, in other fields, numerous concerns have emerged regarding the suitability of this terminology. According to Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg - for example - the main problem with the standard narrative of the Anthropocene proposed by Crutzen, is that this term evokes no distinction among “anthropos”.³¹ They point out that it’s not the whole humankind to

³⁰ McKenzie Prillaman, “Canada’s Crawford Lake could mark the beginning of the Anthropocene”, *ScienceNews* (11 July, 2023). <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/canada-crawford-lake-beginning-anthropocene>.

See also: Francine MG McCarthy et al., “The varved succession of Crawford Lake, Milton, Ontario, Canada as a candidate Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point for the Anthropocene series”, *The Anthropocene Review* 10 no. 1 (2023): 146–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196221149281>.

³¹ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative”, *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291>.

have fostered and benefited of economy triggering the Anthropocene, but “a tiny minority even in Britain”, where Industrial Revolution started, as “this class of people comprised an infinitesimal fraction of the population of *Homo sapiens* in the early 19th century”³². When speaking about anthropogenic climate change which as one of the main aspects characterizing this epoch, one should be aware of “social-metabolic differentiations”³³ among countries (**FIG. 4**) and social classes (**TAB. 1**), where those who suffer the most from the byproduct of wellness, are those who do not benefit from it. In a conversation with the economist Jason W. Moore, Malm - then a PhD student at Lund University - exclaimed: “Forget the Anthropocene, we should call it the *Capitalocene!*”³⁴ This term is preferred indeed by Moore and environmental art critic T.J. Demos, since it is considered more effective in conveying the voracity of the political-economic system to the detriment of the biosphere. Demos in particular rejects the term Anthropocene because of the catastrophic view is often associated with it. He would rather replace it with a more optimistic vision, suggesting that it is still possible to improve things if transitioning to a more sustainable economic system. Another alternative is then *Plantationocene*. This designation refers to the devastating transformation of different types of farms, pastures and forests into extractive, closed plantations based on slave labour and other forms of exploitation. It is suggested that this system, which originated during imperialism, continues to thrive in the present capitalist system. Donna Haraway, author among others of an essay titled precisely “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”³⁵, suggests instead the conceptualization of *Chthulucene*. This term is coined by blending two Greek roots *khthon* and *kainos*, emphasizes the essential practice of continually acknowledging and revitalizing symbiotic relationships. It aligns with the concept of “sympoiesis”, or “acting together”, while also recognizing the dynamic and ongoing forces and powers within the deep, abyssal chthonic entirety that

³² Malm and Hornborg, “The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative”, 64.

³³ Ilona Otto et al., “Human Agency in the Anthropocene”, *Ecological Economics* 167 (Jan, 2020).

³⁴ Jason W. Moore ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press, 2016), XI.

³⁵ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (1 May, 2015): 159–165.

encompasses humans, whose continuity faces potential disruptions.³⁶

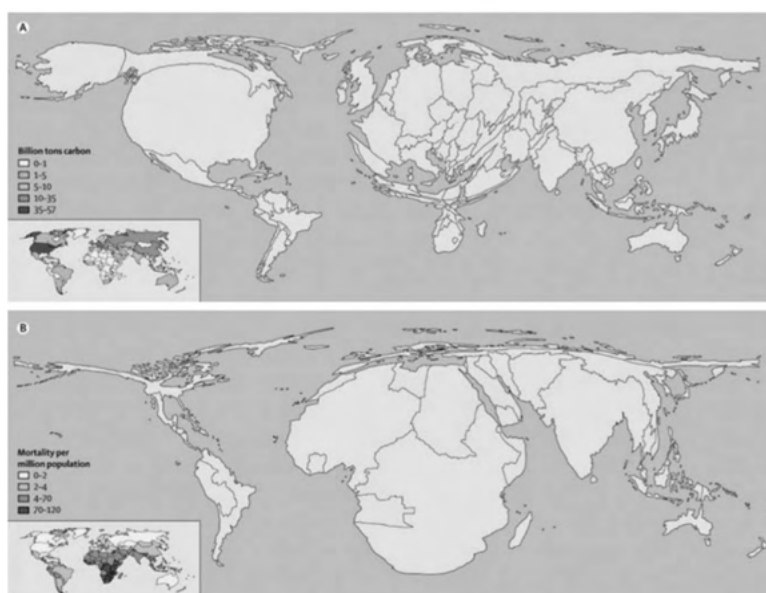


FIG. 4 Nation-states by size according to the quantity of carbon emissions vs. the likely consequences of climate change for each nation-state.

Figure 4 Reprinted from Anthony Costello et al., "Managing the Health Effects of Climate Change: *Lancet* and University College London Institute for Global Health Commission," *Lancet* 373, no. 9676 (2009): 1693–1733, with permission from Elsevier. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140673609609351

	Percent of global population	Percent of life-style CO ₂ emissions	The level of human agency
Socio-metabolic underclass	20%	2.5%	Extremely low
Socio-metabolic energy poor class	30%	7.5%	Low
Socio-metabolic lower class	30%	22%	Moderate level of collective agency
Socio-metabolic middle class	10%	19%	Moderate to high
Socio-metabolic upper class	9.5%	35.4%	Very high
Super-rich	0.54%	13.6%	Extremely high

TAB. 1 Socio-metabolic class differentiation (based on: Oxfam 2015; Otto et al. 2019)

Despite what we want to call this epoch, now that humanity is about to be recognised as a geological force, we must reconceptualize the cartesian divide between nature and culture as well as the relations between natural and social

³⁶ Gaia Bindi, "Prefazione. Come sfidare l'Antropocene", *Earthbound. Superare l'Antropocene*, *Kabul Magazine* (2021), 13-14.

sciences. Environmental Humanities are an attempt in this direction and Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén propose them as “a means by which fundamental concerns within the humanities... can be brought to bear on question of the environment through the deployment of humanities modes of enquiry”³⁷. Then, in their essay “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene”, they proceed by saying that:

any policy or action aimed at ameliorating environmental problems must take into account human desire, motivation, and values; a deep understanding of environment cannot be divorced from human imagination, culture, and institutional and social practices. In other words, imagination is salient here, and the proclaimed advent of the Anthropocene offers a vital moment for contemplation and critique of how such understandings and imaginings might be shifting.³⁸

Ecocriticism is becoming increasingly prominent as a powerful instrument for critically examining the products of culture in the context of environmental ethics, encompassing its analyses and debates. This dynamic interaction between ethics and culture forms an intriguing ethical-cultural fusion, as Iovino conceives it.³⁹ The goal of this research is precisely to show how this versatile method can extend its application to other - and potentially all - cultural products beyond the field of literature. The next subchapter will explore the recognition of ecocriticism by art history, after which the focus will shift more precisely to photography, the other co-protagonist of this thesis.

³⁷ Neimanis, Åsberg and Hedrén, “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene”, 69.

³⁸ Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén, “Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene”, 80.

³⁹ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 21.

1.2 Ecocriticism and art history

ECOCRITICISM AS AN EXPANDING FIELD

Although ecocritics who primarily focused on literature have occasionally explored other media creatively, and environmental criticism directed to other fields such as art, landscape architecture and film have drawn upon literary imagination and critical work, it wasn't until the past dozen years or so that critics from outside literature's domain began to identify their works as *ecocriticism*.⁴⁰ For what concerns art history, 19th century landscape paintings have inspired at least two significant books, which are recognised by scholars as "proto ecocritical"⁴¹. Ann Bermingham's *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740–1860* (1986) examines how Romantic landscape paintings, such as those of John Constable, were influenced by the enclosure of countryside land for private cultivation. Similarly, Greg Thomas explores the material and geographical conditions in *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau* (2000). Thomas highlights Rousseau's personal connection to the Forest of Fontainebleau, which is vividly depicted in his paintings, and suggests that the artist encourages viewers to consider the interconnectedness of the landscape components. Additionally, Rousseau's advocacy for the preservation of this forest, which was menaced by severe deforestation, positions him as an early conservationist.⁴² Nevertheless, while these books - along with the criticism addressing explicitly environmentalist art produced since the 1960s - paved the way for ecocritical perspectives in art, there has been a general slowness on the part of art history to formally embrace an ecocritical approach.⁴³

⁴⁰ Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends", 104; Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 19.

⁴¹ Suzaan Boettger, "Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art", *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 668.

⁴² Together with other young painters, Rousseau was part of the Barbizon School, named after the village where they lived. By launching petitions and alerting the newspapers, they engaged for the preservation of the forest of Fontainebleau, which was finally recognised as "Réserve Artistique" in 1853. Many writers also spoke out in favour of protecting the forest. See for example: George Sand, "La Forêt de Fontainebleau", *Œuvres complètes XVII, Impressions et souvenirs, Indiana*, (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1980).

⁴³ Braddock and Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene", 6.

This shift gained traction in 2009 with the publication of Christoph Irmscher and Alan Braddock's seminal work, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*. In this way, art history emerges as the first discipline outside literature to have formally recognized ecocriticism, however many scholars have pondered why it occurred so late.⁴⁴ According to Buell, who has been already mentioned as one of the pioneering figures of literary ecocriticism, a "decisive factor, without which these sundry forms of institutionalization might never have happened, has been that second-wave work has shifted the center of gravity in a 'cultures of environment' direction, from ecocriticism as textual practice to environmental criticism as cultural practice."⁴⁵ Renée Ater and Alan Braddock suggest that "delayed engagement with ecocriticism on the part of art historians undoubtedly owes something to enduring disciplinary boundaries."⁴⁶ They point out how some scholars may view ecology and sustainability as fundamentally distinct from matters of aesthetics. While for others, environmental concerns may be seen as associated with an elitist, predominantly white, liberal privilege, which could lead them to regard them as a diversion from what they considered more pressing issues such as human civil rights and postcolonial analysis.⁴⁷ Suzaan Boettger argues instead additionally that "a more provocative source of the late and marginal interest in both eco art and ecocriticism is, ironically – and perhaps counter-intuitively – the very long-standing presence of representations of nature, embedded in the history of art as landscape painting."⁴⁸ As Marc Antrop states "the earliest realistic representations of landscape date from the fifteenth century, in particular in the Renaissance paintings and emphasize visual character and symbolic meanings. Landscape became also expression of human ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings."⁴⁹ However - as observed with Bermingham and Thomas's books - expanding the gaze beyond appreciating the delightful rendering of a portion of the sky, the complexity of the concept of landscape already contains within itself the seeds for the thriving of a broader

⁴⁴ Braddock and Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene", 6.

⁴⁵ Buell, "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends", 104.

⁴⁶ Braddock and Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene", 6.

⁴⁷ Braddock and Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene", 6.

⁴⁸ Boettger, "Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art", 667.

⁴⁹ Marc Antrop, "A brief history of landscape research", *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, eds. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson and Emma Waterton, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

ecocritical analysis. As Antrop reports in his article for *The Routledge companion to landscape studies* (2013):

The origin of the word ‘landscape’ comes from the Germanic languages. One of the oldest references in the Dutch language dates from the early thirteenth century when ‘lantscap’(‘lantscep’, ‘landschap’) referred to a region or environment. It is related to the word ‘land’, meaning a border territory, but its suffix -scep refers to land reclamation and creation, as is also found in the German ‘Landschaft’ - ‘schaffen’ = to make.⁵⁰

Despite this term extended throughout other connotations, using the definition of the Article 1 of the European Landscape Convention (2000), landscape is defined as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.”⁵¹ According to the French critic Michel Collot “La notion de paysage fait intervenir au moins trois composantes, unies dans une relation complexe: un site, un regard, une image.”⁵² Thus, like narrative texts, also visual representations both reflect and mold our comprehension of ecological matters, configuring as “cultural expression on landscape, nature and environment”⁵³. And it is therefore interesting to see how the connotation transition from “landscape” in its more narrow sense to “environment” has taken place over time, and even to contribute to such a transition in a critical sense.⁵⁴

Furthermore, while one can speak of disciplinary boundaries that have delayed the development of ecocriticism, Andrew Patrizio reminds us that “over the last century

⁵⁰ Antrop, “A brief history of landscape research”, 12.

⁵¹ Council of Europe, “Council of Europe Landscape Convention as amended by the 2016 Protocol”, *European Treaty Series* no. 176, Florence, Italy (2000): 2.

⁵² Michel Collot, *La pensée-paysage*, (Arles: Actes Sud, 2011), 17.

⁵³ Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): XIII, as quoted in Gisela Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the new topographics transnational impact* (Braunschweig: Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, 2015), 90.

⁵⁴ This shift in connotation from “landscape” to “environment” matches to the one occurring between the terms “weather” and “climate”. This latter theme is currently explored through the exhibition *Everybody talks about the weather* curated by Dieter Roelstraete, which was inaugurated last 20th May at Ca’ Corner della Regina in Venice, and will take place till 26th November 2023. Through more than fifty works of contemporary art and a supportive section of historical artworks, the exhibition “explor[es] the semantics of “weather” in visual art, taking atmospheric conditions as a point of departure to investigate the emergency of climate crisis”. See: <https://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/everybody-talks-about-the-weather/?lang=en>.

or more [art] has shown that there is no subject, however material or immaterial, that is beyond the legitimate attention of artists.”⁵⁵ According to the Scottish scholar this internal tendency is matched by an external one, namely that “global ecologies shape all human activity now more than ever, including the humanities within which lies art history.”⁵⁶ Patrizio identifies them as “double pressure” whose consequence is that “there is that there is no scale, no theme, no method, no ethics, no organism, no mineral, with which the history of art cannot be in symbiotic relationship.”⁵⁷

In the view of Braddock and Irmscher ecocriticism is “an effort to reorient and expand cultural studies by emphasizing particular ways in which human creativity - regardless of form (visual, verbal, aural) or time period of environments, whether urban, rural, or suburban.”⁵⁸ In an interview released in March 2023 in occasion of the release of his new (e)book *Implication: An Ecocritical Dictionary for Art History*, in which he reveal the inescapable entanglement of art with ecology through a wide array of creative works spanning from ancient Roman mosaics to contemporary activist art, Braddock is asked about his expectations concerning the reception of the book. The scholar, who has paved the way for the recognition of ecocriticism within the field of art history, answers as following:

I hope that students and other readers of *Implication* will come away convinced that all art—regardless of historical period, context, genre, or medium—has an ecological connection to the world in which it was created. Sometimes the connection is obvious and intentional on the part of the artist as an explicit expression of environmentalist attitudes. More often, though, especially when considering historical art that is rarely environmentalist in orientation, the connection must be discerned through careful ecocritical inquiry that takes various kinds of evidence into account, including the formal appearance of the work, the materials with which it was made, the attitudes and historical context of the artist, and interdisciplinary knowledge about ecology and environmental history. Ultimately, I believe strongly

⁵⁵ Andrew Patrizio, *The ecological eye* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 4.

⁵⁶ Patrizio, *The ecological eye*, 4.

⁵⁷ Patrizio, *The ecological eye*, 4.

⁵⁸ Alan C. Braddock and Christopher Irmscher, *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 3.

that ecocritical interpretation makes art history both more interesting and more responsive to the world in which we live.⁵⁹

According to Patrizio, broadening the ecological perspective when discussing artistic works could be beneficial for all parties involved, including creators, exhibitors, critics, and viewers.⁶⁰ In his book *The ecological eye* (2019), Patrizio argues that the field of art history, not just art itself, should actively engage in conversations within the humanities about the boundaries between humans and the non-human, societal perceptions of nature and biopolitics, and the impact of environmental justice and activism on political and cultural dynamics. To accomplish this, art history must venture beyond its traditional boundaries, which - as Patrizio precises - is however a task easier to describe than to put into practice, but unavoidable in light of the current ecological crisis.⁶¹

ANTHROPOCENE AND AESTHESIS

In the volume *Art in the Anthropocene* (2015), the editors Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin set out to investigate how art grapples with the Anthropocene. In the first pages they assert that:

art, as the vehicle of *aesthesis*, is central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene. And we believe the inherent relation between the two occurs at a number of strata and across various scales. First, we argue that the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon: the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world. Second, the way we have come to understand the Anthropocene has frequently been framed through modes of the visual, that is, through data visualization, satellite imagery, climate models, and other legacies of the “whole earth.” Third, art provides a polyarchic site of experimentation for “living in a damaged world,” as Anna Tsing has called it, and a non-moral form of address that

⁵⁹ Alan C. Braddock, “Ecocritical Art History on the A&AePortal”, by Patricia Fidler, Yale University Press (March 22, 2023). <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2023/03/22/ecocritical-art-history-on-the-aaeportal/>.

⁶⁰ Patrizio, *The ecological eye*, 2.

⁶¹ Patrizio, *The ecological eye*, 19.

offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression.⁶²

In his essay “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, Nicholas Mirzoeff also claims that “to visualize the Anthropocene is to invoke the aesthetic”.⁶³ According to this theorist of visual culture, the “Anthropocene visibility”⁶⁴ permits us to persist in our societal patterns of consuming and trading commodities, even in the face of ecological devastation. It essentially convinces us that the ongoing “war against nature”⁶⁵, which Western society has waged for centuries, is not only morally justified but also possesses a certain beauty and can ultimately be triumphant. Briefly, in his words: “the aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics - it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful - and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.”⁶⁶

Mirzoeff illustrates this idea through several famous paintings within Western art, including Claude Monet’s 1873 masterpiece *Impression, soleil levant* (Impression, sun rising) (**FIG. 5**). In addition to appreciating the artist’s exceptional use of color and light, Mirzoeff underlines how the painting simultaneously exposes and aestheticizes the environmentally harmful impact of human activities on the planet. At the time, France was just beginning to experience the pollution resulting from industrial coal usage, a phenomenon



FIG. 5 Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant*, 1872.

⁶² Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin eds., *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), 3-4. <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/art-in-the-anthropocene/>.

⁶³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (April, 2014): 213.

⁶⁴ Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, 217.

⁶⁵ Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, 217.

⁶⁶ Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, 220.

vividly depicted in Monet's portrayal of the smoky atmosphere of the port of Le Havre in Normandy. This smokiness had become a prominent aspect of French visual culture, evident in popular photographs and paintings of the mid-19th and 20th century. Monet's upbringing in Le Havre, which had evolved into France's primary port for transatlantic passenger shipping, provided him with a firsthand view of this industrial transformation. While the foreground of the painting showcases traditional rowing boats, in the background it is possible to discern industrial machinery, such as cranes on the right, and steamers' smokestacks on the left. What contributes to the striking beauty of Monet's artwork is precisely industrial byproduct, notably coal smoke. During the early morning hours, its yellow hue interacts with the blue morning light and red of the rising sun, producing a mesmerizing array of refracted colors "generat[ing] the set of sense impressions that gave first this painting, and then an entire movement, its name."⁶⁷

A similar complaint of contributing to renewing the aesthetics of the Anthropocene has also been raised against the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky. The fundamental clashing between ecological disaster and visual allure, conferred through large size prints and sensational use of color, emerges as a key quandary for most viewers of his work (FIG.

6). Art historian Bénédicte Ramade argues that "Burtynsky contributes the hyper technological vision of the Anthropocene, super scientific, obsessed with technicity and strongly believing in the power of scientist."⁶⁸ While Demos adds that his images are "more about dramatizing



FIG. 6 Edward Burtynsky, *Silver Lake Operations #1, Lake Lefroy, Western Australia*, 2007.

⁶⁷ Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", 220.

⁶⁸ Bénédicte Ramade, "Pictures for the Anthropocene Era." UGOT Photography, Publishing Platform for Contemporary Photography, University of Gotenburg 1, no. 1 (2018).

in spectacular fashion the perverse visual beauty of a technological, and even geological, mastery devoid of environmental ethics.”⁶⁹ In fact, in his book *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today* (2017), precisely in the chapter “Capitalocene Violence”, Demos proposes Burtynsky’s collection *Oil* to illustrate how some specific artistic representations align with capitalistic governance, legitimizing the Anthropocene narrative. Depicting the intricacies of capitalist brutality, Burtynsky offers also a forensic examination of consumer involvement in the profit-driven strategies of the oil industry (FIG. 7 and FIG. 8). If from one side he is right to do this, from the other side he prompts us to doubt human capacity for positive change, “diverting attention from the fact of corporate petrocapi- talism’s enormous

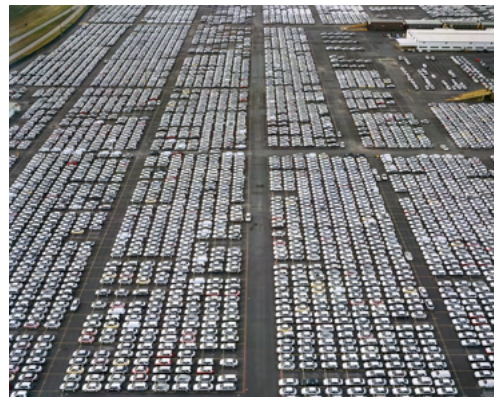


FIG. 7 Edward Burtynsky, *VW Lot #1*, Houston, Texas, USA, 2004.



FIG. 8 Edward Burtynsky, *Oxford Tire Pile #8*, Westley, California, USA, 1999.

economic influence on global politics that keeps us all locked in its clutches”.⁷⁰ As already mentioned, Demos suggests the term Capitalocene instead of that of Anthropocene, a choice that entails a more optimistic approach. In his book *Decolonizing nature. Contemporary art and the politics of ecology* (2016), Demos quotes literature professor and activist Nicholas Powers sharing his view that “if a green revolution is to happen we must exchange apocalyptic imagery for utopian prophecy”⁷¹. Demos also asks what is the role of artists - who are increasingly

⁶⁹ T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 64.

⁷⁰ Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 65.

⁷¹ “Se una rivoluzione Verde deve accadere”, spiega l’attivista e professore di letteratura Nicholas Powers, “dobbiamo scambiare l’immaginario apocalittico con una profezia utopistica, per creare un ‘selvaggio’ culturale in cui le persone possono entrare per aggregarsi al carnevale”. T. J. Demos, “Decolonizzare la natura”, trans. Elena d’Angelo, *KABUL Magazine* (29 June, 2017): 57.

becoming activists - in this emergency situation. In his view, the most ambitious artistic examples are those that arise from the intersection of aesthetics and politics, in which art emerges as the result of interdisciplinary collaborations.⁷² According to him, it is indeed impossible to adequately address climate justice without also focusing on other phenomena including the corruption of democratic practices by lobbies, the violation of indigenous peoples' rights or the militarization of borders etc., which he envisions as "interconnected strands of political ecology"⁷³. Indeed for Demos, "an intersectional approach would insist on seeing the visual field as structured by these inextricable relations of power, economic forces, and ideological mechanisms."⁷⁴ In *Against the Anthropocene*, he expresses himself as follows regarding this topic:

If the Capitalocene sanctions a more directed address of, and intervention into, the processes and causes of current ecological violence, then numerous artistic-activist practices are already providing proposals that insist on embedding experimental visual culture within social engagements and collaborative social movements that are posed against the Anthropocene. They are doing so in order to foster creative forms of life, joining survival to cultural resilience, Indigenous sovereignty to multi-species composition, democratic practice to economic justice and ecological sustainability.⁷⁵

As illustration Demos proposes Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares's *Forest Law* (2014) (**FIG. 9**). This work consists of a video and mixed-media installation investigating the historical impact of destructive oil extraction in the Amazon region of Ecuador, the resilience of Indigenous communities in the face of this destruction, the activism centered around environmental causes, and the legal concepts aimed at achieving transformative justice. Biemann and Tavares' work exemplifies the artists-activists' commitment to understanding the impact of capitalism on nature, as is done in the collective platform World of Matter of which they are both part.⁷⁶ On this same plane moves also Tavares' recent contribution as curator of the Brazilian

⁷² T. J. Demos, "Decolonizzare la natura". Trans. by Elena d'Angelo, *KABUL Magazine* (29 June, 2017): 51-58.

⁷³ Demos, "Decolonizzare la natura", 52.

⁷⁴ T. J. Demos and Charlotte Cotton. "Art in the Anthropocene", *Aperture*, no. 234 (2019): 48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26668536>.

⁷⁵ Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 98.

⁷⁶ Demos, *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today*, 98.

pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, “The laboratory of the future” along with Afro-Brazilian architect and activist Gabriela de Matos. An insight about this work will be provided in the third chapter of this research, in connection with the work of Beate Güttschow.



FIG. 9 Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, *Forest Law*, 2014.

1.3 Photography and the environment: from the representation of *wilderness* to *human altered landscapes*

If it is possible to assert that photography has a long tradition of interexchange with the environment, it is also important to take in mind that there isn't a single unified field of photographic practice, instead there exists a multitude of approaches, often in conflict with each other.⁷⁷ However, even if not all photographs may have a deliberate environmentalist agenda in their purpose and conception, each of them - upon a focused analysis - may communicate various meanings related to the environment. Indeed, as a cultural product, photography can - and should - be investigated ecocritically. Then, the documentary value of photomicrographs is inherent not only in the fact that they allow us to keep track of physical changes, but also of the change in perception towards certain themes. By focusing on the same period during which literary criticism developed in America, it is possible to observe a proliferation of images which may be properly defined as "eco-imaes". Following Gisela Parak, photographs are defined as such, when "they are specifically used within the framework of a political campaign and which are intended to shake up general public and appeal to the latter's ecological conscience"⁷⁸. Yet they circulated mainly outside the official art scene.

Among the most cited examples are the series of illustrated books presented by the environmental organization Sierra Club, where Ansel Adams' *This is the American Earth* (1960) and Eliot Porter's *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World* (1962) surely stand out

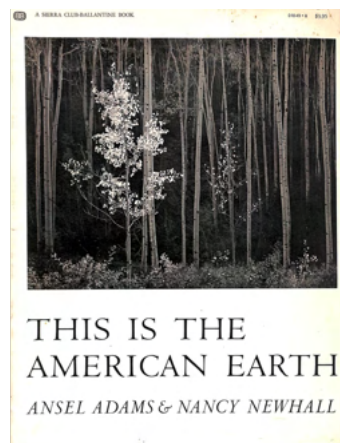


FIG. 10 Cover of Ansel Adams' *This is the American Earth* (1960).



FIG. 11 Cover of Eliot Porter's *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World* (1962).

⁷⁷ Demos and Cotton, "Art in the Anthropocene", 45.

⁷⁸ Gisela Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur: On the New Topographics' Transnational Impact* (Braunschweig: Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, 2015), 4.

(FIG. 10 and FIG. 11). Adams captured black-and-white wide-angle shots of pristine landscapes such as majestic soaring mountain rock, while Porter innovatively embraced color in sharply delineated close-ups, where the rocks are tinged with green shades of moss. As noticed by Suzaan Boettger, both photographers’ intense focus on natural forms within landscapes lead Serpil Oppermann to recognize in them what she defines as natural “matter’s ‘expressive’ dimension”⁷⁹, and Jane Bennett to appreciate the profound material vitality that she emphasizes in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). Then such captivating views and intricate textures undoubtedly fostered a sense of vicarious intimacies in their viewers, which was reflected in the actual increase of memberships in protective and activist organizations like Environmental Defense Fund, founded in 1967.⁸⁰ Both photographers were indeed themselves passionate environmentalists and the widespread popularity of their works strongly contributed to the development of environmentalism.⁸¹

In particular, Adams’ exaltation of a wild and unspoilt American landscape became the main benchmark of American photography until the 1970s. His frequent choice of vantage points accentuated the grandeur of the mountain peaks, while his use of a wide tonal range, from deep blacks to brilliant whites, captured the texture and captivating effects of light and weather, provoking a



FIG. 12 Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942.

⁷⁹ Serpil Oppermann, “From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency.” *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 21–36; as cited in Suzaan Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art”, *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 674.

⁸⁰ Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art”, 674.

⁸¹ Boettger, “Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art”, 674.

feeling of awe in viewers (FIG. 12). Such images, in which the human figure was largely absent, contributed thus to spread the idea of “wilderness”, which for decades has been a cornerstone of environmental movement, and which is also intrinsic to the establishment of national parks, whose commonly declared mission was “preserving the commons for all of the people”⁸². As Mark Dowie argues in his article “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans” (2019), this “idealized version of nature” was in fact imagined as “a place that humans had explored but never altered, exalted but never touched”⁸³. The sacredness attributed to wilderness is pivotal in grasping the significance of emotional attachment and the rejection of modernity, which is also to be found in the writings of Thoreau. Yet, as Dowie highlights quoting American environmental historian William Cronon, “wilderness” works rather as “a form of historical erasure”⁸⁴, whether by evoking the innocence of the garden or depicting a “savage world at the dawn of civilization”⁸⁵. Far from being an unspoiled sanctuary where remnants of an untamed, endangered, transcendent nature dwell, it fundamentally arises from human intervention, specifically from distinct human cultures at particular moments in history, having a strong connection to the land.⁸⁶ Hence, the establishment of National Parks, such as the Yellowstone (1872) or the Yosemite (1890) had significant repercussions, involving multiple stakeholders and sparking controversies related to land rights, sovereignty, and environmental management. The primary affected stakeholder were precisely the Indigenous people, which were evicted from their homeland during the parks’ creation.⁸⁷ In his own book-based essay “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Returning to the Wrong Kind of Nature” published in 1996, Cronon makes the case that Western conservationists err by idealizing untouched landscapes that mostly exist in the realm of romantic imagination. This, according to the author, constitutes in fact a diversion from the

⁸² Mark Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”, The MIT Press Reader, 11 October 2019.

<https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-myth-of-a-wilderness-without-humans/#:~:text=For%20over%200a%20century%2C%20conflicting,protecting%20nature%20 from%20human%20 disturb nc>.

⁸³ Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”.

⁸⁴ Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”.

⁸⁵ Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”.

⁸⁶ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, *Environmental History* 1 no.1 (1996): 17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3985059?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

⁸⁷ The University of British Columbia, “Indigenous Homelands in Yellowstone National Park”. Accessed 27 September, 2023.

<https://cases.open.ubc.ca/indigenous-homelands-in-yellowstone-national-park/>.

environmental harm caused by people in their everyday lives.⁸⁸ As observed by Dowie, by challenging the cartesian divide between nature and culture, Cronon highlights the paradoxical nature of our perception of wilderness. He contends that without recognizing this contradiction, “we [...] leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honourable human place in nature might actually look like.”⁸⁹ By questioning the myth of untouched wilderness, Cronon proposes thus an alternative ideology that centers on human responsibility for our actions.

In 1973 also the land-artist Robert Smithson commented on the concept of “wilderness”, opposing it to the “dialectic of the landscape”⁹⁰: “Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal. This does not mean one is helpless before nature, but rather that nature’s conditions are unexpected.”⁹¹ In his review of Braddock and Hirmsher’s seminal book, where Yates McKee reproaches the two authors of having underestimate Smithson’s ecological concerns, he rightly points out that “among the ‘unexpected’ conditions of nature was precisely its non-separability from humanity, such that even the most apparently remote sites, processes and events already bear the trace of human involvement or interference”.⁹² As example the artist cites the “urbanized wilderness of Yosemite with its electrical outlets for campers”, yet also his works may be considered as an expression of such a dialectic. The most iconic one is probably *Spiral Jetty* (**FIG. 13**), a 4.6 m wide x 457.2 m long earthwork in Great Salt Lake in northern Utah. Smithson selected this location, situated in a sparsely inhabited area, not just for its expansive natural surroundings but also due to its proximity to abandoned oil rigs and the Golden Spike monument, which commemorated the 1869 transcontinental railway

⁸⁸ Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”.

⁸⁹ Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, 17; as also cited in Dowie, “The Myth of a Wilderness Without Humans”.

⁹⁰ Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape”, *Artforum 11* (February 1973): 63. <https://www.artforum.com/features/frederick-law-olmsted-and-the-dialectical-landscape-210276/>.

⁹¹ Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape”, 63.

⁹² Yates McKee, “Art History, Ecocriticism, and the Ends of Man”, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2011): 127. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41315366>.

completion.⁹³ Moreover, as McKee further observes, in the last years of his life Smithson shifted his attention towards abandoned strip-mines. During this time, he envisioned ecological “re-mediation” projects that would connect media technology like maps, photographs and films with the sculptural restoration of damaged landscapes.⁹⁴ Within the context of this research, it is worth mentioning 1968 “field trip” with Bernd and Hilla Becher to Oberhausen, once one of the most dense industrial sites of the Ruhr region, which led them to different artistic results (**FIG. 14**).



FIG. 13 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970).

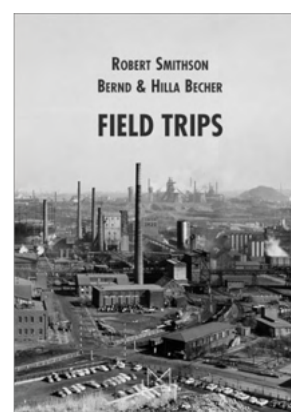


FIG. 14 Cover of the *Field Trips*' exhibition catalog.

Returning to photography, a groundbreaking point in landscape representation was marked by the 1975 photography exhibit entitled *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*. Held at the George Eastman House's International Museum of Photography of Rochester, New York, the exhibition showcased 168 photographs by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr. The exhibition centered around the representation of ordinary rather than extraordinary landscapes. Instead of portraying pristine or exceptional scenes, these photographers turned their lenses towards the aftermath of suburban growth in the postwar era, as part of a newfound fascination with the cultural aspects of the vernacular landscape. The displayed subjects included freeways, gas stations, motels,

⁹³ Gary Shapiro, “Spiral Jetty”, Holt/Smithson Foundation, November 2019. <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/spiral-jetty-0>.

