Out of Place by Lucy R. Lippard

Dachau: Execution Range and Blood Ditch, 1994

Almost as soon as they began working together, in 1986, Andrea Robbins and Max Becher marked off their unique photographic territory: critical reflections on cultural "transportation"—buildings, dress, places, people, and things that are "out of place." At Cooper Union, where they met, Robbins was trying to make connections between photography, painting, and sculpture. For instance, she built a big white tube linking the sculpture and photography classrooms; she also prepared food to replicate the picture on the package it was sold in, then photographed it. Becher was working on the theme of Looking for Europe —finding it in American places, and on the notion of "directioning," deliberately turning spaces around so that the viewer was alienated from familiarity and expectations—"spatial rather than cultural disorientation." Robbins says she was more interested in identity, and the "swoosh" when daily life becomes art, while Becher was more involved in place, but they passed ideas back and forth "naturally, like a conversation," which remains characteristic of their seamless art-and-life partnership: "Quite often we have the same idea at the same time. . . . Often we are not sure who did what."[1]

Robbins and Becher's first collaboration, for their thesis project at Cooper, was a series of very large photographs of a friend's baby looking thoughtful and "presidential," removed from infanthood by size, placement, and expression. The idea came from the portraits the two had made of the very expressive sheep at a re-created Dutch farm in Queens. (Another prototypical project was when they photographed a friend who gave tours, in a maid's costume, at the Colonial Dames of America House.) Robbins's graduate thesis project at Hunter was the series Still Life Maintenance , big pictures of the gallery office where she worked; close up, they looked like "organized dust," and from a distance they provided information about daily maintenance rituals. Becher's thesis project at Rutgers was "Transportation of Place: Geographic Memory in the First/New World"—photographs of New Orleans, Quebec, New York's Chinatown, and the North End of Boston, all billed as picturesque and non-American. He was trying to find out why the rest of America had evolved so differently. (He still has dreams about such "transportations," about "finding your childhood bedroom in Asia," and thinks about his hometown of Kaiserswerth, which has changed from "Dutch-looking"—like New York in the seventeenth century—to "German-looking" today.)[2]

Out of graduate school, having decided to work as a team, Robbins and Becher focused initially on architecture—its purported permanence countering the purported impermanence of memory. Their photographs of institutional, corporate, and imperial domestic architecture in Havana and Namibia were so stunning that a conventional career might have stopped there. But their interests lay in far more complex issues: the manipulation and simulation of place and identity and all the subtle underlying social and psychological causes of such curious boundary constructions and crossings. The built environment remains a significant component, its public role unavoidable as they seek out cultural markers surrealistically transposed from one geography to another—more elusive images of place. (I use the term *place* to mean a cultural landscape or cityscape, formed when culture and nature, politics and lives, meet in an almost surreal process to form a new entity.) More recently—in Samaná and Sosúa in the Dominican Republic, and in an ongoing project with Hasidic Jews in Postville, Iowa—the pair have turned to video and portraits of people rather than their environments, zeroing in on narratives that also illuminate transcultural phenomena.

Although they have never to my knowledge "glued" anything, Robbins and Becher's method is a kind of sociogeographic collage, or rather they seek out social collages that have already happened, such as the manicured and manipulated incarnation of Dachau (complete with marked "execution ground" and "blood ditch") paired with the series Bavarian by Law. The latter examines the "German" town of Leavenworth, Washington, which transformed itself into a tourist destination after the failure of an industrial economy, choosing this arbitrary identity because of the handy "Alpine" landscape. Apparently the citizens gave little thought to Bavaria's contributions to National Socialism, Dachau among them.

Holland, Michigan, on the other hand, chose to become Dutch a bit more legitimately, given its regional heritage. The bullet-riddled windmill that ended up there and the nineteenth-century London Bridge that ended up in Lake Havazu, Arizona, accompanied by a fake English Village, were both imported from "old" countries divesting themselves of historical clutter in favor of "modernization," while their adoptive country, having abandoned so much of its own history in favor of "progress," selectively provides homes for displaced European artifacts. London Bridge and the windmill fit well into our culture (though uneasily into our landscapes), since the U.S.A's architectural heritage is already totally hybridized; witness the "Moorish" and "Elizabethan" variations on Holland's main street, behind the superimposed *klompen* dancers. While we might want to know more about how such costume and set changes affect people's lives, we are left to imagine what it means to live in a place that is no longer the place we thought we knew. Robbins and Becher's mandate is to show, not tell. They avoid reaffirmation of photographic hierarchy. Their goal is "interaction, not power."

The places they select are interesting primarily because of their *dis*placement. In context, national idiosyncrasies might be invisible. Out of context, they stand out, like the fake German lettering on all commercial signs in Leavenworth. Similarly, the Samaná descendants of African American freed slaves from the United States are only different from the majority of Dominicans (Spanish-speaking Catholics) when they speak English, when they go to Protestant churches, when their histories as "Americans" emerge.

