Photography in the Middle: Dispatches on Media Ecologies and Aesthetics

Rob Coley, Dean Lockwood

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76516
2.2 | CSI Düsseldorf
The following fragments originate in leaked classified files. Little has ever emerged about the broader motivations and machinations of the enigmatic police cabal known, where it has even been acknowledged, as Sektion Null, but what is clear is that the files in question all relate to an operation with the code name Documenta, relating to surveillance of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. The Bechers adopted an influential methodology for the photographing of industrial structures (viz. the Düsseldorf School), structuring their exhibited work according to a number of ideas about typological organization. Operation Documenta appears to have been conducted over a five year period, roughly 1967 to 1972 (dates have largely been expunged from the leaked files as made available to us, but they seem to concentrate on the period ’68–’69), and involved interviews, wire taps, letter intercepts, covert recordings, house searches, general surveillance and more specialized infiltration and dreamwork. As far as possible, we have arranged the fragments chronologically, with the exception of the most recent document, a Sektion Null memo, which we present first.

NONDISCLOSABLE MEMO
To: Cptn Schneider
Date: 13 October, 1972
Subject: OPERATION DOCUMENTA
This office is pleased to report that Operation Documenta has been a complete success. We recommend Special Agent Szeeemann be awarded the high commendation (though,
of course, he will remain unaware of his work for this office). As you know, the aim of the operation was to instigate a general perceptual shift whereby the investigation led by Hilla and Bernd Becher would be safely recuperated as art. We are now able to report that this endeavour has been entirely successful. The exhibition, entitled ‘Interrogation of Reality – Picture Worlds Today’ and held in Kassel earlier this year, exceeded our expectations. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to describe it as a blockbuster of sublime spectacle. Accordingly, although photographic excerpts from the Bechers’ enquiries had already been released publically, in New York and elsewhere, the scale and international ambition of this show (200+ artists, 1000+ exhibits), and its success at bringing together values previously deemed experimental, radical or counter-cultural (utopia, play, science-fiction), marks a decisive shift in power relations. While the end of the exhibition marks the formal conclusion of this operation, it is the belief of this office that events now set in motion will securitize the ecological circumstances in which the Bechers’ investigation takes place. We might imagine an industry of large scale international biennials, managed by artist-curators, which remains safely regulated by a strong art market. However, beyond such speculation, it is clear that the current trajectory of the Bechers’ investigation is now firmly associated with minimal and concept art, and that public perception of its future
development will be aligned to these aesthetics. You are advised to refer to the Assets Inventory for further background.

**Shift report, undercover agent** *(Unsigned, but we have reason to believe the agent’s name to be Voss and his report to have been made in late ’67/early ’68)*

After lunch, and a discussion with Hilla about the Bechers’ investigations, I helped set up the ladders and then I watched out for them both while they poked around in some dangerously toxic nooks and crannies around the plant. She told me that their work meant being surrounded by dead or dying beasts, primeval arrangements. This tangle of technological corpses feels ancient even as it remains unbelievably precise, so it seems appropriate to take a cue from the ordering systems of natural sciences. When you arrive at the scene (like a crime scene, Hilla said) you’re aware that nature is slowly encroaching, you can feel the hard forms...becoming soft.¹ Industrial nature, for the Bechers, is neither good nor bad. They have assumed a forensic attitude which resists, or at least attempts to re-

---

¹ Bernd Becher: ‘even though it looks so primeval and jungle-like, there is an unbelievable precision to an industrial plant that cannot be represented by painting.’ Cited in Susanne Lange, *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work*, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 204. Hilla Becher refers to the industrial plants as ‘the scene of the crime’ (cited in ibid., 213), and contends that ‘a blast furnace is like a living creature. Barely has it ceased to function than it dies. It is dead and decays and seldom mummifies’ (cited in ibid., 209). Writing in her diary about a visit, in 1983, to a plant in Alabama, Hilla Becher notes: ‘The plant is completely dead and looks like a thousand-year-old temple in the jungle, but everything is still there in original condition, it is only that nature is encroaching slowly and the hard forms are slowly becoming soft’ (cited in ibid., 181).
sist, moral judgement. But even so there is a discernible positivity about Hilla, even a love of the transformations enacted upon the landscape, the new hills and dales of the slag heaps. Hilla clearly delights in it, uplifted by the endeavour. She laughs often. She is not a pessimist. Bernd is different, however. He seems grim, actually desperate. When a plant is on the point of demolition, Bernd can get hysterical, much to Hilla’s bemusement. And it is true that when these lumbering nomadic life-forms die, they leave no trace. They are quickly pulled apart, their bones picked clean and dispersed. Despite the rolling hills left in their wake, of the beasts themselves there is nothing to dig for when they are fallen.