⁹⁴ Yates McKee, “Art History, Ecocriticism, and the Ends of Man”, 127.

industrial parks, and tract housing. While Bernd and Hilla Becher, the only Europeans in the group, were unique in their focus on 19th-century subjects, which for this occasion were organized into seven industrial typologies found in the northeastern United States and Canada. All photographs were in black and white with the exception of those by Stephan Shore. This extensive observation took place on the basis of work partly already completed by the individual photographers, but also unpublished and still-in-progress projects.

The portrayal of the American landscape as nature with a capital N, untouched, sacred, handed down by Ansel Adams, suddenly found itself confronted with a changing environment, with the occupation and transformation of land and nature into a territory that is taken possession of, exploited and sold. For a comparative perspective, one may consider *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado* by Robert Adams (FIG. 15), who, despite sharing the last name with Ansel, has no familial connection to him. Shot in 1973, this picture finds its setting is Colorado, but it's not the romanticized frontier of legend. Despite including the Rocky Mountains in his pictures, Robert Adams removes their mythical and revered essence, framing them together with an array of mobile homes, whose sharp geometric features dominate the foreground of the image. Captured in the harsh midday sunlight, his image lacks the interplay of light and shadow. Similar to many works in the New Topographics



FIG. 15 Robert Adams, *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado*, 1973.

movement, there is then a remarkable absence of recognizable human presence, yet it's firmly anchored in context rather than erased from it. This positions individuals with a sense of responsibility for the future of the landscape and the environment.

Among the cultural assumptions that form the

basis on which this exhibition is rooted, Francesco Zanut identifies the photographic researches of Ed Ruscha and Walker Evans, the reflections and outcomes of artistic currents such as Pop Art, Minimalism, up to Dan Graham, and finally Land Art, with a particular emphasis on Robert Smithson, and the studies on cultural geography of Carl Sauer and John Brinckerhoff Jackson, as well as the spread of environmentalism.⁹⁵ As strengthened by Gisela Parak in the exhibition catalog *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics transnational impact* (Landscape. Environment. Culture. On the New Topographics transnational impact), society's growing concern for the environment that began to develop since the 1960s resonates in fact in the photography of the New Topographics. Also worth mentioning is the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, published only three years before the exhibition, which alarmed about the ecological and social collapse that could result from uncontrolled growth. Furthermore, according to the scholar Suzaan Boettger:

Their banal urban and suburban landscapes featuring arrays of blocky factories and industrially manufactured residences present an early, implicit evocation of the Anthropocene. That work can then be recognized as a precedent to a prominent subject matter among current photographers of more overtly displaying our geological era's disproportionate impact by humans on natural ecologies in images emphasizing the scale and extent of extraction, construction, consumption and waste.⁹⁶

In the words of his curator William Jenkins the approach permeating the exhibition was “anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic.”⁹⁷ The style with which they depict these banal subjects responded to a deliberate attempt to convey a cold detachment. Citing Charlotte Cotton, who refers to this style as “deadpan”, Marianna Michalowska reports that New Topographic photography is

⁹⁵ Francesco Zanut, “New Topographics”, in *La Fotografia dalla Stampa al Museo 1941-1980* vol. 3, ed. Walter Guadagnini (Milano: Skira, 2013), 250.

⁹⁶ Suzaan Boettger, “Whispers and Cries: Photographic Evocations of the Anthropocene”, *Depth of Field* 7, no. 1 (December 2015).

⁹⁷ Wendy Cheng, review of “*New Topographics*”: *Locating Epistemological Concerns in the American Landscape; Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies*, by E. Robinson, A. Nordstrom, & B. Salvesen. *American Quarterly* 63 no. 1 (March 2011): 153. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41237535>.

recognizable through some specific features such as: “1) the specific emotional chill of the performance, often accented by the flatness of perspective, resulting from shooting in diffused light; 2) clarity resulting from the use of sharp imaging cameras; 3) a carefully planned, static frame, enclosing the composition in a frame.”⁹⁸

According to Parak, whose personal research focuses on photography “in the wake of environmental awareness”⁹⁹, such “topographic style” has to be seen in connection with Walker Evans’ “documentary style”. Albeit with a slight shift in purpose, these same authors view Evans as a key influence in their photographic lineage. Interestingly, they also acknowledge a “commonly shared transatlantic heritage” inaugurated by the work of Eugène Atget, August Sander and Albert Renger Patzsch for Europe.¹⁰⁰ Evans himself, when he was still a little-known 28-year-old photographer, in a review entitled “The Reappearance of Photography” of 1931 reserves his enthusiasm for Atget and Sander, while holding however a more reserved stance towards Renger Patzsch¹⁰¹. As Parak concisely states:

The issue of document was central in all of their works, which jointly claim to the quality of a work of art as well as to the power of the document in a “documentary style”. This means that the photographer favors a neutral posture, though he or she shows his or her specific perspective through the framing, composition or light, all these elements aiming to create a seemingly neutral whole, making up the illusion of “objectivity”.

It is precisely this formal ascribable to *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography that will be investigated in the course of this thesis. If, as Boettger says referring to New Topographics, this style implied the concealing of any personal judgment and - by extension - also any “environmentalist commentary had to be disguised or whispered”¹⁰², through the lenses of ecocriticism this research aims precisely at

⁹⁸ Marianna Michalowska, “Photography’s Narrative Spaces – Stories About Man-Altered Landscape”, *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts* 9, no. 4, (October 2022): 279-280. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.9-4-1>.

⁹⁹ See: Gisela Parak, *Photographs of Environmental Phenomena. Scientific Images in the Wake of Environmental Awareness, USA 1860s-1970s* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Gisela Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact* (Braunschweig: Museum für Photographie Braunschweig e.V., 2015),

¹⁰¹ Olivier Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2008), 78.

¹⁰² Boettger, “Whispers and Cries: Photographic Evocations of the Anthropocene”.

highlighting (some of) the various possible environmental interconnections intrinsic in the proposed photographic work.

CHAPTER 2. Neue Sachlichkeit: historical-theoretical background

2.1 Origins and essential features

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT AND PAINTING

The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) was originally introduced in the early 1900s by German architect Hermann Muthesius, who employed it to describe a kind of architecture in contrast to historicism.¹⁰³ In 1923 it was then adopted by art historian and curator Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub to announce an upcoming German painting exhibition at the Mannheim Kunsthalle, of which he became director in that year.¹⁰⁴ Hartlaub intended to showcase works that departed from impressionism and expressionism, focusing on representational pieces addressing reality. The exhibition, titled *Neue Sachlichkeit. Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (New Objectivity. German Painting since Expressionism), debuted in June 1925 and featured 124 representational works by various artists. The exhibition received approval from both the public and art critics and toured several cities in Saxony and Thuringia. Thus, it was instrumental in spreading the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* to denote the artists' objective approach to reality and the representational content of their depictions.¹⁰⁵

Attempting to rigidly define the boundaries of this movement is however challenging. In fact the associated artists developed distinct stylistic elements influenced more by local nuances than overarching trends. Yet, that was clear to the same Hartlaub from the outset. In his introductory catalog statement concerning artistic associations, he asserted:

¹⁰³ Annika Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", (PhD thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2013), 82.
https://uve-iaa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/11oebgc/TN_cdi_openaire_primary_oai_dnet_od_4732_a49daa9975f11fa25e1259f0c8d1d508.

¹⁰⁴ Lee Sorensen, ed., "Hartlaub, Gustav." Dictionary of Art Historians, accessed 29 September, 2023. <https://arthistorians.info/hartlaubg>.

¹⁰⁵ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 82.

Thus two groups informally came into being. One – you could almost call it a ‘left wing’ – wresting the representational from the world of contemporary fact and bursting out with reality in all its pace and heat; the other group searching, rather, for a timelessly-relevant subject, in order to attain the eternal laws of existence in the realm of art. The former were called ‘Verists’ and one could almost call the latter Classicists, but both labels are only imprecise and could easily lead once again to the supremacy of artistic terminology over the richness of its material manifestations.¹⁰⁶



FIG. 16 George Grosz, *Grauer Tag*, 1921.

Following art historian John Willet the Verists group included artists like Otto Dix and Georg Grosz (**FIG. 16**), who were harsh critics of war and the established system and made the tool of aggressive and bitter satire their own; while in the Classicists’ one, figured the name of Georg Schrimpf or Carl Grossberg, whose approach to reality largely eschews the overt presence of such violence.¹⁰⁷

This research is unfortunately not the place to delve into the meanders of meaning of this diverse movement as far as painting is concerned, but it is worth briefly considering the work of Carl Grossberg (1894 - 1940). Some of Grossberg’s works are reminiscent of the illusionistic spatial structure of Giorgio de Chirico’s *pittura metafisica*. This similarity arises from the “supposed emotionlessness in the face of the world of things produced new fears and a feeling of alienation”¹⁰⁸, ultimately resulting also in irrationality. However, what is particularly interesting here is his relationship to technology, exemplified in his 1933 painting *Der gelbe Kessel* (The yellow boiler) (**FIG. 17**). The boiler is depicted in the middle a sterile-looking room, presumably part of a more complex industrial facility. What stands out is Grossberg’s

¹⁰⁶ Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, foreword, in exhibition catalogue *Die neue Sachlichkeit – Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus*, Kunsthalle Mannheim 1925, unpaginated; quoted in Olaf Peters, “Carl Grossberg and New Objectivity”, in *Carl Grossberg 1894-1940. Industry and Architecture*, (München: Galerie Michael Hasenclever, 2017).

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Hankel, “Reconsidering New Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and *Die Welt ist schön*”, (Master Thesis, University of Georgia, 2017), 6. <https://esploro.libs.uga.edu/esploro/outputs/9949334716502959>.

¹⁰⁸ Olaf Peters, “Carl Grossberg and New Objectivity”.

meticulous and precise depiction of the object, which is rendered in a sober and sharp look. The artist depicts the voluminous body to which thin pipes and tubes are connected as a portrait in the round. Although fluid circulation is assumed, its specific function, and thus the significance of its existence, are rather elusive.¹⁰⁹ In another work from the same year, *Oelkessel* (Fuel Depots), the space is instead dominated by the monumental presence of the fuel depots. Depicted in the background, they are partially covered by steel girders of an elevated railroad in the foreground. The deserted ambiance accentuates the significance of these structures, which standing as everyday aspects of modern life, are now the absolute focal points of the painting (FIG. 18). Such detailed machine images were mainly created from preliminary drawings that Grossberg made on site in the industrial plants and factories in the Ruhr area or in its wider vicinity.¹¹⁰ What is finally captivating about his paintings is his ability to merge realistic and lucid industrial visions with a sense of estrangement in a unified formula.

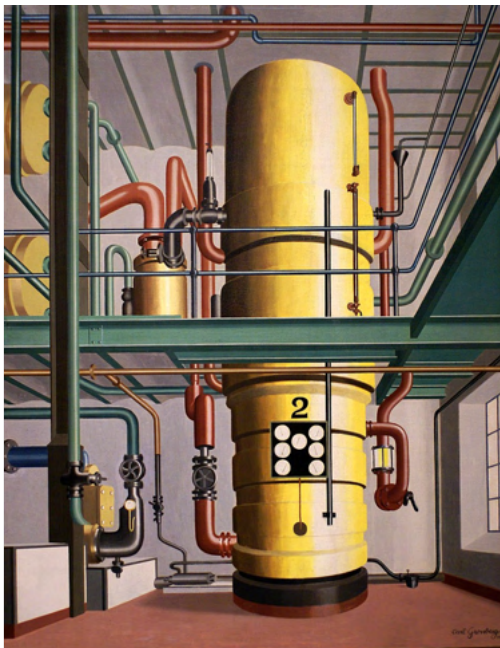


FIG. 17 Carl Grossberg, *Der gelbe Kessel*, 1933.



FIG. 18 Carl Grossberg, *Weiße Röhren* (*Harburger Ölwerke*), 1933

¹⁰⁹ Von der Heydt Museum Wuppertal, “Der gelbe Kessel”, accessed 19 September, 2023. <https://sammlung.von-der-heydt-museum.de/Details/Index/3034#:~:text=Grossberg%20stellt%20ihn%20wie%20ein,Sinn%20seiner%20Existenz%2C%20bleiben%20r%C3%A4tselhaft.>

¹¹⁰ Susanne Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen* (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 19.

NEU SACHLICH PHOTOGRAPHY AS A RESPONSE TO PICTORIALISM

In the same years the stylistic characteristic of letting the real world and things themselves speak is not only found in painting, but also in photography. Before analyzing the characteristics of the New Objectivity in this domain, it is however necessary to illustrate the context of the preceding epoch and its prevalent photographic tendencies, in contrast to which it developed. Towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, most photographers were in fact fundamentally concerned with approximating painting as closely as possible or even imitating it perfectly, with the aim to affirm photography as a form of art. This



FIG. 19 James Craig Annan, *The Riva Schiavoni, Venice*, 1984.

widespread photographic style, known in Germany as *Piktorialismus* (Pictorialism), had its heyday from 1890 to the First World War, reaching its peak around 1900 (**FIG. 19**). This period in photographic history is argued to have marked the peak of subjectivity, as it advocated for not only mechanical reproduction but also for alignment with the human eye.¹¹¹

Quoting Peter C. Bunnell:

Indeed, expression, not depiction, is the key concept in understanding the substance and meaning of pictorial photographs. Photography as expression was understood to be a reflection of personal values of conduct and experience, based on the notion of aesthetic significance and tradition.¹¹²

This resulted in the development and use of singular technical means both optically and in the final print.¹¹³ On one hand the simplest method was to deliberately blur the

¹¹¹ Alessandra Mauro, Denis Curti and Roberto Koch eds., *Dizionario di Fotografia* (Milano: Rizzoli-Contrasto, 2001), 577.

¹¹² Peter C. Bunnell, "Pictorial Photography", *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 51, no. 2 (1992): 11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3774688>.

¹¹³ Mauro, Curti and Koch, *Dizionario di Fotografia*, 577.

camera lens. The use of special filters or coated lenses provided the soft focus that photographers sought. The use of glass plates as lens attachments was also not uncommon. These were clouded in their clarity with the help of vaseline in order to achieve the desired painterly effects¹¹⁴. On the other hand, such manipulations involved the use of pigment, gum, oil, bromine oil or platinum prints, which contributed to eliminating halftones. As illustrated by Annika Baacke, in gum prints, for example, gum arabic served as a colloid; in pigment or charcoal prints, a gelatine layer fulfilled the same function.¹¹⁵ Briefly, atmospheric perspective became the hallmark of the Pictorialist aesthetic. Furthermore, the convergence sought between photography and painting was evident in the choice of the subjects. Among their favorite themes, landscapes were particularly prominent. In their landscapes, light was generally diffused like mist, emphasizing the romantic aspects. Thanks to the interventions just briefly discussed, parts of the photograph were plunged into



FIG. 20 Edward Steichen, *Midnight Lake George*, 1904.

complete darkness. The viewer's gaze was thus directed toward the lighter tonal values of the outlines and evoking a mystical and dramatic atmosphere, such as that of Edward Steichen's *Midnight lake George* of 1904 (**FIG. 20**). As a consequence of this purported imitation of painting, these manipulations limited the intrinsic qualities of the photographic medium.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Annika Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation. Objektivität und Ästhetik, Kontinuität und Veränderung im Werk von Bernd und Hilla Becher, Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander und Karl Blossfeldt", (PhD Thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2013), 80.

¹¹⁵ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 80.

¹¹⁶ Mauro, Curti and Koch, *Dizionario di Fotografia*, 577.

THE BIRTH OF MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY: NEUE SEHEN AND NEUE SACHLICHKEIT

In the 1920s, the field of photography began to focus attention on a new way of looking at things, and to look at camera technology from a matter-of-fact and pure photography perspective. While this process occurred at a relatively slower pace in the rest of Europe, both Germany and the United States definitively rejected

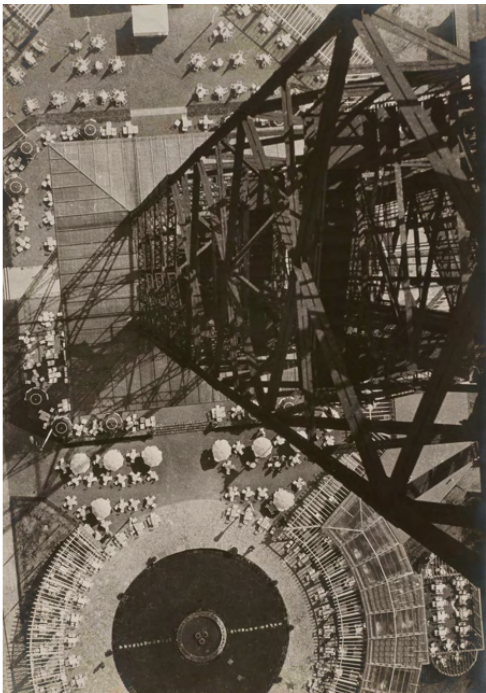


FIG. 21 Lazló Moholy-Nagy, *Berlin Radio Tower*, 1928.

pictorialism during the latter half of the 1920s. In Germany, this transformation began in the first half of the decade through the experiments of the *Neue Sehen* (New Vision) movement, represented notably by Lazló Moholy-Nagy, who at the time was a professor at the Bauhaus. Around 1925, coinciding with the release of Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei Fotografie Film*, the striking visual effects of New Vision started gaining attention. These effects included aerial and ground-level perspectives, extreme close-ups, x-rays, photograms, and photomontages. The primary goal was to expand and liberate human vision through a device facilitating and improving perception (**FIG. 21**).

In 1926, an exhibition in Frankfurt featured photographers of this “new way of seeing”, although they had not yet received full recognition, appearing in the amateur section. By 1929, a series of significant exhibitions marked the pinnacle of this movement's success, culminating in the *Film und Foto* exhibition (**FIG. 22**). Also known as *FiFo*, it was promoted by the deutsche Werkbund. Debuted in May in Stuttgart (**FIG. 23**), it was conceived as a traveling exhibition to assess the state of photographic and film art on the international stage. The exhibition comprised thirteen linearly arranged rooms, each coordinated by artists from different nations,

with Moholy-Nagy representing Germany. But the apotheosis of *Neue Sehen*



FIG. 22 Poster for *Film und Foto*, 1929.

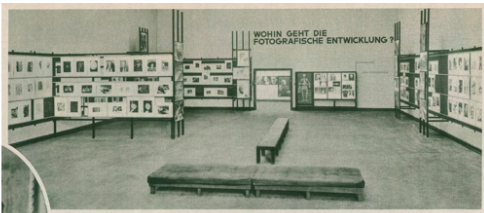


FIG. 23 *Film und Foto*, Stuttgart, 1929. Installation view of Room 1.

coincided with the beginning of its decline in favor of another trend that had developed in the meanwhile: the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Albert Renger-Patzsch, who was already considered its greatest representative, was known and appreciated by Moholy-Nagy himself, who in his book *Malerei Fotografie Film* had also listed him among the examples of good photography to follow.¹¹⁷ Clearly, his photographs were also included in the exhibition, yet the photographer complained of having been poorly represented.

Despite having many similar traits, and sharing a common rejection of pictorialism, the two movements had aspects that significantly differentiated them from each other. Above all, the *Neue Sehen* considered photography as an additional tool to the human eye, while the *Neue Sachlichkeit* on the contrary set out to reproduce the real world without any artistic aim and in the most objective way possible. So the photographic lens had to get as close as possible to what the human eye saw. In the 1927 article titled “Ziele” (Aims) published in *Das Deutsche Lichtbild*, Renger-Patzsch argued:

Die Photographie hat ihre *eigene* Technik und ihre *eigenen* Mittel. Mit diesen Mitteln Effekte erzielen zu wollen, wie sie der Malerei gegeben sind, bringt den

¹¹⁷ Florian Castiglione, “L’architettura nel contesto urbano e paesaggistico attraverso lo strumento fotografico tra gli anni ‘30 e ‘50. I casi studio di: Albert Renger-Patzsch e Roberto Pane” (PhD Thesis, Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II: 2016): 30-31.

Photographen in Konflikt mit der Wahrhaftigkeit und Eindeutigkeit seiner Mittel, seines Materials, seiner Technik. Und es könnten allenfalls rein äußerliche Ähnlichkeiten mit Werken der bildende Kunst erzielt werden. Das Geheimnis einer guten Photographie, die künstlerische Qualitäten wie ein Werk der bildende Kunst besitzen kann, beruht in ihrem Realismus.¹¹⁸

Then, in the essay “Die Freude am Gegenstand” (The Joy Before the Object) published in the January 1928 issue of *Das Kunstblatt*, he further stated: “Es wäre dringend notwendig, alte Ansichten zu revidieren und die Dinge aus einem neuen Blickpunkt zu betrachten. Die Freude am Gegenstand muß wachsen, und der Photograph sollte sich der glänzenden Materialwiedergabe seiner Technik voll bewusst werden.”¹¹⁹

These purposes are epitomized in his 1928 work *Die Welt ist schön*, which is still considered a kind of manifesto of the New Objectivity. The actual breakthrough of New Objectivity in the field of photography came precisely in the years 1928/1929. Two other volumes that were then considered expressions of this movement were in fact published in that period: 1928 saw also the publication of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst*, while the following year August Sander’s *Antlitz der Zeit* appeared. Although there was a differentiated range in the choice of subjects these works share similar formal characteristics. Such features include strict image composition, absolute sharpness, unsentimental view of everyday subjects, but also the preference for the static over the dynamic and - as already stressed out - the renunciation of interpretation and “artistic signature”. The French art historian Olivier Lugon argues that a text generically titled “Photography in America” published in 1926 by *Das Kunstblatt* encapsulates the essence of German New Objectivity itself (**FIG. 24**):

¹¹⁸ “Photography has its own technique and its own means. To try to achieve effects with these means, as they are given to painting, brings the photographer into conflict with the truthfulness and unambiguity of his means, his material, his technique. And at best, only external similarities with works of fine art can be achieved. The secret of a good photograph, which can have artistic qualities like a work of fine art, lies in its reality.” (My translation). Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Ziele”, in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, eds. Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), 91.

¹¹⁹ “It would be urgent to revise old perspectives and to look at things from a new point of view. The joy before the object must grow, and the photographer should become fully aware of the brilliant material reproduction of his technique.” (My translation). Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Die Freude am Gegenstand”. In *Die Freude am Gegenstand*, 107.

“Präzisionsarbeit. Exakte Sachdarstellung. Keine ‘malerische’ Stimmungsromantik. Unbedingtes Eingehen auf die Technik. Steigerung der technischen Möglichkeiten zu äußerster Leistungsfähigkeit. Klarer Bildaufbau. Betonung der plastischen Werte. Angespanntes Interesse für die Formenwelt der Alltagsumgebung. Durch Nahsicht wird den Dingen ein neuer Aspekt gegeben.”¹²⁰

The rise of the New Objectivity, in fact, seems initially to be supported by the spread of American *straight photography* and the rediscovery of the French photographer Eugène Atget. In fact, it can be said that these were all numerous variants of so-called “documentary photography”. In his book *Lo stile documentaire. D’August*

Sander à Walker Evans 1920-1945 (Documentary style. From August Sander to Walker Evans 1920-1945), Lugon ventures to clarify this discourse. Because of its blurred boundaries and a broad scope, within the sphere of this research it would not be possible to render the topic with due depth, and so for further study the direct consultation of the cited text is suggested.

According to Lugon, the first aspect - and perhaps the most important one - characterizing these images is their extreme



FIG. 24 *Photographie in Amerika*, “Das Kunstblatt”, 1926.

¹²⁰ “Precision work. Exact factual representation. No atmospheric pictorial romanticism. Unconditional acceptance of technique. Increase of the technical possibilities to the utmost efficiency. Clear picture structure. Emphasis on plastic values. Tense interest in the world of forms of the everyday environment. Close-up view gives things a new aspect.” (My translation). Olivier Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, trans. Caterina Grimaldi (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2008), 52.

formal simplicity, which can be seen as a sum of aesthetic choices. He proposes the concept of “clarity”¹²¹ as the key-term to the documentary project in its entirety. As the author recalls, in photography this term refers to a bundle of different characteristics, such as tonal clarity, precision of rendering, objectivity, and legibility, for which distinct analyses appear necessary. First of all, the tonal clarity of documentary works is striking in comparison to the systematically dark images of pictorialism and the shot tends to favor bright tones and even lighting. However, the search for brightness mainly concerns printing methods. The light, low-contrast paper of the Pictorialists is gradually replaced by stiffer papers, hitherto reserved for commercial photography, which enhance tonal differences. In some cases the change is accentuated by moving from matte to glossy paper. Lugon highlights this aspect offering the example of Sander. In fact when the photographer decided to incorporate certain 1910s portraits, still retaining elements of the Pictorialist aesthetic, into *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, he accomplished this through a redesigned and lightened printing process.¹²² The quest for formal clarity is then related to the extreme cleanliness of details. Although small-format machines began to come on the market, large-format devices, which allow for extreme formal sharpness, were still favored. The large-format camera - a sophisticated piece of equipment demanding substantial preparation, careful thought, and skillful handling - compelled photographers to envision the image before capturing it.¹²³ But sharpness is not indent only as “magic of matter” and “variety of surface grain”, but also as “texture of clues, sum of information to decipher”¹²⁴. According to Lugon, it is precisely the transition from a “tactile” to a “clinical” understanding of sharpness that determines the shift toward the “documentary style”. This shift results in the semantic variation from “Sachlichkeit” (objectivity) to “Exaktheit” (exactness), which - although slight - is not without significance. Lugon notes that the word “exactness”, strangely enough, is little used by proponents of the New Objectivity, who nevertheless do not

¹²¹ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 139.

¹²² Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 142.

¹²³ However it is worthy to point out that Sander was a professional from another generation with little interest in modernity from a technical point of view. Renger-Patzsch, despite being younger, embarked on his career a few years prior to the advent of smaller formats, and his first assignments required the use of large format, which from necessity would later become stylistic choice. Very interesting is instead the choice of large format by Bernd and Hilla Becher, who belong to a later generation.

¹²⁴ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 151.

cease to praise its “realism” and “precision of rendering”, as if to avoid pushing too hard the reference to a perfect, i.e., excessively mechanical, record. For example, in 1928, Hugo Sieker, a great supporter of Renger-Patzsch and his “absolute realism”, explicitly rejected this term as suitable, in his view, to describe scientific analysis and not the artistic order. On the contrary, Sander not only embraces it as the essential characteristic of a good photograph, but - although he is considered by critics to be one of the leading exponents of New Objectivity - he even makes it the definition of another real genre. Even in the magazine *a bis z. organ der provressiver künstler*, he advertised his own work through the slogan: “fotograf august sander. die exakte fotografie” (Photograph August Sander. The exact photography).¹²⁵ Lugon uses in fact the term “documentary style” to refer specifically to the work of Sander in Germany and Walker Evans in the United States, who independently and through different projects came to develop a similar form and theoretical framework.¹²⁶ Here, however, those aspects most suitable to bring out the overall characteristics of the New Objectivity more clearly and that can be applied more or less indiscriminately to Renger-Patzsch, Blossfeldt and Sander have been highlighted. Below, a more detailed examination of how these facets were expounded upon by the three authors, respectively in their works *Die Welt ist schön* (FIG. 25), *Antlitz der Zeit* (FIG. 26) and *Urformen der Kunst* will follow (FIG. 27).



FIG. 25 Cover of *Die Welt ist schön* (1928).



FIG. 26 Cover of *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929).

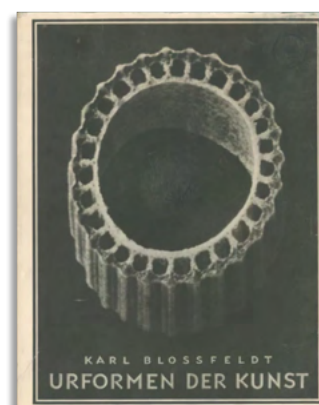


FIG. 27 Cover of *Urformen der Kunst* (1928).

¹²⁵ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 154.

¹²⁶ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 30.

2.2 Representatives: Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt

ALBERT RENGER-PATZSCH

Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966) was born in the city of Würzburg. He began to photograph at the age of fourteen, perhaps following his father, who was an amateur photographer. In 1919, after military service, he began his studies in chemistry at the University of Technology in Dresden. In 1922 was hired as director of the photographic archive of the Folkwang-Auriga Verlag in Hagen. Here he was responsible for collecting photographic documentation for publications such as *Kulturen der Erde, Material zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte aller Völker* (Cultures of the Earth, Material on the History of Culture and Art of all Populations). In some cases he also found himself supplementing these photographs by taking new ones himself, having to adopt a method that would greatly influence his own approach to photography.¹²⁷ In 1924, two volumes of *Die Welt der Pflanze* (The World of Plants) were published, featuring his photographs, though the authors remained unnamed. It wasn't until 1925 that his name was credited as the photographer in the book *Das Chorgestühl von Cappenberg* (The choir of Cappenberg), published by Auriga. However, his first significant publication, *Die Halligen* (The Halligen Islands) was not released until the end of 1927. Included in the series "Das Gesicht der Landschaft" (The Face of the Landscape), the book consist of photographs covering a wide range of subjects: landscapes and portraits, architectural motifs and everyday activities, the relationship between the authentic, deeply ingrained, traditional way of life of the inhabitants and the physical characteristics of this particular territory on the northern coast of Germany. Thus a portrayal which stood in stark contrast to the significant industrial transformations that were affecting most major urban centers in Germany during that era.

Then in 1928 he published his most famous book: *Die Welt ist Schön* (The World is beautiful). As Florian Castiglione points out, this photobook was the result of a long publishing issue and of the efforts of art historian Carl Georg Heise. In 1927, while serving as the director of the Museum of the History of Cultures and Arts in Lübeck,

¹²⁷ Megan R. Luke, "The Ghost and the Rock: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time", *Art History*, 46, (2023): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12696>.

Heise came across Renger-Patzsch's photographs and was instantly enthusiastic about them. He wasted no time and arranged the photographer's inaugural solo exhibition in December of that very year. Alongside this, Renger-Patzsch was commissioned to photograph the city of Lübeck, inaugurating a series of monographic books dedicated to cities¹²⁸. Nevertheless, Heise aspired to expand the photographer's recognition beyond the local scene, prompting him to reach out to his publisher acquaintance, Kurt Wolff, based in Munich. Once Wolff was convinced of Renger-Patzsch's work, Heise endeavored to persuade him to produce a series of photographic books in various languages. Each book was supposed to contain fifty photos and cover a different photographic genre. However, Wolff hesitated because it would have been economically risky to propose a relatively unknown author. Eventually, they agreed to create a single volume with one hundred photos of various genres. When it came to choosing the title, Heise organized a meeting in Lübeck with intellectuals he knew, and they decided to title the book *Die Welt ist Schön* (The World is Beautiful). From the beginning, Renger-Patzsch was dissatisfied with this title, as he thought it could lead to misunderstandings. He would have preferred the more neutral *Die Dinge* (Things), however he did not insist on changing the title, given the immense endeavors made by Heise for publication. In the book the photographs are all presented in the same size on the right-hand pages. They are accompanied by no caption, but preceded by an index listing the titles of the photos and an introduction by Heise himself. Heise's text is divided into eight sections, mirroring the units of the photographic plates: "Plants", "Animals and People", "Landscape", "Material", "Architecture", "Technology", "Colorful World" and "Symbol". It is an anthology of photographs taken since the beginning of his career, including images produced for *Die Welt der Pflanze*, *Die Halligen*, *Lübeck* and commercial commissions.

The book opens with close-ups of plants, such as the shape of a stem, reproductive parts of a flower, the arrangement of spines on a cactus, or branches. Despite belonging to the natural world their visual effect is quite mechanical, since these elements are completely decontextualized and presented in their absolute form. The affinities between the plant, animal, and human worlds are first highlighted and then

¹²⁸ The photobook *Lübeck* published in 1928 was followed by a monograph on Dresden in 1929 and one on Hamburg in 1930.

presented as a unified whole in the landscape. Initially, open spaces are shown, and then the camera's focus shifts to tiny details taken from the street, leading to the portrayal of human-made products, whether they were everyday objects, or architectural structures. From the city, the perspective shifts again towards new industrial areas. Many pictures are in fact devoted to industrial structures such as levers, pylons, electrical cables, dams, blast furnaces, cranes, and water pumps. In the final pages tree trunks, a wooden Pietà, and a massive blast furnace are displayed, along with an array of spatulas followed by a vaulted ceiling. In the very last pages two clasped hands are represented.

The book images share a common focus on details and tight framing, shaping a worldview that connects nature to technology, the sacred to the profane, and history to modernity. Renger-Patzsch's meticulous composition and lighting reveal indeed

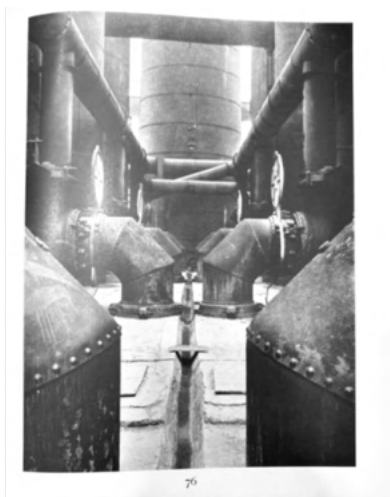


FIG. 28 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Winderhitzer im Hochofenwerk Herrenwyk*, plate 76 from *Die Welt ist schön*.



