

PRESS COVERAGE



The Transportation of Place: Andrea Robbins & Max Becher

January 10 - March 5, 2003

1. Chicago Reader, 2. 14. 2003
2. Goethe, 3. 21. 2003
3. Medill News Service, 3. 21. 2003

ANDREA ROBBINS AND MAX BECHER:
THE TRANSPORTATION OF PLAGE
at the Museum of Contemporary
Photography, through March 5

STEVEN SZORADI: WATER
at City, through March 31

By Fred Cooper

BEYOND THE FRAME

Newson art critic Hilton Kramer once griped that "the more minimal the art, the more maximum the explanation," and many others have questioned the legitimacy of visual art that depends on explanatory texts. But some artists do simply define their work as pictures plus words, as Max Becher and Andrea Robbins have implicitly done with their exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Photography: their 34 photographs are grouped into four series, each accompanied by a wall text (and one by a video as well).

Unlike photographers in the modernist tradition—Edward Weston, for example—Robbins and Becher create images that respond to their subjects rather than impose order on them. As a result their photographs don't really succeed as autonomous aesthetic objects but are often strange enough to demand some kind of explanation: what are those middle-aged Caucasians doing in Native American garb? The answers are supplied by Robbins and Becher's wall texts, but these only make the images seem stranger.

In the series "German Indians, 1997/98," *Melting Snow* shows people in full Indian dress in front of a teepee. Their Caucasian features and random poses "they seem to be just milling around" call their authenticity into question, as does the title. *Knife Thinner* shows a middle-aged mustachioed man sporting a headdress, complete with horns, his face utterly lacking the fierceness his attire might suggest. A wall text for the series explains that these are Germans attending an annual celebration of the birthday of Karl May in his hometown of Radebeul, Germany. May was the German novelist whose "pro-Indian" books supported Germans' "romantic view of a pre-industrial past," the text tells us; he was much admired by Hitler, who "made his generals carry around volumes of Karl May's writings" while he was "researching American Indian reservations as models for concentration camps." The contradictions evoked by the text echo those in the photos, and such messy and even ugly specifics of history further distance these images from the modernist quest for universals, locating them instead in present-day cross-cultural discourse.

In the series "Bavarian by Law, 1995/96," *Children's Chorus #2* shows little girls in pinafores and white blouses



"MAYFEST" BY ANDREA ROBBINS AND MAX BECHER

who look convincingly Bavarian but not like a disciplined chorus: one is sad, one smiles, one sticks her tongue out, seemingly preoccupied. In *Mayfest* young people in Bavarian folk-dance costumes circle a maypole before a backdrop of Bavarian-style buildings. The crowd observing them seems quite American, however, and a "15

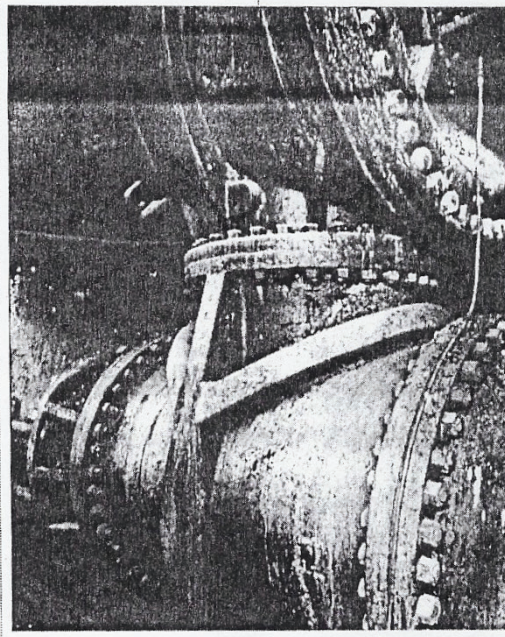
Robbins was born in Boston in 1963, Becher in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1964; both now live in New York. Becher is the son of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose photos of industrial structures, arranged in typological grids, helped establish the field of industrial archaeology. Robbins and Becher met in 1984, when

both were students at Cooper Union in New York; both studied there with politically engaged conceptual artist Hans Haacke. Haacke has himself used photographs in conjunction with texts, but Robbins and Becher's photos add a postmodern edge: by depicting the superimposition of one cultural tradition on another, they question

photography

minute parking" sign is a further giveaway that this is a tourist attraction. In fact the series was taken in Leavenworth, Washington, which responded to an economic decline in the 1960s by choosing a Bavarian "new look," according to the text, regulating architecture and even requiring Germanic typefaces as a way of encouraging tourism. The scheme worked, though some townspeople are said to remain unhappy with the regulations. The mountain scene painted on a motel wall in *Motel With Mural* serves as a metaphor for the whole town, whose "actual" scenes are as much a confection as this illusionistic image. The series' proximity to the wall text for "German Indians" summons up disturbing echoes: Hitler had Bavarian roots, and the Nazis valorized the cultural stasis symbolized by traditional attire.

