

# *The Anonymous Memory of the Living Past*

Lyubomir Krastev\*

*Sichuan Fine Arts Institute*

Chongqing, China

lyubomirkrastev@hotmail.com

**Abstract**—This article studies the interaction between photography and archive, in terms of its important role in the contemporary artistic practices of recent decades. The nature of the photographic record allows it to construct historical memory, which underlines its documentary/ archival potential. The method of archiving in photography offers the artists the opportunity to look at the collective history and memory from a different angle, other than the scientific. The problematizing and analysis of the interrelations between the two media, photography and archives, and their specific interaction, specifically discussed in the works of Christian Boltanski and Bernd and Hilla Becher, are key components in the methodology of the study. In the two examples, the photographic subject performs an inversion redefining the boundaries between an image and an object. In this way, constructing / deconstructing the concept of the archive, they challenge or establish it by focusing on a specific fragment of time, with which they discuss the questions of the loss and preservation of historical memory and heritage, from the point of view of their own identity and biographical trace.

**Keywords**—*photography, archive, memory, Becher, Boltanski*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In one of his reflections on the distinctive features of photography compared to “the other types of images”, in his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* Roland Barthes points out the impossibility of classifying photography with the “obsolete forms of presentation” adopted for other media. Definitions such as professional/ amateur photography, or purely in terms of subject matter, such as portraits, objects, naked bodies, etc., are not sufficient to interpret the essence (“if it exists”) of a photographic image [1]. Within the context of the contemporary visual art, the interplay between various artistic practices and genres evolves, similarly to the photographic subjectivity, in undefinable artistic forms, and the effect of the photographic image on them is essential.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the essence of photography, or its subject, has problematic character appealing to philosophers, photographers and artists. With the first collages/ assemblages and quotations, the interpretation of the found object and image in a variety of constellations is an attempt to create, analyse, or deconstruct historical and cultural memory. The presence of a story in the photo is a product of controversial theorizations, but also a creative provocation, whose attempt for amalgamation of different visual artefacts, puts together the puzzle of images by discovering or creating a new contextual discourse, forming a unified/ collective visual entity [2]. Naturally, the process itself is based on the accumulation of images through their creation, gathering and collection, which are most often organized in various serial

forms, such as portfolios, photographic books, typologies and atlases, or are exhibited as panels characterizing the aesthetics of the collage and assemblage. On the one hand this could be manifested in the pulsation of these accumulations, invading uncontrollably the sensory perception, for example the collage. And on the other in their classified and organized presentation with the methods of the archive, established in the practice of a number of European artists from the post-war period and forming to a great extent the look of modern visual art.

In this case, this study is devoted to the interaction between photography and archives. The problematization and analysis of the interrelations between the two media, photography and archives, and their specific interaction, specifically discussed in the works of Christian Boltanski and Bernd and Hilla Becher, are key components in the methodology of the study. Their projects, with their structural appearance of archive boards, can be seen as a cumulative synthesis covering the assemblage and collage practices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the concept of the appearance of a foreign body in the work of art. In the photographic series of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the appropriated/ borrowed memories or lives in the projects of Christian Boltanski, the photographic subject achieves an inversion redefining the boundaries between an image and an object, transforming both the “archive material to aesthetic object” [3], but also from aesthetic object (the photograph) to archive record. In both cases the projects, although structurally and conceptually different or even opposite, are located on the poles of the same “orbit”, representing a common functional “system of formation and transformation of statements” [4]. In the one case, the “documents” once enter into the artworks of the graphic/ the installation / the object, as it is with the works of Boltanski, and then leave the documentary in such a way so as to quote the figure of the document; as he himself shares “It’s not an archive. It’s art about archive” [3]. In the other case, on the board appear “photographs/ documents”, which are not “chosen” to go into the fictional “orbit”, and this turns the board into another kind of work, as is the case with Becher. The photography uses these methods to mark the process of archival creation, becoming a part of this process. The deconstruction of the photographic archive creates a secondary fictitious archive, which changes the original. This way, the two examples above once construct/ establish the concept of the archive, and then they deconstruct or challenge it. This way they focus on a specific fragment of time, with which they discuss the questions of the loss and preservation of historical memory and heritage, from the point of view of their own identity and biographical trace. Such approach in turn leads to the following questions:

How the photographic archive builds connection with the past and gives historical meaning by forming collective visual and historical memory?