FIG. 29 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Kernstück einer*, plate 99 from *Die Welt ist schön*.

striking aspects of various subjects, such as in the case of the *Blast furnace* (**FIG. 28**) and the *Agave plant* (**FIG. 29**) respectively at page 76 and 99 of the book, which are portrayed from the same low perspective. Then, the seriality and

modularity characterizing for example the picture *Head of a serpent* (**FIG. 30**) are to be found in the majority of the pictures of the photobook, as for example in *Shoes* (**FIG. 31**). In this way a visual - even if “false” (as Matthew Simms highlights) - reconciliation between nature and technology is induced.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Matthew Simms, “Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön*”, *History of Photography*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1997): 200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1997.10443829>.



FIG. 30 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Natterkopf*, plate 27 from *Die Welt ist schön*.



FIG. 31 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Musterzimmer im Fagus-Werk Benscheidt in Alfeld. Schuhleisten- und Stanzmesser Fabrik*, plate 50 from *Die Welt ist schön*.

Regarding the reception of the book, the first comments were positive. The most influential one was by the writer Thomas Mann and even the journalist Kurt Tucholsky, who later criticized it, spent himself in its favor:

Dieser herrliche Fotografienband zeigt uns aber noch mehr als die Kunst eines Körpers. Er zeigt unsre Zeit. [...] Einbezogen ist die Technik in die Natur – Eisengerüste sind wie Wälder, Schornsteine wie Felsen; Brücken wie Gewachsenes. Dogmenlos ist diese Kunst, scheinbar ganz und gar ohne Voraussetzungen, gut und böse gilt hier nicht – so sieht ein Gott die Welt. Und so ist sie schön.¹³⁰

However, as Carl Gelderloos says, his “encyclopedic inclusiveness, isolating disparate objects from their contexts and uniting them all, without explicit commentary, as objects of aesthetic appreciation under the title ‘Die Welt ist schön’, earned Renger-Patzsch the accusation of *Verklärung*, or aesthetic transfiguration.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ “But this magnificent photobook shows us even more than the art of a body. It shows us our time. [...] The technique is integrated into nature - iron frameworks are like forests, chimneys like rocks; bridges seem to have grown. This art has no dogma, seemingly without preconditions, good and evil do not apply here - this is how a god sees the world. And so it is beautiful.” (My translation).

Peter Panter, “Das schönste Geschenk”, *Die Weltbühne*, 18 December, 1928. <https://www.textlog.de/tucholsky/kritiken-rezensionen/das-schoenste-geschenk>.

¹³¹ Gelderloos, “Simply Reproducing Reality—: Brecht, Benjamin, and Renger-Patzsch on Photography”, 549.

AUGUST SANDER

August Sander (1876-1964) was born in Herdorf, a small town in the Siegerland region, where he grew up in a family of miners. At a young age he began to explore the medium of photography as autodidact and with the support of an uncle, he was able to fulfill his wish for a camera and a laboratory. From then on spent most of his free time taking photographs, the subjects of which were mostly family members and acquaintances among the villagers. During his military service in Trier, which he began in 1896, Sander worked alongside a professional photographer. From there he subsequently traveled for over a year to expand his knowledge of photographic practice in various metropolitan studios. In 1902 he opened his own studio in the Austrian city of Linz. There he worked as a professional portrait photographer, whose style still reflected the pictorialist tradition of the turn of the century. In 1909 he moved again and opened a new atelier in Cologne. Finding himself short of a clientele among the bourgeoisie, he decided to offer his services to the peasant families of Westerwald. As Lugon points out, “this social enlargement is accompanied by a formal enlargement.”¹³² In fact, Sander distanced himself completely from the process of art photography abandoning image-altering devices such as bichromated rubbers, as well as the simulation of domestic naturalness dear to bourgeois photography. He moved towards a more “conventional” form of portrait where the subjects, all portrayed frontally, appear blatantly posed and almost rigid, dealing primarily with the documentary function of the medium.¹³³ His move to Cologne exposed him to the ideas of the Cologne Progressives, a group of artists and intellectuals around Heinrich Hoerle and Franz Wihlelm Steinwert exploring new forms of visual representation. In Wieland Schmeid’s words, it was an artists collective “endeavored to unite Constructivism and Objectivity, geometry and the object, the universal and the individual, avantgarde conventions and political commitment, and constituted the position in New Objectivity which was most seminal for the future, a movement brought to a sudden end by the Nazi’s seizure of

¹³² Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 72.

¹³³ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 72.

power.”¹³⁴ These experiences greatly impacted Sander’s artistic philosophy, encouraging him to view photography as a means to comprehend the complex layers of society.

While accumulating images, he also drew up long, ordered lists divided into groups, working “in the manner of an archivist”, as Lugon puts it.¹³⁵ By 1925, his concept of photography had gained clear contours and he was increasingly concerned with systematizing his work. As reported by Baacke, in the same year, in a letter to the photo chemist and historian Professor Dr. Erich Stenger he illustrates his intentions and plans:

Was ich Ihnen im folgenden kurz umreiße, enthält in groben Zügen die Idee, die die Arbeit verkörpert. – Mit Hilfe der reinen Photographie ist es uns möglich, Bildnisse zu schaffen, die die Betreffenden unbedingt wahrheitsgetreu und in ihrer ganzen Psychologie wiedergeben. Von diesem Grundsatz ging ich aus, nachdem ich mir sagte, daß wenn wir wahre Bildnisse von Menschen schaffen können, wir damit einen Spiegel der Zeit schaffen, in der diese Menschen leben [...]. Um nun wirklich einen Querschnitt durch die heutige Zeit [...] zu bringen, habe ich diese Aufnahmen in Mappen zusammengestellt und beginne hierbei mit dem Bauer und ende bei den Vertretern der Geistesaristokratie. Dieser Entwicklungsgang wird eingefaßt durch ein dem genannten parallel laufendes Mappenwerk, welches die Entwicklung vom Dorfe bis zur modernsten Großstadt darstellt. – Dadurch, daß ich sowohl die einzelnen Schichten wie auch deren Umgebung durch absolute Photographie festlege, hoffe ich eine wahre Psychologie unserer Zeit und unseres Volkes zu geben.¹³⁶

Early on, Sander decided in fact on a differentiated arrangement in seven sections, comprising a total of forty five portfolios. He preceded the portfolios with the

¹³⁴ Susanne Lange, *Vergleichende Konzeptionen. August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd und Hilla Becher* (München, Paris, London: Schirmer/Mosel, 1997), 143.

¹³⁵ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 77.

¹³⁶ “What I briefly outline for you below contains in broad outline the idea that the work embodies. - With the help of pure photography, it is possible for us to create portraits that necessarily represent the subjects truthfully and in all their psychology. I started from this principle, having said to myself that if we can create true portraits of people, we thereby create a mirror of the time in which these people live [...]. In order to really bring a cross-section through the present time [...], I have arranged these photographs in folders and begin here with the peasant and end with the representatives of the intellectual aristocracy. This course of development is framed by a portfolio running parallel to the above-mentioned, which represents the development from the village to the most modern metropolis. - By defining the individual layers as well as their surroundings through absolute photography, I hope to give a true psychology of our time and our people.” (My translation). Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 99.

so-called “Stammappe”, devoted to the farmer as the archetype of human existence (FIG. 32). The following groups comprehended: “the Skilled Tradesman”, “the



FIG. 32 August Sander, *Bauernpaar - Zucht und Harmonie*, 1912.



FIG. 33 August Sander, *Konditor*, 1928.

Woman”, “Classes and Professions”, “the Artists”, “the City”, and finally “the Last People”. These individual groups are each divided once again into subgroups. In addition, Sander distinguished between private and professional spheres of life. The structure of the portfolio follows the idea that society consists of different professions.¹³⁷ Each depicted character is presented as an amalgamation of various elements, akin to the way words in a written text can be scrutinized, deciphered, and interpreted. First, it is the character’s pose and the conformation of his or her body that hold a range of information about the character’s account. The reserved or vain stiffness of the pose is perceived as the fairest and more objective way to render the psychology of the individual aware of being portrayed, as opposed to the perceived spontaneity that began to be stigmatized as fake.¹³⁸ Additionally, their clothing provides insights into their occupation or societal standing, as in the striking example of the pastry chef (FIG. 33). Furthermore, the individual is also influenced by their surroundings; hence, the setting in which the character is positioned plays a pivotal role. In fact, Sander’s photographic pursuits extend beyond the confines of his studio, as indicated

¹³⁷ Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 99-100.

¹³⁸ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 172-183.

by the neutral white backdrop in some photographs. Instead, he endeavors to capture the subject in a distinctive environment that aligns with a particular profession or social position, thereby contributing to the character's portrayal.¹³⁹ The fusion of the aforementioned elements - namely posture, gestures, clothing, context - condensed in each individual photograph, make Sander's portraits not only characteristic images of an individual, but also a valid sociological-typological documentation. It is precisely this latter aspect that will influence artists of later generations and arouse great interest in the photographic, exhibition, and publishing context of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴⁰

In 1929 sixty of his photos were published in *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of Our Time) by Kurt Wolff, editor of *Die Welt ist Schön*. Introduced by a preface by the novelist Alfred Döblin, this volume was conceived as an advertising medium to accompany the launch of the unabridged work. The publisher advertised the book as follow:

The author has not approached this immense self-imposed task - the like of which has never been attempted before on this scale - from an academic standpoint, nor with scientific aids, and has received advice neither from racial theorists nor from social researchers. He has approached his task as a photographer from his own immediate observations of human nature and human appearances, of the human environment, and with an infallible instinct for what is genuine and essential. And he has brought the task to completion with the fanaticism of a seeker after truth, and without prejudice either for or against any one party, tendency, class, or society.¹⁴¹

Initially, the book - that had come to light in the midst of the so-called *photo-inflation*¹⁴² - sold little. Despite many writers and intellectuals, including Walter Benjamin, sang its praises, Sander never saw this ambitious project of his

¹³⁹ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 150.

¹⁴⁰ Alessandra Nappo, "I nuovi documentaristi tedeschi: stile documentario e forme di sopravvivenza della fotografia della Neue Sachlichkeit nella Germania Ovest (1959-1980)" (PhD Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia: 2014), 139.

¹⁴¹ Publisher's advertisement for *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929), reprinted in August Sander, *Face of Our Time* (Schirmer/Mosel Verlag: Munich, 1994), as quoted in Andy Jones, "Reading August Sander's Archive", *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2000): 3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600459>.

¹⁴² The enthusiasm of the "photo-boom" of the late 1920s, which gave rise to a veritable explosion in output at all levels, was nevertheless short-lived. It had hardly reached its apogee when it was judged excessive, thus resulting in a "photo-inflation". See: Olivier Lugon, "'Photo-Inflation': Image Profusion in German Photography, 1925-1945", *History of Photography*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2009): 219-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087290802018942>.

published in full. Then, during the Third Reich he slowed down his production of portraits while he continued to be very active in landscape. Part of his work on the landscape was finally published in the form of a monograph series devoted to the regions of West Germany: *Deutsche Lande/Deutsche Menschen* (German Lands/German People), which was given a more nationalist connotation becoming *Deutsches Land/Deutsches Volk*, when he changed publisher in 1934.¹⁴³ That same year his son Erich, who was a member of the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany, was arrested for distributing anti-fascist leaflets, which his father himself had helped to print.¹⁴⁴ Two years later, in 1936, the negatives of *Antlitz der Zeit* were seized and



FIG. 34 August Sander, *Gelände um Heisterbach*, before 1934.



FIG. 35 August Sander, *Der Rhein bei Boppard, Osterspey*, 1938.

destroyed, and the authorities also obstructed other projects of the author. Including portraits of disabled, Sinti, Jews and communist militants, the book conflicted with the conception of man desired by the party's ideologues. The genre of landscape was instead less susceptible to ideological criticism, yet it wasn't merely a secondary pursuit. Despite observations of a stylistic shift between the time Sander focused on portraits and when he turned to depicting landscapes, Lugon argues that there wasn't actually a significant stylistic break between these two periods. In reality, landscape had been an essential component of his artistic repertoire since the 1920s.¹⁴⁵ Then Sander applied to the landscape the

¹⁴³ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 120.

¹⁴⁴ Rose-Carol Washton Long, "August Sander's Portraits of Persecuted Jews", *Tate Papers* no. 19 (Spring 2013). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/19/august-sanders-portraits-of-persecuted-jews>.

¹⁴⁵ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 120.

same approach he demonstrated in *Antlitz der Zeit*. His overall aim was to capture typical distinctive qualities within individual landscapes, emphasizing what characterizes them. Sander's photographs depict landscapes with meticulous and austere precision, revealing the unmistakable traces of human influence rather than portraying them as untouched, wild, or immaculate. These images should be thus regarded as *Kulturlandschaften* or cultural landscapes, where the intricate interplay between human actions and the natural environment is evident (**FIG. 34 and FIG. 35**).¹⁴⁶

KARL BLOSSFELDT

Karl Blossfeldt (1865 - 1932) was born in Schielo, a small village in the Harz Mountains in Sachsen-Anhalt. There, between 1881 and 1883, he began his career as sculptor, completing an apprenticeship at the art foundry of the ironworks in Mägdesprung. Then from 1884 to 1890 he studied at the Institute of the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin. His professor at the time, Moritz Meurer, was commissioned around 1890 to create a collection of teaching aids for the study of natural forms for the teaching institution. This was to follow the theory he had developed that the forms of nature could be transferred to artistic or architectural works. Due to his multifaceted skills in drawing, modeling, and photography, Blossfeldt was selected by Meurer, alongside five other partners, as assistant on the development of this collection of teaching material. Thus he traveled through Italy, Greece, and North Africa, to gather the most different plants from different environments. From 1892 to 1897, Blossfeldt also settled in Rome working side-by-side with his professor. As reported by Baacke, during his study visit he had the possibility to discover how ancient civilizations took inspiration directly from nature's forms, adapting the chosen shape to the respective purpose and the material used.¹⁴⁷ While working with Meurer, he dealt with a variety of conservation methods to preserve and represent samples of local flora. He experimented with immersion in

¹⁴⁶ Nappo, "I nuovi documentaristi tedeschi: stile documentario e forme di sopravvivenza della fotografia della Neue Sachlichkeit nella Germania Ovest (1959-1980)", 130.

¹⁴⁷ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 89.

alcohol, electroplating and plaster casts, but photography proved to be the most suitable practice.¹⁴⁸ Blossfeldt had in fact realized that modeled or dried plants were not particularly well suited to collecting models because of the enormous amount of space they required and their fragility. Detailed photographic images offered indeed a better solution, as they could reproduce both the fresh and the dried plant from any point of view. Another major advantage of photographs was that they could be magnified, making plant's details much easier to perceive. Yet, this experience became the starting point and basis for Karl Blossfeldt's later photographic work, However - as Lange points out - beside Mauer's influence, Blossfeldt's didactic-documentary approach should also be seen against the background of the well-known naturalists and natural philosophers of the 19th century, such as Ernst Haeckel. In 1866 Haeckel published his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (General morphology of organisms), followed in 1904 by *Kunstformen der Natur*

(Art Forms in Nature) (FIG. 36). Initially released in various series of ten drawings between 1899 and 1904, this work consisted of 100 masterfully executed prints of microorganisms, animals, insects and more. It has become widely acclaimed for both its beauty and biological accuracy.¹⁴⁹ In his article "Die Natur als Künstlerin", where he discusses his belief that the emphasis in photography should be on the shape rather than the color of plants, even Renger-Patzsch praises Haeckel for having disclosed the art form of nature.¹⁵⁰ Then, as added by Baacke, as early as the 18th century, comparative morphology had



FIG. 36. Ernst Haeckel, *Ascidiae*, plate 85 from *Kunstformen der Natur*.

¹⁴⁸ Francesco Zanot, "Karl Blossfeldt", *la Fotografia. Una nuova visione del mondo*, ed. Walter Guadagnini, vol. 2 (Milano: Skira, 2012), 140.

¹⁴⁹ Lange, *Vergleichende Konzeptionen*. August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd und Hilla Becher, 142.

¹⁵⁰ Albert Renger-Patzsch, "Die Natur als Künstlerin", in *Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, eds. Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde and Jürgen Wilde (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), 87.

explored the variety of forms underlying the individual forms and type. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's scientific studies on his idea of the "Urpflanze", that is, the archetype of all plants, was also widely known and it can be assumed that Karl Blossfeldt was also familiar with these scientific writings, which were part of the educational canon of the 19th century.¹⁵¹

Similar to these authors' contributions, Blossfeldt's work lies at the intersection of art and science. However, art was not his main purpose, or rather, photography was only intended as a means towards the realization of the final art product, based on the imitation of nature. Indeed he began a systematic photographic documentation of plant forms as part of his teaching activity at the Royal Arts and Crafts Museum. After having settled in Italy as freelance sculptor and model-builder, in 1898 Blossfeldt actually came back to Berlin, where he was offered a lectureship for a special modeling class. This position matched precisely with his main area of work, as the newly established subject of this class was "modeling from living plants".¹⁵² He did not limit himself to a particular plant species, but constantly sought to expand his repertoire. Whether it was around Berlin, in the mountains of the Harz, in



FIG. 37 Karl Blossfeldt, *Allium ostrovskianum* (enlarged 6X), 1928.

botanical gardens or on his travels, Blossfeldt was always looking for new species and forms.¹⁵³ It is important to stress out that he was not one of the landscape photographers who made forays into nature with his camera. Indeed he revisited the material collected during his numerous field trips only afterwards in his studio. Karl Blossfeldt realized his photographs with a self-made plate camera with interchangeable lenses of different focal lengths. He took the majority of his photographs at a scale of 1:1 or even larger. They were then further

¹⁵¹ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 93.

¹⁵² Lange, *Vergleichende Konzeptionen. August Sander, Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd und Hilla Becher*, 142.

¹⁵³ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 91.

magnified by 2 to 40 times in the copying process¹⁵⁴. In order to clearly reveal their forms, plants were photographed in soft daylight from a horizontal or vertical view against a neutral background. The objects, isolated from their natural context, stood in fact against large sheets of paper, selected in light or dark color depending on the motif (**FIG. 37**). Quoting Rajka Knipper of the Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur Cologne, Baacke refers that in order to bring and maintain the plants into position for the long shooting times, he fixed them with a kneadable mass, wooden staples and glass panes, impaled them on nails or tied them with strings (**FIG. 38**).¹⁵⁵ Karl Blossfeldt worked on the plants himself in order to highlight the



FIG. 38 Karl Blossfeldt, *Pasque Flower, Fastened on Modeling Clay*, 1926.

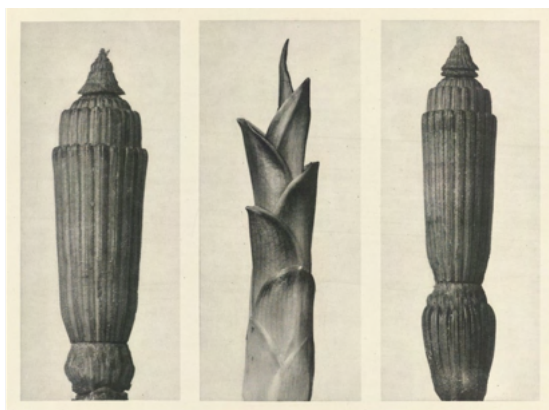


FIG. 39 Karl Blossfeldt, a) *Equisetum hiemale* 6x enlarged, b) *Hosta japonica* 2x enlarged c) *Equisetum hiemale* 6x enlarged.

art forms of nature. He usually trimmed flowers and branches to such an extent that only an even stem with a bud remained. He often enlarged the petals in order to photograph them in a state that they would not have eventually reached in nature until much later. Sometimes his interventions on plants were so extensive that today it is difficult to identify and classify preparations botanically. When enlarging the photographs, Blossfeldt selected a smaller section from the isolated motif and - as Baacke says - he thus moved the “Kunstform” (art form) of the plant further and further away from its original “Naturform” (natural form).¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, Blossfeldt also worked with comparison groups by means of which he arranged the

¹⁵⁴ Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 92.

¹⁵⁵ Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 91.

¹⁵⁶ Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 92.

motifs either as pairs or as triptychs (**FIG. 39**). In Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira's eyes "Blossfeldt appears here as a plant anatomist who composes tables in which details encounter each other through their ramifications."¹⁵⁷

Although Blossfeldt's initial motivation for documenting plants photographically stemmed from the mere desire to produce the best possible illustrative material for teaching his students, he developed the foundations of the method that led him to be considered one of the leading exponents of the New Objectivity. He was actually discovered by Karl Nierendorf, one of the leading art dealers in Germany, who had made his name by representing Otto Dix and that in 1926 hosted the first solo exhibition of Carl Grossberg in his gallery.¹⁵⁸ In 1928 Walter Benjamin authored a widely referenced critique of Blossfeldt's book publication, titled "Neues von Blumen" (News from Flowers), in which he expressed unreserved admiration for his work, which according to him would allow the viewers to change their perception of the world:

Urformen der Kunst, gewiß. Was kann das aber anderes bedeuten als Urformen der Natur? Formen also, die niemals ein bloßes Vorbild der Kunst, sondern von Beginn an als Urformen in allem Geschaffenen am Werke waren. [...] Wer diese Sammlung von Pflanzenphotos zustande brachte, kann mehr als Brot essen. Er hat in jener großen Überprüfung des Wahrnehmungsinventars, die unser Weltbild noch unabsehbar verändern wird, das Seine geleistet. [...] Ob wir das Wachsen einer Pflanze mit dem Zeitraffer beschleunigen oder ihre Gestalt in vierzigfacher Vergrößerung zeigen – in beiden Fällen zischt an Stelle des Daseins, von denen wir es am wenigsten dachten, ein Geysir neuer Bilderwelten auf.¹⁵⁹

The consecration of Blossfeldt's project took place as early as 1929 with a personal exhibition at the Bauhaus in Dessau and through the introduction of some of his photographs in the large exhibition *Film und Foto*, however, for a definitive

¹⁵⁷ Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira, "Towards a *Phanerology* of Images: Karl Blossfeldt and the Skin of the World", 124-125.

¹⁵⁸ Olaf Peters, "Carl Grossberg and New Objectivity", in *Carl Grossberg 1894-1940. Industry and Architecture*, (München: Galerie Michael Hasenclever, 2017).

¹⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Neues von Blumen", in: ders.: *Kritiken und Rezensionen. Gesammelte Schriften*, Band III, 1. Aufl., hrsg. von Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, Frankfurt am Main 1972, S. 152. In Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 95.

re-evaluation of his figure it would be necessary to wait until the 1950s when the original pedagogical intentions of his work would fade into the background.¹⁶⁰ Even if Blossfeldt may not have fundamentally changed the view of the world as auspicated from Benjamin, his close-up photographs of plants are still seen as a “pioneering act of the technical medium”¹⁶¹. Although the juxtaposition of *Urformen der Kunst* with the New Objectivity is external and unintentional, it is difficult to find a volume on the history of photography where he is not included among its leading figures. The enduring relevance and captivating allure of Karl Blossfeldt’s work are evident in the various reviews, publications, and exhibitions that continue to highlight his artistic significance. A noteworthy tribute to Blossfeldt’s legacy came from Joan Fontcuberta, who - sixty years after the publication of *Urformen der Kunst* - sweeps away the romantic ideals still present in Blossfeldt’s work. In 1985, the Catalan artist released *Herbarium*, a book containing a collection of 28 images depicting seemingly exotic plants. At first sight the viewer mistakes them for real, but later discovers their fictitious character. They are in fact a composition of inanimate objects. With his *Herbarium*, Fontcuberta’s aim was to depict a nature that



FIG. 40 Joan Fontcuberta, *Karchofa sardinae* (*Herbarium*), 1983.

has deteriorated and become contaminated, briefly an artificially manipulated nature. In an interview for *Artribune*, Fontcuberta explains that, like Blossfeldt, he never intended to create a botanical atlas. The photographer appropriates the scientific method and taxonomy to “generate confusion between reality and fiction”¹⁶². Just like taxonomic tradition, each plant is also associated with a double Latin name, such as *Braohypoda frustrata* or *Karchofa sardinae*, which is nothing more than a dry fish bone topped by an artichoke (**FIG. 40**). Yet, a closer

¹⁶⁰ Francesco Zanot, “Karl Blossfeldt”, 141.

¹⁶¹ Gert Mattenklott: „Einführung“, in: Blossfeldt, Karl: Photographien, München 1991, S. 7. In Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 95

¹⁶² Joan Fontcuberta, “Teoria e pratica della fotografia. Intervista con Joan Fontcuberta”, by Angela Madesani, *Artribune*, 11 June, 2019. <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/fotografia/2019/06/intervista-joan-fontcuberta/>.

inspection reveals his subversion of scientific nomenclature, which is substituted with fictitious names, that according to Andrea Soto and Rainer Guldin, are probably created according to different combination strategies¹⁶³. *Herbarium* was often presented in natural history museums disguising its artistic dimension. His project “questions scientific truth and the very nature of the documentary image”¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶³ Andrea Soto Calderon and Rainer Guldin, “„To document something which does not exist.“ Vilém Flusser and Joan Fontcuberta: A Collaboration”, *Flusser studies* 13 (2023): 15.

¹⁶⁴ Joan Fontcuberta, “Teoria e pratica della fotografia. Intervista con Joan Fontcuberta”, by Angela Madesani. <https://www.tribune.com/arti-visive/fotografia/2019/06/intervista-joan-fontcuberta/>.

2.3 Decline and recovery

DECLINE OVER THE 1930s AND 1950s

As mentioned earlier, in the late 1920s in Germany, American photography started to gain significant popularity, partly due to the *Fifo*. This coincided with a reevaluation of the work of the French photographer Atget, who, after his passing, became a subject of interest for both the United States and Germany. Initially, both of these photographic approaches appeared to support New Objectivity in opposition to the excesses of New Vision. However, as time passed, they began to challenge it. Lugon asserts that an overview of the primary phases of this critique can be discerned through the evolution of the annual journal *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* from 1927 to 1933. In the 1927 edition, the journal still advocated for a wide range of photographic expressions, endorsing diversity and featuring articles by both Renger Patzsch and Moholy-Nagy. However, in contrast, the 1928-29 edition took a clear stance in favor of *Sachlichkeit*, albeit rejecting its name. In the October 1929 release, within the 1930 issue, Kurt Tucholsky contributed to an initial critique after having previously praised Renger-Patzsch. At this point, he disapproved this style of photography, deeming it as “neither innovative nor objective”, and perceiving it primarily as “a form of pretentiousness, trendy capriciousness, and leisure activity”¹⁶⁵. This critical viewpoint remained relatively isolated until the 1931 issue, which presented the genre as outdated.

The controversy centered around formalism and the documentary value of images. Close-ups, promising to reveal the “pure essence” of the objects, gradually lost their credibility and they were soon regarded as a tool for creating arbitrary and decorative cuts. It became increasingly clear that the perceived order and rhythm within these images were, in fact, artificially constructed through careful framing. This raised doubts about the cognitive value of such images, as they appeared to offer objectivity

¹⁶⁵ “Die Karikatur dieses Neuen heißt »neue Sachlichkeit« – ein Ding, das insofern keinen ganz richtigen Namen trägt, als es weder neu noch sachlich ist. In ihm ist bei seinen ehrlichen Vertretern jenes »Indianerstaunen über die Zivilisation«, wie Karl Kraus das genannt hat; in ihren unechten Vertretern viel Koketterie, Modelaune, Spielerei – und in allen die Ziellosigkeit dieser Epoche, die nicht mehr ganz mechanistisch ist und noch nicht wieder fromm. Sie parodiert beides.” Peter Panter, “Neues Licht”, *Die Weltbühne*, 27 August, 1929.

and pure beauty but were essentially an escape from reality.¹⁶⁶ From the chorus of multiplying negative comments even the voice of Renger-Patzsch himself emerged. In 1929, he published a critical article in the *bauhaus* magazine against *FiFo*, where he also criticized the close-up shots but associated them with the impulses of the New Vision. From that moment onwards Renger-Patzsch would seek to distance himself, not only from *Die Welt ist schön*, the title of which caused many misunderstandings, but also from *Neue Sachlichkeit* itself. The photographer, first and foremost, rejects the label: “Da das deutsche Wort Sachlichkeit heute fast das Gegenteil bedeutet, muss ich ein Fremdwort nennen, um meine dienende Stellung gegenüber dem Motiv richtig zu kennzeichnen: Objektivität.”¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, he attributed the formalistic drift to his followers.

However, while around 1930 the debate initially focused on the formal aspects of the movement, over time the criticism shifted from aesthetic considerations to ideological accusations.¹⁶⁸ Considered as the photographic epitomization of modernism and, consequently of internationalism, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* became a prime target for magazines that supported National Socialist ideology. In parallel with *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art), which saw among the banned artists the already mentioned Otto Dix and Georg Gosz, it was categorized as *entartete Photo-Kunst* (degenerate photo art). Conversely, the term “documentary”, which had less direct association with a specific movement or school, remained used by those who still wanted to praise Renger-Patzsch.¹⁶⁹

The movement’s decline continued through the post-war years and into the 1950s. The dominant trends in photography shifted towards more subjective and experimental approaches, recalling rather the *Neue Sehen*. Thanks to Otto Steinert (1915-1978) the function of photography as a means of documenting, duplicating or recounting reality was set aside in favor of an artistic approach, which, as a result of

¹⁶⁶ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 58-59.

¹⁶⁷ “Since the German word Sachlichkeit means almost the opposite today, I have to use a foreign word to properly characterize my servant position toward the subject: objectivity.” (My translation). Albert Renger-Patzsch, “[Beitrag zu:] Meister der Kamera erzählen”, in *Das Freude am Gegenstand*, 151.

¹⁶⁸ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 58.

¹⁶⁹ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 119.

Nazi defamation and censorship, had ceased to be of interest to German photographers.¹⁷⁰

Despite training as a physician, after the war Steinert established himself as photographer, educator and curator. He played a pivotal role in the development of *subjektive Fotografie* (Subjective Photography) in the 1950s. His name is inextricably linked with the Folkwangschule für Gestaltung in Essen, where since 1959 he served as a professor and head of the photography department until his death. This prestigious school soon became a prestigious hub for innovative photographic experimentation and creative exploration, leaving its mark on countless students. Unlike *Neue Sachlichkeit's* emphasis on objectivity and documentary representation, Steinert's approach encouraged photographers to embrace the subjective and emotional aspects of photography. Subjective photography puts overall emphasis on the process of human vision, by exploring the medium's expressive and artistic potential often through experimental and abstract techniques (FIG. 41 and FIG. 42).¹⁷¹



FIG. 41 Otto Steinert, *Ein-Fuß-Gänger*, ca. 1950.



FIG. 42 Otto Steinert, *Face of a Dancer*, 1952.

¹⁷⁰ Nappo, “I nuovi documentaristi tedeschi: stile documentario e forme di sopravvivenza della fotografia della Neue Sachlichkeit nella Germania Ovest (1959-1980)”, 28.

¹⁷¹ Matthew Biro, “From Analogue to Digital Photography: Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky”, *History of Photography*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2012.686242>.

RECOVERY OVER THE 1960s AND 1970s

During the 1960s and 1970s, there arose a growing recognition of the necessity to re-embrace reality in response to previous artistic experiences. Due to its extent, a comprehensive examination of this revival phenomenon could not be provided here, instead I recommend referring to Alessandra Nappo's doctoral thesis. The scholar delves into this subject by first meticulously examining the extensive and multifaceted reception of *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography in various journals, specialized publications, and exhibition platforms during that period. Secondly, she reconstructs a somewhat overlooked photographic trend that emerged during those years, which adopted the documentary style pioneered by the masters of Sachlich photography.¹⁷² When recalling that the scholar Martina Dobbe was prompted to ask the question "Neue Neusachlichkeit?", reflecting on the Bechers' work in her 2001 essay, Nappo adds that the same assumption could reasonably be extended to other photographers active in those same years.¹⁷³ However, for the purposes of this research the analysis will focus in particular on the pivotal role that Bernd and Hilla Becher played in reviving *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography as well as artists and educators. Referring to their very beginnings, during the early years in Dusseldorf Bernd started collecting photos of industrial plants, among which those of Renger-Patzsch. Even if he didn't really collect Sander, whose work Bernd managed to find at an antiquarium dealer, in an interview with Thomas Weaver, Hilla highlights the importance of his legacy.¹⁷⁴ In particular, she recalls that, when they started working with the publisher Lutz Schirmer from Schirmer/Mosel, Bernd actually convinced him to publish a book of Sander before their own one. So in 1975 *August Sander - Rheinlandschaften* was produced.¹⁷⁵ For what concerns their own work more specifically, critics have frequently drawn parallels between the Bechers and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, both in terms of themes and techniques. Not only do their photographs echo one of Renger-Patzsch's favorite subjects, often photographing the

¹⁷² Nappo, "I nuovi documentaristi tedeschi: stile documentario e forme di sopravvivenza della fotografia della Neue Sachlichkeit nella Germania Ovest (1959-1980)"

¹⁷³ Nappo, "I nuovi documentaristi tedeschi: stile documentario e forme di sopravvivenza della fotografia della Neue Sachlichkeit nella Germania Ovest (1959-1980)", 159.

¹⁷⁴ Hilla Becher and Thomas Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", *AA Files*, no. 66 (2013): 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23595436>.