By picking on blatant but little-known examples of appropriation and economic desperation, Robbins and Becher are in fact pointing out trends and events common to all of our places. When we see Holland, Michigan, or Leavenworth, Washington through their eyes, we know, because we live in this country, that beyond the theme-park center, beyond the Gothic lettering, the tulip fields, or the fake fiestas, lies "real" American life, whatever that is. In fact, most real places, in the United States anyway, shift shape almost as quickly as the simulacra, surprising and appalling those who return to a town after years away with memories of what it was like "in the good old days." While the common urban American transformations (e.g., the suburbanization of New York City over the last two decades) tend to be less focused, they too have economic roots. Unlike the usual motley and thoughtless urban sprawls, Leavenworth and Holland have been neatly and deliberately packaged by consent of their citizenry into tight little images that lend themselves to rapid consumption and a kind of miniaturization enhanced by distance. As such, they resemble the micro-snapshots of New York, Luxor, Paris, and Venice in Las Vegas, Nevada, which Robbins and Becher have also addressed, pointing out that Las Vegas is the only city to include the skyline of another city in its own.

Above all, their choice of subjects is brilliant, edifying, and always unexpected. Since this book—"an atlas of transported places"—is the first time so many of their projects have been gathered under one cover, it offers a great opportunity to see the interconnections forged in almost twenty years of work. "We each have a wide range of interests," the photographers say, "and where they intersect is 'the place' that we focus on." They seek out the visually varied symptoms of disruption and dislocation, exposing the bizarre manifestations of colonialism and its postcolonial counterpart—global tourism. With their own precise vision, they find the eyes of various socioeconomic storms, places where confusion of place and identity has become most blatant and disturbing—"cultural non-sequiturs" as Gary Hesse has called them.[3] Yet once those non sequiturs are scrutinized, it becomes obvious that the connecting threads have not really been severed, merely stretched. For instance, the movie set/tourist trap "Old Tucson" (which, they note, is neither "old" nor "Tucson") is followed by almost indistinguishable shots of simulated Old West architecture in the Spanish province of Almeria an equally arid landscape (minus saguaro cactus) -- where many spaghetti Westerns were shot. In the process, the photographers call attention to the colonial recasting of the Mexican borderlands and their ancestral connection to Spain.[4]

Robbins and Becher's real subject is change, and the circumstances dictating artificially forced or relatively organic change. Even as visual artists, they cannot disregard tourism's major subtext—capitalism playing itself out on a global stage. Unlike many documentarians, they do not stop with innuendo or anecdote. They are political artists in the best sense, in that their informed progressive opinions infuse everything they see, but first they permit the viewer a relatively "objective" view: "We believe in taking sides, but not if it turns the work into illustration." Overstatement and even overt statement become unnecessary. Irony reveals itself without fanfare. They attack stereotypes obliquely, by adding new information to replace preconceptions.

As they unveil histories unknown to most of us, Robbins and Becher have created some unforgettable images that are neither dramatic nor spontaneous like photojournalism nor pretentiously ambiguous like much "art photography." They are able to work in this gap because they are well aware of what lies on either side: "We don't use the camera to reveal the exotic or as a tool for discovery. One of the assumptions of documentary photography is that what is in the picture is a little piece of what is taking place beyond the frame, but that is not the case in our work."[5] Athough they have been associated with other socially critical photographers—like Martha Rosler, whose theoretical frameworks for this kind of work have been so important—their images differ in their very weight. Along with their use of color, this stability somehow transcends the rapid, casual character associated with the documentary impulse. It is here, in the way simple images become iconic, that they owe their greatest debt to Max's parents—Hilla and Bernd Becher—against whom they have not rebelled so much as diverged. The two

couples may also share a taste for symmetry that parallels their marital collaborations, though Robbins and Becher point out that the Bechers "invigorate nineteenth-century classifications, while we rely on de-classification; their work functions in a grid, but ours is closer to a net, or neural, configuration."

The texts that accompany each of Robbins and Becher's series are brief and transparent, with flashes of deadpan wit. The same for every image in a series, they are not conceptually complex. Their function is to provide local or historical information and to jolt the images into focus so that the pictures abruptly become more than vignettes, more than they appear to be—surface being what photography and tourism are all about. Like all truly gifted photographers, Robbins and Becher find ways to ruffle that surface so that the framed image itself takes on extra life.