How, when comparing the projects of Christian Boltanski and Bernd and Hilla Becher, we find a distinctive opposite interpretation of photography through the archive method, highlighted by a different cultural and historical background and identity?

The problematization of the interrelation photography/archive is an extensive and complex topic, the discussion of which addresses some of the significant processes that occur in the course of contemporary art. Focusing on the cases of Boltanski and Becher, as symbolic examples of such problems, is a glance over the changing definitions of “traditional” and “new”, not only in photography, but also in its communication in relation with other media such as graphics, installation, object, etc. On the other hand, this study gives an example of the importance of art in the transfer and preservation of historical and cultural memory and identity, a current phenomenon in the contemporary cultural dynamics. The topic of the study, and the conclusions reached, would be beneficial for some lecture courses in the studying of visual arts and/or art history.

## II. METHOD

The following methods are used in the research process: description, historical analysis, analysis of works of art, description of a works, theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, formal analysis, content analysis, style analysis, analysis of the obtained results, iconographic analysis, etc.

The philosophical and theoretical works of authors such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur are some of the most significant philosophies focusing on the historical transfer of art and photography. The analysis of their works, listed in the bibliography, was crucial for the thorough discussion of the subject.

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Ruth Rosengarten, Okwui Enwezor, Kate Palmer Albers, Sue Breakell, David Houston Jones, are some of the authors writing and investigating the intervention of the photographic archive, but not only, in the practices of a number of visual artists from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, including the work of Boltanski and Becher.

The texts of Emma Dexter; Thomas Weski; Susane Lange; David Company and Blake Stimson trace the historical, philosophical and artistic movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that have shaped the contemporary character of photography.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The establishment of the connection document/ photograph goes together with the “transforming function” of art from the time of Modernism, which Walter Benjamin touches upon in his critical essay of the 1935, posing questions about the value of mechanically reproduced artworks. In it, Benjamin defines the photographic image as “standard evidence for historical occurrences”, describing the deserted urban landscapes in Atget’s photographs and saying “that he photographed them

like scenes of crime”, and that they are “photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence”. These clues, or “evidence”, become stirring and “they demand a certain apprehension”, for which the viewer needs to “find a specific kind of approach” [5]. Becher’s projects, and their photographs of industrial architecture void of human presence, with which they develop further the traditions of the pre-war movement of New Objectivity preceded by Atget, illustrate this rhetoric requiring “perception in a certain sense”.

If we take photography as “standard evidence for historical occurrences”, it would appear to be a natural conductor between “past and present” and logical archival material. Paul Ricoeur describes the archive as a connection between the two, claiming that its value (as well as that of the document) lies in its significance to the history as a trace. Ricoeur refers to the encyclopaedic definitions, highlighting several archival features in which the accumulation of historical records is directly related to finding facts and evidence gathered in “repositories”. The finding of facts and evidence puts together the puzzle of information that brings the history to light. The conservation of documents, however, is biased, Ricoeur hints: who decides “what should be conserved, what thrown away?”. The bringing out of this issue in itself makes a distinction in the different attitudes towards the archive, that of the historians, anthropologists, sociologists, etc. and that of the artists. Unlike its significance for science, in art, each author has a different view of this information, as he correlates it to his story and connection with his past, thus allowing a look from another personal angle on the collective history and memory, once again referring to Ricoeur’s reflections “Our reflection on historical consciousness will begin its own second-order investigation from this final requirement.” [6].