¹⁷⁵ Becher and Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 28.

same industrial sites, but their work adhered to the principles of *Neue Sachlichkeit* because of the emphasis on clarity. Their approach went beyond merely representing the world as it is; instead, it aimed to emphasize that what one observes also reflects the inherent essence of the subject. Given this perspective, the decision to capture industrial landscapes through photography was a logical outcome, as machinery epitomizes the perfect alignment between external appearance and internal essence, leaving no room for symbolism or metaphor (**FIG. 43**).

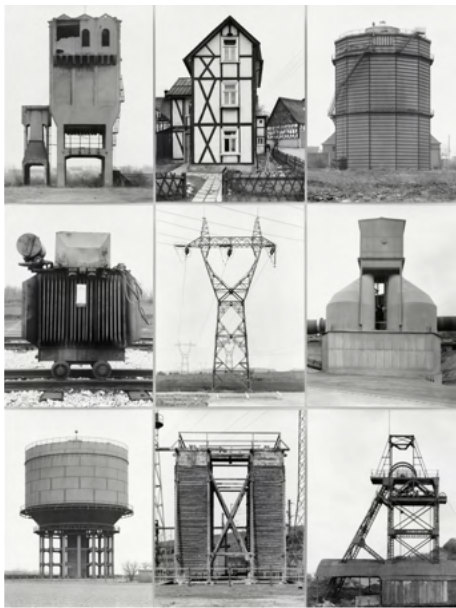


FIG. 43 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Comparative Juxtaposition, Nine Objects, Each with a Different Function*, 1961–72.

Furthermore, it is not to be underestimated that the Bechers were instrumental in reintroducing the principles of objectivity and documentation inherent in *Neue Sachlichkeit* to a new generation of photographers and artists. In fact the Bechers were not only prolific photographers but also dedicated educators, who produced their own legacy known as the “Becher School”, (although Hilla joked on the fact that she had never used this term.)¹⁷⁶ While still a student herself at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts from 1958 to 1961, Hilla was asked to establish the photography department, a discipline absent at the time. Then from 1976, in collaboration

with his wife, Bernd undertook his teaching activities at the Academy, which he would continue until 1996. The Düsseldorf School became renowned for its commitment to objective, large-format photography, playing a significant role in the resurgence of *Neue Sachlichkeit* principles. First of all, despite the diversity of photographic works that emerged, there was a common interest in the photographic archive. Then one can discern a notable inclination towards isolating the objects/subjects depicted so that the viewer is invited to analyze them in their mere anatomy. To facilitate this observation, the subject tends to be placed symmetrically with respect to the vertical or horizontal axis of the image to avoid perspective

¹⁷⁶ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 28.

distortions that would interfere with the objectivity of the work. The use of the large format accentuates the attempt to objectively show reality to the viewer, allowing the perception of the subtlest details that might escape the naked eye, thus enriching its significance. Finally this is further compounded by the almost total absence of human figures. Instead of featuring humans directly, the focus is on examining their behaviors, constructions and traces.

PHOTOGRAPHERS FROM THE “BECHER SCHOOL”

Although it is possible to trace a common thread linking the students of the Düsseldorf School to their teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher and to the various exponents of the New Objectivity, each author has succeeded in re-elaborating basic and common aspects and then turning them into original works, each having its own characterization in its own right. This new generation of photographers influenced by the Becher includes among others: Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky.

Candida Höfer, born in 1944 in Eberswalde, shares the documentary approach of the Becher School, marked by a keen and almost obsessive focus on detail. Her photographs beckon viewers to engage in profound contemplation, as if embarking on a potential journey into the depicted



FIG. 44 Candida Höfer, *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di S. Rocco Venezia I*, 2003.

spaces. These spaces encompass a wide array of locations, including museums, libraries, hotels, concert halls, palaces, and various other edifices. In her work, Höfer not only reveals what is readily visible but also unveils the subtle nuances concealed within these environments. Much like the Bechers, she frequently excludes human

figures from her compositions, allowing the settings themselves to take center stage (FIG. 44).¹⁷⁷

Born in 1954 in Geldern am Niederrhein, Thomas Struth is a versatile artist known for his diverse themes. His early work, until the 1980s, featured desolate urban scenes devoid of people, emphasizing strict central perspectives and grayscale tones (FIG. 45). In the mid-1980s, Struth added portraiture in both color and black-and-white to his repertoire, exploring the psychological and social dynamics of his subjects' gazes. Notable among his projects is the *Museum Photographs* series, capturing visitors absorbed in art and shedding light on human behavior under specific conditions (FIG. 46). Starting in 2000, Struth expanded his subjects to include natural landscapes, industrial facilities, and research centers, delving into visual structures affecting human observation mechanisms (FIG. 47).¹⁷⁸



FIG. 45 Thomas Struth, *Wagnerstrasse*, Düsseldorf, 1979.



FIG. 46 Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago II*, Chicago, 1990.



FIG. 47 Thomas Struth, *Tokamak Asdex Upgrade Interior 2*, Max Planck IPP, Garching, 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Stefan Gronert, *La Scuola di Dusseldorf: fotografia contemporanea tedesca*, trans. Cinzia Sinigaglia (Milano: Johan & Levi, 2009), 25-28.

¹⁷⁸ Gronert, *La Scuola di Dusseldorf: fotografia contemporanea tedesca*, 34-40.

Thomas Ruff, born in 1958 in Zell am Harmersbach, studied at the Düsseldorf Academy under the guidance of Bernd and Hilla Becher from 1977 to 1985. Interestingly, from 1998 he took on the role of photography professor himself over a period of eight years. His early artistic endeavors, spanning from 1981 to 1985, revolved around a collection of approximately sixty half-length portraits of individuals aged 25 to 35. These portraits, initially captured in black and white and in a compact format, underwent a transformation as they evolved into color portraits and transitioned into a larger format, measuring 210x165 cm (FIG. 48). It is worth noting that his approach to portraiture deviates from exploring the psychology of the subject, as Struth's work does, for instance. Using even lighting and a large-format camera, the photographer shows every detail of the self-confident subject's face but without revealing any emotions. The primary goal was to create official-looking portraits of his generation resembling passport photos, but devoid of personal information, or feelings, making it impossible for viewers - nor police, whose controls were numerous in 1980s Germany - to discern anything beyond their appearance.¹⁷⁹



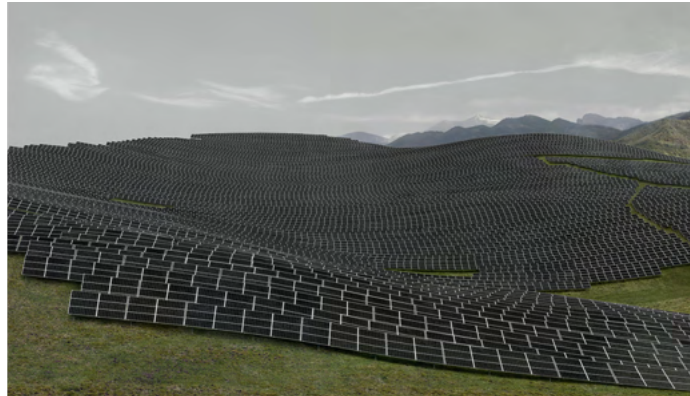
FIG. 48 Thomas Ruff, *Selected Portraits*, 1987-1998.

Andreas Gursky was born in Leipzig in 1955. Before studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf, Gursky actually studied Visual Communication as a student of Otto Steinert at the Folkwangschule in Essen. Gursky's initial approach to photography was thus to use it as a means to communicate his own way of seeing reality. This goal can be achieved both through the camera and through post-production, which later became essential to his work. A ubiquitous theme in Gursky's work is the complicated relationship between human beings and the built

¹⁷⁹ Gil Blank and Thomas Ruff, "Gil Blank and Thomas Ruff in Conversation", *Influence*, Issue 2 (2004): 50; Gronert, *La Scuola di Dusseldorf: fotografia contemporanea tedesca*, 45-50.

environment and social organizational structures. Individuals, whether viewers or part of the photograph, are swallowed up by the vastness of the anonymous mass of industrial and architectural

structures that surround them. Gursky, in a rigid and abstract composition, renders the fullness of every detail by alternating the documentary aspect, almost manic in detail, with the formal-pictorial aspect



given by the particular use of colors (FIG. 49)¹⁸⁰. The

FIG. 49. Andreas Gursky, *Les Mées*, 2016.

artist is best known for his photograph *Rhein II* (1999), where he eroded the specificity of the place, removing industrial buildings on the far side of the river (FIG. 50). This work is known for having been the most expensive picture on the art market till 2014, yet what I argue is most relevant to mention within this research is the revisitation that Gursky made twenty years after. Coming back to that place in 2018, after the extreme drought that had plagued Germany in that summer and reduced the river to an all-time low¹⁸¹, the artist felt compelled to realize a new picture. Although the dimensions, setting and composition of both are almost identical, *Rhein III* (2018-19) showcases a dry and yellowing riverside, laden with a threatening mood, which echoes the current climate crisis (FIG. 51).¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Gronert, *La Scuola di Dusseldorf: fotografia contemporanea tedesca*, 52-58.

¹⁸¹ See: Marc Wieland, Sandro Martinis, “Large-scale surface water change observed by Sentinel-2 during the 2018 drought in Germany”, *International Journal of Remote Sensing* 41 no. 12 (2020): 4742-4756. [10.1080/01431161.2020.1723817](https://doi.org/10.1080/01431161.2020.1723817); and Katharina Schuster, “Extremste Dürre seit 250 Jahren: Hitze-Sommer 2018 bis 2020 waren historisch”, *ZDFheute*, (26 May, 2022). <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/klima-duerre-sommer-deutschland-europa-100.html>.

¹⁸² Sprüth Magers, “Andreas Gursky September 12–November 14, 2020”, Sprüth Magers press release. <https://spruethmagers.com/exhibitions/andreas-gursky-berlin-2/>.

The Scholar Olga Smith also spoke of *Rhein III* in these terms during her seminar “The place and the planet: art and ecology” held at Querini Stampalia on April 28, 2023.



FIG. 50 Andreas Gursky, *Rhein II*, 1999



FIG. 51 Andreas Gursky, *Rhein III*, 2018

CHAPTER 3. Case studies: Albert Renger-Patzsch, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Beate Gütschow

3.1 Albert Renger-Patzsch

Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897 - 1966) is undoubtedly one of the most influential photographers associated with New Objectivity photography in Germany. Born in Würzburg, he began to photograph at the age of fourteen and before finishing his study in chemistry at the University of Technology in Dresden, was hired in 1922 as director of the photographic archive of the Folkwang-Auriga Verlag in Hagen. Here he was responsible for collecting photographic documentation for publications such



FIG. 52 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Songye mask (kifwebe)*, 1922.

as *Kulturen der Erde*, *Material zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte aller Völker* (**FIG. 52**). During this time, he became familiar with subjects represented against a neutral background, with focused attention to detail and diffused lighting: thus an experience greatly influencing his own approach to photography.¹⁸³ His first important publication was the volume *Die Halligen*, which was included in the series *Das Gesicht der Landschaft* (The face of the Landscape) in 1927. In January 1928 he published in the magazine *Das Kunstblatt* an essay with the programmatic title *Die Freude am Gegenstand* (The joy before the object), summarizing his vision of photography. Toward the end of the same year, after extensive editorial discussions, Renger-Patzsch released his most famous book, *Die Welt ist schön* (The World is Beautiful), which is considered as the manifesto of the New Objectivity in photography. This publication featured one hundred photographs capturing various subjects with clarity and meticulous attention to detail, which, after positive acclaim, also received critical reviews, which from an ecocritical point of view may be already interesting *per se*. In the first subchapter, starting precisely from the criticism

¹⁸³ Luke, “The Ghost and the Rock: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time”, 11.

raised by intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, and in the light of relevant environmental history, we will see why that of the German photographer can be considered “an aesthetic of purification”. The second subchapter delves instead into the works that the photographer realized without commission, in contrast to many of those which flew into *Die Welt ist schön* and other commissioned projects that followed its success. Examples such as *Sylt. Bild einer Insel* (1936) and *Ruhrgebiet Landschaften 1927-1935* (1982) illustrate a formal evolution in his photography, characterized by an expanded visual plane and recontextualization of subjects, which is accompanied by the awareness of a changing landscape and environment.

3.1.1 The world in fragments: *Die Welt ist schön*

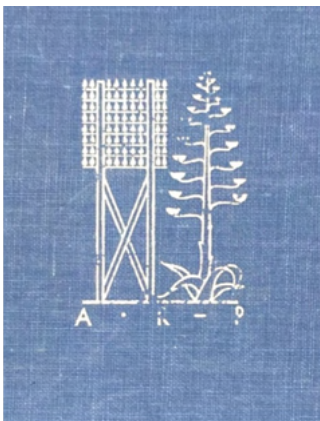


FIG. 53 Illustration by Alfred Malhau on the first edition’s cover of *Die Welt ist schön*.

In the photobook *Die Welt ist schön*, which can be considered the manifesto-volume of the New Objectivity in photography, Albert Renger-Patzsch approaches the material world in its totality. The illustration by Alfred Malhau on the first edition’s cover (**FIG. 53**), depicting a telegraph mast and an agave plant standing over the photographer’s initials A. R.-P.¹⁸⁴, is representative of the volume’s aesthetic program of collecting visual forms from different domains usually considered as distinct. While in the introduction Carl Georg Heise split the book into eight thematic sections, such as “Plants,” “Animals and People,” “Landscape,” “Material,” “Architecture,” “Technology,” “Colorful World,” and “Symbol”, the collection progresses through formal rhyming and visual analogy shifting thematically from one image to the next. These motives are however not equally represented, and according to several observers the most accomplished ones are indeed those concerning technology and plants, which are promptly alluded to in Malhau’s cover, epitomizing the overcoming

¹⁸⁴ Renger-Patzsch, “Die Technik, die Dingen und die Formen”, in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 309-310.

of the traditional nature-culture divide.¹⁸⁵ In an essay entitled “Photographie und Kunst” (Photography and Art) Renger-Patzsch prizes the possibilities given by photography precisely to fix evanescent moments in biological processes and reproduce technological dynamism¹⁸⁶, then in the programmatic text “Ziele” (Aims) he advocates a form of photographic realism that would be able to reproduce impressions (“Eindrücke”) and the “enchantment of the material” (“den Zauber des Materials”)¹⁸⁷. Renger-Patzsch’s aim is in fact to recreate a perceptual experience for the viewers, allowing them to engage with the essence (“das Wesentliche”) of the represented object. Yet, if it is the reduction of the object to its “pure essence” that determined the glory of the New Objectivity, in the early 1930s it became also one of the main arguments for critics.¹⁸⁸ As pointed out by Olivier Lugon, the extreme close-up, specifically intended as a tool for investigation and analysis, lost credibility as a means of creating arbitrary and decorative cuts. It became increasingly apparent that the perceived order and rhythm believed to be discovered in the world were actually a constructed artifice achieved through framing. The cognitive value of such pictures was thus completely challenged: not only these decorative fragments failed to provide any understanding of the world, but they also obscured it, denying access to its social and historical reality.¹⁸⁹ This observation matches particularly with industrial subjects and specifically with a notable image of *Die Welt ist schön* depicting a chimney flanked by six cylindrical towers (**FIG. 54**). Seen from below, the Herrenwyk blast furnace plant in Lubeck stands out against the bright background between the two rows of stoves. A sense of order is conveyed by the strict symmetry of the dark towers, converging towards the center of the picture. The representation of the smokestack is so grandiose and monumental, that it evokes the image of a cathedral, a comparison further supported when browsing just three pages more, where the vault of St. Catherine Church in Lubeck (**FIG. 55**) is photographed from the same ascendant perspective.

¹⁸⁵ Simms, “Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön*”, 199.

¹⁸⁶ Renger-Patzsch, “Photographie und Kunst”, in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 83.

¹⁸⁷ Renger-Patzsch, “Ziele”, in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 91.

¹⁸⁸ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 58.

¹⁸⁹ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 58.



FIG. 54 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Kaupen von unten gesehen. Hochofen. Werk Herrenwyk*, plate 91 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.



FIG. 55 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Gewölbe des Mittelschiffs der St. Katharinenkirche in Lübeck*, plate 94 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

Matthew Simms, in his article “Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön*”, highlights that this majestic and harmonic representation of the chimney clashes considerably with the entry for “chiminée d’usine” (smokestack) provided by Georges Bataille in his *Dictionnaire critique*, written between 1929 and 1930. Here Bataille reports in fact that “the most fear-inspiring architectural form” for his generation were “certain large smokestacks, true channels of communication between the ominously dull, threatening sky and the muddy, stinking earth surrounding the textile and dye factories.”¹⁹⁰ As well as describing the critical surrounding environmental situation omitted from Renger-Patzsch’s image, Bataille also illustrates his text with a photograph of a chimney during demolition (**FIG. 56**), which further increases the tension between these two opposite ways of representation. Simms legitimately wonders if the French intellectual had browsed a

¹⁹⁰ Georges Bataille, “Smokestack”, trans. Annette Michelson, *October 36* (Spring 1986), 15, as cited in Matthew Simms, “Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön*”, 201.

copy of *Die Welt ist schön* before writing his comment, as he continues as follows:

Today, when the truly wretched aesthete, at a loss for objects of admiration, has invented the contemptible ‘beauty’ of the factory, the dire filth of those enormous tentacles appears all the more revolting; the rain puddles at their feet, the empty lots, the black smoke half beaten down by the wind, the piles of slag and dross are the sole true attributes of those gods of a sewer Olympus.¹⁹¹



FIG. 56 Georges Bataille's entry for "Cheminée d'usine" *Documents*, n°6, November 1929.

Based on comments expressed by Albert-Renger Patzsch's contemporaries it becomes evident that his photographs were criticized for their apparent disregard of environmental reality of the time, which was deeply intertwined with social concerns they were strongly fostering. On this level the criticism dwells particularly on the tension arising between the industrial imagery and the title of the book *Die Welt ist schön* (The World is beautiful). "Ist die Welt nur schön?" is for example the title of an article written by Fritz Kuhr, which was published in the Bauhaus magazine in 1929 in response to the pleasing review

by Ernst Kállai. The German artist defined the title as "disgusting, or rather inexcusable tasteless"¹⁹²; and continuing, he wrote:

The perspective of a reading glass: everything lying outside the focal distance is hazy, inverted, or not there at all. I suggest to Mr. Renger-Patzsch that he have a look

¹⁹¹ Bataille, "Smokestack", 15; in Matthew Simms, "Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön*", 201.

¹⁹² Fritz Kuhr, "Is the world only beautiful?", *Bauhaus Photography*, trans. by Harvey L. Mendelsohn (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1982), 131.

at a hornet's nest or, indeed, at workers' or better still agricultural worker's houses. Perhaps fine little pictures could also be made of the "modern" punishment in our penitentiaries and prisons.¹⁹³

The same year the art critic Walther Petry wrote in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that such a pursuit of beauty of industrial technology gave rise to a form that was completely disconnected from its environmental and social context: "the filth surrounding its foundations and that troublesome attendant are omitted"¹⁹⁴. Yet, one of the most discussed criticism in the photography world remains certainly that contained in Walter Benjamin's famous *Little History of Photography*, where in 1931 he wrote:

It goes without saying that [this kind of] photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: the world is beautiful! *The World is Beautiful*- that is the title of the well-known picture book by Renger-Patzsch, in which we see New Objectivity photography at its peak... one of its political functions is to renew from within - that is, fashionably - the world as it is.¹⁹⁵

Quoting Brecht, Benjamin adds that "a simple 'reproduction of reality' is now less than ever able to say anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG shows almost nothing about these institutions."¹⁹⁶ According to them the photographic surface of such accumulated fragments was thus "helplessly mute"¹⁹⁷ and if ever it was able to convey any meaning it was a misleading one.

It goes without saying that together with the fragmentation and decontextualisation of his images, it was the title of Renger-Patzsch's bestseller that was easily targeted. Yet, this was precisely the title that he did not choose and which was rather the result of an editorial decision. Fearing from the outset of being misunderstood, the

¹⁹³ Fritz Kuhr, "Is the world only beautiful?", 131.

¹⁹⁴ "E si omettono il sudiciume che ne circonda le fondamenta e quell'addetto tanto fastidioso" (My translation). Walter Petry, "Film und Foto", *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 28 October 1929, as cited in Olivier Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 61.

¹⁹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography", as cited in Matthew Simms, "Just photography: Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön*", 201.

¹⁹⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozess. Ein soziologisches Experiment*, in *Werke. Grosse Kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe, Schriften I*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf, Werner Mittenzwei, and Klaus-Detlef Müller (Berlin: Aufbau, 1988), 469, as cited in Carl Gelderloos, "Simply Reproducing Reality—: Brecht, Benjamin, and Renger-Patzsch on Photography", 549.

¹⁹⁷ Gelderloos, "Simply Reproducing Reality—: Brecht, Benjamin, and Renger-Patzsch on Photography", 553.

photographer reiterated on numerous occasions that he preferred the more neutral *Die Dinge* (Things).¹⁹⁸

However, while it is true that Benjamin's critique was particularly harsh when compared to the judgment made on other protagonists of the New Objectivity, such as Karl Blossfeldt, and while it was considered by many to be a myopic analysis¹⁹⁹, it must be said that from an ecocritical perspective - even leaving aside the title - Renger-Patzsch's aesthetics can still be considered an aesthetic of "purification". With this term I want to recall expressly the expression "aesthetic of filtration"²⁰⁰ that Braddock uses to describe the realism of Thomas Eakins in *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1876-77). In his essay "Ecocritical Art History" the American art historian aims in fact to reread this painting by taking into account the condition of water pollution, and in particular of the Schuylkill River, of the city of Philadelphia as a result of population growth and the development of industry. As far as the condition of rivers is concerned, a symbolic case in the Ruhr Valley - which Renger-Patzsch extensively photographed - is that of the Emscher, which together with the Ruhr and Rhein flows through the region. Known as the "Kloake des Ruhrgebiets"²⁰¹, or the sewer of the Ruhr, as pointed out by historian Franz-Josef Brüggemeier:

The case of the Emscher was exceptional, and not just by German standards. While rivers were polluted in other countries, no other industrialized country possessed a situation where a seventy mile river and most of its tributaries were *legally* turned into sewage canals with an almost total destruction of biological life.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Renger-Patzsch, "[Beitrag zu:] Meister der Kamera erzählen" in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 150.

¹⁹⁹ See: Bernhard Mensch and Peter Pachnicke, eds., *Pathos der Sachlichkeit. Die Entdeckung der Schönheit der Industriekultur. - Meisterwerke der Fotografie von: Albert Renger-Patzsch, Karl Blossfeldt, August Sander, Chargesheimer, Bernd und Hilla Becher*, (Oberhausen: Pitt Druck und Verlag GmbH, 2001), 12.

²⁰⁰ Braddock, "Ecocritical Art History", 26.

²⁰¹ Oliver Scheytt and Nikolaj Beier, "BEGREIFEN, GESTALTEN, BEWEGEN – DIE KULTURHAUPTSTADT EUROPAS RUHR.2010", *Intervention Kultur*, Kristina Volke, ed., (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010): 42-57. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92311-6_3.

²⁰² Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990", *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1994), 39-40.

Interestingly, the troubled history of the river from pre-modern times to industrialisation and naturalization was recently illustrated through objects and photographs in the exhibition *The Emscher. Pictorial History of a River*, held from September 2022 to April 2023 in the Ruhr Museum in Essen²⁰³. The museum is located in the former coal washing plant of the Zollverein, which was extensively photographed by Renger-Patzsch himself and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001²⁰⁴. In her article “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry” the scholar Katerina Korola “investigates the tension between the clarity of Renger-Patzsch’s aesthetic and the physical reality of the industrial environment in which he worked”²⁰⁵, precisely focusing on photographs realized in 1932 by Renger Patzsch for the Zollverein colliery after the wake of success of *Die Welt ist schön*.



FIG. 57 Albert Renger- Patzsch, Zollverein Colliery, 1932.

Opened in 1847, the last shaft complex at the Zollverein colliery was built between 1928 and 1932 with the aim of raising production to 12,000 tons of coal per day.²⁰⁶ Designed by the architects Fritz Schupp and Martin Kremmer in the graphic language of the Bauhaus, upon opening in February 1932, the facility was the most advanced of its kind in the country. It stood as the peak of a process of modernisation and rationalization based on the principle of Fordism imported from America, i.e. assembly line production, that substantially transformed the region’s coal industry in the period between the two World Wars.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ See: Ruhr Museum, “The Emscher. Pictorial History of a River”, accessed 29 September 2023. <https://ruhrmuseum.de/en/exhibitions/archive/2023/the-emscher-pictorial-history-of-a-river>

²⁰⁴ See: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen”, accessed 29 September 2023. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/975/>.

²⁰⁵ Katerina Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, *Representations* 157, no. 1 (February 2022): 90. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.5.90>.

²⁰⁶ Society for Industrial Archeology, “IA in the Ruhr, Germany”, *Society for Industrial Archeology Newsletter* 30, n. 2 (Spring 2001): 2-4. <https://www.yumpu.com/s/GTvLoVz6HbJwxZZp>.

²⁰⁷ Zollverein, “Geschichte”, accessed 29 September 2023. <https://www.zollverein.de/ueber-zollverein/geschichte/>.

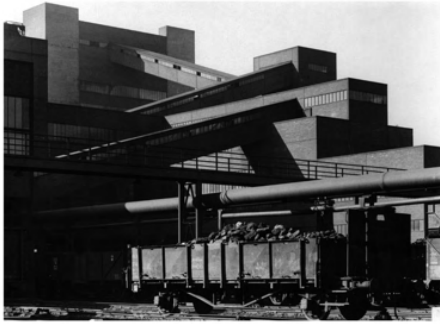


FIG. 58 Albert Renger-Patzsch, Zollverein Colliery, 1932.

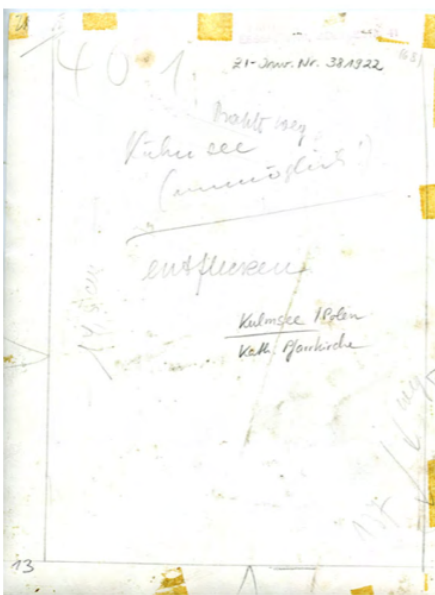


FIG. 59 Verso of a vintage print by Albert Renger-Patzsch, featuring the “entflecken” (remove flacks).



FIG. 60 Krupp Works West Quarter around 1910.

Capturing the structure of the industrial icon with a serene and precise depiction of form, Renger-Patzsch succeeds to convey this sense of confidence through the visual language of his photographs. The complex, whose lines and edges are clearly defined, is presented as a solid geometric mass against a uniform and bright background.

As observed by Korola “looking at these picture, one is left with the impression that nothing stands between the viewer’s eye and the represented structure”²⁰⁸, as they possess such a clarity that, despite the presence of a chimney (**FIG. 57**) and a coal-laden wagon (**FIG. 58**), it is hard to detect any dust in the air, which results indeed as “filtrated”. Only a faint hint of smoke can in fact be inferred from the subtle whiteness surrounding the chimney’s rim²⁰⁹. According to the scholar, Patzsch’s industrial photographs can be envisioned as “an attempt [...] to extract clarity from the smoke of industry”²¹⁰. This endeavor, materializing in sharp fragments, is envisioned indeed as the result of a struggle against the surrounding environment. Researching in the collection of the Photothek of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, Korola came across several Renger-Patzsch’s vintage prints, bearing the verb “entflecken” on the verso, indicating

²⁰⁸ Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 91-92.

²⁰⁹ Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 91.

²¹⁰ Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 94.

instructions to remove spots during printing²¹¹, demonstrating “pictorial intervention into a compromised environment”²¹² (FIG. 59). Considering that during the photographic process various potential imperfections may occur because of several factors, and even a tiny speck of dust could ruin a print, it is difficult to imagine a less welcoming environment for the aesthetic principles of New Objectivity than the Ruhr (FIG. 60).

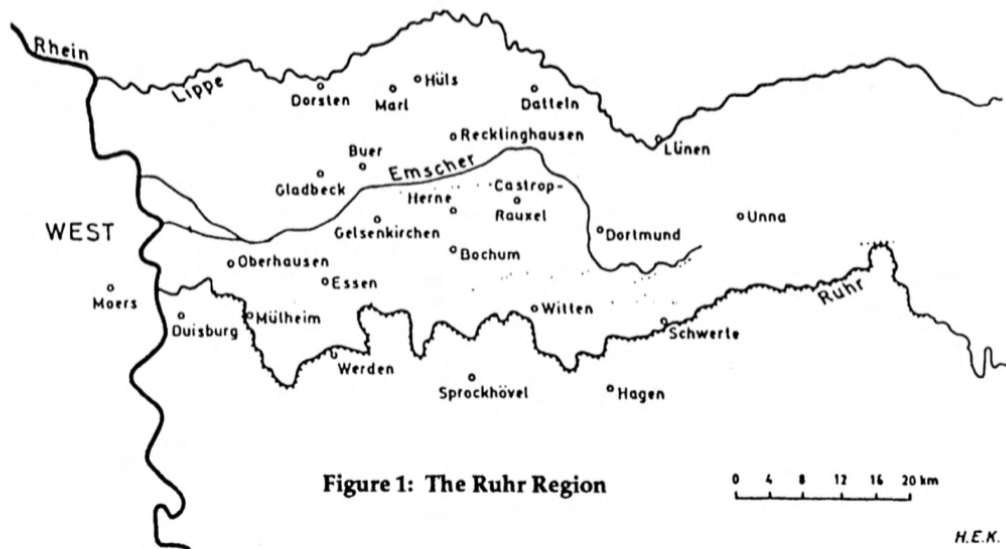


Figure 1: The Ruhr Region

FIG. 61 Map of the Ruhr Region.

The Ruhr Region (FIG. 61) is then a peculiar case study in terms of both the scale and the speed with which the process of industrialisation took place, mainly linked to the coal and steel industry. Indeed, in the space of half a century from 1850, it was transformed from an almost uninhabited valley into the most productive industrial zone in Europe, in the grip of galloping, unplanned industrialisation, which transformed the area “into a chaotic mixture of railway lines, canals, streets, workers’ colonies, buildings, factories, and mines”²¹³. As historian Franz-Josef Brüggemeier points out, “the environmental history of the Ruhr Basin makes clear that industrial development rather than the protection of nature received the highest priority in the

²¹¹ Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 103.

²¹² Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 109.

²¹³ Brüggemeier, “A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990”, 35.

industrializing German state for well over a century.”²¹⁴ Also called *Kohlenpott* (coal pot) and *Schwarzes Revier* (black territory), the Ruhr was well known across Germany for its overcast skies and standing fog, which nothing had to “envy” to notorious London fog, which has been standing present in British fiction from Charles Dickens to Virginia Woolf²¹⁵. The visual impact of this mixture of smoke, dust and soot quickly became the defining characteristic of a region that lacked distinctive natural landmarks. This is how in 1926 the Austro-Hungarian writer Joseph Roth (1894-1939) describes the atmospheric conditions in the Ruhr in his report “Der Rauch verbindet Städte”:

Hier ist der Rauch ein Himmel. Alle Städte verbindet er. Er wölbt sich in einer grauen Kuppel über dem Land, das ihn selbst geboren hat und fortwährend neu gebärt. [...] Erfüllt ist von ihm die ganze große Stadt, die alle Städte des Ruhrgebiets zusammen bilden. [...] Wozu hier Essen, da Duisburg, Hamborn, Oberhausen, Mülheim, Bottrop, Elberfeld, Barmen? Wozu so viele Namen, so viele Bürgermeister, so viele Magistratsbeamte für eine einzige Stadt? Zum Überfluß läuft noch in der Mitte eine Landesgrenze. Die Bewohner bilden sich ein, rechts Westfalen, links Rheinländer zu sein. Was aber sind sie? Bewohner des Rauchlands, der großen Rauchstadt, Gläubige des Rauchs, Arbeiter des Rauchs, Kinder des Rauchs. [...] Rauch über der Welt! Kein Himmel, keine Wolke! Regen, der aus Rauch kommt. Schwarzer Regen. Hundert Schornsteine, aufgestreckte Zeigefinger, Säulen des Rauchhimmels, Altäre des Gottes Rauch. Schienen auf der Erde, korrespondierende Drähte in der Luft. Eine einzige, grausame Stadt aus Stadthäufchen, aus Städtchengruppen. Dazwischen läuft eine eingebildete Landesgrenze. Aber darüber wölbt sich ein einheitlicher Himmel aus Rauch, Rauch, Rauch.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Brüggemeier, “A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990”, 35.

²¹⁵ See: Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*. University of Virginia Press, 2016. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19qgk6>.