Aware as they are of how photography "operates on many different levels simultaneously and can even shift meanings over time," Robbins and Becher pay close attention to that area of "slippage" where revelation begins, the tipping point when the viewer realizes all is not as it seemed at first glance, the moment of subversion.[6] For instance, in some images of "little Wall Street"—neoclassical financial institutions built in Havana, Cuba, from the 1920s through the 1950s—the imposing architecture is enough to imply power and posterity.[7] But in other photographs in the same series, the story is flipped, just as the Cuban Revolution altered colonial intent. The windows of the Trust Company Building are boarded up and taped with wobbly Xs; families appear on balconies above the Bolsa de Habana. (Though the buildings' names may be graven in stone, their functions have succumbed to social change.) Robbins and Becher have also photographed Havana at night, from a distance, during a vast power blackout—a metaphorically suggestive event.

The Revolutionary government happily exploits Spanish colonialism in the restoration of the colonial quarter—"Habana Vieja," touted as "a lost page in universal history." However, as D. Medina Lasansky has remarked, it ignores the more threatening, all-too-well-remembered U.S. domination reflected in "little Wall Street" and in the Capitolio (designed in 1929 in now-ironic homage to the capitol in Washington, D.C.), also photographed by Robbins and Becher.[8] It's all part of what Joan Ockman has called the "politics of appearance," a refinement of Guy Debord's brilliant but now overused concept of the spectacle.[9] Robbins and Becher are not immune to the notion of display, crucial to "spectacle" theory. Like Debord, they look at display on a structural scale, as they expose what happens when whole towns take on or kick off a cultural disguise. Their Colonial Remains series, made in Namibia around the time of its independence, constitutes a commentary on freedom and lack thereof. In the image of a pawnshop in the German colonial town of Lüderitz, the power of an oblique blank wall contrasted with the crisply painted storefront says more about the nature of a facade than a head-on shot could have.

For all Robbins and Becher's specificity, we can draw general conclusions from these places. The once elegant house that belonged to the manager of the Sinclair dDiamond Mine now stands alone in the bleak desert, against a deep blue sky, raked by the relentless African light that exposes the building's pretenses of ever belonging there. At the same time, a sign reading "Göring Strasse" (named after Hermann Göring's father) transforms another rather ordinary house into a historical artifact. (This sign might be balanced by "Calle Dr. Rosen" in Sosúa, calling attention to the stronghold of German Jews who landed during World War II in the Dominican Republic.)

Conscious of their relationship to tourism, Robbins and Becher have made postcards of some of their series. Postcards are inherently mediums of decontextualization. Even when they are absurdly local, showing buildings that seem banal to the extreme, their meaning is opaque to nonresidents. Postcards separate specific buildings and places from their surroundings at the same time as they trigger memories: "the old Brown's Hardware building," or "the subdivision where Grandma's farm used to be." When Robbins and Becher mail out single images from their series, each card goes its own way, evicted from its serial home, becoming more generalized the farther it is carried *away*, echoing the artists' larger project.

As avid and intelligent tourists, Robbins and Becher have always been off the beaten track. (I've known Max since his early teens and Andrea since her early twenties, and it was evident from the beginning that not only did they think out of the box but the box barely existed for them.) Their 2004 show at Sonnabend was titled *Where Do You Think You Are?* and consisted of pairs of images that did not pan out, or have not yet been developed into series. (They see this as a game, and do an annual program at their sons' school in Gainesville, Florida, along these lines.) Stores culturally recognizable as "French" in the colonies of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, islands off Canada, are paired with Americanized malls in Toulouse. Elian Gonzalez's family's house in Miami is paired with the Bay of Pigs; a Stonehenge replica in Washington State, with the actual London Bridge in Arizona; and Columbus's first settlement on Hispaniola, with the (much earlier) Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland.

Robbins and Becher's photographic strategies differ with the nature of the dislocation in each place or group. They play with things that look alike and aren't (e.g., Cuban-made Cuban cigars, and "exile" Cuban cigars), and things that are alike and look different (e.g., Star Wars figures from the late 1970s through the 1990s). They have paralleled product and architectural "cross-dressing" with variations on historical/cultural cross-dressing. In Okahanja, Namibia, they photographed commemorations of the rebellious Hereros, celebrating a history

of courage in the face of genocide. Participants dress in the hoop skirts and braid-adorned jackets of their German colonial oppressors—but the dresses are mostly vivid red, and the women wearing them are black. The abyss between these processions and the social dances of their predecessors is all the wider for the superficial resemblances.

Robbins and Becher have had the sense not to photograph Native Americans,[10] but they have aimed their lenses at German hobbyists who appropriate regalia from North American Plains tribes with an honest if misplaced passion, reducing Native culture to mere technique. Like U.S. sports teams with Indian mascots—so vehemently opposed by many Native people—German hobbyists inspired by the novels of Karl May also insist that they are "respecting" and "paying homage to" the cultures they pillage. The series German Indians consists of straightforward, even compassionate, portraits. The white subjects in Robbins and Becher's photos peer out at us as though from carnival cutouts, their "displaced" faces and blond hair suggesting European captives of American tribes, their sheepish expressions speaking volumes. Native Americans are still seen by some as "places" (a historical photo of a Native man was used in the poster for a recent western landscape show), identified with stereotypes of the American west. Tuscarora artist/writer Jolene Rickard asks, "Are the eagle feather bonnet and deerskin shirt just cultural trophies for the categorizing West?"[11] The answer would have to be yes.