When it was time for a break, Hilla and I left Bernd to his own devices and found a nearby hill on which to sit and talk. I picked up where we had left off at lunch and asked her how she conceived of the material she was assembling. I wanted to draw her out on the issue of typological system. It is greatly overestimated, she said, when it is admired for its own sake. She asked me to consider the strange temporality of these forms. She likened them to dragonflies that live only for a day. Life is telescoped into a few hours, the recent past is already old time, almost prehistoric. There is something ‘crazy’ about these architectures. They’re never really finished, they’re always mutating and are host to excrescences that grow upon them, odd additions grafted onto them for
particular functions and to keep them up to date. They grow in this way even unto the point of collapse and death. So, while they may be functional forms, very logical and pragmatic, they have a tendency to ‘craziness’, to junglefication, to becoming chaos. Method is called for and typicality is the key -- ideal types...exemplary forms...Essentially, you have to cut a swathe through the jungle and identify its basic forms, she said. How do you do this? It depends on the kind of creature, the kind of design and growth you are hunting. If you are after an octopus, you need a special method to rein in its many wriggling appendages, its peculiar movements. It is the same with a blast furnace or a winding tower. This kind of photography is almost ethology or botany. It involves taming the jungle, learning its pathways, its sights, sounds and smells. I noted that at lunch we had talked mainly about death, in a kind of elegiac mode. Now we were talking about life, raw and teeming.

I confirm that this report constitutes a true and factual record.

From Hilla Becher’s case notes
Mail intercept
[The following is reproduced from tightly compacted handwriting.]
Our investigation is making progress. We have now compiled an extensive document of evidence: winding towers, processing plants, silos, blast furnaces, lime kilns, cooling towers, water towers, gasometers.
This we have arranged in the form of typologies and comparative juxtapositions. Standing in the middle of the vast space in which the images have been arranged, grouped and labeled, Bernd and I have gazed upon the result of our years of work together: research, reconnoiters, technical precision. As Karl has so insightfully put it, this is a document of ‘a second form of nature’, it assembles evidence on the ‘organs of technical existence.’ To accomplish this, it has been necessary to maintain a rigorous systematic approach: neutrality, continuity. There can be none of the sublime associations with the power of first nature -- we have recorded the landscape without the frustrations of perspective, without the drama of cloud formations, without shadows. But this is not simply a procedure that ‘shows’. Our document is one born of a refusal to be exegetical, born of a distrust of the anonymous landscape of built forms. This unremarkable background to material existence communicates something -- it represents, it reflects -- but we have refused to be complicit with this communication. We are suspicious of second nature. It is a deceptive, obfuscatory landscape. It must be confronted, decoded, unraveled. To determine the nature of this place, we have gone against its grain. We are emissaries of Hermes, wayfarers, journeying into the land. Images of our travels

---

2 In the various interviews reproduced in Lange’s Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work, the Bechers describe a process that is, on one hand, interpretive and hermeneutic (Lange, for example, makes an explicit link between hermeneutics and the
surround us: Siegen, Heidelberg, Hofstede, Duisburg, Charleroi, Valenciennes, Pas-de-Calais, Cevennes, Aberdare, Pontypridd, Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham.

[Here follows a missing section. It appears the author has cut this from the page entirely prior to the point at which these notes came into the possession of Sektion Null. The handwritten notes then continue.]

And yet, although we have journeyed deep into these lands, it is the surfaces that most interest us, that offer up the most clues. To gaze upon these typologies, arranged as they are, it is clear that their clues are not 'objective', not separate from the phenomenon of experience. Instead, these are concrete clues, clues rendered as forces with present intimacy, clues that bring us into a space of contact with the flesh of second nature, with the material organs of technical existence. I can feel the unhuman body of the land -- its surface -- entangled with my own surface, my skin. To gaze upon this document is to touch and be touched. Its surfaces crack, crumble and ooze, I encounter the deterioration, the decomposition, of the landscape. Faultless images transmit a strange force of life. Organs of technical existence transform and reconfigure the organ-ized body.

