

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **PHOTOGRAPHS BECOME PICTURES THE BECHER CLASS**

**Volker Döhne, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Tata Ronkholz,  
Thomas Ruff, Jörg Sasse, Thomas Struth and Petra Wunderlich**

**27 APRIL TO 13 AUGUST 2017**

**Press preview: Wednesday, 26 April 2017, 11 am  
Städel Museum, exhibition annex**

**Frankfurt am Main, 29 March 2017.** From 27 April to 13 August 2017, the Städel Museum is staging a comprehensive survey on the Becher Class at the Düsseldorf art academy and the major paradigm shift in the medium of artistic photography with which the Bechers and their students are associated. With the aid of some 200 photographs by Volker Döhne, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Tata Ronkholz, Thomas Ruff, Jörg Sasse, Thomas Struth and Petra Wunderlich – a group of whom some enjoy international renown and others are due for rediscovery –, the exhibition will examine the influence exerted by Bernd and Hilla Becher on their students at the Düsseldorf school. What unites the students' works with those of their teachers? How do they differ? Is there really such a thing as the "Becher School" or is it 'merely' a matter of several highly successful photographers who happened to be studying at the 'right place' at an especially propitious moment in history? And how have those artists influenced our present conception of what a picture is? Taking the artist duo's work as a point of departure, the exhibition "Photographs Become Pictures. The Becher Class" will acquaint viewers with the radical changes in the medium of artistic photography that became manifest in the works of the Becher pupils in the eighties and above all the nineties, and investigate the art-historical impact of this development up to the very present. It will feature major large-scale works as well as key early endeavours by the members of what is presumably the most influential generation of German photographers in the field of fine art.

The students of the first in a long line of Becher Classes at the Düsseldorfer art academy introduced elementary changes to contemporary art's aesthetic, media and economic contexts. They not only contributed decisively to shaping international

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photography in the 1990s, but also fundamentally redefined the status and perception of artistic photography in general. Their works can be considered as one of the most self-confident emancipations of photography as art in the mediums history, while at the same time reflecting the (not merely digital) moment when the boundaries between the media dissolve.

The presentation is being sponsored by the DZ BANK AG.

“Bernd and Hilla Becher’s first – meanwhile world-famous – students played a tremendously important role in establishing photography as an expressive medium on a par with other art forms. The nine artists featured in our show occupy a realm where the distinction between painting and photography is no longer clear. The permeability of the boundary between the media is deliberate in their work, and in that respect they mirror one of the key focuses of the Städel Museum’s collection of contemporary art”, observes Städel director Dr Philipp Demandt.

And exhibition curator Dr Martin Engler adds: “What the teachings of Bernd and Hilla Becher sparked off – and their students developed further – is a new conception of the artwork according to which the boundaries between sculpture, painting and photography dissolve in terms of media and aesthetics alike. In other words, in the very moment in history when photography emancipated itself to become an independent medium, it sounded its own death knell.”

The founding of a chair for artistic photography at the Düsseldorf art academy in 1976 provided perhaps the single most important impulse for a change in how the medium of photography was perceived. In close cooperation with his wife Hilla Becher, Bernd Becher held that chair until 1996. Even before their appointment to the Düsseldorf school, the Bechers had been taking pictures of historical industrial architecture, subscribing to a work concept that exceeded the scope of a common documentary approach in photography. They portrayed mining headframes, blast furnaces, gas tanks, water towers and other testimonies to a vanishing industrial culture – frontally, in central perspective, with fascinating depth of field, and where possible before the backdrop of a uniformly grey sky. They arranged the individual shots in grids to form large-scale tableaus they called typologies. The concern here was no longer merely the illustration of reality, but its perception. Reality could no longer be depicted singly, but only in a multiplicity of simultaneous images. From the formal aesthetic point of view, the staging of the pictorial subjects was now far more than documentary in nature. The affinity to minimal and concept art – evident in the rigour of the pictorial vocabulary, the industrial aesthetic and the new perception of a work in stages – is unmistakable.

