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COMPARATIVE CATALOGUES

Seriality in the photography of the Bechers, Ruscha and its aftermath

The camera is my tool.
Through it I give a reason
to everything around me.
André Kertész

Seriality

Sequences, repetition and seriality are related to the mechanistic nature of the camera. As pointed out Moholy-Nagy, “There is no more surprising, yet, in its naturalness and organic sequence, simpler form than the photographic series. This is the logical culmination of photography. The series is no longer a picture, and none of the canons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it”. The artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha, Mariana Tassinari and Alain Bublex use seriality in photography in a very particular way, depicting architecture, depopulated spaces, conducting our eyes through a series of photographs. In their series of photographs, all the images have to be shown together, as a group of images that do not work individually.

The German artists, Bernd and Hilla Becher, used seriality in a way that it became as important as their subject matter – typologies of industrial buildings and façades, and the creation of families of things that are going to disappear. In the work of Ed Ruscha, seriality appears through grouped snapshots that show

iconic images of Los Angeles, the city where the artist lives. Both of their series of photographs made roughly concurrently (beginning in the early 1960s) have a vernacular approach. Mariana Tassinari, born in Brazil, in 1980, presents her groups of pictures as one, printed in the same paper. The focus of Tassinari's photographs is more formal and less critical than in the Bechers or Ruscha's series. Seriality, in Tassinari's work is used to heighten our perception. In the work of the French artist, Alain Bublex's, the seriality refers to the time the artist spent in his car taking the pictures, while driving around the houses he photographed. In all these works, executed in four different countries, by artists of different generations, we can see examples of how seriality is central to their creative process. Their works, comprised of individual pictures, exist only in their entirety.

Photography freezes the moment, transmutes present into past, life into death. It is a reminder that time passes. At the same time, photographs are associated with uniqueness. The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, known as the master of the "decisive moment" is, perhaps, the best example of that. Seriality is also as a reminder of time passing, giving the viewer a chance to take more time to contemplate different frozen moments of the same object. However, seriality denies the "decisive moment", since the main idea is to give the viewer a chance to look at the same object again and again. But, in the work of Tassinari and Bublex, this temporal distinction is clear as we are made aware of

the repositioning of the camera for each picture in the series. Even in the work of Ruscha and the Bechers, where we see grouping of similar objects, it is not about the moment when the picture was taken, but about the objects themselves and their collective meanings.

Common among all artists is an interest in taking photographs of buildings constructed by man. This focus on architectural is related to one of Baudelaire's favorite figures, the ragpicker: "Everything that the city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues... He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry". Susan Sontag wrote, inspired by this quote, that bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera's eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes.

One thing after another

Repetition appears in other mediums, too. It has been present in the arts in very different forms. In painting it can be seen in the works of Claude Monet by the end of the 19th century, and in Giorgio Morandi's oeuvre, during 1930s, 40s and 50s. Monet painted water lilies during his whole life, and Morandi made still-lives of bottles and vases. In these cases, seriality is a way of studying the subject, showing the fascination that these artists have with the theme they have

chosen to depict. The repetition and the sequence have also appeared in Pop art as a reference to mass culture and consumption, and in Minimal art as their main idea of putting “one thing after another”.

Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1990

In dance, the German choreographer Pina Bausch uses repetition, or series of repeated movements, to create epics. Bausch tell stories by repeating movements, using the viewer’s memory as an ingredient of her choreographies. Gestures that are initially done by a single dancer, as a phrase in a solo, are repeated by one, two, three or more dancers and become a unique body of movement. The choreographer also uses repetition as a way of explaining the gestures. *Répétition* is the French word for rehearsal – a way of practicing, understanding, learning,

and ultimately absorbing information. One could even argue that to study something is to photograph it many times.

In the case of photography, seriality is associated with the nature of the camera, which gives the photographer the possibility of clicking many times the same object or landscape. As early as the British photographer Eadweard Muybridge used multiple cameras to capture motion in the end of the 19th century. The way he presented his pictures, one after the other, is a good example of how seriality and photography are naturally related. Seriality is also related to the origin of the cinema, where one picture after the other generates action. The machine, developed by the French brothers Lumière in the last decade of the 19th century, known as the *cinématographe* could record and project motion pictures.