Part of the "Colonial Remains, 1991" series shows the buildings of a German settlement in Namibia, remains of the period from the 1880s to 1916, when it was a German colony. The text tells us that as many as 80 percent of the native Herero people were killed by the Germans in a war of resistance, which adds a somber note to the images of a bookshop, a Lutheran church, and a pompously grand contemporary home in *Suburban Home*, which could just as easily be in an American suburb.



"PUMPING STATION" BY STEVEN SZORADI

the authenticity of both, reminding the viewer that styles of clothing and architecture are arbitrary. The texts argue not only that images—whether their own or the constructed one in *Mayfest*, for example—are insufficient for full understanding but that culture is often linked to power, whether in the murderous form of colonization or in the regulations of the town council in Leavenworth, Washington.

As fascinating as Robbins and Becher's series are, they left me a bit dissatisfied. I wanted even more information—more on the motivations of the German Indians and on what some Leavenworth residents dislike about their Bavarian laws. I wondered if their show might not work better as a series of magazine articles or a book. And while Weston's refined prints don't survive reproduction, there was little here that suggested one must see an actual print.

The same cannot be said of the photographs of Stephen Szoradi, a Chicagoan now spending a year in Switzerland. His first significant body of work—produced in the early 90s, while he was still a Columbia College graduate student—depicted steel mills. Photographing local waterworks courtesy of the city's Department of Water and the Metropolitan Water District of Greater Chicago, he produces Weston-like images whose vibrant darks and shimmering reflected light celebrate, almost fetishistically, the stark beauty and power of machines or of rocky reservoirs. But his compositions, unlike Weston's, are not self-enclosed, which links his work to Robbins and Becher's text-dependent photos.

Among the 20 works, many with identical titles, at City Gallery are two small vertical prints, both called *Pumping Station*, showing the joints between giant water pipes. Rather than constructing a balanced composition, Szoradi gets close enough to make the pipes seem to strain against the frame's edges, emphasizing the way they extend far beyond the image's borders. In yet another titled *Pumping Station*, a motor in the foreground is apparently powering water through the huge curving pipes behind it. The uninformed viewer may not know exactly how everything works here, but the high-angle view seems designed to cause one to think about functionality as well as compositional beauty.

One *Waste Treatment* photo frames concrete open-air aeration chambers symmetrically, emphasizing their symmetry: too schematic to be of great interest aesthetically, the composition instead calls attention to the tanks' curious labyrinthine patterns. And the show's diptychs and triptychs—such as one of several titled *Reservoir*—emphasize the waterworks' huge spaces by juxtaposing partial views, suggesting that even several images won't be sufficient to show anything in its entirety. A circle too large to be shown whole in the rock wall of the right-hand picture, Szoradi wrote me, is "a capped future water supply pipe that brings fresh lake water to the filtration plant."

While Robbins and Becher's work
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photography

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fits in neatly with today's trends, conflating concerns with cultural identity and postmodern ideas about the artificiality of imagery. Szoradi's photographs don't fall in with any current fashion. His way out of the modernist trap of aestheticism is to investigate the materials that sustain us—his compositions invite the viewer to participate by encouraging an interest in how things work. The world of rock and metal is rendered with intense physicality, not solely for aesthetic ends but to show how humans have put it to use. We see no water but are asked to imagine how water passes through these pipes and channels, to consider the ways one substance can direct or transform another. I found myself thinking of the small patches of transformative fire and red-hot metal in Velazquez's painting *The Forge of Vulcan*, a much earlier celebration of human mastery over the materials of the world. ■

rock, etc.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

meanness is paradoxically tender, and makes me feel sorry for him. (Well, as sorry as you can feel for a guy who's had Alyssa Milano beeping him on his two-way.) Compared to even the best of 'N Sync's puppy-dog weepers, "Cry Me a River" sounds recognizably mature.

Oberst's defining change is a new political awareness—*Lifted* closes with a wide-ranging protest number, "Let's Not Shit Ourselves (to Love and to Be Loved)," to which he's added a chorus explicitly about Iraq when he performs it live. These sentiments were foreshadowed on last winter's *Read Music/Speak Spanish*, from Oberst side project Desaparecidos, a crunchy emo unit that sounded like a grunge Weezer. *Read Music/Speak Spanish* is almost a concept album about suburban sprawl and gentrification destroying Omaha. Like plenty of underpaid artists before him, Oberst

links the evils of capitalism with the perfidy of women—the album begins with testimonies from gals who consider romance without finance a nuisance. ("I like a man that has money," one says with a vapid giggle.)