Especially in their early work, the students of the first Becher Class explored their teachers' artistic strategy with great intensity. Yet as they continued to pursue it in the nineties, they did so ever more independently, and in their own highly individual styles. With the aid of various strategies in terms of scale, presentation and motif, and not least of all with abstract pictorial inventions provoked by digital image techniques, they took the interpenetration of the mediums of painting and photography to an extreme. The result was a new concept of the picture that blurs aesthetic and media distinctions. "The dissolution of media boundaries, but also the use of technical innovations, are characteristic of the works of the first Becher Class. It is here that the impact of a changing media culture is felt", explains Dr Jana Baumann, the co-curator of the exhibition.

A show devoted to such a complex phenomenon on the one hand, and such productive teaching activities on the other, must inevitably be limited in scope. "Photographs Become Pictures" concentrates deliberately on the students of the early years of the Becher Class, beginning with Höfer, Döhne, Hütte and Struth in 1976 and ending with the completion of Gursky's and Sasse's studies in 1987/1988. In retrospect, it is precisely in the heterogeneity of the first Becher Class – with its wide range of approaches that have influenced our present-day understanding of the pictorial image – that the success of Bernd and Hilla Becher's teachings is evident.

**Candida Höfer** (b. 1944) is known above all for her pictures of public interiors such as libraries, universities, museums and waiting rooms. Nevertheless, the purely documentary aspect is ultimately of secondary importance to her, as is also true of her teachers. Particularly when she turned to colour photography, she began producing iconically clear shots of meaning-charged interiors extremely striking in their rigorous aesthetic. In composition, repetition and rhythm as well as the sculptural emphasis, Höfer's formal staging of her interiors is reminiscent of the Becher typologies.

A distinct affinity to the typologies is also evident in early street shots by **Thomas Struth** (b. 1954), such as *West Broadway, Tribeca, New York* (1978) or *Sommerstrasse, Düsseldorf* (1980). He proceeded in a manner similar to his teachers, but broadened his spectrum of motifs. He is concerned in his work with cultural structures; in addition to streets he also depicts museums or religious cult sites and portrays families. With the aid of social and ethnological allusions he reveals orders and interrelationships, thus achieving a universal survey of human and their lifeworld in imagery.

**Petra Wunderlich's** (b. 1954) black-and-white series depict details of churches or quarries that the artist has introduced to a new, abstract compositional framework. By this method she reduces architecture visually to its stereometric tectonics in such a

way that elementary architectonic forms unexpectedly emerge from the “broken” surfaces of nature. Wunderlich’s photographs, like those by the Bechers, can be read as sociological and historical testimonies.

The workgroups of **Volker Döhne** (b. 1953) closely resemble Bernd and Hilla Bechers’ typologies with regard to concept and motif alike. He developed series such as *Small-Scale Iron Industry* (1977/78) or *Small Railway Bridges and Underpasses in the Bergisches and Märkisches Land* (1979). With his experimental *Colour* (1979) series, he then emancipated himself from his teachers.

**Tata Ronkholz** (1940–1997) was interested primarily in factory gates, shop windows, beverage kiosks and snack bars, which she photographed in the even light of grey days. Many aspects of these works are strongly reminiscent of the Becher photographs: the consistent placement of the subject at the pictorial centre, the unchanging size of the prints, but also the serial, typologically comparative approach.

**Thomas Ruff** (b. 1958) is likewise deeply indebted to his teachers’ serial method, which we encounter in his work in ever-different formulations. His portraits as well as the strongly enlarged nocturnal shots of, in part, found material, convey his fundamentally sceptical attitude towards photography’s claim to truth and documentation. His persistent investigations of new pictorial sources and technologies are perhaps the most impressive demonstrations of the manner in which Ruff continues the approach of Bernd and Hilla Becher.

**Axel Hütte**’s (b. 1951) early architectural details investigate social situations using a mode of photographic expression distinguished by distance and anonymity. Within this context, he devotes himself as much to spoiled landscapes as to supposedly untouched nature which nevertheless has always been formed by human intervention. A conspicuous aspect of his work is the strong reference to historical landscape painting, whose formal compositional principles he both copies and deconstructs. Whereas the Bechers directed their attention to the sculptural or conceptual potential of their pictures, Hütte focusses on painting as the leading medium of modern art.