After the end of the World War II and its subsequent conflicts, and later the fall of the Iron Curtain, the “secondary study of historical consciousness” was the foundation of many artistic practices. For the critical theory in the conceptual art and the post-structuralism, the discrediting of the authority of the archive is one of the most problematic topics. In his book *Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in 1969, Michel Foucault interprets the archive, as based not on its material state of documents, photographs and other historical collections, but on „systems of statements (whether events or things) and a whole set of relations that are peculiar to the discursive level“, forming our relation with the past, building historical importance. For Foucault, the archive cannot be described in its entirety because it is a fragmented structure of “systems” and “networks”, whose understanding and analysis requires “the greater chronological distance”, which gives it value “for our diagnosis”, and as such, the archive brings out “the other, and the outside”. The archive “*is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us*” [4], therefore it remains incomplete and never fully revealed, and this shapes its horizon, forming the so-called “archive continuum” [7].

The interpretation in terms of Foucault’s concept of the archive, as a practice of learning about the past through systems of narrations, allows us to understand it “as a framing structure, a conceptual apparatus”, as Kate Albers says, which

we can use to highlight the paradoxicality engrained in Boltanski's fictitious archive constructed from found photographs, but also in Becher's typologies. In her introduction for an exhibition dedicated to the photographic archive in contemporary art, Ruth Rosengarten explains the crucial distinction which Foucault makes between "method and system", as "useful to the understanding of the archival turn in art". She tells us that in classifying knowledge, quoting Foucault: "there can be only one method; but one can invent and apply a considerable number of systems" [8]. Referring to his reasoning, the author convincingly makes this connection, finding that "'the system....., needing only to be coherent in itself, self-consistent". In this sense, Rosengarten offers the following conclusion about the archive system: "it is a systematic means of actively grouping together items 'in accordance with multiple relations' playing a significant role in the very constitution of a method. Acknowledging the important fact that every archive contains a phantom counter-archive of trash, things it has omitted or thrown away" [9]. Rosengarten refers this state of the archive to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher as being controlled by the system of exclusion and storage of objects, guided by its principles. An interpretation taking a distinct form in the deliberate and methodical capture of the decommissioned industrial architectural constructions, which are about to be destroyed.

#### IV. THE CASE OF BERND AND HILLA BECHER

With their photographic collections of the remains of the retreating industrial age of the 19th and the early 20th century, Bernd and Hilla Becher have created, over several decades starting in the early 1960s, a personal archive bearing the title *Typologien industrieller Bauten* (Typologies of Industrial Buildings). Photographed in various industrial areas in Europe and America, in this archive they classify the almost decommissioned facilities according to their function: lime kilns, cooling towers, blast furnace towers, water towers, gas tanks, silos, and other such structures. Applying a model of comparative observation, they create "typologies of anonymous industrial architecture", in which they preserve and document these transient structures, over which there is hanging some "existential threat". As the Bechers themselves believe "that a common industrial heritage has been overlooked, not only by photography, but in most areas of cultural production" [10]. Their series deal with controversial themes, such as that "we ignore vast tracts of our culture because it does not conform to notions of importance, and of the expendability and waste inherent in the workings of capitalism" [11]. The Bechers' cause is to document the image of the disappearing heritage, by preserving it for the future generations, and thus helping us to comprehend the value of these structures in terms of aesthetics and history. These are traces/ artefacts from the industrial era and the near past, nourishing and not allowing the loss of memory, but they are also photographic subjects concentrated with a tangible aesthetic charge. Bernd defines this architecture as "Calvinist Baroque", saying: "It is concerned with the idea of making money fast, of being efficient....there is no aesthetic thinking behind that architecture, no idea of making it look beautiful. But the very idea of not wanting to make it look beautiful creates a variety, a very independent aesthetic" [11]. Thus,

Becher directs our attention to an industrial reality that is otherwise unnoticed, used in purely instrumental/ manipulative way in its practical function of serving the industry. Beyond this utilitarianism, the aesthetic value in the photographed constructions and buildings represents a particular age, a way of thinking or a certain economic and industrial state.