__ typological method, 51), and, on the other hand, phenomenological, motivated purely by description, to document without interpretation (210).
Something lives in the images. Vectors that outrun people or things. Inaccessible. It hovers. No, not IN the images, BETWEEN them, beyond them, hidden in reality's negative counterpart. In an encounter with nature as cosmic ordeal. The flesh creeps.

NONDISCLOSABLE
Seized schizoanalytic records for Becher, H.
Consultant: Dr [REDACTED]
Date: [REDACTED]
Hypnagogic therapy -- dream machine session no.5
Another fascinating session thanks to Gysin and Sommerville’s extraordinary device. Despite my initial reservations, Hilla insisted upon using the machine for a period far in excess of our previous experiments. I must confess to some excitement at the thought of eventually publishing my conclusions on this ongoing series of consultations.

Hilla once again reports perceptions of the city. As before, she describes to the rest of the group images of what she insists upon calling the ‘capital of the twentieth century’. Though unfamiliar to her in a normal waking state, the details of these images are remarkable. She describes a city shaken apart by its own accelerated ener-
gies. Once a place of industrial potency, it is now a drosscape, abandoned, absent of any human presence, a Zone more eerie than any of Hollywood’s most prosaic visions. And yet this place is not without life. The historical centre of the city is based around a collection of grand, ornamental buildings, constructed in ‘the years before the crash’, as she puts it. These structures -- hotels, banks, theatres, cinemas, shopping arcades, transport terminals -- are now putrefying, their forms decomposing, inseparable from the plant matter which seems to sprout everywhere. Her tone, which is often ecstatic, suggests this is a process of revitalization rather than ruin, a renewal of the city’s materiality in a form she has yet to make clear. In these images, the built landscape is itself vegetal, the forms she describes are not collapsing but mulching down.

At other times, Hilla reverts to her wakening tendency toward forensic detail. She describes the decaying ballroom of a once lavish hotel, a fallen piano in a weird state of transformation, on the way to becoming some kind of fungal organism. Nearby, formerly grand residences, built in Art Deco and Spanish Revival style (such detail!), are rotting. As in her previous encounters with the dream machine, Hilla spends considerable time telling us of factories, industrial plants, and the enormous automobile works and empty assembly lines with which the rest of the group is now fa-
miliar.\(^3\) Once again, this level of detail tests the patience of us all (though I fav-our this collective sense of irritability to the unease I had also begun to detect in the room).

As I bring the session to an end by turning off the machine, Hilla once again loses her grasp on the images, the city fades, it becomes indistinct, a memory.

**Agent Wasserman (surveillance), shift report**

[According to an archivist’s annotation, Sektion Null agent Wasserman filed these reports by Telex in the summer of 1968, shortly before his unfortunate disappearance. He was assigned to conduct Level 1 surveillance of the Bechers (during their travels in the Ruhr district??). Records indicate that Wasserman’s case officer had become concerned over the tone of these reports, and a request was eventually made for Wasserman to be pulled from active duty. This request was not approved.]

In what appears to have been a lengthy surveying process for suitable perspective, the targets spent the entire day tramping up and down the hills overlooking the plant. H & B carried a considerable amount of equipment which they hauled throughout their wanderings. During this process, their activity was continually interrupt-

---

3 In case it is not already clear, these images are inspired by the various examples of Detroit ruin porn, most notably Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010). Equally, part of this imagined description is familiar to Marchand and Meffre’s study of Hashima Island, the old Mitsubishi coal mining facility.
ed by repeated discussions which, based on their gestures toward the sky, most likely concerned the light. By late afternoon, after finally setting up their equipment, it began to rain intermittently. The equipment was packed away and unpacked several times, before the targets decided to return to their Volkswagen and drive back to the hotel. No photographs were taken all day. No further activity occurred.