²¹⁶ “Here the smoke is a sky. It connects all cities. It arches in a gray dome over the land that gave birth to it and continues to give birth to it anew. [...] It fills the whole great city, which all the cities of the Ruhr together form. [...] Why Essen here, Duisburg there, Hamborn, Oberhausen, Mülheim, Bottrop, Elberfeld, Barmen? Why so many names, so many mayors, so many magistrates for a single city? To make matters worse, a state border runs down the middle. The inhabitants imagine themselves to be Westphalians on the right and Rhinelanders on the left. But what are they? Inhabitants of the smoke country, the great smoke city, believers in smoke, workers in smoke, children in smoke [...] Smoke over the world! No sky, no clouds! Rain coming from smoke. Black rain. Hundred chimneys, index fingers lifted in the air, pillars of smoky sky, altars of god smoke. Rails on the earth, corresponding wires in the air. A single, cruel city made of small towns, groups of towns.

Yet, if about one hundred years ago human and natural environments appeared completely swallowed up by smoke, blending even with sun, wind and rain, in the last few decades the Ruhr area has struggled to turn from a gray to green metropolis²¹⁷ and, as illustrated in Andreas Rossmann's book, whose title echoes the same Roth, nowadays "the smoke no longer connects the cities"²¹⁸, or at least not like once. Anyway as underlined by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier the more harmful and noxious effects were produced by invisible gasses²¹⁹, whose cumulative effects are still tangible. Today the same existence of the notion of Anthropocene suggests that these effects encompass a temporal and spatial dimension much wider than the already detrimental consequences on the 19th century Ruhr's environmental condition. Paul J. Crutzen, who coined this term in 2002, argues in fact that the carbon dioxide emissions produced by the burning of fossil fuels triggered by the Industrial Revolution have started a process of rapid climate change.²²⁰ From a legal perspective, an illustrative example in this regard is offered by the climate lawsuit filed in 2015 energy company RWE (Rheinisch-Westfälisches Elektrizitätswerk) by the Peruvian farmer Saúl Luciano Lliuya with the support of the NGO Germanwatch. Founded in 1898 in Essen, RWE is still one of the biggest CO₂ emitters in Europe and according to the plaintiff it has significantly contributed to an increase in greenhouse gas concentration in the Earth's atmosphere, leading to a steady increase in surface temperatures and glacial melting, which menaces his house near the lake Palcacocha, in the Andean city of Huaraz.²²¹ Lliuya's case is the first climate lawsuit in Germany questioning the liability of big emitters for protective measure against climate change, and even if relying on legal actions by vulnerable individuals for

Between them runs an imaginary national border. But above it arches a uniform sky of smoke, smoke, smoke." (My translation). Joseph Roth, "Der Rauch verbindet Städte" in *Joseph Roth. Gesammelte Werke* (Null Papier Verlag, 2014), 41.

²¹⁷ Pia Eiringhaus, "Grüne Metropole Ruhr, ein Versöhnungsnarrativ gegenüber industriellem Raubbau und dessen Hinterlassenschaften?", *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13, no. 1 (2022): 14.

²¹⁸ Andreas Rossmann, *Der Rauch verbindet die Städte nicht mehr. Ruhrgebiet: Orte, Bauten, Szenen*, (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2012)

²¹⁹ Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990", 41.

²²⁰ Crutzen, "Geology of mankind", 23.

²²¹ See: The climate case - Saúl vs. RWE, accessed 30 September 2023. <https://rwe.climatecase.org/en/>; and Will Frank, Christoph Bals and Julia Grimm, "The Case of Huaraz: First Climate Lawsuit on Loss and Damage Against an Energy Company Before German Courts", in *Loss and Damage from Climate Change Concepts, Methods and Policy Options*, Melcher et al., eds., (Springer, 2018), 475-481. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72026-5_20.

climate-related losses is not a long-term solution, the court decision will have implications for global major emitters, necessitating them to communicate litigation risks to shareholders and set aside financial reserves.²²²

Finally, in the light of the detrimental impact that fossil fuels industry has and had on various levels, the installation displayed in 2011 in the entrance hall of the corporate headquarters of RWE AG by the artist and photographer Axel Braun²²³ may be read as an institutional criticism and a non-consolatorial apology of environmental



FIG. 62 Axel Braun's installation displayed in 2011 in the entrance hall of the corporate headquarters of RWE AG.

injustice (**FIG. 62**). It constitutes the first presentation of the artist's long-term project "Towards an understanding of Anthropocene Landscapes" and display a citation from an article in the social democrat newspaper *Vorwärts* from 1928, leaning towards the building of a dam in the Black Forest: "Die Technik muss grausam sein, wenn sie sich

durchsetzen will", namely "technology must be cruel in order to assert itself".

²²² Frank, Bals and Grimm, *Loss and Damage from Climate Change Concepts, Methods and Policy Options*, 481.

²²³ Axel Braun (Düsseldorf, 1983) is an artist and photographer based in Essen. In 2011-12 he conducted archive research in the Corporate Historic Archives of RWE AG as participant of an artist-in-residence programme of RWE foundation. Through his artistic practice based on a collection of case studies, he aims to explore the trajectory of humanity in an era shaped by human influence on the planet. While he delves into ecological concerns, he also focuses on the political, economic, social and cultural consequences stemming from these transformative processes. Recently he has been selected for a German Center for Venetian Studies scholarship for visual arts, which will take place in Venice in 2024. - See: artist website <https://axelbraun.org/curriculum-vitae>.

3.1.2 Landscape and documentation: *Sylt. Bild einer Insel* and *Ruhrgebiet Landschaften*.

For what concerns architecture photography, in order to safeguard his own independence, Renger-Patzsch often declined works offered by some clients and generally refused to be conditioned by architects in terms of the perspective to be taken.²²⁴ But it is nonetheless important to make a distinction between images made for commercial purposes, such as many of those that flowed into the book *Die Welt ist schön* (1928), and those made freely by the photographer. As examples can be considered *Ruhrgebiet Landschaften 1927-1935* (1982), where Ann und Jürgen Wilde collected shots that the photographer began to take when he occasionally traveled to the Ruhr for work reasons and which were intensified when he moved to Essen in 1928²²⁵, and *Sylt. Bild einer Insel* (1936), in the introduction to which he theorized the idea of “landscape as document”. These volumes are taken as the illustration of a formal evolution characterizing the work of the photographer after the publication of *Die Welt ist schön*. This formal enlargement has to be observed within the genre of landscape, which, suffering from bourgeois and pictorialist taste characterized by softness and atmospheric perspective, had been discarded until the 1920s by modernist photography. Yet in the 1930s it saw a general revival.²²⁶

It is worth mentioning that Renger-Patzsch’s first photobook, *Die Halligen*, as well as several shots included in *Die Welt ist schön* attested already a certain interest in the subject. But, the fact is rather that, if unified motifs such as dunes, waves or repeated tree trunks in a forest were still accepted by modernism, it was every open landscape to be rejected. Then from a formal point of view, the vastness of the landscape opposed the controlling ideal of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. In fact, while it is true that the *Neue Sachlichkeit* rejected retouching, this was enabled by the fact that this type of work was largely carried out before the shot was taken²²⁷. Focusing on

²²⁴ Giovanni Fanelli, *Storia delle fotografia di architettura*, (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2009), 181.

²²⁵ Before Renger-Patzsch passed away in 1966, these images were not included in any unified publication, for which we have to wait until the 1980s. However these photographs were already widespread and known at the time, since the photographer selected them in numerous exhibitions, often as unique subjects, and some of them were also republished in the periodical press. See: Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 65.

²²⁶ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 244.

²²⁷ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 229.

single objects offers indeed the assurance of geometric clarity and the advantage of working on manipulable elements, as their proportions allow them to be moved, oriented or illuminated. With landscape, as Renger-Patzsch writes, one is instead essentially “der Sklave aller Umstände”²²⁸, i.e. slave to circumstances. In a way, this statement supports the arguments presented in the previous sub-chapter “The world in fragments: *Die Welt ist schön*”. Indeed, it validates both the thesis of the “aesthetics of filtration” as well as that of Korola, who in the context of industrial photography speaks of “pictorial intervention into a compromised environment”²²⁹. In fact, the same criticism directed by Renger-Patzsch towards pictorialism and also towards Moholy-Nagy’s New Vision started to be moved also against the New Objectivity²³⁰. From 1929 onwards, however, Renger-Patzsch seems to have taken on board the criticism leveled at him by his contemporaries, embracing formal dispersion. As a matter of fact, if the first photographs of the Ruhr dating back to 1927 are essentially relatively narrow and graphically simple industrial and architectural shots, from then on the shots intensify and the form changes radically. The framing widens to include vast panoramas and nature and machinery, which remained his favorite themes afterwards, were no longer depicted in ethereal fragments, but embedded in the complexity of its context, interweaving within a landscape whose main characteristic was a composite and impure appearance ²³¹ **(FIG. 63 and FIG. 64):**

Here a remnant of a forest borders the land of a factory, there the land suddenly spreads out for a kilometer, while the edges of the precipice are still blooming, [...] the city itself is no longer an organic entity, it does not grow but proliferates, and even a slanting lamppost is a stopping point for the wandering eye in this desolate monotony, where rented buildings and shacks face each other on both sides of the street.²³²

²²⁸ Renger-Patzsch, “Versuch einer Einordnung der Fotografie”, in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 178.

²²⁹ Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, 109.

²³⁰ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 56.

²³¹ Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 65.

²³² “Qui un rimasuglio di bosco confina con il terreno di una fabbrica, lì la terra improvvisamente si allarga per un chilometro, mentre i bordi del precipizio sono ancora fioriti, [...] la città stessa non è più un’entità organica, non cresce bensì prolifera, e anche un lampione inclinato costituisce un punto d’arresto per l’occhio che erra in questa monotonia desolata, dove gli immobili in affitto e le baracche



FIG. 63 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Landschaft bei Essen und Zeche "Rosenblumendelle"*, 1928.



FIG. 64. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Schrebergärten zwischen Duisburg und Hamborn*, 1929.

It should come as no surprise that in the same years, August Sander also devoted himself to landscapes, which, together with portraits, were conceived from the outset as an imprescindible part of *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (People of the 20th Century). As pointed out by Lugon, not only the urban but also the natural environment is to be read as a network of traces revealing social and cultural structure of an era, in fact “not only do man-made things, architecture and factories, acquire a historical and social dimension, but nature itself, in this landscape riddled with cracks and fractures, reveals, through geology, a temporal depth and an economic dimension”²³³. The state of forests in the Ruhr region definitely validates Sander’s statement that “still and always it is man who imposes his mark on the landscape [...]. The result of his action is before our eyes today with the cultivated and well-finished forests that have replaced the primitive, wild forest.”²³⁴ In fact, when in 1924 a commission investigating industrial air pollution discovered that invisible acidic gasses containing sulfur dioxide were damaging vegetation, rather than tackling pollution directly, the commission proposed changing the environment

si fronteggiano sui due lati della strada.” (My translation). [Anon.], “Kamera und Wirklichkeit”. Articolo sui paesaggi della Ruhr di Renger-Patzsch, s.l., s.d. [1933-1936], as cited in Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 232.

²³³ “Non solo le cose prodotte dall’uomo, l’architettura e le fabbriche, acquisiscono una dimensione storica e sociale, ma la natura stessa, in questo paesaggio crivellato di falle e fratture, rivela, attraverso la geologia, uno spessore temporale e una dimensione economica.” (My translation). Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 65.

²³⁴ “Ancora e sempre è l’uomo a imporre il proprio segno sul paesaggio [...]. Il risultato della sua azione lo abbiamo oggi davanti agli occhi con i boschi coltivati e ben curati che si sono sostituiti alla foresta primitiva e selvaggia.” (My translation). August Sander, *Der deutsche Wald*, Kloeckner-Post, fuori collana n. 4, “Vom Werkstoff Holz”, 1936, 4, as cited in Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, 241.

to resist it. They concluded that sulfuric acid destroyed pine forests and hindered fruit growth, suggesting planting acid-resistant trees as the only solution. Since deciduous trees had proven more resilient than conifers, nurseries were established to grow and sell these resilient tree species at a discount.²³⁵ Alluding to the title of Franz-Josef Brüggemeier's article one may affirm that "nature was fit for industry". Thus, as a result of human intervention, the landscape and environment were, and are, being increasingly visually altered. In the introduction to *Sylt. Bild einer Insel* (FIG. 65) Renger-Patzsch expresses himself in the following terms on this subject:

Aufnahmen, die den Charakter einer Landschaft wesentlich enthüllen, sind für spätere Zeiten von großer Bedeutung, vermitteln sie uns doch ein klares Bild von dem, was war. Immer mehr zerstört der wachsende Verkehr die ursprüngliche Eigenart der Landschaft und wir selbst können und können es jeden Tag erleben, wie schöne alte Bauernhäuser verschwinden, Halligen Inseln und Inseln Festland werden. Es wäre falsch, diese Entwicklung zu verdammen, die notwendig bedingt ist durch das Anwachsen der Industrie und die Bildung von Großstädten. Doch müssen wir die Verpflichtung fühlen, unsern Nachkommen das Bild der Landschaft unserer Zeit zu übermitteln [...]. Vielleicht fällt bei Sylt diese Entwicklung besonderes stark ins Auge. [...] So sollten wie die Wiedergabe der "Landschaft als Dokument" wie eine Verpflichtung auffassen, die für uns mehr Reiz hat, als die Aufnahme pompöser Sonnenuntergänge, die für Mondscheinaufnahmen ausgegeben werden. Kurz ausgedrückt: nicht photographisches Glücksrittertum, sonder Dienst an einer Aufgabe.²³⁶

²³⁵ Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990", 40-42.

²³⁶ "Photographs that essentially reveal the character of a landscape are of great importance for later times, as they give us a clear picture of what was. More and more, the growing traffic is destroying the original character of the landscape and we ourselves can and do experience every day how beautiful old farmhouses disappear, Halligen islands and islets become mainland. It would be wrong to condemn this development, which is necessarily caused by the growth of industry and the formation of metropolises. But we must feel obliged to pass on to our descendants the image of the landscape of our time [...]. Perhaps this development is particularly noticeable on Sylt. [...] So we should regard the reproduction of the "landscape as a document" as an obligation that has more appeal for us than taking pompous sunsets that are spent on moonlight shots. In short: not photographic fortune-telling, but service to a task." (My translation). Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Sylt. Bild einer Insel*, München: F. Bruckmann Verlag, 1936.

Theorizing the concept of “landscape as document”, photography is envisioned as a tool for preserving the community’s collective memory, and documentation as a moral obligation. Though, considering the growth of industry and urbanization as inevitable steps towards the progress of society, Renger-Patzsch fatally beared environmental loss, which was still justified by development. At the time the only violence to the landscape that the photographer openly opposed was that wrought by art. In a text redacted in 1935 under the engaging title “Vergewaltigung der Landschaft verboten” (Violation of the landscape prohibited), the photographer once again finds room to criticize the pictorialist tradition, involving manipulation techniques to establish photography as an art form.

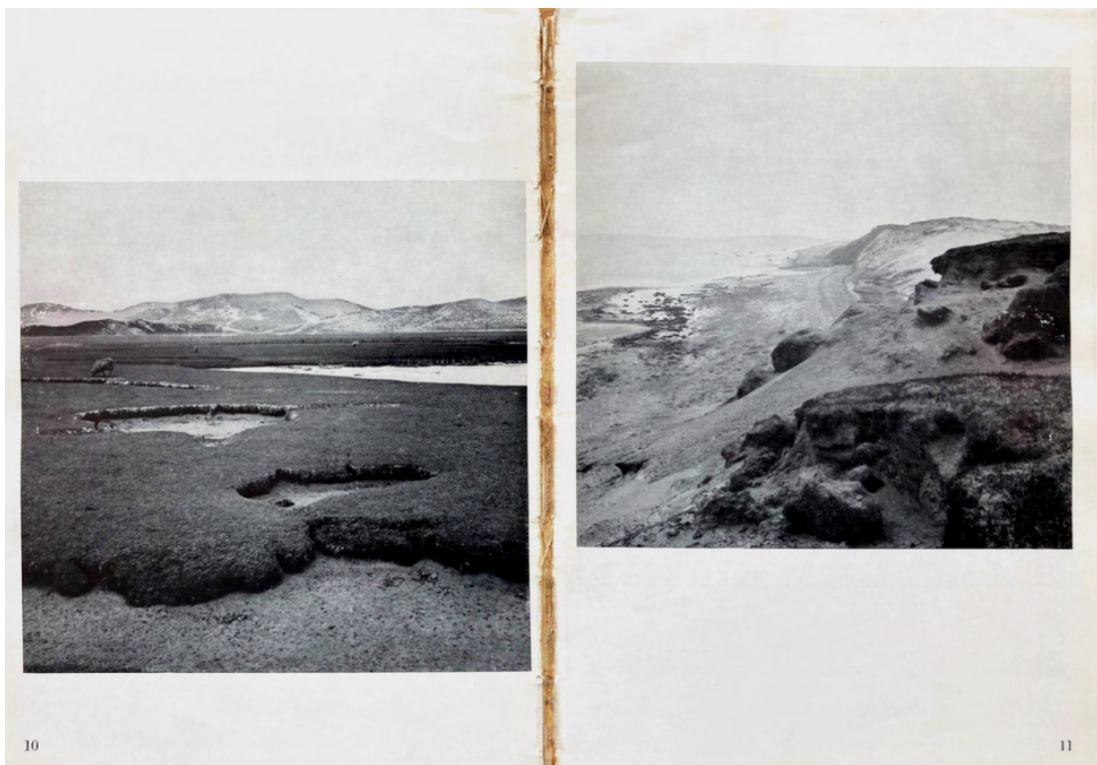


FIG. 65 Plates 10 and 11 from *Sylt. Bild einer Insel*, 1936.

However, in the 1950s, Renger-Patzsch’s faith in progress wanes and some of his writings demonstrate also the photographer’s active engagement in environmental conservation. He became in fact involved in local politics and voiced opposition to the construction of a factory on the banks of Möneseesee. Additionally, he fought against the felling of numerous avenue trees near his home in Wamel, where he

moved from Essen in 1944, year in which the major part of his archives in Folkwang Museum was destroyed by Allied bombing²³⁷. In a general text published in 1953 in the newspaper *die Gegenwart* with the title “Der Mensch - dem technischen hörig - zerstört seine eigene Wohnung” (Man - in bondage to technology - destroys his own dwelling) he denounces measures that will be taken in favour of a few and to the detriment of the community and the environment itself:

Den äußeren Anlass für diese Zeilen gab der aussichtslose Kampf einer grossen Reihe wundervoller alter Bäume gegen einen mit einer Motorsäge bewaffneten Trupp eines Strassenbauamtes in einem sehr bekannten Erholungsgebiet. [...] Wenn die Öffentlichkeit, d.h. Jeder Mensch, der noch keinen Rechenschieber, sondern ein Herz im Liebe hat und Augen im Kopfe, die noch im Baum die Schöpfung erkennen, aber nicht ausschliesslich ein Hindernis fuer Autofahrer oder eine Geldquelle, sich nichts aufs Aeusserste zur Wehr setzt, so wird die Union zwischen Strassenverkehrsamt, Strassenbuamt in Allianz mit bestimmten Teilen der Autoindustrie in wenigen Jahren aus den schönsten Landschaften Deutschlands mit den besten rationellen, unwiderleglichen Gründen, die all das Wohl der Staatsbuerger zur Deckung haben, eine Art von Wueste machen. Die “Natur” kann man dann nur noch im Kino sehen.²³⁸

After the Second World War, it seems that all remnants of trust in industrial and social progress, as well as in society itself, were left behind, and there was a shift - or perhaps an escape - towards the forest²³⁹. Nature became the central theme of his remaining years, and with funding from Ernst Boehringer, he traveled across Europe

²³⁷ Donald Burton Kuspit, *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Joy before the object* (New York: Aperture and The J.Paul Getty Museum, 1993), 6.

²³⁸ “The external occasion for these lines was the hopeless struggle of a large row of wonderful old trees against a squad of a road construction office armed with a chainsaw in a very well-known recreation area. [...] When the public, that is every person who does not yet have a slide rule but a heart in his love and eyes in his head that still recognise in the tree the creation, but not exclusively an obstacle for motorists or a source of money, does not put up a fight to the utmost, then the union between the road traffic authority, the road building authority in alliance with certain parts of the motor industry will in a few years make a kind of desert out of the most beautiful landscapes of Germany with the best rational, irrefutable reasons, which have all the welfare of the state citizens to cover them. ‘Nature’ can then only be seen in the cinema.” (My translation). Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Der Mensch - dem technischen hörig - zerstört seine eigene Wohnung” in *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Die Freude am Gegenstand. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, Bernd Stiegler, Ann Wilde, Jürgen Wilde, eds., 299.

²³⁹ Kuspit, *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Joy before the object*, 73.

in search of new landscapes. It is known that he would trek sixty to eighty kilometers to photograph a specific tree in the early morning light, and he would read books on geology and geography before photographing stones.²⁴⁰ His books *Bäume* (Trees, 1962) and *Gestein* (Stones, 1966)²⁴¹ are perhaps among the most imaginative, solitary, personal, and - according to Donald Kuspit - also his “least realistic”²⁴².

The trust once placed in technical progress and scientific achievements has overall long since faltered and the foundations on which Western societies felt solid for many years now seem precarious. The very use of the term Anthropocene symbolizes a profound crisis of civilization. Alongside the term Anthropocene, another concept appears relevant in connection with Renger-Patzsch photography, namely that of the Technosphere. Coined in 1968 by control engineer John H. Milsum,²⁴³ this term was then revived in 2014 by professor of geology and civil engineering Peter Haff, which defines the whole set of structures that humans have designed and built over time. Like the Biosphere, the Hydrosphere, the Lithosphere and the Atmosphere, the Technosphere is envisioned as a proper system encompassing all the materials we - as humans - use, have used and discarded on the planet. If we think that life (i.e. biosphere) dates back to 3.5 billion years ago, it can be assumed that these four former spheres - in a form or another - have been existing for most of our planet's 4.6-billion-year existence; this latter is instead linked to the appearance of the genus *homo*, who with his 200.000-years, is a very recent presence on the planet. Although at the beginning the weight of the *tecné* was not significant on planetary terms,

²⁴⁰ Kuspit, *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Joy before the object*, 6.

²⁴¹ For the sake of shortness it is not possible to go into this topic in depth within this study, but from an ecocritical point of view further considerations could be made about these works. In particular, according to Renger-Patzsch *Gestein* represented “a completely new type of book”, one that, “by encircling its theme, we show from poetic, scientific, and optical sides” (p. 66) as it includes a general introduction to geological science, in addition to Ernst Jünger's essay. For what concerns the genesis of the publication, Megan R. Luke argues that “Renger's photographs of stone are thereby suspended between Jünger's proleptic vision of a submerged civilization in the Eder valley, where soon ‘there would no longer be air to breathe’, and the scorched earth of chemical warfare in Southeast Asia, whose indelible pollution remains a time bomb for generations to come” (p. 3). As anticipated *Gestein* was in fact published by C.H. Boehringer Sohn, a pharmaceutical company that profited from forced labour during World War II and aligned with National Socialist policies, and which during this last partnership with Renger-Patzsch, entered into a secret agreement with Dow Chemical to increase dioxin production for Agent Orange used in Vietnam. See.: Luke, “The Ghost and the Rock: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time”, 5-8.

²⁴² Kuspit, *Albert Renger-Patzsch. Joy before the object*, 73.

²⁴³ Herbert Girardet, “Biosphere and Technosphere”, *The Ecologist*, Special Series: Megamorphosis, (28 November, 2022). <https://theecologist.org/2022/nov/28/biosphere-and-technosphere>.

nowadays - after the push of the industrial revolution and particularly of the Great Acceleration of the mid-20th century - it has exceeded the biosphere weight, reaching 30 trillion tons.²⁴⁴



FIG. 66 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Zeche "Victoria Mathias" in Essen*, 1929.



FIG. 67 Edward Burtinsky, *Oil Bunkering #4*, Niger Delta, Nigeria 2016.

The subject of the built environment, or Technosphere, was also the central theme of the IV Biennale of Photography of Industry and Work, which took place in Bologna from October to November 2019, and which, curated by Alessandro Zanot, was articulated in eleven monographic exhibitions.²⁴⁵ For the purpose of this study, the interest lies in the fact that Renger-Patzsch's Ruhr Landscapes were included as documentation of an unsuspected - maybe invented? - balance between the landscape and the most typical industrial installations of the 19th century²⁴⁶ (**FIG. 66**). The slant given to the FOTO/INDUSTRIA 2019 can be elsewhere deduced from the fact that it hosted also *Anthropocene*, which showcased the work of the canadian photographer Edward Burtinsky, together with Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, namely the director and photography director of his documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* (**FIG. 67**). The aim was to stimulate and disseminate reflection on the impact of mankind on the environment,

emphasizing the technosphere's significant inability to sustain itself, thus greatly affecting the global system. Echoing the words of the curator, the technosphere is reminiscent of dystopian narratives that depict a future where humanity realizes the

²⁴⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz, "The unbearable burden of the Technosphere", *The UNESCO courier*, vol. 2, (April-June, 2018): 15. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261903>.

²⁴⁵ Fondazione MAST, "FI2019", accessed 29 September 2023..

<https://www.fotoindustria.it/archivio/fi2019/>.

²⁴⁶ "Il primo documenta il rapporto tra il paesaggio e le più tipiche installazioni industriali dell'Ottocento, riscontrando (ovvero inventandosi letteralmente) tra loro un insospettabile equilibrio." Francesco Zanot, "Foto/Industria 2019. Vedere e costruire il mondo", 2019. https://www.mast.org/documents/41694/623884/3.+FOTOINDUSTRIA+2019_Testo+Francesco+Zanot.pdf/f13eae1-a94c-4a39-914e-e2377a4a8763.

magnitude of its remarkable creations, just as they jeopardize their own existence. The technosphere therefore presents us an open challenge, which in order to deal with surely needs new narratives.

Looking at German contemporary experiences in the field of visual culture, the Technosphere has been the theme of a research project conducted from 2015 to 2019 by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. The research was supported by an online publication entitled *Technosphere magazine*. Its 120 contributions, curated into seventeen thematic dossiers, include also Alex Braux's project *Towards an Understanding of Anthropocene Landscapes*²⁴⁷, where the Emscher River figures among the various case studies, which the artist has collected as examples of human-altered landscapes. As already mentioned, the Emscher River flows in Germany's Northern Ruhr area: once a clean stream, it was heavily polluted during the 19th century under the pressure of expanding urban areas and industrialization, because of the reversal of household and untreated industrial wastewater into its



FIG. 68 Axel Braux, *Oxbow of river Emscher*, Kaisergarten, Oberhausen, 2014.

waters. The severity of the 1904 Typhus epidemic brought to the foundation of the *Emschergenossenschaft*²⁴⁸ to attempt to solve the dramatic situation, whose solution was found in the full canalization and diking of the river, relocation of the estuary, and the establishment of hundreds of pumping stations, finally resulting in an open sewer for the entire industrial region. Since the decline of coal mining, a new ambitious technological endeavor has been initiated to separate the river and sewage water again by constructing a tunnel spanning seventy kilometers and reshaping

²⁴⁷ Axel Braux, "Towards an Understanding of Anthropocene Landscapes", *Technosphere Magazine*, April 15, 2017. <https://technosphere-magazine.hkw.de/p/Towards-an-Understanding-of-Anthropocene-Landscapes-5GzobWpWw9Dzf5K3WsWdcc>.

²⁴⁸ Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990", 38-39.

areas of the river landscape to achieve a more natural appeal. **(FIG. 68)** shows the only remaining branch of the original river that survived as a pond in the Kaisergarten in Oberhausen. Although now stagnant, it is the only remaining trace of this anthropogenic riverscape. It is a symbol in the heavily impacted landscape of the Ruhr, around which Renger-Patzsch is credited with inaugurating a photographic tradition almost a century ago .

3.2 Bernd and Hilla Becher

The life-long collaboration between Bernd and Hilla Becher gave birth to a work at the intersections between different genres, which contributed to revolutionizing the course of late 20th century photography.

Bernhard Becher (1931-2007), called Bernd, was born in Siegen, in an area of Northwest Germany rich in mines and steel plants. He studied drawing and painting in Stuttgart and then graphic and printing techniques in Düsseldorf, where he met Hilla Wobeser (1934-2015). Born in Potsdam, she had instead trained as a photographer and was already working as such when she started to attend the Art



FIG. 69 Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ensdorf Mine, Saarland, Germany, 1979.

Academy, where she was asked to help to set up a little department of photography.²⁴⁹ Their cooperation started in 1959, inaugurated by a first project on the loom houses built in the second half of the 19th century by immigrants employed in local factories in Siegerland. After that, their interest expanded to other categories of industrial installations, such as water towers, coal bunkers, winding towers, breakers (ore, coal, and stone), lime kilns, grain

elevators, blast furnaces, steel mills, oil refineries and factory facades. They began to take photographs in Germany, particularly in the Ruhr region, but then they started traveling also abroad on board their Volkswagen van, visiting England, France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and even the United States.

The initial section of the present subchapter will highlight the intrinsic documentary value of their work. As well as recording the technological change of an epoch, it also testifies a changing perception of the landscape, which will be linked to the famous exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, to

²⁴⁹ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 24.

which they took part in 1975. Attention will be thus called to landscape transformations and environmental concerns between local and global scales, which with the growing recognition of the Anthropocene need to be recontextualized. Moreover the connection between their *modus operandi* and the methodologies of natural sciences will be deepened. In fact, critics have not only widely recognised that the Bechers contributed to the further development of the traditions of the New Objectivity, at a time when photography was dominated by subjectivism in the wake of Otto Steinert; but also agree in identifying a certain legacy in the natural sciences as well. Drawing upon the recognition of such a link by both the critique and the Bechers themselves, the photographers' application of the same organizational principle found in herbariums and biology books will be observed. This principle is in fact transitioned from the realm of the biosphere, to that of the technosphere.

3.2.1 Records of loss

In 2013, on the occasion of an interview with Thomas Weaver, Hilla was asked about the seemingly different approaches characterizing her and her husband. The artist confirmed the impression of the British architectural historian, according to whom she seemed “to have a more chemical, physical fascination”²⁵⁰ with materials such as metal, whose “very nicely”²⁵¹ combination with black-and-white photography she had already become obsessed with while assisting the photographer Eichgrün. Conversely, Bernd “appeared to be fundamentally interested in something that was disappearing”²⁵². This was notably due to his deep familiarity with the industrial landscape, which had shaped his entire childhood²⁵³. His roots traced indeed back to the industrial region of Siegerland, where multiple generations of his family had been miners. Bernd's first artistic attempts to represent industrial structures date back to when he was young and involved drawing and lithography, sometimes painting **(FIG. 70)**. However, as he realized he could not keep pace with the rapid industrial

²⁵⁰ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 23.

²⁵¹ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 23.

²⁵² Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 23.

²⁵³ Heinz-Norbert Jocks, “Interviews mit Bernd und Hilla Becher”, in Susanne Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen* (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2005), 209.

changes, he shifted to photography. His initial ventures into this medium date precisely to 1957, when returning to his home to draw the ironworks, found it to be under demolition. He began thus to take snapshots with a 35mm camera to use them as the basis for his sketches or to assemble them together into collages (**FIG. 71**).²⁵⁴



FIG. 70 Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine*, Eisern, Germany, 1955/56.



FIG. 71 Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine*, Eisern, Germany, 1957.

Later on, when Bernd and Hilla started to work together, particularly in their early years, they further had to face the challenges posed by rapid industrial transformation. Of particular impact was for example the coal crisis of 1959, which - initially perceived by numerous analysts as a cyclical problem - signified the onset of coal's gradual decline. During the 1970s, the steel sector similarly encountered a period of turmoil.²⁵⁵ As a response to such changes, to which were added financial constraints, and organizational obstacles, they felt compelled to systematize their approach and focus on those buildings directly impacted by rationalization measures. In 1967, describing these circumstances, the duo indeed stated:

Unsere Arbeit ist, wenn man sie einigermaßen gründlich tun will, ein *Wettlauf mit der Zeit*. Bei der Auswahl mußten wir uns, eingeengt von finanziellen und organisatorischen Schwierigkeiten, sehr beschränken. Von den Gebäuden, die sich

²⁵⁴ When in 1958, while visiting a large Dada exhibition at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, Bernd discovered the collages that Paul Citroen had made in the 1920s, he decided to abandon this practice, convinced that he could not do them better. Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 33.

²⁵⁵ Stefan Berger and Jana Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany", in *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*, ed. Stefan Berger, 1st ed. Vol. 38, (Berghahn Books, 2020), 199. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1850gh6>.

überhaupt fotografieren ließen, bevorzugten wir im allgemeinen die vom Abbruch bedrohten, die für Zeit, Gegend und Bauart charakteristischen und die technisch und optisch besonderen Exemplare.²⁵⁶

In addition to the individual's affective attachment to a particular landscape, through their photographs, the Bechers offer a reimagined portrayal of the pioneering aspirations of the 1920s and 1930s. According to Blake Stimson, the grand industrial edifices that once stood as symbols of the grandiose endeavors of collective existence, testaments to advancements in technology, society, and politics, "have aged and are now empty of all but memory of the ambition they once housed".²⁵⁷ Moreover, as asserted by Elissa Rosenberg, "photographs do not only interpret; they also implicitly define what we value in the landscape, and thus shape what we see."²⁵⁸ This aspect can be observed here in connection with the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, to which they took part in 1975 as the only Europeans out of ten. The exhibit took place at George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, in the State of New York and was curated by William Jenkins. The curator's aim was to present "a new documentary objectivity toward the contemporary landscape"²⁵⁹, which challenged the representation of the American landscape as that of Nature, whose romantic grandeur was pursued by photographers such as Ansel Adams. The exhibited images, whose central theme was the built environment, showcased landscape as a circumscribed, occupied and unspectacular territory. In the particular case of the Bechers, their focus was directed towards capturing industrial architecture that had lost its function over time, leading to its destruction or menaced to eventual

²⁵⁶ "Our work, if you want to do it reasonably thoroughly, is *a race against time*. In the selection we had to limit ourselves very much, constrained by financial and organizational difficulties. Of the buildings we were allowed to photograph, we generally preferred those threatened with demolition, those characteristic of the time, area and type of construction, and those that were technically and visually special." (My translation; my italics). Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, "Anonyme Industriebauten. Fotografische Dokumentation von Hilla und Bernd Becher" by Wend Fischer, *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, no. 1 (1967), 868, as cited in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 90.