But this interpretation of "Enlightenment promise of progress that distinguishes the world of aesthetics from that of the instrumental thinking" [12] in work of the Bechers inevitably faces the grim past of their own country, whose industrial progress and modernization are associated with the ideological appeal of the National Socialism "a catastrophe whose memory was both irremovable from (and suppressed in) the period when the Bechers' working method evolved" [9], and that of many other artists from the postwar period of the 1950s-60s. Our task, however, says Stimson quoting Anson Rabinbach is "not to moralize about remembering and forgetting (.....) but to identify the ways that certain metaphoric pasts can be cathected to contemporary events" [13].

In addition to their historical background, the work of the Bechers reflects a clear biographical trail. Bernd was born in a city whose main economic resource is metallurgy, a key industry in prewar and postwar Germany until the 1950s. The common past, history, and childhood memories of the two authors from the years before and during World War II, also make a clear connection with their creative subject. Living their adolescence surrounded by the postwar destruction, their instinct to preserve something, which will be obliterated, acquires subliminal meaning. Their work can also be interpreted as an act caused by the quest for the preservation of vanishing values. These values, once created by us as a symbol of the technical and industrial progress, are then eliminated as unnecessary, as a result of the same progress. The Bechers themselves even identify this cycle as something natural, a part of their "organizational methodology" in which they seek to construct a variety of groups or a family of objects/ motifs based on similarity, geography and function. Like a biological process, they are similar to their motives, "as in Nature where the older is devoured by the newer" [14].

The Bechers' photographs are a buffer of this time transit, a historical record, bearers of memory. The universality of this memory, however, is cautious in the conveyance of sentimentality or nostalgia, their consistent research approach presents and exposes their different "species" and "families" into an overall organizational scheme in series and rows, similar to a taxonomic panel in the comparative anatomy and natural science. Exposed in this way, these interacting images act as a complex ornamental grid, in which the feeling of a small difference disappears [15]. In 1970, like their predecessors Karl Blossfeldt, Albert Renger-Patzsch and August Sander, the Bechers choose the organizational model of the photographic book, which they title *Anonymous Sculptures*. In it, in contrast to the pictures exhibited on the wall arranged in rows and columns, the single images presented on individual pages, have almost a portrait effect, which is emphasized by their composition and shape. "The Bechers are interested in the character implicit in a façade, just the way Sander was in the character implicit in a face", says Donald Kuspit, adding, "I

cannot help regarding these pictures as macabre monuments to human self-distortion in the name of social reason – all-too-human structures that are ridiculously social.” [16].

#### V. THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

Both the Bechers, with the typologies of their “anonymous sculptures”, and Boltanski, with his elegiac ephemeral images, “explore the historical and moral underpinnings of their own cultures”[8], however, their biography in relation to the war period distinguishes two different generations. Born in the early 1930s, in their early childhood Bernd and Hilla, experience the cataclysms of war, which largely explains the “suppression of the catastrophe” in the search of the beautiful. Boltanski, on the other hand, born after the liberation of Paris in the 1944, inherits the war trauma through the accounts and the stories of his own family, the son of a surviving Polish Jew, despite the distance of time, he was directly affected by the consequences and the “memory” of the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch coins the term *postmemory* referring to the children of the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust, who grow up surrounded by the narratives of a previous generation. Their memory is “shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated”, says Hirsch [17]. Such rhetoric, loaded with multiple unknowns, causes a natural aspiration for unveiling this otherwise dark period. In the search for certain evidence or traces to demystify the past, the records, documents and photographs assemble the puzzle, or at least seemingly so, as accented by Boltanski in his series. Obliterating the delineation between fiction and history, he manages to present the conditionality of the historical memory, focusing on the photographic archive and its “hesitant” state in relation to the transfer of recollection/ memory to historical fact. As Marianne Hirsch claims, visual representation of the Holocaust has tended to center on a limited repertoire of ‘iconic’ images; she asks, ‘if these images, in their obsessive repetition, delimit our available archive of trauma, can they enable a responsible and ethical discourse in its aftermath?’ [18]. Boltanski works precisely with the paradigm of this question. He portrays these images and their “obsessive repetition”, creating signs-symbols-simulacrum of the variable memory in Hirsch’s definition of postmemory.