Addendum: In the evening, H & B went to the cinema where they saw FAHRSTUHL ZUM SCHAFFOTT. The film tells the story of a perfect crime unraveling. In a narrative that takes place over 24 hours, the audience is presented with entangled pairs of lovers, coincidences, mix-ups, mistaken identities, fast cars, the spectre of war, murder, interrogation. Julien has killed Florence’s husband and made it look like a suicide but, having forgotten to remove a piece of evidence that will tie him to the murder, he is forced to return to the scene of the crime. Once there, he becomes trapped in an elevator, the power to the building shut down overnight. Florence wanders desolately through the city at night, searching for any sign of her lover, but he seems to have disappeared. Meanwhile, Louis and Véronique have stolen Julien’s car. They drive to a motel where they end up murdering a couple of German tourists -- the Benckers! Placing his car, his overcoat and his gun at the scene, the police finger Julien for the murder of this German couple. Julien’s photograph appears on the front page of the
paper, a manhunt is in progress, and -- just as soon as he manages to free himself from the elevator, he is arrested. In the end, it is a set of photographs that sorts out the confusion. A forgotten film from a miniature camera, left with the motel’s processing service, puts Louis and Véronique at the scene of the Benkers’ murder, just as it reveals Julien and Florence to be lovers who conspired against her husband. The image wraps everything up, the grizzled detective has won the day. ‘Never leave photos lying around’ he advises Florence, intimating that she will face a death sentence for her crime. The final scene takes place in a darkroom. Latent images become visible, Miles Davis’s forlorn trumpet weeps. Florence’s hands are in the developer, fingers caressing the emulsion of prints which show her and Julien embracing, smiling. Their punishment will be separation -- across time, across life and death -- but they will remain together in the image.

**Note:** Dr S insisted that I record any personal sensation or experience that might be considered out of the ordinary, so here goes. This afternoon, hidden behind a small slag heap some distance from the targets, I took photographs of the Bechers loading their equipment back into the Volkswagen. As they prepared to leave, I quickly headed back to my car. At this time, I became vaguely conscious of something coiling around the lower part of my right leg, but in my effort to maintain surveillance
while getting back to the car without being spotted, I simply ignored the sensation. By the time I reached the car I found there was nothing attached to my leg and assumed the plant, or whatever it was, must have snagged on something and come loose. Later, in the cinema, eight rows back from the Bechers, I became conscious of the sensation again -- an impression of something tightening on my lower leg, or what dimly felt like a vine or creeper was still wrapped around it. Even now, writing this report back at the hotel, the feeling is so distinct that I can’t help but repeatedly glance down at my leg to check there is nothing entwined! I can only assume that I’m experiencing a minor allergic reaction to toxic flora, though I can’t imagine how this happened -- the steel works is notable for its utter lack of vegetation.

I confirm that the foregoing is a true and accurate account.

NONDISCLOSABLE
Seized schizoanalytic records for Becher, H.
Consultant: Dr [Redacted]
Date: [Redacted]
Hypnagogic therapy -- dream machine session no. 6
Something new... From the past we travel to the future of Hilla’s fabulous city, which, in spite of her condition, is conjured with utopian vigor. After the crash, Hilla tells us with absolute confidence, the people had migrated to the flat sub-
urban areas, but even these are now without trace of the human. In the plots where abandoned houses are most decayed there are already small, dense forests. In the distance, prairie grasses. She is knotweed, a network of vines, creepers.

As she moves through the city, her descriptions become more like brief flashes: the floor of a police station littered with Polaroids, tendrils growing over, across and through the intermingled pile of suspects and victims; a clock on a high school wall, its face and hands dissolving into vegetal slime. She becomes breathless as her account of these snapshots becomes faster and faster. But as I reach to switch off the machine, she comes to a sudden halt.

The group collectively exhales as Hilla describes one final image. The city is now surrounded by photographers, every one of them a Last Man. They do not understand, she tells us in a whisper. The photographers believe it is their job to capture the triumph of Nature over human culture. For these romantic realists, the city will serve as a feature of the human landscape, as memento mori, as picturesque monument for human time. It is a theme park, a Pompeii or Herculaneum for the 21st century, to be reproduced in giant limited edition tomes. But, she murmurs, the city’s vegetal images are tendrillar systems, a form of media open to an immanent outside, linking

---

the photographer, the human, to ‘billions of other worlds’.\(^5\)