This is curious, because Oberst rarely relies on the depressive singer-songwriter trope of blaming ex-girlfriends for his misery. Nasty bits of obsessive love-hate like "The Calendar Hung Itself," from 2000's *Fever & Mirrors*, are the exception. His main subject is the unbearable fragility of contact between humans, as a solution for which he's often encouraged us against-the-world smuggling: "Now that it's June, we'll sleep out in the garden / And if it rains we'll just sink into the mud," he sings on "The Difference in the Shades," from 1998's *Letting Off the Happiness*. His songs are the typical reports from a bohemian dating scene where the boundaries between befriending and fucking blur uncomfortably.

Bohemia's sexual politics have always been tricky to navigate. When I

saw Bright Eyes last spring Oberst was accompanied by an all-female band. The idea was probably to project camaraderie, but it looked like a warped indie-rock take on Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" video. There was also plenty of flirting as he gaddled about the stage, and my friend Melissa said he seemed to play them off one another. But on the Desaparecidos record, Oberst locates the threat to his gender-balanced scene in the world outside. The male-narrated lead track, "Man and Wife, the Former (Financial Planning)," is balanced by the woman's perspective on "Man and Wife, the Latter (Damaged Goods)"; together the songs examine how economic insecurity and work-related stress crush relationships, cramming partners into the stereotypical gender roles they thought they'd wiggled out of. And on *Lifted*, rather than cuddling in the dirt, Oberst rouses a chorus of men and women to sing along with him. On the softer numbers, when the girls murmur in harmony, they sound more necessary than ever.

Neither Oberst nor Timberlake is coming up with any new sentiments, but neither man's perspective seems received—what they have in common are flexible responses to the boy-girl conundrum at the center of pop. Oberst has rallied his tiny community in a crusade against some distant, unlikable father figures. Timberlake has intertwined unthreatening sexuality and a cocksure swagger. He wants to make his growth seem graceful, inevitable, while Oberst tries to make it look like a struggle. Neither is totally persuasive. Timberlake's spontaneity and Oberst's pain both sound acted—not outright false, but an aspect of a role that each is feeling his way into. In fact, that sense of role playing, of trying out new ideas of manhood, is what makes their forays into adulthood sound so honest. Oberst's political pronouncements ("The approval rating's high / And so someone's gonna die") are all the more believable for being so callow. Timberlake's promises all the sexier for sounding like cheap come-ons. ■

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Franz Ackermann: The Waterfall

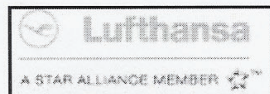
October 19, 2002 – September 28, 2003
at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

The Waterfall is the title of German artist Franz Ackermann's site-specific wall painting which will be executed in the MCA's second floor lobby. Painted directly on the 24-foot-high North lobby wall, Ackermann's vibrant network of bold colors and forms will greet visitors as they enter the museum's main entrance. Visually dazzling and disorienting, Ackermann's paintings vacillate between abstract composition and representational cityscape or landscape and present the artist's own fleeting impressions of particular places to which he has traveled. Embodying the excitement and flux of cities in today's increasingly globalized society, Ackermann's work also reflects the flurry of building activity, economic fluctuation, and cultural readjustment in his home base of Berlin. This will be the first time Ackermann's work will be presented in Chicago. This exhibition is curated by Associate Curator Staci Boris.

Franz Ackermann's website:

<http://www.carnegieinternational.org/html/art/ackermann.htm>

MCA website: <http://www.mcachicago.org/>



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Programs recently presented in association with the Goethe-Institut:

Photography: Andrea Robbins & Max Becher - The Transportation of Place



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, Mayfest from Bavarian By Law, 1995/96, chromogenic development print 35¼-by-30½ inches, Courtesy the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York

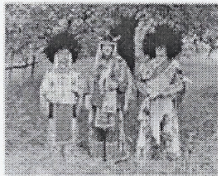


Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, Moses Pool from The Americans of Samaná, 1998-2001, chromogenic development print, 34¼-by-30 inches, Courtesy the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, Pawnshop, Lüderitz from

colonial remains, 1991, chromogenic development print, 25¾-by-30 inches,
 Courtesy the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, Three Men from German
 Indians, 1997/98, chromogenic development print, 35¼-by-30½
 inches, Courtesy the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York

