

Global Breach

The Photos of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher

by Andy Grundberg

In the postmodernist heyday of the 1980s, contemporary artists used photographs to show that present-day reality is really a sham, a sum of mostly camera-produced images that represent reality only partially, inadequately, and stereotypically. A decade later, a different group of artists were employing photographs to investigate or reconstruct their cultural heritage, essentially making photography an agent of multicultural, genealogical inquiry. On the face of it, these two projects would seem to be antithetical, one viewing photographs as inauthentic by virtue of being cultural representations, the other seeing them as authentic because of their rootedness in culture. But as the work of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher demonstrates, photography's functions in relation to culture are not so much conflicted as productively paradoxical.

For the last ten years, Robbins and Becher have made photographs that focus on ersatz, adopted, dislocated, and reconstituted cultural experience. They have paired Cuban cigars made in Honduras with the same brands made in Havana, taken portraits of African Americans settled in the Dominican Republic and of Germans who dress up as Native Americans, and made architectural views of German colonial-era buildings in Africa and of new Bavarian-style buildings in America. Their classic documentary style is descriptive, straightforward, and seemingly objective, albeit in color. The result is what Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* has called "postmodern National Geographic."¹ Actually, the Geographic comparison is a stretch, since Robbins and Becher — collaborators who also are husband and wife — scrupulously avoid any hint of the picturesque. They work out of a tradition of social documentation that includes such canonical historical figures as Walker Evans and Lewis Hine in the United States and Albert Renger-Patzsch and August Sander in Germany, as well as more contemporary artist photographers like Lewis Baltz, Dan Graham, and Steven Shore. Like Graham, they might be thought of as conceptual photographers, since the ironies and layered meanings of their pictures often become apparent only with the aid of their accompanying titles and texts.

Take, for example, a picture from one of their earliest series, *Colonial Remains*, called "One Göring Strasse" (1991). The nominal subject is a prototypical German-style house in Lüderitz, a seaside town in Namibia, which was formerly a German colony known as South-West Africa. Occupying the middle ground between a pristine blue sky and a brown unpaved street, the house is unremarkable in appearance except for the presence of a small blue sign that reads "Göring Strasse." Seeing this, we are likely to think of Hermann Göring, Hitler's henchman, but in fact the street is named in honor of Göring's father, the first commissioner of the colony. Robbins and Becher's text panel that accompanies the series implicates the older Göring in an earlier holocaust against an indigenous people called the Herero. Between 1904 and 1905, the artists tell us, 75 to 80 percent of the Herero were killed by the German colonists in a campaign of cultural extirpation.

Knowing this fundamentally changes the way we look at the picture, to the extent that the bland façade of the house seems purposely designed to mislead us. As the critic Benjamin Buchloh wrote of the series in a 1994 catalog essay, "Every detail of the colonialist architecture now appears as a manifestation

of historical oppression . . . Every feature of the seemingly benign architecture now reads like a missionary tale."² In short, *Colonial Remains* encompasses a historical narrative that extends from German colonialism in the 19th century to the trauma of Nazism in the mid-20th.

The series also defines the overarching ambition of Robbins and Becher's work, which is to make linkages between past and present that implicate the dark side of history and its cultural passages. Three years after making the pictures for *Colonial Remains*, they photographed the grounds of Dachau, the Nazi extermination camp that now attracts millions of visitors, its sanitized, landscaped visage shown in seemingly pleasant pictures with titles like "Execution Range and Blood Ditch." A more recent series, *German Indians* (1997/98), shows pale-faced Germans dressed up as quasi-Sioux warriors in an annual festival in Radebeul, a town near Dresden, in honor of Karl May, a 19th-century German who wrote novels about the American West. Again, context is crucial: the artists point out that May's glorification of the American Indian at the expense of Western civilization was influential within the ranks of Nazi-era racists, who saw their own "folk" as a noble tribe corrupted by "outsiders."

This fascination with German history and German behavior is not surprising, given that Max Becher was born and raised in Düsseldorf. His parents are the influential artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose pioneering photographs of decaying industrial structures, presented in grids as "typologies" of form, helped herald the entry of photography into the contemporary art world of the early 1970s. Some of the "Becher style" of photography — now known not only through them but also through the work of their students, including Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth — has rubbed off on Robbins and Becher. Their pictures are descriptive, clear and well made, and they keep a respectful distance between the camera and their subjects, seemingly letting them speak for themselves. Their use of color film allows them to take advantage of the saturation of bright, solid hues, but they refrain from calendarizing their subjects by avoiding directional or dramatic light conditions.

Robbins was born in Boston; her career path linked with Becher's when they met in New York at the Cooper Union School of Art, where they studied with Hans Haacke and from which they graduated in 1986. Not surprisingly, American colonialism and cultural appropriation have been given equal time in their career. The series *Wall Street in Cuba* (1992) consists of photographs of neoclassical stone buildings of the sort that banks and staid corporations inhabit, only instead of being located in Manhattan they are in Havana. A view of what was once the Havana Stock Exchange includes three Cubans, among them an infant, who now make their home in the building. Like the German buildings in Namibia, the remnants of American architecture in Cuba speak to a history of colonial oppression and exploitation, as well as to the inability of the present to heal or erase those scars.