The use of photographic seriality in the works of the Bechers, Ruscha, Tassinari and Bublex is going to be examined, showing how each artist uses sequences of individual photos in their works, creating series that can not be presented separately. The development of artmaking that uses seriality as its “medium” will be considered, beginning with the Bechers and Ruscha, and identifying the similarities and differences in their works and the later examples of Tassinari and Bublex.

Bernd and Hilla Becher

The couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, who began working together in 1959, later getting married in 1969, were always interested in architectural portraiture. Bernd – born in 1931 – and his wife Hilla – born in 1934 – used industrial and domestic structures such as gas tanks and framework houses as themes for their photographs. During their career, Bernd Becher – who died in 2007 – and Hilla Becher took photographs of buildings that have a finite, and in many cases, short life – a nomadic architecture, as they call it. Both are involved in all aspects of producing the work, including scouting sites, negotiating with the owners and other authorities, setting up the cameras, and printing. It seemed important for them to register these constructions that would disappear in maybe 100 years. Their photographs also work as a vernacular archive, a documentation of things, and Hilla Becher once said: “we could say a project is finished when the object is destroyed. “Their photographs serve a double function: they are unromantic documents of historic structures, while their unpretentiousness and systematic recording of architecture sits within the use of taxonomies in conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s”.

Seriality appears in their work as a form of typology. They have created their own system of presenting these industrial catalogues: groups of nine, twelve or fifteen examples of objects that belong to the same families. This approach lets people understand the subjects they photograph through its visual

appearance. They want the viewer to have clarity and not sentimentality. Carl Andre wrote about their photographs: “The theme of variations within limits determined by function is made apparent by the Bechers in their grouping of similar views of different structures built to serve the same purpose. Photography also makes it easier to compare the proportions of similar structures of unequal size.”

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Pitheads*, 1974

At first, the photographers considered showing single images, but soon realized the value of multiple images: “There was a particular moment when we placed several cooling towers alongside each other and something happened. A kind of music. You only see the differences between the objects when they are close together, because they are sometimes very subtle. All the objects in one

family resemble each other, they are similar. But they also have a special individuality. And this individuality can only be shown if they are comparable". The artists take painstaking efforts to make images that are as compositionally similar as possible, using consistent vantages and following the same process. The system they use to show their photographs in sequences is so remarkable, that the seriality itself became the subject matter in their work. Order and structure in these grids of black and white pictures are as important as the shapes of the water towers depicted and the documentation of the architecture.

Their work invites us to see interesting aesthetic aspects existing in coal bunkers, blast furnaces, pitheads and other industrial machines. "It is common for those who have glimpsed something beautiful to express regret at not having been able to photograph it". Taking photographs of the same kind of building shows that they have a particular interest in them, and while looking at their pictures we share their involved point of view. It is the eye of two artists looking to the work of engineers, who were probably much more worried about functionality than aesthetics. As Charlotte Cotton held, "the Bechers have been instrumental in rephrasing vernacular photography into highly considered artistic strategies, in part as a way of investing art photography with visual and mental connections to history and the everyday".

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Coal Bunkers*, 1974

Ed Ruscha

Ed Ruscha is an American artist – born in 1937 –, associated with both Pop and Conceptual art movements. During his career he has used photography, painting, drawing, prints, and other materials as mediums.

His photographs were all part of series that were intended to be presented in book form, in the 1960s and early 1970s. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, from 1962, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, 1967, and *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*, 1968, are just some of the examples of his vernacular photographs from Los Angeles. Ruscha wanted these books to become a mass-produced object, to be a cohesive thing, and to show photography not as an arty thing: “The photographs I use are not arty in any sense of the word. I think photography is dead as a fine art, its only place is in the commercial world, for technical or information purposes”.

Ed Ruscha, *Nine Swimming pools*, 1968

They are snapshots, in some cases even taken by someone other than the artist. Ruscha refers to his photographs as collections of facts, or collections of readymades. While many of the series, such as the parking lots and gas stations, address the functional, and often wasteful use of public space and natural resources, the artist is clearly more concerned with the form of the series. In an interview with John Coplans, Ruscha said: “The first book came out of a play with words. The title came before I even thought about the pictures. I like the word gasoline and like the specific quality of twenty-six. If you look at the book you’ll see how well the typology works – I worked on all that before I took the photographs. Not that I had an important message about photographs or gasoline,

or anything like that – I merely wanted a cohesive thing”.