January 10 - March 5, 2003
 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, 600 S.
 Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL, www.mocp.org

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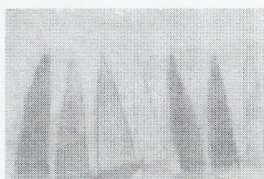


EN/OF at the Julia Friedman Gallery

When: December 13, 2002 - February, 2003

**Where: Julia Friedman Gallery, 118 N. Peoria, Chicago, IL
 60607**

Established by Robert Meijer, the EN/OF series initiated
 collaborations between contemporary visual artists and
 experimental musicians. EN/OF included nine art editions (photography, print,
 drawing, or flat object); each from an internationally known visual artist. Artists:
 Gerwald Rockenschau / The Rip-Off Artist, Carsten Höller / Wander, Simon Starling
 / Oren Ambarchi, Sarah Morris / Jan Jelinek, Henrik Hakansson / Alejandra & Aeron,
 Angela Bulloch / TV Pow, Liam Gillick / Ekkehard Ehlers & Joseph Suchy, Olafur
 Eliasson / Heimir Björgulfsson, Tobias Rehberger / Stephan Mathieu.



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The Chicago Cultural Center; 78 E. Washington St.; **October 18th - December 30th,
 2002;** <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Tourism/CulturalCenter>

The Museum of Contemporary Art; 220 E. Chicago Ave.; **October 16th - November
 30th, 2002** <http://www.mcachicago.org>

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Gerhard Richter: 40 Years of Painting - The Art Institute of Chicago; 111 S.
 Michigan Ave.; (312) 443-3600; June 22nd to September 8th, 2002;
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/gerhardrichter.html>

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Photo exhibit examines multicultural identity crisis

by
LEA SILVERMAN

1/15/2003

A photograph of a German man dressed in American Indian costume might suggest a case of an identity crisis to the viewer. However, when this image is displayed with photographs depicting an American town built in Bavarian style and traditional European architecture constructed in Africa, they represent -- strongly -- the global phenomenon of displaced culture.

Login

In "The Transportation of Place," a new exhibit at The Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College in downtown Chicago, photographers Andrea Robbins and Max Becher document communities that have been drastically influenced by a foreign culture. The exhibition, which opened Jan. 10, will be running through March 5.

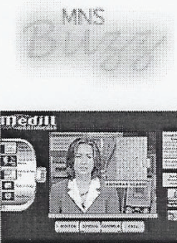
"There is not a proportional relationship between distance and difference," Becher said. The photographs "are examples of [traveling] far, expecting [the culture] to be very different and finding it very familiar."

Robbins and Becher's interest in cultural anomalies arose from their personal experiences. Robbins grew up in a Jewish family that lived in an English-settled Massachusetts town. Becher was born in Germany and immigrated to the United States. The two photographers are now based in New York City.

"In America, any place you grow up is a new place composed of other places," Robbins said.

An extreme example of this is recorded in "Bavarian by Law," a series of photographs of Leavenworth, a small town in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state that imposed a mandatory Bavarian architecture style in order to attract tourists.

"'Bavaria by Law' shows a German-style town in America," said Natasha Egan, associate director of The Museum of Contemporary Photography and the curator of this exhibition. "This is the New World trying to look like the Old World."



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Robbins and Becher often photograph people and places that are stereotypically considered to be tourist attractions. However, their straightforward presentation includes a commentary on globalization, explained Egan.

In the series "Colonial Remains," Robbins and Becher photographed remnants of German architecture in Namibia, Africa. Although the deteriorating European-style architecture is a popular tourist attraction, Robbins and Becher intend their photographs to draw attention to the meaning behind the presence of these buildings.

"I think the main message is to show how there are these old forms of globalization," Egan said. "Most people think about this word in terms of the Internet or Starbucks, but colonialism has been around in different forms."

Although Becher notes that the West has colonized more than any other culture in history, the series "German Indians" documents a completely different genre of cultural appropriation. These photographs show Germans dressed as American Indians. According to the photographers, American Indian culture is extremely popular in Germany.

"Cultures overlap each other everywhere you turn; it is a very large subject," Egan said. "[Robbins and Becher] are interested in the reverse -- where the stereotype is not what you would expect."

Egan identified Robbins and Becher's work as part of a current trend in contemporary art and photography that involves geopolitical commentary.

"Earlier photographs were based in exoticism and the study of people who are different," Egan said. "You still get that with National Geographic showing exotic places. We can't avoid interest in exotic places -- in contemporary art, someone is analyzing that."

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