At the late 1960s, Boltanski started creating his own archive of images, often from ordinary or perishable sources, with which he loads the everyday with additional artistic meaning. His strategies often include copying anonymous photographs of newspapers, magazines, family albums, school pictures, passport photographs, but also another “inventory of historical traces” [19]. In the 1990s he focuses on the remembrance of the Holocaust using the same photograph, but in a different way, which casts doubt on their documentary authenticity. An example are several versions of *Les Suisses morts* (1990), whose images are used for *364 Suisses Morts* (1990); *Archive Dead Swiss* (1990); *174 Suisses morts* (1990). As well as the three projects *Autel de Lycée Chases* (86-870, *Monument: Les Enfants de Dijon*(.....) and *Gymnasium Chases* (1990), in which the author interprets the same problem. Using a photograph of a graduating class from the Viennese Gymnasium Chases, found in a book on the Jewish life in Vienna, he leads us from personal to collective memory and

history, recalling an emotional hologram, a tribute to the victims of the Holocaust.

In the project *Gymnasium Chases*, Boltanski processes the original photography of the class, separating each of the 24 faces into an individual-image. For this purpose, he processes the photographs in photogravures, overcoming the banality of the ordinary photographs, emphasizing the unusual. The original photos are part of a school yearbook, but the information with the students’ names has been deleted. Boltanski melts the individual features to such an extent that they are completely removed. So the 24 unclear and unidentified black-and-white faces are presented on the title page simply as members of the graduating class.

In essence, the images are anonymous. Boltanski introduces them, adding a little information concerning the individual fates. On the cover page of the portfolio, under the original photography of the 23 students and their teacher, in French is written: “*They are gathered together for the last time. It is the end of the year, they are students at the Gymnasium Chases, the Jewish high school in Vienna, we are in 1931. What have they become after so many years, what sort of life have they had? One of them recognized himself in this photograph, he escape the horror and lives today in New York, of the others I know nothing*” [20].

The 24 photogravures are organized in a portfolio arranged in a thin metal box, similar to a container for storing memories, archives or ashes. Enlarged and highly defocused, the portraits have become ephemeral images of people from the past. „*You retrace the shadows again and again in search of a person, a clue to history: which is the one in New York, still living? What happened to the girl on the right? Elegiac, terrifying, sweet, the faces-otherwise unremarkable-are transformed into icons of the irretrievable past.*”[20].

In this conditional reality the questions he leaves with the viewer are related to the interpretation of the possible history that has befallen the class in the years of war and persecution. The link in his storyline, as in *Les Suisses morts*, is based on his personal memory and biography – to which Boltanski often returns to present us the traces of his likely past.

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS

The archival approach in the works of the Bechers and Boltanski is not only on a visual level, as it becomes clear, the memory and the preservation of history in the creation of their projects stand in the depth of their creative direction. The archive immortalizes the presented images. With Becher, the industrial constructions and buildings receive longevity through the archive, attributing memory and personification to the ordinary objects, they create a perspective to the frozen time of the world. Or if we compare the art of the Bechers and Boltanski, we will find two different approaches to the presentation of the everyday and the banal. While in Boltanski the subtlety of memory is in a state of disappearance and extreme obliteration of the images and objects reminiscent of the loss in time, with the Bechers the images and objects rather hinder the disappearance in time, even more so that at the moment of their presentation nobody knows whether they still exist. Or opposite to Boltanski, in which a part of the idea of

building memory passes through preliminary presented information pointing out the certain absence of the depicted faces. In both cases the anonymity is the prerequisite for searching of a trace that is rooted in the biographical past and personal history. The delicately provided information, as a descriptive unobtrusive text to the works themselves, makes us look for that trace and meaning in the otherwise realistic images/portraits.

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