The 1995 series *The Exile Brands* also looks at Cuba and its relationship to the United States, only with a more burning subject, cigars. In close-up still-lives worthy of Irving Penn, the artists photographed pairs of nearly identical "Cuban" cigars with nearly identical labels, the differences being that one cigar is made in Cuba and the other in Honduras or the Dominican Republic. The "exile brands" have more finely printed labels and an authentic, pre-Castro lineage, while the cigars really made in Cuba are true "Havanas" and represent Castro's attempt to maintain the reputations of the original brands. This doubling back of our ideas about real and fake presents a quandary, a situation not unlike that of Cuban exiles who have lived in Miami for 40 years and claim to represent the real culture of Cuba.

Other bodies of work focus more directly on the United States, concentrating on our national skill in creating simulations of other places and people. A 1993 series called *Old Tucson* documents a make-believe Western town on the outskirts of Tucson that serves as a location for Hollywood filmmakers; another series shows the Manhattan skyline of a Las Vegas casino named New York, New York. Holland (1993), a series that includes pictures of tulips and windmills, was photographed in Holland, Michigan, a town that has resuscitated its Dutch heritage as a step toward economic revitalization. Similarly, the town of Leavenworth, Washington, the subject of *Bavarian by Law* (1995/96), has become a tourist magnet by adopting a German alpine "look" — despite, in this case, the absence of any history of German immigration to the area. Undeterred, the people of Leavenworth now don Lederhosen and embroidered aprons for town parades, and all the area's signs are written in an "alt Deutsch" type style.

Picturing America as a borderless theme park of free-association cultural materials and meanings is not an unprecedented tactic in recent photography — Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects* and David Graham's *American Beauty* are cases in point. But Robbins and Becher come closer to the heart of what Jean Baudrillard proposed in *Simulations* — "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland"³ — but without the French theorist's abandonment of the possibility of political and social intervention. By concentrating on the cracks in the illusions we create for ourselves (in Holland, Michigan, a distant Burger King sign belies the Dutch landscape), they allow historical consciousness to seep through. This, Buchloh has suggested, makes them distinct from the elder Bechers and the venerable *Neue Sachlichkeit* tradition, although arguably not from the aims of Dan Graham and other Conceptualists who employed photographs against "marketplace art" in the 1970s.⁴ In this regard *Bavarian by Law* could be considered central to the artists' career to date because of its intersection of the German and American tangents in their previous work. In grand postmodern fashion the Americans of Leavenworth appropriate the architecture, costumes, graphic design, and customs of Bavaria, but in doing so they unwittingly engage a German history of racialism. Hitler, after all, lived as a young man in Bavaria, a rude provincial backwater in the minds of many cultured northern Germans and a region that consequently long fostered feelings of racial inferiority. By celebrating the Bavarian "myth" of purity and innocence, Leavenworth is conjoined with modern-day Dachau (the camp happens to be located in Bavaria) and Lüderitz, Namibia, in a process of historical reconfiguration and erasure.

The conjunction of the American and German tendencies to engage in cultural displacement also appears in the artists' most recent work, made in the Dominican Republic. One group of pictures is from Sosúa, where 600 European Jews, most of them German-speaking, settled in 1938 after they were given sanctuary by Rafael Trujillo, the country's longtime dictator. The other group comes from the peninsula of Samaná, where descendants of freed American slaves have lived since 1824, when the entire island was part of Haiti. In both series the pictures are mostly portraits, although there also are exterior and interior views of houses in the Sosúa selection. The artists now seem to be asking portraiture to do the same work that their architectural photographs did, which is to say that there is a tension in the pictures that suggests a non-indigenous, anomalous presence. This is most clear in "Sosúa," where signs of the German language and culture are visible — we even see a framed picture of a soldier wearing the characteristic German flak helmet.

The people in the "Samaná" series are less obviously immigrants, since most have been photographed against plain backgrounds. Here again, the artists rely on their own text to give these portraits a more com-

plex resonance. They note that some 8,000 residents of Samaná still speak a form of American English that is nearly 200 years old. We are also told that using English has been outlawed as part of a campaign of social and economic discrimination against them. About Sosúa we learn that the descendants of the Germanic settlers have prospered not only as farmers but also as hosts to a tourist industry that depends on young, sun-loving Europeans, most of them from Germany. This strategy of relying on text to reorient or complicate the pictorial information of the photographs may irritate traditionalists who believe that pictures should tell their own stories, but it is part of the tradition of Conceptual art inherited by a later generation of photo-based artists, from Martha Rosler to Lorna Simpson.

The artists continue to visit the Dominican Republic to work on projects, including a video on the Americans of Samaná, and they are preparing a book they envision as "an atlas of transported places." Meanwhile, their work is being shown widely, with simultaneous gallery shows at Sonnabend and Leslie Tonkonow in New York last fall and an exhibition in Barcelona in March at Galerie Senda. Clearly the confluence of cultural and representational issues in their work has struck the central nervous system of today's art audience, and the combination of visual and textual information has added a new dimension to the deadpan, self-sufficient documentary style of their forebears.

¹ Roberta Smith, "Andrea Robbins and Max Becher," *New York Times* (Oct. 5, 2001), Section E, p. 31.

² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Architectural Uncanny in the Photographs of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher," in Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, ed. M. Catherine De Zegher (Kanaal Art Foundation, 1994), p. 20.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, tr. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York, 1983), p. 25.

⁴ Robbins and Becher "actually succeed in reintroducing historical subjects into their photographic investigations without even approaching the threat of anecdote," writes Buchloh, p. 21.

Andy Grundberg is an independent critic and curator living in Washington, D.C. A collection of his criticism, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography Since 1974*, was recently published by Aperture.