As in the work of the Bechers, these books – series of photographs – gives us the idea of catalogues, documentation. The seriality and the interest in buildings are characteristics in both their works. By photographing twenty-six examples of a gas station, Ruscha gives us the possibility of comparing – similarities and differences – and understanding them. The Bechers offers us the same opportunity: comparing and defining water towers, coal bunkers and so on. Ruscha’s photos, though, have the informality of a diary, while the Becher’s work is more formal. In this way the use of a common aesthetic form, the series, can potentially reveal the underlying cultural differences as well, as in a less formal Californian versus more rigorous German. This does not mean that Ruscha was not completely aware of every single detail in his series. The book *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, “was arranged so that our progress through its pages, left to right, was roughly analogous to our progress across a map from west to east, while the narrative obviously recounted a journey from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City and back. Thirteen tanks of gas one way and thirteen the other!”

Ed Ruscha, *Twenty-six gasoline stations*, 1962

Mariana Tassinari

Mariana Tassinari is a Brazilian artist who started taking photographs in 1996. Her work is mainly constituted by series of 2, 3, 4 or more photographs oriented either, vertically or horizontally, unlike the Bechers and Ruscha, she does not separate the individual images from each other, either by frame or layout making more explicit the notion that each series is a unique image, a unique work.

Tassinari also works in snapshots, usually depicting architecture and landscape. The photographs are very aesthetical and her focus is the form. The way the pictures are presented reminds us of cinema: “Individually, the pictures make no sense, are graceless. And side by side you are invited to pay attention to subtle similarities and differences, both in the pictures and in the forms”. The photographs showed together are usually very similar – same subject, same shapes. This outlook creates a relation between the photos, especially when they are printed in bigger dimensions and we are able to see details. Tassinari believes that her work is very related to movement, the movement of our gaze. “The pictures are presented together so that one can see these subtle differences without interruption. If presented with a frame – between the pictures –, this

would interfere, separate images, and you wouldn't notice details that much. I want it all to be the same thing, comprised by similar pictures that have different details", explained Tassinari.

Mariana Tassinari, *Tempo Atrás*, 2007

In Tassinari's work, seriality is not related to typology like in the photographs of the Bechers and Ruscha. But it is similar in the sense that

pictures are put together for you to compare content, form and subject.

Tassinari's work can be related to the Bechers in the sense that seriality is central for their work. If not shown together, their photographs are not as challenging, in fact have almost meaning at all. With Ruscha, what she has in common is the fact that they are snapshots. Sometimes Tassinari takes her pictures from the inside of a train wagon, as Ruscha does from his car. Color is another characteristic that comes into sight in Tassinari and Ruscha's work, where it is completely absent in the Bechers.

An important characteristic in Tassinari's work, as she herself pointed out, is the subtleness. It can be found in each picture itself and in the relation between them. "This does not mean that the subtleness should not be visible", said Tassinari. By showing the same object from at least two different points of view – in most of her works – Tassinari invites us to pay attention to forms, compare the same object seen from a new angle, and to even imagine new, unphotographed angles of the same object.

In 2007, Tassinari was part of a group exhibition curated by Nessia Pope, in Rio de Janeiro, where the theme was a quote by Sol leWitt: "Since art is a vehicle for the transmission of ideas through form, the reproduction of the form only reinforces the concept. It is the idea that is being reproduced. Anyone who understands the work of art owns it. We all own the Mona Lisa". Not only repetition, but also sequence and seriality all reinforce ideas through form in art,

and, as in Pina Bausch's dance, it becomes a way of understanding, reflecting on. In Tassinari's works, seriality is used to sharpen our perception.

Mariana Tassinari, *Deslize*, 2007

Alain Bublex

Alain Bublex is a French artist – born in 1961 – that started his career as a designer at Renault. Most of his work is not related to photography: “I've never had the idea of taking photographs like a photographer, but when I do, I take my time”.

Bublex takes his pictures while he drives his car around the suburbs of Paris. For the artist, photography is much more an activity than an end result printed on glossy paper, an activity which makes it possible to examine everything that surrounds us, in greater detail. "I feel we drive cars not to go from A to B, but to think about things". These series of pictures are presented together, showing different angles of the same subject. The focus is on juxtaposition,

sliding from one place to the other, from one point of view to the other.