**Jörg Sasse** (b. 1962) initially devoted himself to highly artificial and at the same time prosaic arrangements of petit-bourgeois domestic culture. His later “tableaus” represent a virtual antithesis to the reductive rigour of these early works. Using digital and analogue techniques alike, he began processing found pictures as well as images of his own making, in which context he blurred the distinction between painting and photograph beyond recognition.

**Andreas Gursky**’s (b. 1955) early photographs are likewise characterised by a keen interest in everyday surroundings – the private as well as the public sphere, the context of work as well as leisure time. Like Sasse, he investigates the aesthetic boundary between photographic and painterly image production. By means of digital manipulations he uses to duplicate and mount the pictorial motif to the point of abstraction, he creates perplexing pictorial architectures that merge construction and

reality in large-scale colour prints.

The development of the Becher Class shows how concept art's expanding notion of the artwork led to a new concept of the pictorial including photography. What the teachers introduced in rudiments was taken by their students and the following generation of artists to a momentous change in the picturing of reality. The realization that photography cannot reproduce reality impartially does not detract from the medium. On the contrary, it means an enhancement in terms of artistic potential. What is more, the lack of focus in the portrayal of reality – in the literal and figurative sense alike – enriches photography's complexity. It is not least of digital changes that enables innovative pictorial invention. Yet the boundaries of the photographic image also became fluid in the development from individual work to typology and series, and from detail to overall image. The answer to all questions about the significance, classification, doctrine and conception of what we refer to as the "Becher School" can thus be found in an insight as simple as it is surprising: in the very moment in history when photography emancipated itself to become an independent medium, it sounded its own death knell.

#### **PHOTOGRAPHS BECOME PICTURES. THE BECHER CLASS**

**Featured artists:** Bernd and Hilla Becher, Volker Döhne, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Tata Ronkholz, Thomas Ruff, Jörg Sasse, Thomas Struth, Petra Wunderlich

**Curator:** Dr Martin Engler, Head of the Collection of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum

**Co-curator:** Dr Jana Baumann, Städel Museum

**Exhibition dates:** 27 April to 13 August 2017

Press preview: Wednesday, 26. April 2017, 11 am

**Location:** Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt

**Catalogue:** To accompany the exhibition, the Hirmer Verlag is publishing a catalogue with a foreword by Philipp Demandt, essays by Alexander Alberro, Jana Baumann, Martin Engler and Steffen Siegel, and texts by Lukas Engert, Iris Hasler, Markus Kramer and Kristin Schrader. 256 pages and approx. 178 illustrations. In German. 34.90 EUR (museum edition)

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**Opening hours:** Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am – 6 pm, Thu + Fri 10 am – 9 pm,  
Mondays closed

**Special opening hours:** 1 May, 10 am – 6 pm; 25 May, 10 am – 6 pm; 4 Jun, 10 am – 6 pm; 5 Jun, 10 am – 6 pm; 15 Jun, 10 am – 6 pm

**Admission:** 14 euros, reduced 12 euros, families 24 euros; free admission for children up to twelve years of age. Groups of at least ten persons: reduced admission per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

**Advance ticket sales online at:** [tickets.staedelmuseum.de](http://tickets.staedelmuseum.de).

**Digital:** Starting on 5 April 2017, an interactive digital, elaborately designed to provide comprehensive insights into the exhibition, will be available at [becherklasse.staedelmuseum.de](http://becherklasse.staedelmuseum.de). The digital is being made possible by the Aventis Foundation.

**Social Media:** The Städel Museum is communicating the exhibition in the social media with the hashtags #BecherKlasse and #Staedel.

**General guided tours of the exhibition:** Thu 7 pm, Sat 4 pm and Mon, 1 May, Thu, 25 May, Mon, 5 Jun, Thu, 15 Jun 4 pm. The number of participants is limited.

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