²⁵⁷ Blake Stimson, "The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher", *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (Spring 2004). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-comportment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>.

²⁵⁸ Elissa Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", *Heidelberger E-Books*, no. 24 (2018): 222.

²⁵⁹ Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

disappearance. The presentation of their sequential photographs, organized in a consistent grid and captured directly in black and white, allowed to emphasize the intrinsic quality of these structures as “anonymous sculptures”²⁶⁰. In the interview with Weaver, Hilla mentioned that in addition to the anonymity of these constructions, she was intrigued by their state of “stasis”:

As much as their silence and anonymity, the images that I like are always working against something - usually technology. Ever since I was a child, there has always been some new technological development: high-speed film, or smaller faster cameras that people could use while they move. I was always interested in something older, something more static.²⁶¹

The technology these pictures were “working against” was continuously renewing itself, “as in Nature where the older is devoured by the newer”²⁶². Their pictures contributed to capture the gradual transition from a society rooted in industrial production and storage to one driven by a service-based global economy, tied to distribution and consumerism.²⁶³ In an interview of 1996, Bernd asserted:

Jede Fabrik produziert soviel wie nur möglich. Wenn sie überleben soll, muss sie wachsen. Fabriken werden immer größer, und die Leute glauben, die Möglichkeiten zum Wachstum seien unbegrenzt. *Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen*. Gerade als die Nachfrage nach Stahl nachließ, wurden die größten Stahlwerke gebaut. In Baltimore beschloss man, den größten Hochofen der westlichen Welt zu bauen. Dann kam die Stahlkrise. Sie waren Dinosaurier. Sie haben sich gegenseitig aufgefressen.²⁶⁴ **(FIG. 72)**

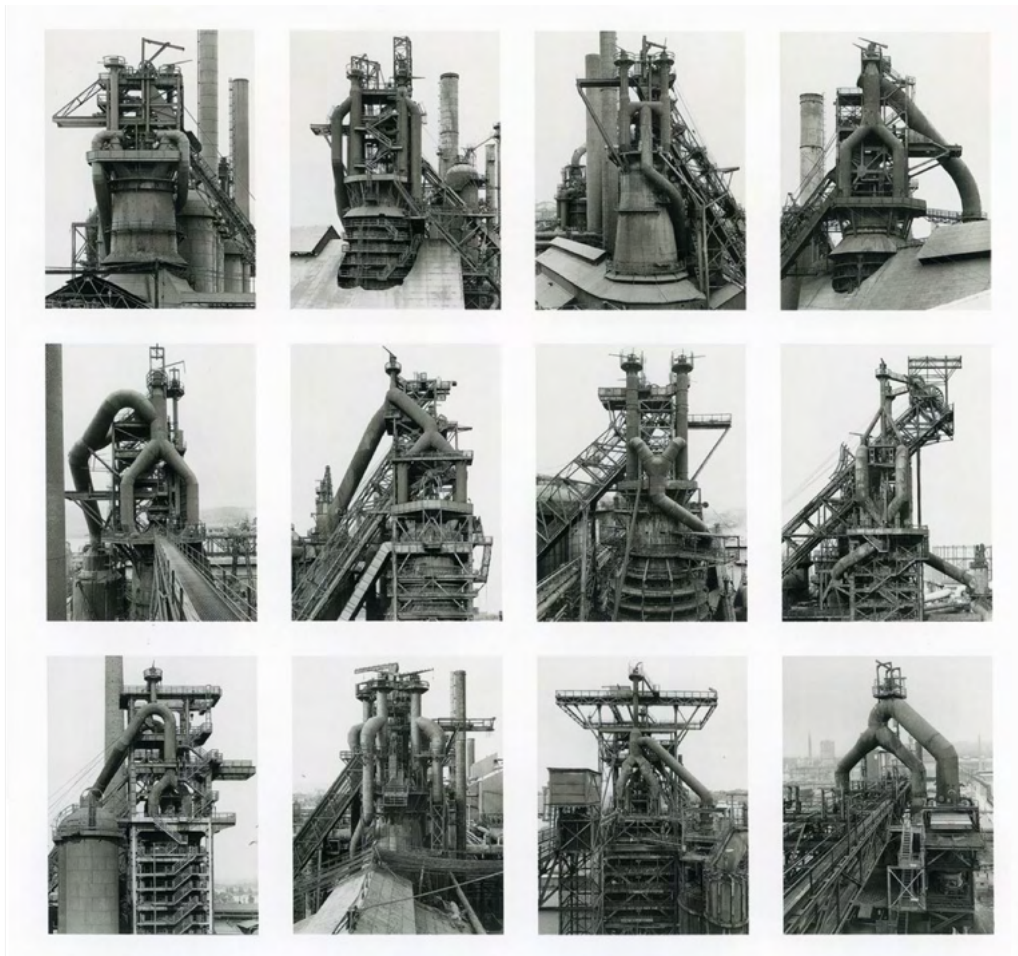
²⁶⁰ *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten (Anonymus sculptures: a typology of technical construction)* was the title of their first publication in 1970. It was structured in seven chapters, whose subjects were lime kiln, cooling towers, blast furnaces, winding towers, water towers, gas tanks, silos. Later on some of them reached the stature of autonomous collections. It is also worthy to mention that “for the particular plasticity of their photographic work”, Bernd and Hilla Becher were awarded the Golden Lion in Sculpture at the XLIV International Art Biennale in Venice in 1990.

²⁶¹ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 25.

²⁶² Stimson, “The Photographic Compartment of Bernd and Hilla Becher”.

²⁶³ Rosenberg, “Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic”, 225.; Francesco Zanot, “Bernhard e Hilla Becher”, in *La Fotografia dalla Stampa al Museo 1941-1980* vol. 3, ed. Walter Guadagnini (Milano: Skira, 2013), 226.

²⁶⁴ “Every factory produces as much as possible. If it is to survive, it must grow. Factories are getting bigger and bigger, and people believe that the possibilities for growth are unlimited. *But nothing can grow unlimitedly*. Just when the demand for steel was slowing down, the biggest steel mills were built.



Neville Island,
USA 1980

Baltimore,
Maryland, USA 1981

Gary, Indiana,
USA 1982

Baltimore,
Maryland, USA 1981

Steubenville,
Ohio, USA 1986

Gutehoffnungshütte,
Oberhausen, D 1972

Dudelage,
L 1983

Duisburg-Ruhrort,
D 1970

Schalken Verein,
Gelsenkirchen, D 1982

Aliquippa,
Pennsylvania, USA 1986

Heinrichshütte
Hattingen, D 1989

Georgsmarienhütte,
Osnabrück, D 1987

FIG. 72 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Hochöfen*, 1965-1992.

In the context of this research the adversative clause “Aber nichts kann unbegrenzt wachsen”, which sounds in English as “But nothing can grow unlimitedly” cannot go unnoticed. It echoes in fact the publication of the Club of Rome’s 1972 *The Limits to Growth*, shedding light on the limits in terms of resource availability, environmental

In Baltimore they decided to build the biggest blast furnace in the western world. Then came the steel crisis. They were dinosaurs. They ate each other up.” (My translation from German. My italics). Bernd Becher, “Die Musik der Hochöfen. Bernd and Hilla Becher im Gespräch mit James Lingwood” by James Lingwood, *artpress*, No. 209 (January 1996), in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 192.

degradation, and the planet's carrying capacity, which exponential economic and population growth can encounter. Although, following the art historian Gisela Parak, *New Topographics* exhibition - and thus also the Bechers by extension - can by no means be considered "green"²⁶⁵, it aligns with a growing societal concern for the environment. The focal point on how human actions influence the landscape can be in fact interpreted as a form of "cultural expression on landscape, nature, and environment"²⁶⁶. It may be envisioned as a reaction to the ecological challenges arising from a century of industrialization, urbanization, rapid population growth, and globalization, which - as Parak reminds - from the 1970s led to the emergence of ecocriticism within the humanities.²⁶⁷

Besides, another point that is important to keep in mind is that the types of industries depicted in the structures of the Bechers' photographs were not disappearing altogether. Abandonment and demolitions involved just some old fashioned buildings, due to structural changes in the industry, material crises or modernisation of certain structures. Yet, this seems rather obvious considering the current climate crisis. According to the IPCC AR4 (2007), it is very likely that most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-20th century are due to the observed rapid increase in anthropogenic GHGs concentration. Emissions of CO₂ due to fossil fuel burning are then virtually certain to be the dominant influence on this increasing trend.²⁶⁸ For what concerns Germany, after the Second World War it was called for the deindustrialization of the country. However, during the Cold war, its industrial base became too important for the West and as a result industrial production reached new heights, renewing emissions and pollution.²⁶⁹ A Statista survey dealing with a time span between 1970 and 2022 reports that Germany emitted 1043,4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 1970. The statistic reflects only those carbon emissions through consumption of oil, gas

²⁶⁵ Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact*, 90.

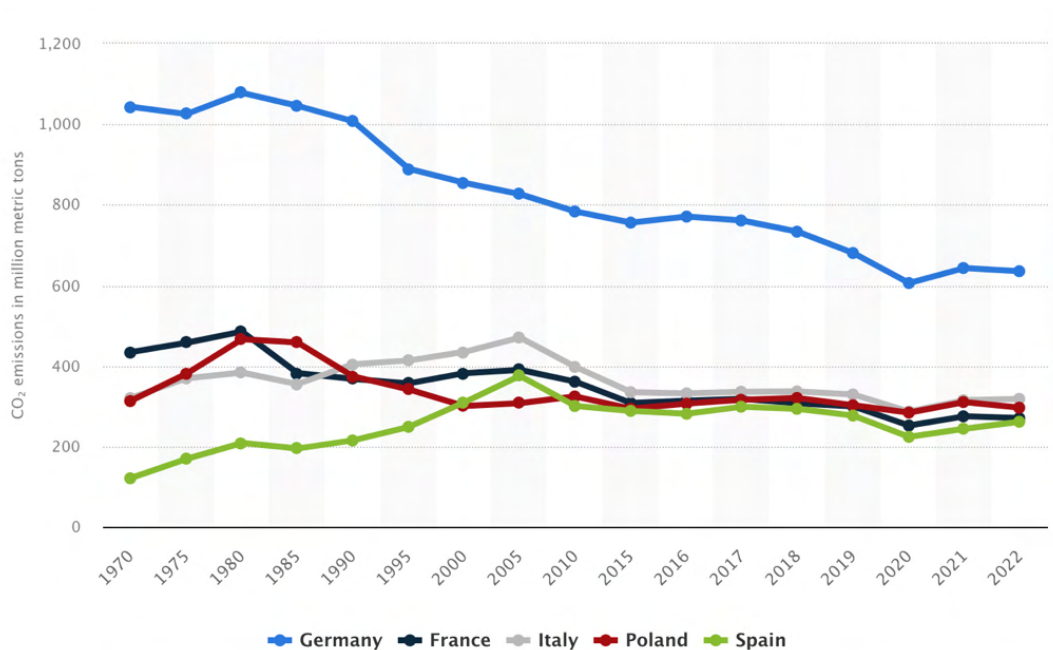
²⁶⁶ Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact*, 90.

²⁶⁷ Parak, *Landschaft. Umwelt. Kultur. On the New Topographics Transnational Impact*, 90.

²⁶⁸ IPCC 2007, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, eds. Core Writing Team, Rajendra K. Pachauri and Andy Reisinger (Geneva: IPCC, 2008), 39. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar4/syr/>.

²⁶⁹ Brüggemeier, "A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990", 43.

and coal (**GRAPH 1**). One of the main reasons for Germany’s high emission levels is that coal is the most polluting fossil fuel.²⁷⁰



GRAPH 1 Carbon dioxide emissions in selected countries in the European Union from 1970 to 2022 (in million metric tons) © Statista 2023

These remarks for Germany particularly apply to the Ruhr industrial area. Bernd and Hilla Becher expanded their work to the region in 1963, photographing in the Gutehoffnungshütte in Oberhausen and the Hüttenwerk Duisburg-Ruhrort as well as in numerous mines.²⁷¹ The following picture represents for example the cooling tower of the “Victoria Mathias” colliery in Essen (**FIG. 73**). A cooling tower is a heat dissipation system which, by exploiting the natural principle of evaporation, rejects waste heat to the atmosphere, allowing a mass of water to be cooled, making it usable again.²⁷² The structure stands against a neutral background, whose even diffused lighting was due to the fact that the Bechers took their pictures during the winter or spring months. The image is dominated by a feeling of stasis, however this impression should not be generalized. The same Hilla once pointed out that:

²⁷⁰ Ian Tiseo, “Carbon dioxide emissions in the European Union 1970-2022, by selected country”, *Statista*, 11 July 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/806887/carbon-dioxide-emissions-co2-emissions-european-union/>.

²⁷¹ Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 37.

²⁷² Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 61.

Many people mistakenly think that we photographed the Ruhr industry when it was already decaying, but this is not true. It was at full power. Of course, there was a kind of disappearance of certain old-fashioned structures, or an updating and modernising of parts that were damaged during the war, but the industry itself was still incredibly active.²⁷³



FIG. 73 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Kühlturm, ca. 1950, Zeche, "Victoria Mathias", Essen, Ruhrgebiet, 1963.*



Die Stadt Essen versank, wie hier 1964, immer wieder in einer Dunstlocke aus Ruß, Staub und giftigen Gasen: © Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum, Foto: Walter Moog.

FIG. 74. "The city of Essen repeatedly sank into a haze of soot, dust and toxic gasses, as here in 1964" © Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum, Foto: Walter Moog.

This is clear by looking at this photograph taken in Essen in 1964, where only two chimneys can be distinguished in a cloud of smoke shrouding the entire frame (**FIG. 74**). This picture serves to depict the subject matter of Christian Möller's article "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung" ("Citizens for a blue sky over the Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck and the Interest Group against Air Pollution") published within the pages of the journal *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* in 2022. As anticipated, rapid reconstruction after the Second World War and economic growth in the 1950s led to a swift upsurge in air pollution levels. The release of soot, dust, and sulfur dioxide - a toxic byproduct of fossil fuels burning - became a detrimental issue for inhabitants of the industrialized region of the Ruhr. The deleterious effects of these airborne pollutants manifested in fact in the form of an alarming escalation in cancer

²⁷³ Becher and Weaver, "Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver", 23.

cases, respiratory afflictions, and cardiovascular ailments. Moreover great damages



FIG. 75 Raised index finger with a dirty fingertip: the trademark of “IG Schmutz” on a leaflet, around 1970.

extended also to agriculture, forestry and buildings. Those affected protested against this in submissions and petitions and thus drew the attention of politicians to the abuses, but without the situation improving. Anyway if - as reported by Brüggemeier - the vast majority of residents, who belonged to the working classes, had so far given a high priority to work, at this point they were no more willing to endure the existing levels of pollution and no longer inclined to surrender.²⁷⁴ Growing public awareness of the pollution problem produced political pressure for change, and it is worth recalling Willy Brandt’s resounding promise of “a blue sky over the Ruhr” during the 1961 national election campaign, where he ran as leader of the Social Democrats”. Of central significance in this period of upheaval were the voices of scientists and doctors, who publicly drew attention to the dangers posed by pollution, as well as the efforts of various citizens’ associations. As Möller underscores, Dr. Clemens Schmeck played a pivotal role in this struggle. In 1962 he established the “IG schmützt”, an initiative that garnered substantial public attention right from its inception, boasting a membership of over 300 individuals by the mid-1970s. **(FIG. 75)** presents the content of leaflets he distributed in Dortmund in 1971, while wearing a gas mask. The flier displays an index finger tarnished with grime, accompanied by the inscription “Your lung... is as dirty as your windowsill!”. Schmeck passed away in 1984, but it wasn’t until 1992, after environmental protection had become commonplace in Germany, that the interest group disbanded. This same year *Beyond the Limits*, the sequel of *Limits to Growth*, was published. In this follow-up the third out of three conclusions drew in

²⁷⁴ See also: Brüggemeier, “A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990”, 45-51.

the previous report, while still considered valid, was rephrased and strengthened as follows:

A sustainable society is still technically and economically possible. It could be much more desirable than a society that tries to solve its problems by constant expansion. *The transition to a sustainable society* requires a careful balance between long-term and short-term goals and an emphasis on sufficiency, equity and quality of life rather than on quantity of output. It requires more than productivity and more than technology; it *also requires maturity, compassion, and wisdom*. (Meadows et al., 1992, p. xvi)²⁷⁵

In this regard, the case of Ruhr is pointed out by several observers as a successful example of transition towards a more sustainable society. Once the biggest industrial agglomeration in Europe, the process of phasing out coal culminated in 2018 with the closure of the last coal mine. The region's eco-restructuring showcases a remarkable case of a well-managed transition, emphasizing the importance of regional actors and factors, alongside external triggers.²⁷⁶ Such transformation encompasses the development of sustainable economic endeavors centered around renewable technologies, research, innovation and ecotourism. The revival of a deteriorated landscape has been a crucial factor in the area's economic and physical revitalization, where the establishment of the Emscher Park especially stands out. Then, another crucial point is that current aspirations harmonize with the region's industrial heritage, which over time began to meet with its identity.²⁷⁷ A notable example is the Zollverein Coal Mine in Essen, which has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage list as part of this transition process. Since 2001, it has been a venue for cultural and outdoor events, attracting over a million visitors annually.²⁷⁸ In conclusion, it is then important to underscore that the initial efforts to

²⁷⁵ Mick Common and Sigrid Stagl, *Ecological Economics. An introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 246.

²⁷⁶ Philipp Schepelmann, René Kemp and Uwe Schneidewind, "The Eco-restructuring of the Ruhr District as an Example of a Managed Transition", in Brauch, H., Oswald Spring, Ú., Grin, J., Scheffran, J. (eds) *Handbook on Sustainability Transition and Sustainable Peace. Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace*, vol 10. (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer Verlag, 2016), 593-612. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43884-9_28.

²⁷⁷ Berger and Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany", 202.; Rosenberg, "Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic", 225.

²⁷⁸ See chapter 3.1.

preserve industrial heritage, driven by social movements inspired by the events of 1968, actually also involved the participation of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic documentation played in fact a pivotal role in advancing the cause for the safeguard of the art deco machine hall of Zeche Zollern in Dortmund (**FIG. 76**).²⁷⁹ This endeavor led to the successful preservation of the coal-mining facility, which now stands as one of the eight former workplaces encompassed by the Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. Through events and exhibitions, historical themes are interconnected with contemporary issues, giving new life to

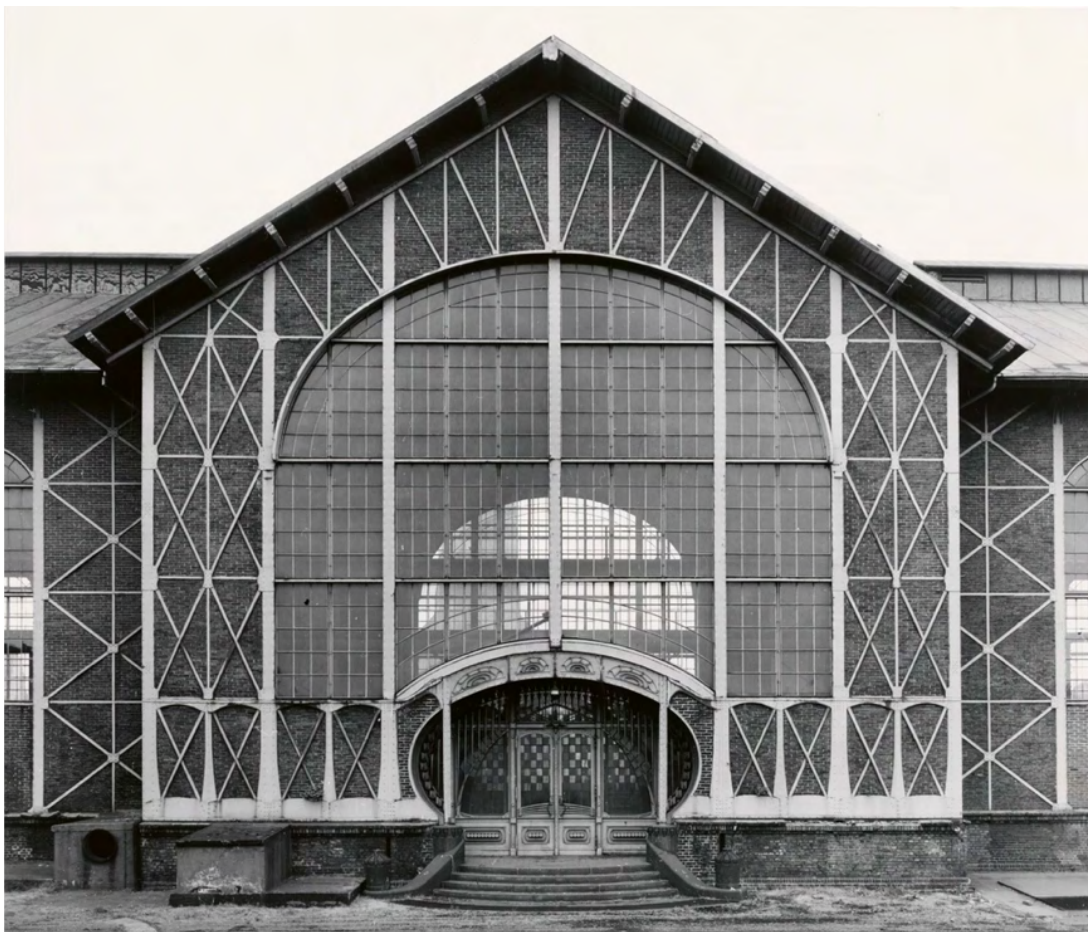


FIG. 76 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Colliery Zollern II*, 1971.

these structures.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichte erzählen*, 38; Berger and Golombek, “Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany”, 202; Rosenberg, “Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape Aesthetic”, 225.

²⁸⁰ See: LWL Museums of Industrial Heritage webpage <https://www.lwl-industriekultur.de/en/>.

3.2.2 Systematisation and the herbarium model

The photographic work of Bernd and Hilla Becher is often associated with the field of industrial archaeology and has been recognized to have inaugurated it in Germany.²⁸¹ Nonetheless, if this category is suitable a posteriori, while working they have always carefully sought buildings, which were about to be demolished but still functioning when they photographed them. For example, an article published in *I'Unità* in 2009, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Morandi Museum in Bologna, reports that Hilla had to refuse the invitation of the journalist interviewing her, to come and photograph a large gasometer in Rome. Although initially enthusiastic, she ultimately declined upon realizing that it was no longer in operation.²⁸² Rather than the field of archeology, on several occasions the photographer reiterated that she felt closer to and inspired by natural sciences, particularly in the realms of taxonomy: “Like a biologist, I loved discovering the order of these things, the groupings and families of parts, but I also loved simply the way they looked.”²⁸³. Similar to how taxonomists identify and group organisms based on shared characteristics, the Bechers crafted typologies of industrial structures by analyzing their architectural features through a systematic approach showcased their profound understanding of the forms and functions of these buildings. In the case of the Bechers, this same principle is transferred from the natural to the technological world, from the biosphere to the technosphere. A recent article on the photographer duo published in 2021 in quarterly journal *Issues in Science and Technology* and authored by Julie Anand, is precisely titled “Natural Historians of the Industrial Landscape”²⁸⁴. Here the author, who is a photography professor with a background in ecology and geology, mentions that also Sean O’Hagan, the photography critic for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* and nominator for the Pictet Prize for photography and sustainability, observed that “the Bechers approached photography the way a botanist might approach the cataloguing of flora and

²⁸¹ Stimson, “The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher”; Rosenberg, “Picturing the Landscape: The New Topographics and the Rise of a Post-Industrial Landscape”.

²⁸² Stefania Scateni, “L’altoforno è la vera astrazione. Parola di Hilla Becher, artista”, *I'Unità*, January 28, 2009.

²⁸³ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 23.

²⁸⁴ Julie Anand, “Natural Historians of the Industrial Landscape.” *Issues in Science and Technology* (Winter 2021): 62-71. <https://issues.org/hilla-bernd-becher-photography-industrial/>.

fauna.”²⁸⁵ Furthermore, the present Global Head of Art at Deutsche Bank Britta Färber associates the industrial structures captured by the two photographers to an array of different living organisms: “Spherical gas tanks become surreal beings, concrete water tanks turn into mushrooms. Blast furnaces look like polymorphous organisms. They actually make the effect of an inextricable steel jungle and hint at the origin of the ‘industrial plant’ concept.”²⁸⁶

One may acknowledge Färber’s creative association by looking for example at this series of water towers (**FIG. 77**), whose “mushroom-like form” is evoked also by



art historian Susanne Lange²⁸⁷. It is composed of nine photographs taken by the Bechers over a period of more than thirty years in different locations across Europe and the United States and arranged and printed in 2013 under the guidance of Hilla.²⁸⁸ Displayed in three rows of three, the photographs show different examples of water towers. Typical of Bechers’ style, the industrial architectures are captured in an isolated manner and from a central

FIG. 77 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1972–2009.

²⁸⁵ Anand, “Natural Historians of the Industrial Landscape”.

²⁸⁶ “Kugelglas-Behälter entpuppen sich als surreale Wesen, Beton-Wassertürme mutieren zu Pilzen. Hochöfen erscheinen als polymorphe Organismen. Besonders sie lassen die Herkunft des englischen Begriffs ‘industrial plant’ für Industrieanlage erahnen, wirken sie doch wie undurchschaubare, stählerne Dschungel” (My translation from German). Britta Färber, “Jenseits der Funktion”, in *Serien. Bernd and Hilla Becher*, eds. Ariane Grigoteit and Deutsche Bank AG (Mainz: Verlag Hermann Schmidt, 1998), 54.

²⁸⁷ Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 62.

²⁸⁸ Emma Lewis, “Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1972–2009”, March 2014.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bernd-becher-and-hilla-becher-water-towers-p81238>.



FIG. 78 Funnel mushroom *Infundibulicybe gibba* also known as *Clitocybe gibba* or common funnel.

elevated perspective, which allows viewers to focus on the shapes themselves. In this way, the nine tanks, varying in width and height, become reminiscent of funnel shaped caps of *infundibulicybe gibba*, while the base of the towers, through which water is pumped, draw parallels with the mushroom's stalks (**FIG. 78**). Moreover, going even further back in time, in a review published in *The New York Times* in 1993, Charles Hagen writes that "like members of a species; arranged in their regular grids, the works seem like excerpts from a collection of particularly exotic mechanical butterflies"²⁸⁹. Like mushrooms, butterflies are also present in great variety, with distinct colors, patterns, and characteristics. Yet, this second comparison is even more accurate when juxtaposed with the subjects the Bechers were dealing with. In fact, butterflies are also known for having a short life cycle compared to other organisms. Just as these living beings, industrial structures have an ephemeral nature, getting old-fashioned faster than other kinds of buildings. Indeed, since their design depends on mere function, the relentless march of technology and changing economic needs, make them become relics of the past in a remarkably short span of time. The Bechers repeatedly return to emphasize this feature of industrial structures, for which "ten years is like a hundred years in other fields."²⁹⁰

Regarding their method of cataloging, according to Blake Stimson's argument, their system is essentially built upon the principle of the archive.²⁹¹ Although cataloging has been a requirement since the dawn of time, its use has been observed to recur cyclically when socio-political, cultural and/or technological changes are

²⁸⁹ Charles Hagen, "Review/Photography; Making Industrial Buildings Look Like Butterflies", *New York Times*, 22 January, 1993. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/22/arts/review-photography-making-industrial-buildings-look-like-butterflies.html?smid=url-share>.

²⁹⁰ "Bei technische Bauten sind zehn Jahre soviel wie hundert Jahre bei anderen". (My translation). Hilla Becher, "Die Musik der Hochöfen. Bernd and Hilla Becher im Gespräch mit James Lingwood", in Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 192.

²⁹¹ Stimson, "The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher".

foreshadowed²⁹². This pattern of recurrence appears to align with the diverse changes seen throughout the 20th century.

More specifically the approach that the Bechers typically utilize is referred to as *typological*. Regarding the genesis of this approach, when questioned by Weaver if she and Bernd had ever contemplated the abstract idea of the “type”, Hilla replied that the typological structure emerged only afterwards. It occurred as the result of what Cristina Baldacci defines as a “very subjective experience”. Their objective records arise in fact from “days spent walking in the landscape, mapping the places visited with one’s body, even before the camera”²⁹³:

We just travelled around, photographing this and that. After a while, when you have a lot of images, you have to sort them out. [...] It’s just like those first classifications of animals and insects. I have an old English book which on one page has all the different kinds of creatures that inhabit water - mammals, fish, insects, snakes, etc. They are all together. Only later on can you discern little sections, differences. It’s exactly the same with us. We don’t go looking for differences and types. We find them afterwards.²⁹⁴

Hilla’s eye for taxonomy was actually shaped by her love of the natural sciences, as for both aesthetic pleasure and research purposes, she collected illustrated books dedicated to scientific classification. In particular, she was influenced by the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919).²⁹⁵ Haeckel is known as the zoologist and follower of Charles Darwin, who in 1886 coined the term *ecology*, where “by ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature [...]. Ecology is the study of all the complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the

²⁹² Cristina Baldacci, “Ripensare l’archivio nell’arte contemporanea. Marcel Broodthaers, Hanne Darboven, Hans Haacke”, (PhD thesis, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, 2011), 255.

²⁹³ “L’estremo rigore degli scatti, quasi sempre in bianco e nero, e della disposizione a griglia nasconde un’esperienza molto soggettiva: il camminare per giorni nel paesaggio, mappando i luoghi visitati con il proprio corpo, prima ancora che con la macchina fotografica.” Baldacci, “Ripensare l’archivio nell’arte contemporanea. Marcel Broodthaers, Hanne Darboven, Hans Haacke”, 30.

²⁹⁴ Becher and Weaver, “Hilla Becher in conversation with Thomas Weaver”, 28.

²⁹⁵ Chris Wiley, “What Bernd and Hilla Becher saw in the Remnants of Industry”, *The New Yorker*, 8 November, 2022.
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-bernd-and-hilla-becher-saw-in-the-remnants-of-industry>.



FIG. 79 Ernst Haeckel, *Mycetozoa*, plate 93 of *Kunstformen der Natur*, 1904.



FIG. 80. Karl Blossfeldt, *Acanthus mollis* (enlarged 4X) 1898–1928.

goal was to highlight how the forms of nature could be transferred into artistic or architectural works. Centrally positioned and strikingly standing out against a light or

conditions of the struggle for existence.”²⁹⁶ However, he became also famous for another rigorous scientific record, which also emerged as a wellspring of artistic inspiration. This contribution is *Kunstformen der Natur*; a book of hundred lithographic and halftone prints shining a spotlight on the enchanting designs and wide array of lifeforms present in the natural world (**FIG. 79**). Published in 1904, it collected drawings initially published in groups of ten between 1899 and 1904. Highlighting the harmonious interplay between the domains of biology and aesthetics, it successfully merges together the realms of art and science.²⁹⁷ The book had a rapid circulation and it should not be underestimated that its influence also extended to Karl Blossfeldt. Indeed, Renger-Patzsch is not the only exponent of the New Objectivity in relation to whom the Bechers have been cited; Blossfeldt is also frequently associated with them. The representational model of Bechers’ industrial structures stand in fact in continuity with his depiction of plants. Long before the publication of *Urformen der Kunst* in 1928, Blossfeldt’s initial aim was to produce illustrative teaching material for his students at the Institute of the Royal Arts Museum in Berlin. Indeed, his

²⁹⁶ Despite Haeckel endorsing Eurocentric notions of racial superiority that were prevalent during his era, he also endorsed and made widely known Darwinian concepts regarding the evolution of human beings within a more extensive interconnected network of life. See: Braddock and Ater, “Art in the Anthropocene”, 4.

²⁹⁷ Baacke, “Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation”, 93.

black background, the shapes of the botanical species were thus stressed and magnified (FIG. 80). Such backgrounds recall those of the Bechers, whose neutral texture highlights industrial forms. As pointed out by Lange there is no longer room for the shape of clouds that characterized early landscape photographs, emphasizing the power of nature.²⁹⁸ The only forms to be strengthened are those of the represented objects. Briefly, they both transformed the way viewers perceived ordinary subjects: the Bechers elevated industrial structures to the status of art through their photographs, and Blossfeldt revealed the artistic qualities of plants, such as Heackel



FIG. 81 August Sander,
Strassenarbeiter im Ruhrgebiet, ca.
1928.

did. Moreover, Bechers' vast archive is also commonly related to August Sander's *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (FIG. 81). This ambitious project occupied the photographer for some 40 years, from the early 1920s until he passed away in 1964. Yet, despite the publication of *Antlitz der Zeit* in 1929, he failed to achieve it in the manner in which he had originally intended it. He sought to catalog the German people of the 20th century through a compendious photographic document, organized according to broad types. Early on, Sander decided on a differentiated arrangement in seven sections. He prefaced the project with a "Stammappe", which was devoted to the farmer as the archetype of human existence.