As the press release described, during his exhibition *Sudden Arrests*, in 2002: Bublex's work starts with a journey. In it, shifts in vision are closely linked by the combination of two tools, which are both very much part and parcel of his activity as an artist: the car and the camera. But the eye and the body in motion, both mechanically abetted, are already associated in the car itself which, for Bublex, is nothing less than a viewing machine: "The car alone permits this head-on relationship with the landscape, which sets it apart from aircraft and trains".

Alain Bublex, *Une demi-heure entre Dan Graham et Thomas Demand*,
2002

Like Tassinari, Bublex series of photographs are related to time passing, since the pictures have no omission and no selection: we see what the artist saw. Even the title *Une demi-heure entre Dan Graham et Thomas Demand (Half hour between Dan Graham and Thomas Demand)* refers to time. Aswell as a sly art historical reference to Graham in his work *Homes for America*, 1965, and Demand's *Bathroom*, 1997, making an architecture critique.

Bublex uses seriality in his work as a representation of thinking, the moment while he drives and reflects, differently for the Bechers, Ruscha and Tassinari. In these voyages we travel far beyond the horizons that the artist himself shows us. His images work as sequences. By taking a large number of different shots on the same site at the same moment, the artist refers to the very duration of his presence in the landscape. In the exhibition, we discover how Alain Bublex intends to change his own car into a service vehicle, thus creating a very specific tool perfectly adapted to his oh so serious peregrinations. In the

meantime, with this poetic proposal, the work in progress mutes in a metaphorical and poetic link between past, present and future, as in many others works and projects by Alain Bublex. One of Bublex's work was the creation of a camera called *Awareness Box*, that, in the artists words, allows you to capture an image once in presence of the subject, but without recording it, since this is unnecessary. "Why do we take so many pictures, is it to produce images or is it because it forces us to go somewhere? What is really important for us? The images, or simply observing the world? As such, the object that I intend to conceive to heighten one's awareness and attention should not be considered a camera at all, but is a new type of product, an electronic product that helps one observe better. I notice that in my case, as in the case of many photo enthusiasts, I take many pictures but rarely look at them afterwards – it is the same case with video, which I watch even less frequently. As an artist, I also use photography in my work, and there again, I take many more pictures than I print or enlarge afterwards."

As in the works of Ruscha and Tassinari, Bublex's photographs are snapshots. Bublex and Tassinari are both giving us the opportunity to see the same object – building – from different points of view, while the Bechers and Ruscha offers us different examples of the same object, from a similar point of view.

Alain Bublex, *En Alabama*, 2002

Democratic anatomy

Seriality is central for the works of the Bechers, Ruscha, Tassinari and Bublex. When presented in a series, the picture makes no sense when presented alone. The work includes the idea of parts being an element of the overall; they work as an organism, where one piece depends on other pieces to make the machine work. “Here the separate picture loses its identity as such and becomes a detail of assembly, an essential structural element of the whole which is the

thing itself. In this concatenation of its separate but inseparable parts a photographic series inspired by a definite purpose can become at once the most potent weapon and the tenderest lyric. The true significance of the film will only appear in a much later, less confused and grouping age than ours. The prerequisite for this revelation is, of course, the realization that a knowledge of photography is just as important as the alphabet. The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike". The seriality gives rhythm to the composition, while at the same time adds something didactic to it: the format of encyclopedic information – comparing models that illustrate characteristic of the studied object.

Photographs give us the chance to see something we did not see in real life – what only took place once –, or to see again a moment we wanted to remember. In the same way, seriality allows us to see the same object, more than once. It is a second stage from what Susan Sontag pointed out: "Photography is commonly regarded as an instrument for knowing things. When Thoreau said, "You can't say more than you see," he took for granted that sight had pride of place among the senses. (...) Cameras did not simply make it possible to apprehend more by seeing (through microphotography and teledetection). They changed seeing itself; by fostering the idea of seeing for seeing's sake. (...) When Strand quotes Thoreau, he assumes another attitude toward the sensorium: the didactic cultivation of perception, independent of notions about what is worth perceiving,

which animates all modernist movements in the arts”.

In 1918, Alvin Langdon Coburn declared that the camera is indeed the instrument of “fast seeing”. These artists using seriality are inviting the viewer for a “slow seeing”. Taking pictures of similar objects and presenting them together as one work encourages the viewer to spend more time examining and comparing details – variations and correspondences – and invites a new way of seeing.

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