The verbal and visual inquiries Robbins and Becher make of the places and the people they see and photograph are straightforward and almost innocent. They do their homework ahead of time and refrain from personal questions, though they sometimes receive personal answers that are subtly factored into the work. People are invited to present themselves as they please. The photographers bring back photos as gifts. They return to their subjects more than once (up to thirteen times in one case). "We treat each project as an introduction to our approach as well as an introduction to the subject," they write, leaving theory up to others. They do not choose the obvious—Disneyland, Hopi kids in reggae T-shirts—unless the obvious lends itself to a systematic disjunction rather than merely a disjunctive moment, as it does, for instance, when their former hometown of New York is reproduced, downscaled and hyper-colorized in Las Vegas.

The ultimate story is of course globalization, the processes by which place and people are thoroughly destabilized and depersonalized, in which identity is alienated or outsourced. Global Village, the Habitat for Humanity educational theme park in Americus, Georgia, might have been made for Robbins and Becher's delectation. It reminded them of homes they visited in the Dominican Republic, though tellingly devoid of people. They shot it with Farm Security Administration photography from the Great Depression in mind, but created new connections worthy of the age of the Internet and the Global Forum. In this "poverty theme park," global slums from poor countries have been reconstructed to attract donations to change those very places, while 28 percent of the residents of Americus itself live in poverty. At the same time, a certain homage is paid to the inventive resourcefulness of the residents of global *favelas*, *colonias*, South African townships, or shantytowns, where the ultimate victims of "free trade" make do with the detritus of the First World.

"Critique without vision is complicitous with domination."[12] Critique *with* vision is Robbins and Becher's impressive achievement, even as they continue to pursue the crooked course of dislocation, most recently in Hasidic communities reproducing their ur-building at 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, with "770s" in Iowa, Los Angeles, Australia, Israel, Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere.

1. All unsourced quotations from the artists come from phone conversations with the author, June 2005.

Robbins and Becher's visceral agreements are all the more unique when one considers that Becher is the German-born son of well-known artists, and Robbins grew up in a conservative Jewish home in Marblehead, Massachusetts (which reminds her of the towns they photograph); her mother was a nurse, and her father is still a salesman. "The vibrations between place, history and personal identity were sort of my growing pains," she says.

2. At Cooper Union, Robbins also made sculptures, such as a row of three connected bowler hats, that commented on the different lives of objects in "reality" and as props in films. At Rutgers, Becher explored the "situation" in sitcoms on TV in his Network Landmarks series and played with virtual or mental geography, wrapping a 3-D globe with a 2-D map to show the discrepancies.

3. Gary Hesse, Andrea Robbins and Max Becher: Bavarian by Law, German Indians, Contact Sheet # 98 (Syracuse, N.Y.: Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery, 1998), n.p.

4. I live in full view of a place in disguise—a southwestern movie set very similar to those photographed by Robbins and Becher in Tucson.(Last month a Sioux village appeared in a nearby pasture.) By coincidence, in 1970, I also lived in that same "wild western" landscape in Almeria. And in another twist, it was being used at the time by the U.S. Army for "war games."

5 "How We Work," statement by Robbins/Becher for the Godowsky Award for Photography, 2005.

6 Robbins/Becher, "Whose point of view is in the image anyway?" Jewish Museum Exhibition [INFO TK]

7 Benjamin Buchloh has recognized neoclassicism as the archetypal style of imperialism, the "sign system of domination disguised as enlightenment." Buchloh, "The Architectural Uncanny in the Photographs of Andrea Robbins and Max Becher," in Andrea Robbins and Max

Becher (Middelburg, Holland: Kanaal Art Foundation and de Vleeshal, 1994), p.21.

8. D. Medina Lasansky, “Tourist Geographies: Remapping Old Havana,” in D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren, eds., Architecture and Tourism: erception,erformance and lace (New York: Berg, 2004), p. 166.

9. Joan Ockman, “New Politics of the Spectacle: ‘Bilbao’ and the Global Imagination,” in Lasansky and McLaren, Architecture and Tourism, 235.

10. Robbins and Becher have considered shooting tourist sites on the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. For the argument against photographing Native people, see James C. Faris, Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of the Representation of an American People (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996; paperback ed., University of Utah Press, 2003).

11. Jolene Rickard, “Alterity, Mimicry and German Indians,” in Hesse, Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, n.p.

12. Carolyn Kesey on National Public Radio, 3/12/05.