This group was then supposed to be followed by: "the Skilled Tradesman", "the Woman", "Classes and Professions", "the Artists", "the City", and finally "the Last People".²⁹⁹ A similar cataloging is also to be found in Becher's first publication *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten* (Anonymus sculptures: a typology of technical construction), which was released in 1970. It was also structured in seven chapters, whose subjects were lime kiln, cooling towers, blast

²⁹⁸ Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichten erzählen*, 33.

²⁹⁹ Baacke, "Fotografie zwischen Kunst und Dokumentation", 99.

furnaces, winding towers, water towers, gas tanks, silos.³⁰⁰ Each image, through comparison with the others, helps to determine the traits of the typology to which it belongs, while at the same time showing its possible variables. Instead, with regard to exhibitions, starting with a 1967 exhibition at the Neue Sammlung in Munich, the Bechers began to display their images in grids, accompanied by details about the location and year of capture. These grids typically consisted of six, nine, or fifteen prints, arranged in square or rectangular layouts. This presentation style effectively eliminated any hierarchical distinctions between individual photographs, instead emphasizing their overall value.³⁰¹

In relation to Sander, it seems interesting also to mention that, from the very beginning, his documentary ambition to bring to life a photographic cross-section of his era, was not intended to be limited to portraits only. In fact, a second part of his work was to be about the environment, in its various facets.³⁰² Insofar it presents traces of human alterations, Sander valued an intrinsic documentary value in the landscape. Landscape should in fact to be regarded as a complex system of ecosystems, “whose character is the result of action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”³⁰³. This ecological nexus reverberates also in the Bechers’ conception, as Hilla describes industrial structures as kind of living being embedded in their environment:

*These objects are fixed to the ground, they are part of a landscape, you could almost say they have roots. Other objects, like a cup or a sewing machine, do not have roots, but a water tower is strictly connected to the ground, it is not a moveable object, although it is an object which is put up only for a certain period of time. This object is linked to a certain mechanism and to a landscape, to people working there and to a social network. You have to isolate the object otherwise you surrender to chaos and confusion but at the same time, you have to show a part of its background to show that it is not a moveable object like a cup of tea.*³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Lange, *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichte erzählen*, 72-73.

³⁰¹ Zanut, “Bernhard e Hilla Becher”, 225-26.

³⁰² Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920-40*, 77.

³⁰³ Peter Howard, Ian H. Thompson and Emma Waterton ed., *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

³⁰⁴ Fried, *Why Photography matters as Art as never before*, 322.

Bern highlights indeed that their “method of photographing objects from a high viewpoint” had precisely the aim to “ma[k]e them look more rooted in the ground”³⁰⁵. Looking at some of their photos, one can arrive at the same hypothesis Färber formulated about the origin of the concept of “industrial plant”, where the various structures seem to be components of an “inextricable steel jungle”³⁰⁶ (FIG. 82). Hilla, on her part, in an interview with Ariane Grigoteit, attributes this jungle-like perception to the choice of starting capturing specific objects not just from an elevated position, but also from beneath. Such a perspective is credited with enabling the viewer to unveil lower tiers, additional functionalities, and extended interconnections.³⁰⁷ However, the two photographers use this perspective while avoiding monumentalization as in Renger-Patzsch’s “chimney seen from below”. This type of approach is in fact mostly evident in series entirely dedicated to specific sites. When dealing with complex sites, their gaze started indeed from the outside and gradually moved closer to discovering the functional details, in a continuous game of analysis and synthesis.

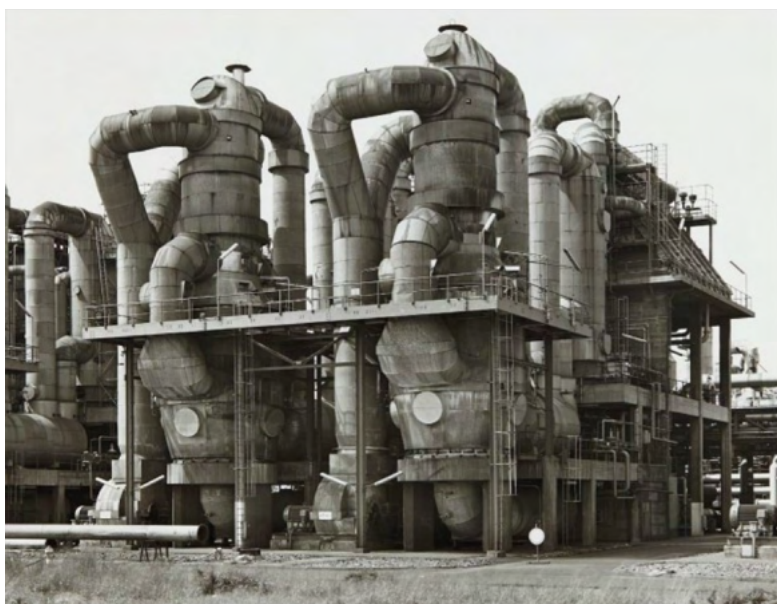


FIG. 82 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Chemical Plant, Wesseling near Cologne, Germany*, 1983.

³⁰⁵ Becher and Weaver, *In conversation with Hilla Becher*, 24.

³⁰⁶ Britta Färber, “Jenseits der Funktion”, in *Serien. Bernd and Hilla Becher*, eds. Ariane Grigoteit and Deutsche Bank AG, 54.

³⁰⁷ Ariane Grigoteit, “Was uns immer wichtig war. Ein Besuch bei Hilla und Bernd Becher”, in *Serien. Bernd and Hilla Becher*, eds. Ariane Grigoteit and Deutsche Bank AG, 19.

3.3 Beate Gütschow

Born in Mainz in 1970, Beate Gütschow is a contemporary German artist working between Cologne and Berlin. Having begun with painting and installations, Gütschow doesn't consider herself a photographer, but primarily as "an artist using photography accidentally"³⁰⁸. She is mostly known for its digitally manipulated pictures, of which her series *LS* and *S* offer a valuable example. These two works have been published together in the book *Beate Gütschow: LS/S*, where she deals with both the natural and urban sphere: *LS* is the abbreviation for landscape, *Landschaft* in German and *S* for *Stadt* or city. Although the two parts are treated with equal importance in the volume, for the purpose of the present work the focus will



FIG. 83 Beate Gütschow, *Was entsteht wenn die Perfektion ins kleinste Detail reicht (I)*, 2011.



FIG. 84 Beate Gütschow, *Schneller von heute nach morgen (I)*, 2013.

lay into the series *S* due to its strong formal connection with objective photography described in previous chapters. However, in order to introduce Gütschow's methods and environmental concerns, as well as for the purposes of comparison, I will also offer an overview of *LS*. Furthermore, even if in this research deals more specifically with the representation of those objects that "are fixed in the ground" and are "linked to a certain mechanism and to a landscape"³⁰⁹, both within the work of Renger-Patzsch and the Bechers, I argue that it is at least worth mentioning another thematic intersection offered by Gütschow's series *I* (2010). Leaving behind the natural and urban external worlds, here she delves into the representation of objects and things, through which she explores the promises of modernity (**FIG. 83 and FIG. 84**). Within the frame of this research it is particularly significant that the exhibition of this work, which took place in 2011 at the Museum für Photographie Braunschweig,

³⁰⁸ Beate Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S* (New York: Aperture, 2007), 42.

³⁰⁹ Fried, "'Good' versus 'Bad' Objecthood: James Welling, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Jeff Wall", in *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 322.



FIG. 85 Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Musterzimmer im Fagus-Werk Benscheidt in Alfeld. Schuhleisten- und Stanzmesser Fabrik*, plate 50 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

and which she ironically titled *Produktpolitik*, has been realised “in dialogue with factual photographs by Albert Renger-Patzsch and Elisabeth Hase”³¹⁰, where the photos by Renger-Patzsch have been selected from the series realised for the Fagus factory in Alfeld (Leine) (**FIG. 85**). Although she abandons the digital compositions of previous series, in some pictures, objects coming from different contexts are also arranged together, but without apparent connection.

She challenges the new objective vision of reality according to which the essence of things could be revealed through the camera’s gaze: not only their essence can not be grasped, but the objects, once they no longer have their product value, appear lost to us, “as cannibalized components and eerie revenants of our consumer culture”³¹¹. Then, as further observed by Ebner, “this hermeticism of the objects stands [...] in a strange contradiction to the absolute precision and transparency elicited by their presentation in the lightboxes”³¹². The objects are located in impersonal settings, which may remind photo studios, advertising agencies, laboratories, or offices. Whereas here she questions modernity and consumerism, a deeper insight into her critique of notions of ideal, utopia, as well as that of photographic objectivity will follow.

3.3.1 Arranging fragments

LS

In her series *LS*, Gütschow employs photography to recreate landscapes depicted in 17th and 18th-century paintings. Using Photoshop, the artist meticulously constructs each image by combining fragments - ranging from thirty to one hundred - from

³¹⁰ Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, “Beate Gütschow. Produktpolitik”, accessed 14 July 2023. <http://www.photomuseum.de/beate-gutschowproduktpolitik/>.

³¹¹ Florian Ebner, “Things, Naked.”, in *Beate Gütschow: ZISLS*, trans. by Chris Michalski (Heidelberg: Kehrer 2017), 66-75, <https://beateguetschow.de/i-series/>.

³¹² Ebner, “Things, Naked”.

analog photographs she had previously taken. Her reconstructed landscapes aim particularly to challenge the conventions employed in Classical and Romantic paintings to convey an “ideal” or “Arcadian” vision of nature. Specifically, Gütschow seeks to evoke the representation patterns of artists such as Poussin, van Ruisdael, Lorrain, Constable, Vernet, and Gainsborough,³¹³ not reproducing single paintings but picking up fragments from various landscape compositions and mixing them together. It is important to note that such pictures were already strongly constructed, as artists realized their works by copying portions of reality and assembling them according to specific patterns. As Gütschow herself summarizes:

The picture was divided into foreground, middle ground, and background. The foreground is the entrance: the viewer “walks” into the picture from this entry point. The landscape is framed by clumps of trees and bushes, like a stage. The people, the staffage are generally placed in the middle ground. They look out into the landscape on behalf of the viewer. The middle ground often contains a river or a path. The background is composed of a view into the distance: ranges of hills that vanish into the haze. The light mainly enters from the side, illuminating some areas and leaving others in shadow. The many layers create great spatial depth.³¹⁴

For comparison, although with some variations, these established features can be also observed in the 1805 painting *Ideale Landschaft mit Apollo und Hirten* by the



FIG. 86 Jacob Philipp Hackert, *Ideale Landschaft mit Apollo und Hirten*, 1805.

German classicist painter Jacob Philipp Hackert (1737-1807) (**FIG. 86**). The foreground is very detailed and on the right a stream - which can be interpreted as a metaphor for thought - gushes from the rocks. It flows to the left, where a cow is grazing grass. In the center, Apollo leans against a tree with the

³¹³ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 38.

³¹⁴ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 38.

lyre. The god is surrounded by shepherds and on his left is also a dog; a little further back are more cows. The background is clear and nuanced and provides a glimpse into the depths, where one can discern a waterway and finally a mount. As the god of the sun, music and poetry, Apollo reinforces the narrative of the landscape, personifying the harmony that permeates the entire painting, where human and non-human beings exist in symbiosis.

By now, in the light of the current environmental situation, this Arcadian vision has definitely entered a state of crisis. It is evident that contemporary landscapes can no longer be envisioned as the idyllic nature depicted in 17th and 18th century paintings. Our current landscape is in fact characterized by oceans filled with garbage, melting glaciers, forests on fire, storms, depleted soils, increasing droughts and floods. There is no more room for joyful harmony, since disharmonious traces of human presence are everywhere. In this sense, illustrative is the subchapter “Il giardino e la discarica. Una pittura di paesaggio” of Serenella Iovino’s *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza* (2019), which would be translated in English as “The Garden and the Landfill. A landscape painting”. If Iovino reports the sense of habit to the state of things that dominates in daily experience³¹⁵, I would add that it is reinforced by the media, which by subjecting us to almost apocalyptic images of environmental devastation, on the one hand have the effect of increasing this feeling of helplessness. Gütschow’s images aim precisely to disrupt this contemplative passivity. Although the spatial complexity of her scenes imitates the idealized nature depicted in 17th and 18th century paintings, her pictures lack the same harmony and can be somewhat unsettling. Once the viewer look deeper at them, will indeed notice that “the green of the meadow is just that little bit too saturated; the bark of the tree is too sharply in focus, making it appear too dominant; the light on the blades of grass seems to be coming from a different angle than that on the treetop; and, despite the clouds on the horizon, no mist obscures the view into the distance.”³¹⁶

³¹⁵ “I rifiuti in particolare, sono una traccia della società contemporanea, proprio perché essi sembrano essere l'unica finalità del processo di produzione e consumo” (My translation). Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 30.

³¹⁶ Anna-Catharina Gebbers, “Larger than Life.”, in *Beate Gütschow: ZISLS*, trans. by Jacqueline Todd, (Heidelberg: Kehrer 2017), 8-17. <https://beateguetschow.de/lis-series/>.



FIG. 87 Beate Gütschow, *LS#8*, 2000.

The apparent perfection of these landscapes is also undermined by the deliberate inclusion of contemporary disruptive elements. In *LS#8* (**FIG. 87**), for example, a blue plastic bag shows up in the middle of the scene, near the picnicking couple. As Iovino writes “waste, in particular, is a vestige of contemporary

society, precisely because it seems to be the sole purpose of the production and consumption process”³¹⁷. This “very large, smelly and predominant side-effect of modernity”, as Thomas H. Eriksen defines it, has mainly to be treated as a “cultural phenomenon”³¹⁸. Garbages cities or plastic islands are indeed a marker of the fact that human activities are no longer integrated in natural equilibrium³¹⁹.

But in these seemingly ideal landscapes, garbage - to quote Mary Douglas’s famous definition - is not the only “matter out of place”³²⁰. In fact, as observed by Akiko Ono, some of the material used come from distinctly postindustrial sites. This is suggested for example by the exposed ground in *LS#7* (**FIG. 88**). By evoking the Ruhr area, such details may recall certain land portions of Brohm’s *Ruhr* series, where the German photographer documented the rapid transformations of the 1980s resulting from economic crisis and extensive structural changes linked to the decline of heavy industry (**FIG. 89** and **FIG. 90**). As reiterated by Olga Smith, Brohm’s photography is marked by the experience of Albert Renger-Patzsch and Bernd and Hilla Becher, who - as we have seen in previous subchapters - have made a

³¹⁷ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 30.

³¹⁸ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Overheating. An anthropology of accelerated change*, (London: Pluto Press), 105.

³¹⁹ Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, 31.

³²⁰ Eriksen, *Overheating. An anthropology of accelerated change*, 106.

photographic inventory of the region in the 1920s and 1960s respectively.³²¹ This documentary work is however very different from Güttschow's one, where fragments of reality are rearranged, conveying new meanings: it is indeed through these and other alterations that the viewer is led to doubt the truthfulness of the image. These doubts do not stop however at the image level, calling into question the real world as well and leading the viewer to reflect on the current environmental condition.



FIG. 88 Beate Güttschow, *LS#7*, 1999.



FIG. 89 Joachim Brohm, *Essen* 1982, 1982.



FIG. 90 Joachim Brohm, *Bochum* 1983, 1983.

S

In *S*, Güttschow further employs the technique of digital photomontage used in *LS* shifting from a natural to urban context. If in the former series she produces images adhering to the compositional principles of 17th and 18th-century paintings, the constructed landscapes of *S* “clearly reference documentary photography, but at the

³²¹ Olga Smith, “Plaines et plâtitudes: les réinventions du paysage photographique dans les œuvres de Jean-Marc Bustamante et Joachim Brohm”, in *Les inventions photographiques du paysage*, ed. Pierre-Henry Frangne et al. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016), 55.



FIG. 91 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Esch-Alzette, L*, 1980.



FIG. 92 Beate Gütschow, *S#11*, 2005.



FIG. 93 Beate Gütschow, *S#14*, 2005.



FIG. 94 Beate Gütschow, *S#24*, 2007.

same time contradict it with their photographic fictions”³²². Even if, unlike the previous series, the artist doesn’t specify exactly which photographers she takes inspirations from, I argue that in this series a formal continuity can be detected in particular with the objective method characterizing Bernd and Hilla Becher’s documentation of industrial buildings (**FIG. 91**).

First of all consideration should be given to the use of the black and white, since the artist states that her choice to present her photographs in black and white light grain is intentionally to mimic documentary photography.³²³ Then, adhering to the Becher’s standardized representation of single industrial structures, in several pictures, such as *S#11* (**FIG. 92**), *S#14* (**FIG. 93**) and *S#24* (**FIG. 94**), buildings stand at the center of the composition with the background revealing a portion of the surrounding context. Moreover, as we have observed with the structures photographed by the photographer couple, also Gütschow’s architectures appear from an elevated perspective, as if the camera was positioned on a ladder or scaffolding, with the viewfinder tilted to give the impression that the viewer is observing the structures from a mid-level vantage point. Finally the lighting in her photographs is equally diffuse and evenly distributed, with flat and overcast skies. Gütschow creates in fact a similar atmosphere to that of the Bechers, who have always carefully chosen specific times of the year or day to capture their photos and avoid extreme lighting effects or pronounced contrasts. However, unlike Bechers’ images, where human presence is excluded from the

³²² Daniela Janser, Thomas Seelig and Urs Stahel, eds., *Concrete – Photography und Architecture* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2013), 157.

³²³ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 41.

frame, Gütschow sometimes deliberately inserts people in some of her pictures. Appearing really small in comparison to other elements, they never look at the viewer, and contribute to give a sense of “dislocation and disorientation”³²⁴. But the divergence of their works does not depend solely on human presence. As a matter of fact, if Gütschow’s *S* series clearly bears the influence of the Bechers from a formal point of view, a crucial distinction concerning pictures realization sets their bodies of



FIG. 95 Joan Fontcuberta, *Braohypoda frustata* (*Herbarium*), 1984.

work apart. If from one side the Bechers’ strict objective approach responds to the documentation of buildings physically located in space, from the other side Gütschow’s pictures are completely constructed. So, by creating pictures mimicking their form out of nowhere or better out of a blank file, the artist is in a way critiquing the value of objectivity brought forth by the Bechers, Renger-Patzsch and documentary photography more in general. This recalls in a sense Joan Fontcuberta’s *Herbarium* (1983), where the Spanish photographer arranges various objects creating “quasi-plants” closely resembling Karl Blossfeldt’s ones (**FIG. 95**).

If Blossfeldt’s aim was to celebrate nature as a source of inspiration for art, sixty years later Fontcuberta evokes an artificial nature, which in a way matches the state of degradation and contamination of which we have become aware³²⁵. The images of Gütschow and Fontcuberta are in fact displayed together in the exhibition *After Photoshop: Manipulated Photography in the Digital Age*, which took place at The Met Museum from September 25th 2012 to May 27th 2013.³²⁶ Constituted by around twenty five works from the permanent collection it served as an addendum to the

³²⁴ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 41.

³²⁵ Fontcuberta, “Teoria e pratica della fotografia. Intervista con Joan Fontcuberta” by Angela Madesani.

³²⁶ The MET, “*After Photoshop: Manipulated Photography in the Digital Age*. September 25, 2012—May 27, 2013”, accessed 27 September 2023. <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2012/after-photoshop>.

temporary exhibition *Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*³²⁷, focused also on that pictorialist tradition that Renger-Patzsch was strongly opposing. The German artist specifically defines her way of working as pre-photographic:

A pre-photographic approach is a different way to come to a picture. In photography, you are forced to select a slice of reality, so the result is a framed section taken out of a much larger situation. With the pre-photographic approach, the starting point is not reality at all, it is the canvas - or, in my case, the empty file. [...] Working with photography is the exact opposite approach: you start with a lot of information - the 360 degrees around you - and you choose which boundaries to set; by framing a slice of reality, you are inevitably dealing with exclusion!³²⁸

Through this method based on fragments recomposition and manipulation - in *LS* and *S* respectively - the artist questions the concepts of nature and urbanity, which are by now “no longer as clear as it once seemed”³²⁹. Then, according to her:

There are two levels of reception with the landscape works. Either you [the viewer] just look at the photos, take them in directly without questioning them. That is the naïve level of reception, which is possible due to the perfect montage. And then there is a level of reception where you [the viewer] have a prior knowledge of the image fragments, and the montage thus dissolves.³³⁰

Her strategies to reawaken the viewer from passivity evokes in a way the *Verfremdungseffekten* (estrangement or distancing effects) used by twentieth-century German writer Bertold Brecht in his epic theater. The intent of Brecht’s epic dramas is to urge the spectator to grasp for himself the messages that a depicted event implicitly contains. The German playwright wanted an active audience, reflecting through the cues offered by everyday events, which he reported with scrupulous

³²⁷ The MET “*Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*. October 11, 2012—January 27, 2013”, accessed 27 September 2023. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/faking-it>.

³²⁸ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 40.

³²⁹ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 38.

³³⁰ Beate Gütschow interviewed by Hubertus von Amelunxen, “The Narrative Before The Image“, *Ars Viva*, 2006, as cited in Suraya Pelser, “(De)Constructing Worlds High Modernism, Architecture and Photography” (Master thesis, University of Cape Town, 2017), 84.

objectivity and coldness. Thus opens the drama *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (*The Exception and the Rule*):

Wir berichten euch sogleich/ Die Geschichte einer Reise. Ein Ausbeuter/ Und zwei
Ausgebeutete unternehmen sie./ Betrachtet genau das Verhalten dieser Leute:/ Findet
es befremdend, wenn auch nicht fremd./ Unerklärlich, wenn auch gewöhnlich./
Unverständlich, wenn auch die Regel. / Selbst die kleinste Handlung, scheinbar
einfach/ Betrachtet mit Misstrauen! Untersucht, ob es nötig ist/ Besonders das
Übliche!/ Wir bitten euch ausdrücklich, findet/ Das immerfort Vorkommende nicht
natürlich! Denn nichts werde natürlich genannt/ In solcher Zeit blutiger Verwirrung/
Verordneter Unordnung, planmäßiger Willkür/ Entmenschter Menschheit, damit
nichts/ Unveränderlich gelte.³³¹

3.3.2 Building an (eco)critical space: the case of Brasilia

In contrast with *LS* the nature is erased from *S*. As stated by the artist “any traces of nature are dead or dying”³³². As examples may be worthy the bare and seemingly burned or felled trees in *S#10* (FIG. 96) or *S#4* (FIG. 97). Beate Gütschow, which stands among frames of post-apocalyptic, high modernist, human altered landscapes. As well as representing the artist’s vision of reality³³³, *S* is in fact mainly about architecture and more precisely “an architecture that stands for social ideals that have failed”³³⁴. In this work, alongside the criticism of documentary photography, one can in fact also discern a direct critique of high Modernism, which is defined by Scott as “a form of modernity, and more appropriately an ideology, characterized by its

³³¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Versuche 22-24. Herr Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti. Chinesische Gedichte. Die Ausnahme und die Regel*. (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag Vorm. S. Fischer, 1950), 149. (Trans. ‘Anonymous’, Bertolt Brecht, *The Exception and the Rule*, 1930): “We hereby report to you/ The story of a journey, undertaken by/ One who exploits and two who are exploited/ Observe the conduct of these people closely:/ Find it estranging even if not very strange/ Hard to explain even if it is the custom/ Hard to understand even if it is the rule/ Observe the smallest action, seeming simple./ With mistrust/ Inquire if a thing be necessary/ Especially if it is common/ We particularly ask you -/ When a thing continually occurs -/ Not on that account to find it natural/ Let nothing be called natural/ In an age of bloody confusion/ Ordered disordered, planned caprice,/ And dehumanized humanity, lest all things/ Be held unalterable!”

³³² Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 41.

³³³ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 38.

³³⁴ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 41.



FIG. 96 Beate Gütschow, *S#10*, 2005.



FIG. 97 Beate Gütschow, *S#4*, 2004.

unfaltering confidence in science and technology as a means to reorder the social and natural world”³³⁵. Since its beginning, modern architecture has been captivated by the concept of utopia. In fact, instead of merely reimagining architecture and space based on the principles of the industrial revolution, it actively sought to build a more ideal society for the future.³³⁶ Thomas More first introduced this neologism in 1516, to designate “an ideal society in a contemporary, but fictitious and remote world”³³⁷. This term, whose accurate derivation from Greek

should have been “atopia”, denoted thus a “non-place” and it is linked with the concept of *tabula rasa*. Meaning “scraped tablet” or “cleaned slate” in latin³³⁸, it is commonly used to describe something that is new, untainted, or unaffected, symbolizing a chance for a fresh beginning. Within the realm of high Modernist architecture, it can be also used to describe an empty plot of land. This “emptiness” was however mostly the result of clearing vast areas of vegetation or forcefully displacing and demolishing existing communities and structures.

The case of Brasilia, whose cityscape strongly reads Gütschow’s ones³³⁹, is really emblematic in this regard (FIG. 98). Renowned worldwide for its urban planning, the current Brazilian capital was designed by urban planner Lucio Costa and

³³⁵ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 4.

³³⁶ Martino Stierli, “Building No Place”, *Journal of Architectural Education* 67, no. 1 (2013): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.769840>

³³⁷ Stierli, “Building No Place”, 8.

³³⁸ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, “tabula rasa”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 25, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tabula-rasa>.

³³⁹ Gütschow, *Beate Gütschow LS/S*, 41.



FIG. 98 National Congress, Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, 1958.

architect Oscar Niemeyer in the late 1950s, during Juscelino Kubitschek's ruling. In the framework of intersection between visual culture and climate change, its foundation has also been handled by Paulo Tavares's "In the Frontiers of Amazonia. A Brief Political Archeology of Global Climate

Emergency"³⁴⁰ as a pivotal development in relation to the current climate crisis. The Brazilian architect and scholar defines the city as "a product of modern state-led settler colonialism, aimed at expropriating and occupying territories by defining indigenous lands as 'demographic voids' in need of 'development'."³⁴¹ In fact, even if it originated from the desire of having a capital city free from any associations with the Portuguese colonial regime³⁴², it responded to the same colonial mechanisms, since it involved the forcible remotion of Xavante and Quilombola inhabitants from the region. The imaginary of Brasilia as a city built from scratch in the middle of nowhere is questioned also in *Terra*, Brazil's representation for the Venice Architecture Biennale 2023. Curated by the same Tavares, together with Gabriela de

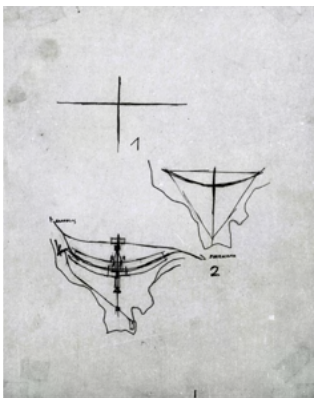


FIG. 99 Lucio Costa's original drawings of the "Plano Piloto", 1957.

Matos, the pavilion has been also awarded with the Golden Lion for the best national participation. The first out of two galleries in which it is divided is entitled "De-colonizing the canon" and displays some central images from the earliest steps of the city's founding. As considered of particular relevance for the purposes of this study, some of them will be briefly discussed below. Costa's "Plano Piloto" or Pilot Plan for the city of Brasilia assumes the shape of an irregular cross (**FIG. 99**). As stated by the urban planner: "It was born out of

³⁴⁰ Paulo Tavares, "In the Frontiers of Amazonia. A Brief Political Archeology of Global Climate Emergency", in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*. (New York : Routledge, 2021), 26.

³⁴¹ Tavares, "In the Frontiers of Amazonia", 27.

³⁴² Rio was the capital of the Portuguese empire from 1808 to 1821.

the primary gesture of one who marks or takes possession of a place - two axes crossing at a right angle, the very sign of the cross”³⁴³ (FIG. 100). Tavares’ statement



FIG. 100 Crossing of the two axes at the early stages of construction, 1956.



FIG. 101 Catholic mass in Brasília’s construction site in 1957.



FIG. 102 Victor Meirelles, *Primeira missa no Brasil*, ca. 1860.

that this cross more accurately resembles a Christian cross, is actually supported by the fact that president Kubitschek arranged a catholic mass in Brasília’s construction site in 1957, to mark its inauguration (FIG. 101). Attended by various state authorities, this event was sought to reproduce the mass celebrated by Portuguese colonists in Bahia in 1500. In particular, the painting *Primeira missa no Brasil (First Mass in Brazil)*, realized by Victor Meirelles in 1860 was taken as a source of inspiration (FIG. 102). By Kubitschek’s directive, Karajá people were brought from Bananal Island to Brasilia to attend the mass³⁴⁴, echoing the Indigenous people represented in the lower plain of the painting, while observing the ceremony taking place in the foreground, where the colonizers pray around a large tree trunks-made cross. A replica of the original crucifix stands at the entrance of Brasília, in the area known as the “Square of the Crucifix”. Thus a monument holding great significance as it embodies the essence of Brasília’s landscape, while also reminding Brazil’s colonial past, which played a crucial role in shaping its modernity.³⁴⁵

³⁴³ “[La presente solución] nació del gesto primario de quien señala un lugar o de él toma posesión: dos ejes cruzándose en ángulo recto, o sea, la propia señal de la cruz”. Lucio Costa, *Relatório do Plano Piloto de Brasília*, ed. 4 (Brasília: 2018), 120.

³⁴⁴ The Bananal Island was converted into a national park and Niemeyer was tasked with creating a luxury hotel called “Hotel JK” for government officials and bureaucrats relocating to Brasília. These government policies led to various incursions into Karajá territory, resulting in severe ecological and cultural damage to their communities. By the mid-1960s, the island had become overrun with cattle farms, and the Karajá villages were effectively trapped within their own lands by barbed wire fences. The villages were fenced off instead of the pastures, giving the appearance of internment camps designed to contain the Karajá people rather than keeping cattle out. See: Paulo Tavares, “Des-habitats”, *PORT Magazine*, 26 July 2021. <https://www.port-magazine.com/design/des-habitat/>.

³⁴⁵ Paulo Tavares, “Brasília: Colonial Capital.” *e-flux Architecture*, October 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/the-settler-colonial-present/351834/brasilia-colonial-capital/>.

Yet, the curve of the horizontal axis of Brasilia gives it at the same time the appearance of an airplane, which was meant as a powerful symbol of progress echoing Kubitschek's propagandistic motto "fifty years of progress in five"³⁴⁶. However, as stated by Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at MoMA Martino Stierli: "Looking back from a contemporary perspective and over fifty years after its completion, the city appears like a monument to an ideology we have lost our faith in long ago, an ossified museification of a utopian vision from a distant past."³⁴⁷ Brasilia never lived in fact in this utopia of democracy, which its architecture wanted to suggest. Then it was not until the early 1970s, during Brazil's military dictatorship



FIG. 103 A war tank and other vehicles of the Brazilian Army near the National Congress of Brazil, during the Coup d'état of 1964.

- which took over the country from 1964 to 1985 - that Brasilia truly emerged as the central hub of national political power (**FIG. 103**). By that time, the city's modernist design, which embodied a colonial program, underwent also significant expansion towards Amazonia³⁴⁸. As observed by Tavares, "like their colonial predecessors, modern strategists and planners defined Amazonia as a void space characterized by chronic lack:

demographic emptiness, technological underdevelopment, economic stagnation, territorial isolation"³⁴⁹. The consequences of this extractivist approach became evident in national reports commissioned in the post-dictatorship phase both on a social and environmental level, revealing dramatic results. In 2013, the Comissão Nacional de Verdade, a temporary national body for truth, compiled a final report documenting the several human rights violations perpetrated by the military regime. These abuses involved compulsory removals and forcible displacements resulting in socio-cultural disintegration, significant demographic reductions, and the near-annihilation of entire indigenous communities.³⁵⁰ As anticipated in the

³⁴⁶ Stierli, "Building No Place", 11.

³⁴⁷ Stierli, "Building No Place", 11.

³⁴⁸ Tavares, "In the Frontiers of Amazonia", 27.

³⁴⁹ Tavares, "In the Frontiers of Amazonia", 27.

³⁵⁰ See: Brasil. Comissão Nacional da Verdade. Relatório: textos temáticos / Comissão Nacional da Verdade. – Brasília: CNV, 2014. – (Relatório da Comissão Nacional da Verdade; v. 2) <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/>.

production of such “*terra nullius-tabula rasa*”³⁵¹ deforestation played an important role. Notably, it was in 1989 when the INPE, the National Institute for Space Research of Brazil, released the first detailed analysis on deforestation in Amazonia (TAB. 2).³⁵²

TABLE II
Original Vegetation and Best Estimate of Areas Recently Cleared in the Brazilian Legal Amazon from 1960 through 1988.

State	Original Vegetation (km ²) ^(a)				Recently cleared Area (km ²)			Percentage recently cleared		Source
	Forest	Cerrado	Humid savanna	Total original vegetation	Forest	Cerrado ^(b)	Total	Of forest	Of forest + cerrado	
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Acre	152,589	0	0	152,589	8,634	0	8,634	5.7	5.7	(d)
Amapá	99,525	0	42,834	142,359	842	0	842	0.8	0.8	(e)
Amazonas	1,562,488	0	5,465	1,567,953	12,837	0	12,837	0.8	0.8	(e)
Maranhão	139,215	121,017	0	260,232	34,140	20,664	54,803	24.5	21.1	(e)
Mato Grosso	572,669	235,345	72,987 ^(c)	881,001	67,216	134,277	201,493	11.7	24.9	(e)
Pará	1,180,004	22,276	44,553	1,246,833	91,200	1,722	92,922	7.7	7.7	(e)
Rondônia	215,259	27,785	0	243,044	30,634	989 ^(f)	31,623	14.2	13.0	(e)
Roraima	173,282	0	51,735	225,017	2,187	0	2,187	1.3	1.3	(e)
Tocantins/Goiás	100,629	169,282	0	269,911	20,279	34,114	54,393	20.2	20.2	(e)
Legal Amazon	4,195,660	575,705	217,574	4,988,939	191,765	459,734	6.4	9.6		

(a) Original vegetation (km²) in accordance with the INPE map (Fig. 1), with the savanna areas apportioned between humid savanna and *cerrado* in their approximate proportions in the savanna areas shown for each state. The forest in Tocantins/Goiás has been increased by 68,573 km² which is presumed to have been included in the INPE survey but not in the map of original vegetation. 'Forest' includes both 'primary (virgin) forest' and 'old secondary forest' (from clearings prior to 1960 in Pará and Maranhão). Totals are areas of political units, including water-surfaces, as in the INPE and IBDF reports (making the percentages underestimates). The area of Tocantins/Goiás is that used by Brazil: INPE, 1989a, 1989b; it is at variance with the 235,793 km² used in previous INPE reports (e.g. Tardin *et al.*, 1980) for the same geographical area.

(b) *Cerrado* clearing, which was not measured in the INPE study (Brazil: INPE, 1989b), has been estimated, assuming that this vegetation-type is cleared in the same proportion as the forest within each state, the exceptions of Rondônia (where proportionality is assumed excluding *cerrado* areas in Amerindian reserves), and Mato Grosso (where data exist for *cerrado*-clearing in the western part of the State in 1983, and the ratio of *cerrado*-to forest-clearing observed there, is assumed to apply to the entire State through 1988).

(c) Pantanal (Mato Grosso humid savanna) area from IBGE data reproduced in Benchimol (1989 p. 56). The remainder of the savanna area in Mato Grosso, shown in Fig. 1 (with correction for State area), is considered *cerrado*.

(d) Linear projection from the last two years of available satellite data (see Fearnside, 1990a).

(e) Brazil: INPE (1989b), with corrections for State areas and *cerrado*-clearing (see Appendix).

(f) Rondônia *cerrado*-clearing assumes that 6,946 km² of *cerrado* (25% of the 27,785 km² of *cerrado* in the State, according to the INPE map) is exposed to clearing. The remainder is in an Amerindian reserve.

TAB. 2 Fearnside, Philip M. “The Rate and Extent of Deforestation in Brazilian Amazonia.” *Environmental Conservation* 17, no. 3 (1990): 216.

Looking at more recent times, in August 2019, after the disclosure of the increase of deforestation rate of 34% between May 2018 and May 2019, the director of INPE, Ricardo Galvão was fired by Brazil’s Minister of Science and Technology Ricardo Salles.³⁵³ The then government ruled by Bolsonaro classified the institute’s data on deforestation as sensationalist and harming Brazil’s image. As a matter of fact, Amazonia - which shelters a quarter of the planet’s fauna and flora - represents

³⁵¹ Tavares, “In the Frontiers of Amazonia”, 27.

³⁵² Philip M. Fearnside, “The Rate and Extent of Deforestation in Brazilian Amazonia”, *Environmental Conservation* 17, no. 3 (1990): 218. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44521360>.

³⁵³ Eder Johnson de Area Leão Pereira *et al.*, “Brazilian Policy and Agribusiness Damage the Amazon Rainforest”, *Land Use Policy* 92 (2020): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104491>.

the largest rainforest mass on the planet, and plays an essential role within the Earth System. If its conservation would prevent changes in climate, temperatures, and droughts, deforestation contributes instead to release carbon from the forest and soil biomass, thereby increasing greenhouse gas emissions.³⁵⁴ IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2022) puts then *high confidence* on the fact that “continued deforestation-driven landscape drying and fragmentation will aggravate fire risk and reduce forest resilience, leading to degradation or savannisation of the tropical forest biomes, in particular in combination with climate change”³⁵⁵.

Anyway, despite scientific evidence, according to Bolsonaro the military regime “led to a more sustainable and prosperous Brazil”³⁵⁶, as the the military view of the development of Amazon was “devised by the military government out of geopolitical concerns: livestock and agricultural occupation to ensure sovereignty and exploitation of minerals, hydropower and fossil fuels as drivers for economic development”³⁵⁷. On his turn, since his installment on January 1st 2019, Bolsonaro has introduced several detrimental measures for the environment. In return for political support, particularly from the ruralist group (representatives and senators associated with Brazilian agribusiness), he has taken action to promote the expansion of agriculture and livestock. These actions include significant cuts in funding for forest inspection and control agencies, more lenient regulations on the use of agrochemicals and pesticides, a third of which contain substances prohibited in the European Union, relaxed environmental licensing procedures, and an unsuccessful attempt to transfer the responsibility for the demarcation of indigenous and

³⁵⁴ De Area Leão Pereira et al., “Brazilian Policy and Agribusiness Damage the Amazon Rainforest”, 2.

³⁵⁵ J.P. Ometto et al., Cross-Chapter Paper 7: Tropical Forests. In: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner et al., eds. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 2369–2410. doi:10.1017/9781009325844.024.<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/ccp7/>.

³⁵⁶ James Brook, “Conversations/Jair Bolsonaro; A Soldier Turned Politician Wants To Give Brazil Back to Army Rule”, *The New York Times Archives*, July 25, 1993. <https://web.archive.org/web/20181024103225/https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/25/weekinreview/conversations-jair-bolsonaro-soldier-turned-politician-wants-give-brazil-back.html>.

³⁵⁷ De Area Leão Pereira et al., “Brazilian Policy and Agribusiness Damage the Amazon Rainforest”, 3-4.

“quilombolas” lands from the National Indian Foundation to the Ministry of Agriculture, headed by the ruralists³⁵⁸.

Bolsonaro was defeated at the elections in November 2022 by the leftwing former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. On the 8th January 2023, one week after his presidency inauguration, Bolsonaristas invaded and vandalized the National Congress Palace in support of the outgoing president (**FIG. 104**). The pictures of such an assault, echoing the United States Capital attack on 6th January 2021, may also be envisioned as the failure of that idea of democracy Niemeyer’s architecture is meant to evoke. It is this kind of failure that Gütschow aims to suggest through *S*, where the utopian planning fantasies of the 1960/70s are exposed as dystopian environments. If the architectural structures are seemingly perfect, upon closer inspection, one cannot be grabbed by a sense of displacement. This uncanny atmosphere lays in fragments: crumbling walls, overturned cars, and disoriented individuals wandering aimlessly. Analogously, the pictures’ internal articulation exhibits subtle flaws that further erode the illusion of the “perfect montage”. For instance, the illogical arrangement of buildings as well as the conflicting utilization of light, shadow, and perspective in *S#11* (**FIG. 105**) contribute to this dissolution. Among the various pictures of the series, although with some variation, *S#11* is precisely the one resembling the most to the Brasilia National Congress, whose dome is made more spherical and the double tower building rotated and with a crack on the top left.



FIG. 104 The assault of the National Congress Palace on the 8th January 2023.



FIG. 105 Beate Gütschow, *S#11*, 2005.

³⁵⁸ De Area Leão Pereira et al., “Brazilian Policy and Agribusiness Damage the Amazon Rainforest”, 2.

Similarly to Brechtian estrangement effects, Gütschow strategies emanate a feeling of unease in the viewer, which will be possibly stimulated to reflection. Uncanny visual traces will encourage the viewer to chase after the truth and to question the forms of oppression derived from the failure of the ideals that modernist architecture pursued.

Thus closes Brecht's *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (*The Exception and the Rule*):

So endet/ Die Geschichte einer Reise./ Ihr habt gehört und habt gesehen./ Ihr saht das Übliche, das immerfort Vorkommende./ Wir bitten euch aber:/ Was nicht Fremd ist, findet befremdlich!/ Was gewöhnlich ist, findet unerklärlich!/ Was das üblich ist, das soll euch erstaunen./ Was die Regel ist, das erkennt als Missbrauch/ Und wo ihr den Missbrauch erkannt habt/ Da schafft Abhilfe!³⁵⁹

To conclude, a similar attempt to “provide a remedy” from a curatorial point of view can be found in the second gallery of the Brazilian Pavilion entitled “Places of Origin, Archaeologies of the Future” (**FIG. 106**), which is animated by “the memorial dimensions of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian people, pointing to a process of retaking and repairing the representation of heritage, which until recently was limited to valuing European colonialism as the matrix of the national artistic and architectural experience”³⁶⁰. This stance is embodied in the site-specific modifications made to the same space in which the exhibition is presented. Designed by Henrique Mindlin, who was a referent in the construction of the ideology of national modernity, the Brazilian Pavilion at Giardini is in fact a building of emblematic modernist heritage. Called “Aterramento”, these changes alluding to Indigenous and Quilombola's traditions materialize in a new earthen floor, in Costa cloths adorning the second gallery, and a set of railings with Sankofa designs put around the outside. In this way “the audience is invited to set foot on the earth, recognizing Brazil as an ancestral and diasporic territory. By coming into contact

³⁵⁹ Brecht, *Versuche 22-24. Herr Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti. Chinesische Gedichte. Die Ausnahme und die Regel*, 172. (Trans. ‘Anonymous’): “So ends/ The story of a journey/ You have heard and you have seen/ You have seen what is common, what continually occurs/ But we ask you:/ Even if it's not very strange, find it estranging/ Even if it is usual, find it hard to explain/ What here is common should astonish you/ What here's rule, recognise as an abuse/ And where you have recognized an abuse/ Provide a remedy!”

³⁶⁰ Terra, “Gallery: Places of Origin, Archaeologies of the Future”, accessed 29 September 2023. <https://terra.bienal.org.br/GALERIA-LUGARES-DE-ORIGEM-ARQUEOLOGIAS-DO-FUTURO>.

with the earth, the public is also invited to reflect on their condition as planetary inhabitants, from local to global, from earth to Earth.”³⁶¹



FIG. 106 Pavilion of BRAZIL, *Terra* [Earth], 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura - La Biennale di Venezia, *The laboratory of the Future*.

³⁶¹ Terra, “Sobre Terra”, accessed 29 September 2023. <https://terra.bienal.org.br/SOBRE-TERRA-1>.

CONCLUSIONS

In the course of this research it has been attempted to analyze *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography from an ecocritical perspective. Initially, it has been sought to contextualize the adopted approach, which - as seen - originated from literature departments in the United States in the 1990s, but has the potential to extend to the study of any cultural product and context. The second chapter, on the other hand, primarily relies on the evolution of the artistic movement of New Objectivity, outlining its characteristics through what are considered its main proponents, namely Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander and Karl Blossfeldt. Since this thesis deals with the persistence of the characteristics of this style, emphasis had been placed on its resurgence in the 1970s in the artistic production of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who also contributed to form what is known as the “Düsseldorf School” artists.

Although the theoretical treatment of ecocriticism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* has initially been conducted separately to better explain the developments of both phenomena, in both chapters, various interconnections between photography and the environment have been explicitly highlighted through examples that would, however, merit further study. Consider, for example, the sort of genealogy that emerges between the naturalist Ernst Haeckel, Karl Blossfeldt, and Joan Fontcuberta; or Andreas Gursky’s revisit of his *Rhein II*, where, after twenty years, the green of the iconic image is tinged with yellow, to evoke the severe drought, which hit Germany in 2018 and which has been considered by many as a climate change-related event. In the third chapter, a meticulous analysis of select case studies unfolded, encompassing Albert Renger Patzsch’s *Die Welt ist schön*, *Sylt. Bild einer Insel*, and *Ruhrgebiet Landschaften*, the systematic cataloging of industrial architectures by Bernd and Hilla Becher, and finally, Beate Gütschow’s *S* series. While these works share a common thread of dry, objective style, the environmental underpinnings that have been unpacked in their photographs are rich and multifaceted. On one hand, this examination has drawn from some formal considerations, revealing for example intriguing contrasts between the clarity of Renger Patzsch’s backgrounds and the surrounding dust- and smoke-filled atmosphere in which these photographs have been taken; or deepening the parallels between the Bechers’ taxonomic approach to

cataloging industrial buildings and that of natural sciences. As the industry is among the main protagonists of the selected works by Renger-Patzsch and Bernd and Hilla Becher, their photographs have been juxtaposed with the concept of the Technosphere and recontextualised within the contemporary debate on the Anthropocene. Through their images about a century of the Ruhr's environmental history, spanning from industrialisation to deindustrialisation, has been outlined, Yet, insights beyond the German context, with environmental justice as a common denominator, have been also addressed throughout the research. For example, the unequal impact on countries of anthropogenic climate change, fostered by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, has been evoked through the Lula vs. RWE legal case. Then, this study has also allowed the reconceptualization of the notions of *wilderness* and *tabula rasa*. As observed, the narrative surrounding wilderness, instrumental in the creation of United States national parks, intersects with the historical denial of indigenous peoples' land rights, rooted in sustainable coexistence models. Meanwhile, the concept of *tabula rasa*, which stands at the very base of the construction of Brasilia, carries implications for both indigenous communities and the environment. Starting from the analysis of Beate Gütschow's digitally created pictures, which resemble the modernist architecture of the Brazilian capital, and through the writings of Paulo Tavares, this discourse has been further extended into contemporary political events and the ongoing climate crisis.

Furthermore, projects like *Terra*, curated by Tavares, exemplify the kind of artistic endeavors championed by T.J. Demos, which emerge from the interconnected realms of political ecology. It is essential to emphasize at this juncture that together with numerous artists continuing to engage with environmental issues, there exists a compelling case for art history to integrate ecocriticism more robustly into its framework, enriching the discipline. Regarding photography, this study has illuminated several significant developments. These encompass the evolution from pictorialism to what is commonly referred to as "modern photography", the intrinsic value of documentary photographs, the creative potential of digital manipulation, and a noteworthy shift in the landscape's representation, which extends from the depiction of pristine environments to the portrayal of everyday, human-altered landscapes, where, even in the absence of the human figure, its indelible imprints are

unmistakably evident. All these facets collectively share a common thread, namely their status as products of “culture”, which, as it has been elucidated throughout this research, should no longer be seen as antithetical to “nature”. Instead, it can serve as a fertile ground for ecocritical analysis, as demonstrated by the explorations undertaken in this study. In essence, this research represents an humble step in the direction of fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between culture and nature within the realm of photography, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and ecologically informed perspective in the field of art history.



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FIGURE 11. Cover of Eliot Porter's *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World* (1962).

FIGURE 12. Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942, gelatin silver print, 38.2 × 48.4 cm.

FIGURE 13. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water, Great Salt Lake, Utah, 457.2 m x 4.6 m, Dia Art Foundation. © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation / Licensed by Artists Rights Society, New York.

FIGURE 14. Cover of the *Field trips'* exhibition catalog, gathering the work of Bernd & Hilla Becher and Robert Smithson inspired by their visit to Oberhausen in 1968. The exhibition was held at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, from 30 November 2001 to 3 March 2002.

FIGURE 15. Robert Adams *Mobile Homes, Jefferson County, Colorado*, 1973, George Eastman House Collections. © Robert Adams, 2009.

FIGURE 16. George Grosz, *Grauer Tag*, 1921, oil on canvas, 115 x 80 cm, Nationalgalerie Berlin.

FIGURE 17. Carl Grossberg, *Der gelbe Kessel*, 1933, oil on panel, 94 × 74 cm, Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal.

FIGURE 18. Carl Grossberg, *Weißer Röhren (Harburger Ölwerke)*, 1933, oil on canvas, 90 x 70 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Sammlung Moderne Kunst in der Pinakothek der Moderne München.

FIGURE 19. James Craig Annan, *The Riva Schiavoni, Venice*, 1984, photogravure, 14.3 x 19.9 cm, Alfred Stieglitz Collection.

FIGURE 20. Edward Steichen, *Midnight Lake George*, 1904, gum bichromate over platinum print, 39.5 x 48.7 cm, Alfred Stieglitz Collection.

FIGURE 21. László Moholy-Nagy, *Berlin Radio Tower*, 1928, gelatin silver print, 36 × 25.5 cm. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

FIGURE 22. Poster for *Film und Foto*, 1929, offset lithograph, 84 x 58.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

FIGURE 23. *Film und Foto*, Stuttgart, 1929. Installation view of Room 1. Exhibition design by László Moholy-Nagy. Reproduced in Schwäbisches Bilderblatt: Wochenschrift zum Stuttgarter Neuen Tagblatt, no. 23 (June 7, 1929). Stadtarchiv Stuttgart. © 2014/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

FIGURE 24. *Photographie in Amerika*, “Das Kunstblatt”, 1926 (Photographs of Ralph Steiner and Paul Outerbridge).

[In: Olivier Lugon, *Lo stile documentario in fotografia. Da August Sander a Walker Evans 1920 - 1945*, trans. Caterina Grimaldi (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2008), 53. (My scan).]

FIGURE 25. Cover of *Die Welt ist schön* (1928).

FIGURE 26. Cover of *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929).

FIGURE 27. Cover of *Urformen der Kunst* (1928).

FIGURE 28. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Winderhitzer im Hochofenwerk Herrenwyk* (Cowper in the Herrenwyk blast furnace plant), plate 76 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928. (My scan)

FIGURE 29. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Kernstück einer Agave* (Core pieces of agave), plate 99 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928. (My scan).

FIGURE 30. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Natterkopf* (Snake Head, 1927), plate 27 from

Die Welt ist schön, 1928.

FIGURE 31. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Musterzimmer im Fagus-Werk Benscheidt in Alfeld. Schuhleisten- und Stanzmesser Fabrik* (Sample room at the Fagus factory Benscheidt in Alfeld. Shoe last and punching tool factory), plate 50 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

FIGURE 32. August Sander, *Bauernpaar - Zucht und Harmonie* (Farming Couple-Propriety and Harmony), 1912, gelatin silver print, 25.8 × 18.7 cm, Group: *The Farmer*, Portfolio: *Portfolio of Archetypes from People of the Twentieth Century* Number: I/ST/10. © 2023 Die Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung, Kultur - August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, NY.

FIGURE 33. August Sander, *Konditor* (Pastry Cook), 1928, gelatin silver print, 25,8 x 18,7 cm, Portfolio: II/8 *The Master Craftsman* from *People of the Twentieth Century*. © 2023 Die Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung, Kultur - August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, NY.

FIGURE 34. August Sander, *Gelände um Heisterbach* (Terrain near Heisterbach), before 1934. © 2018 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Köln; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

FIGURE 35. August Sander, *Der Rhein bei Boppard, Osterspey* (The Rhine near Boppard, Osterspey), 1938. Gelatin silver print 22.9 x 29.3 cm. Sammlung Lothar Schirmer, München. © 2014 Die Photographische Sammlung, SK Stiftung Kultur - August Sander Archiv, Köln, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2014.

FIGURE 36. Ernst Haeckel, *Ascidiae* (Ascidians), lithography, plate 85 of *Kunstformen der Natur*, 1904.

FIGURE 37. Karl Blossfeldt, *Allium ostrovskianum* (Flower of a garlic plant), enlarged 6X, 1928, gelatin silver print.

FIGURE 38. Karl Blossfeldt, *Pasque Flower, Fastened on Modeling Clay*, 1926. © Archiv der Universität der Künste Berlin / SLUB / Deutsche Fotothek.

FIGURE 39. Karl Blossfeldt, a) *Equisetum hiemale* (Winter horsetail) in 6x magnification, b) *Hosta japonica*. (Funkie, funnel lily, young shoot) in 2x magnification, c) *Equisetum hiemale*. (Winter horsetail) in 6x magnification. n.d.

FIGURE 40. Joan Fontcuberta, *Karchofa sardinae (Herbarium)*, 1983, gelatin and silver on barite paper.

FIGURE 41. Otto Steinert, *Ein-Fuß-Gänger (One-Foot Walker)*, ca. 1950, Silbergelatine, 21 x 30,1 cm. Nachlass Otto Steinert, Museum Folkwang, Essen. © Museum Folkwang Essen – ARTOTHEK.

FIGURE 42. Otto Steinert, *Face of a Dancer*, 1952, Gelatin silver print, 40 × 30.5 cm.

FIGURE 43. Bernd and Hilla Becher. *Comparative Juxtaposition, Nine Objects, Each with a Different Function*, 1961–72, gelatin silver prints, each 24.1 × 19.1 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher.

FIGURE 44. Candida Höfer, *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di S. Rocco Venezia I*, 2003, color coupler print, I: 119.5 x 183 cm, S: 152.5 x 216 cm. Number five from an edition of six.

FIGURE 45. Thomas Struth, *Wagnerstrasse*, Düsseldorf, 1979, Silver gelatin print, 66,0 x 84,0 cm.

FIGURE 46. Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago II*, Chicago, 1990, Chromogenic print, 180,0 x 215,0 cm.

FIGURE 47. Thomas Struth, *Tokamak Asdex Upgrade Interior 2*, Max Planck IPP, Garching, 2009, chromogenic print, 141,6 x 176,0 cm.

FIGURE 48. Thomas Ruff, *Selected Portraits*, 1987-1998, eight chromogenic prints, each 23.5 x 17.8 cm.

FIGURE 49. Andreas Gursky, *Les Mées*, 2016, C-Print, Diasec, 220.9 x 367.2 cm.

FIGURE 50. Andreas Gursky, *Rhein II*, 1999, chromogenic print, 155.6 × 308.6 cm.

FIGURE 51. Andreas Gursky, *Rhein III*, 2018, Inkjet Print, Diasec, 237,6 x 407,6 cm.

FIGURE 52. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Congo. Lupunga bei Kabinda. Leipzig, Museum für Völkerkunde* [Songye mask (*kifwebe*)], in Ernst Fuhrmann, *Afrika. Sakralkulte. Vorgeschichte der Hieroglyphen*, vol. 6: Kulturen der Erde. Material zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte aller Völker, Hagen i.W. and Darmstadt, 1922, plate 90. © Albert Renger-Patzsch Archiv/Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich/Artists Rights Society, New York.

[In: Megan R. Luke, "The Ghost and the Rock: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time", *Art History*, 46 (March 2023): 8.]

FIGURE 53. Illustration by Alfred Malhau on the first edition's cover of *Die Welt ist schön* (1928), depicting a telegraph mast and an agave plant standing over the photographer's initials A. R.-P.

FIGURE 54. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Kaupen von unten gesehen. Hochofen. Werk Herrenwyk*. (Chimney seen from below. Herrenwyk Blast Furnace Works), Lübeck, gelatin silver photograph, plate 91 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

FIGURE 55. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Gewölbe des Mittelschiffs der St. Katharinenkirche in Lübeck*, (Vault of the central nave of St. Catherine's Church in Lübeck), gelatin silver photograph, plate 94 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

FIGURE 56. Georges Bataille's entry for "Cheminée d'usine" illustrated with a photograph of a chimney during demolition. *Documents*, n°6, (November 1929): 329.

FIGURE 57. Albert Renger-Patzsch, Zollverein Colliery (Fritz Schupp and Martin Kremmer, Essen-Stoppenberg, 1932), 1932. Gelatin silver print. © Albert Renger-Patzsch / Archiv Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2021.

[In: Katerina Korola, "The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry", *Representations* 157, no. 1 (February 2022): 91.]

FIGURE 58. Albert Renger-Patzsch, Zollverein Colliery (Fritz Schupp and Martin Kremmer, Essen-Stoppenberg, 1932), 1932. Gelatin silver print. © Albert Renger-Patzsch / Archiv Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2021.

[In: Katerina Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, *Representations* 157, no. 1 (February 2022): 93.]

FIGURE 59. Verso of a vintage print by Albert Renger-Patzsch, from the collection of the Photothek of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich. The print features Renger-Patzsch’s annotations, including the verb “entflecken” (remove the flecks).

[In Katerina Korola, “The Air of Objectivity: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Photography of Industry”, *Representations* 157, no. 1 (February 2022): 93.]

FIGURE 60. Krupp Works West Quarter around 1910. © Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum.

FIGURE 61. Map of the Ruhr Region. In Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, “A Nature Fit for Industry: The Environmental History of the Ruhr Basin, 1840 - 1990”, *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1994), 37.

FIGURE 62. Axel Braun’s installation displayed in 2011 in the entrance hall of the corporate headquarters of RWE AG. It reports a quotation from a social democrat newspaper *Vorwärts* from 1928 “Die Technik muss grausam sein, wenn sie sich durchsetzen will”, (Technology must be cruel in order to assert itself).

FIGURE 63. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Landschaft bei Essen und Zeche “Rosenblumendelle”* (Landscape near Essen with the Rosenblumendelle colliery), 1928. © Albert Renger-Patzsch / Archiv Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich / ADAGP, Paris 2017.

FIGURE 64. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Schrebergärten zwischen Duisburg und Hamborn* (Allotment gardens between Duisburg and Hamborn), 1929. © Albert Renger-Patzsch / Archiv Ann und Jürgen Wilde / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

FIGURE 65. Plates 10 and 11 from *Sylt. Bild einer Insel*, 1936. (My scan)

FIGURE 66. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Zeche “Victoria Mathias” in Essen* (Colliery “Victoria Mathias” in Essen), 1929. © Albert Renger-Patzsch / Archiv Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich / ADAGP, Paris 2017.

[This picture has been selected to illustrate Renger-Patzsch’s work in the archive of the Foto/Industria 2019, focused on the theme of the Technosphere.]

FIGURE 67. Edward Burtinsky, *Oil Bunkering #4*, Niger Delta, Nigeria 2016. © Edward Burtinsky, courtesy Admira Photography, Milan / Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

[This picture has been selected to illustrate Burtinsky’s work in the archive of the Foto/Industria 2019, focused on the theme of the Technosphere.]

FIGURE 68. Axel Braux, *Oxbow of river Emscher*, Kaisergarten, Oberhausen, 2014.

FIGURE 69. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Ensdorf Mine*, Saarland, Germany, 1979, unknown, gelatin silver print, 12 × 14.1 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher.

FIGURE 70. Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine*, Eisern, Germany, 1955/56, Graphite and watercolor on paper. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher, courtesy Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—Bernd & Hilla Becher Archive, Cologne.

FIGURE 71. Bernd Becher, *Eisernhardter Tiefbau Mine*, Eisern, Germany, 1957, Collage of six gelatin silver prints, 40 × 29.9 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher, courtesy Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—Bernd & Hilla Becher Archive, Cologne.

FIGURE 72. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Hochöfen*, 1965-1992, 12 silver prints, 40 x 30 cm each, overall dimensions 172 x 189 cm. © Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher. Courtesy Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles.

[Years and locations have been added on the base of: Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, *Typologien*, (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 1990), 92-93.]

FIGURE 73. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Kühlturm, ca. 1950, Zeche, "Victoria Mathias"*, Essen, Ruhrgebiet (Cooling tower, ca. 1950, "Victoria Mathias", Essen, Ruhr District), 1963, gelatin silver print, 19,53 x 19,4 cm. © Estate of Bernd and Hilla Becher.

FIGURE 74. "The city of Essen repeatedly sank into a haze of soot, dust and toxic gasses, as here in 1964" © Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum, Photo: Walter Moog

[In: Möller, Christian. "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung." *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 (2022), 35.]

FIGURE 75. "Raised index finger with a dirty fingertip: the trademark of "IG Schmutz" on a leaflet, around 1970". © Haus der Essener Geschichte/Stadtarchiv, Item 472, No. 62.

[In: Möller, Christian. "Bürger für einen blauen Himmel über der Ruhr. Clemens Schmeck und die Interessengemeinschaft gegen Luftverschmutzung." *Forum Geschichtskultur Ruhr* 13 (2022), 36.]

FIGURE 76. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Colliery Zollern II*, 1971, gelatin silver print, 34,9 x 40,5 cm.

FIGURE 77. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Towers*, 1972–2009, 9 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper, Each frame: 56,3 × 46,2 x 21cm, displayed: 172 × 142 x 21 cm.

FIGURE 78. Funnel mushroom *Infundibulicybe gibba* growing in the moss in the spruce forest. Also known as *Clitocybe gibba* or common funnel. Edible wild mushroom. Photo: Igor Kramar (cropped).

FIGURE 79. Ernst Haeckel, *Mycetozoa*, lithography, plate 93 of *Kunstformen der Natur*, 1904.

FIGURE 80. Karl Blossfeldt, *Acanthus mollis* (Soft Acanthus, Bear's Breeches. Bracteoles with the Flowers Removed, Enlarged 4 Times) 1898–1928, gelatin silver print, 29.8 x 23.8 cm, © 2023 Karl Blossfeldt / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

FIGURE 81. August Sander, *Strassenarbeiter im Ruhrgebiet* [Workmen in the Ruhr], ca. 1928, Group: Der Handwerker [The Skilled Tradesman], Portfolio: II/10 Der Arbeiter – sein Leben und Wirken [II/10 The Worker – His Life and Work], Number: II/10/4.

FIGURE 82. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Chemical Plant, Wesseling near Cologne, Germany*, 1983, ferrotyped gelatin silver print, 48.5 x 58.7 cm.

FIGURE 83. Beate Gütschow, *Was entsteht wenn die Perfektion ins kleinste Detail reicht*, 2011, 121 x 151 cm, Lightbox, from *I* series.
<https://beateguetschow.de/i-whole-series/>.

FIGURE 84. Beate Gütschow, *Schneller von heute nach morgen*, 2013, 115 x 90 cm, Lightbox, from *I* series.

FIGURE 85. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Musterzimmer im Fagus-Werk Benscheidt in Alfeld. Schuhleisten- und Stanzmesser Fabrik* (Sample room at the Fagus factory Benscheidt in Alfeld. Shoe last and punching tool factory), plate 50 from *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928.

FIGURE 86. Jacob Philipp Hackert, *Ideale Landschaft mit Apollo und Hirten*, 1805, oil on canvas, 119 x 167 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

FIGURE 87. Beate Gütschow, *LS#8*, 2000, C-print, 95 x 119 cm, from *LS* series.

FIGURE 88. Beate Gütschow, *LS#7*, 1999, C-print, 164 x 116 cm, from *LS* series.

FIGURE 89. Joachim Brohm, *Essen 1982*, 1982, analog C-Prints, 24 x 30 cm (Ed. of 12) and 50 x 60 cm (Ed. of 8). © Joachim Brohm | VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

FIGURE 90. Joachim Brohm, *Bochum 1983*, 1983, analog C-Prints, 24 x 30 cm (Ed. of 12) and 50 x 60 cm (Ed. of 8). © Joachim Brohm | VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

FIGURE 91. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Esch-Alzette, L*, 1980, gelatin silver print, 60 x 50 cm, Courtesy the Estate and Hauser & Wirth © Estate Bernd and Hilla Becher.

FIGURE 92. Beate Gütschow, *S#11*, 2005, 180 x 232 cm, LightJet print. <https://beateguetschow.de/s-series/>.

FIGURE 93. Beate Gütschow, *S#14*, 2005, 180 x 267 cm, LightJet print.

FIGURE 94. Beate Gütschow, *S#24*, 2007, 212 x 177 cm, LightJet print.

FIGURE 95. Joan Fontcuberta, *Braohypoda frustata (Herbarium)*, 1984, Gelatin and silver on baryta-coated paper, 26 x 22 cm.

FIGURE 96. Beate Gütschow, *S#10*, 2005, 180 x 267 cm, LightJet print.

FIGURE 97. Beate Gütschow, *S#4*, 2004, 100 x 154 cm, LightJet print.

FIGURE 98. National Congress, Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, 1958. Photo: José Moscardi.

FIGURE 99. Lucio Costa's original drawings of the "Plano Piloto", 1957, [under custody of] Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

FIGURE 100. Crossing of the two axes at the early stages of construction, 1956. [under custody of] Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

FIGURE 101. Catholic mass in Brasília's construction site in 1957, with the rustic altar designed by Oscar Niemeyer, [under custody of] Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

FIGURE 102. Victor Meirelles, *Primeira missa no Brasil (First Mass in Brazil)*, ca. 1860, oil on canvas, 250 x 357, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.

FIGURE 103. A war tank and other vehicles of the Brazilian Army near the National Congress of Brazil, during the Coup d'état of 1964 (Golpe de 64). Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

FIGURE 104. The assault of the National Congress Palace on the 8th January 2023 in support of the outgoing president Jair Bolsonaro.

FIGURE 105. Beate Gütschow, *S#11*, 2005, 180 x 232 cm, LightJet print.

FIGURE 106. Pavilion of BRAZIL, *Terra* [Earth], 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura - La Biennale di Venezia, The laboratory of the Future. Photo: Matteo de Mayda.

FIGURE 107. Giulia Incicco, *Nature-culture continuum. Primo studio di casa abbandonata*, Montecosaro, 2023.

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