**Agent Voss, shift report**

‘We are not war photographers!’ Hilla insisted this afternoon when I exasperated her with my continuing questions about their methods. I had been very bored at Oberhausen in the morning and had made the mistake of betraying this to her. She explained once again why they needed to be so well researched and prepared, so discriminating and so -- yes, let’s say it, anal -- about the way they approached the photographs they took and their approach to assembly and display. Emphatically, she said, these are not sterile typologies for the bourgeoisie to tip their wine glasses to in their appreciation in various gallery settings. When these sequences are assembled, ‘something happens’. She said it twice, three times. Something happens, and the best way to understand it is to conceive it as a kind of music-making. I had heard her express this idea before and I pressed her further. Each industrial apparatus, each object, she said, has its own sound -- you could call it a tone or a rhythm. It is individual, it is distinct. It is raw sonic material, and when you arrange several of these forms together, you can, with sufficient experience and skill, cajole them into making music together. It is a natural composition, a song of in-

---

dustrial nature. Typological manipulation is an orchestration of repetition, rhythm, and the introduction of slight differences and variations. We encounter sound in its raw state, she said, that is, as noise. And from it we extract refrains. We are agents of the refrain. Rather grand, I commented. But she was not to be cowed. I had touched on something really important. She believes that this music sounds technological nature and that through it we can track its mutations, its fluxes and congealings. This ‘refraining’ is an ordering of chaos, a productivity of chaos. Hilla grew quiet at this point. When she continued, she mumbled some indistinct remarks on the threat posed by ‘new developments’. She connected this to the fact that they had aborted their plans to create typologies of radio and TV transmitters...Before I dropped her off at their hotel, she made some few last comments about their approach to what she said she might call ‘morphology’ in preference over typology. This approach, she insisted, is absolutely to be conceived as occurring in the fringes, at the edges. It is an investigation of the borderlands of twentieth-century nature -- not quite art, history or science, but something in between. As I bid her goodnight, she reminded me that she was deadly serious about her contention that their work was one of detection, one of penetrating a cover-up, identifying a crime that had been perpetrated in this ‘in-between’.
PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MIDDLE

I confirm that this is a true and factual record.

Extracts from Hilla Becher’s case notes
Mail intercept
Reproduced from handwriting
The war between the wars.
Margaret Bourke-White the herpetologist.
Friend to animals and birds, to reptiles.
Walks the contours, the land, the wilderness. Lessons from the natural world.
[Illegible.]
At Columbia, she becomes a pictorialist.
Soft focus. Romantic.
Machines are perceived through a humanist prism. The world is perceived by a subject.

The human is standardized, scientifically managed, exchanged and interchangeable.
Margaret Bourke-White as the spirit of the machine age.
Charles Sheeler as high priest.
The machine as cultic force, a transcendent power. Mythical.
In Cleveland and New York, Bourke-White channels a machine aesthetic. Realism and abstraction. Pattern and projection.
Henry Luce comes calling. Bourke-White and Sheeler sign up to FORTUNE. Bourke-White depicts the grandeur of industry, giant
structures. Sheeler seeks a precisionist rendering of ‘Power’. To some, their work is simply homage to capital. They monumentalize industrial forms. The power they depict is omnipotent. There is none of Lewis Hine’s humanist outrage here. Little concern for the wage labourer, for the human. But there is something else. Bourke-White begins to map machinic-assemblages, interrelating material objects, users and producers, new social compositions. In her work, the human is not a mere appendage to the machine, the human-machine exist in worlding relation. Together, Bourke-White and Sheeler intimate something else, another geography of relations which extends beyond industrial territories. This is fleeting. After the crash, Bourke-White gives herself up to the moral humanism of LIFE. Sheeler is trapped in walled gardens of artistic expression. But --

[Illegible. Most of the following paragraph is heavily crossed through. Cannot be deciphered despite lab analysis. Continues with:]

Bourke-White’s photomural for RCA (1933). The broadcast sublime. The nascent network.

---

Sheeler’s ‘Self Portrait’ (1923). The artist as feint [faint?] reflection in a pane of glass, subjugated to the dominance of the telephone, to the new regime of communication.

3. Telesthesia. Third nature. The present. The increasing dominance of speed over space and place. Second nature is encompassed by a media layer. Second nature is transformed. The ongoing emanations of the crash pulse throughout the world. Accelerating. These processes are hidden in plain sight. Its forms are not monumental but nomadic.

Agent Wasserman, shift report
The targets arrived back from their day’s work to their hotel at 18:00. At 18:40, they were collected by taxi and driven to the Restaurant Odradek. After the restaurant, they walked the several streets to the cinema. On this occasion, the movie they saw was a relatively new one -- an American crime drama, Point Blank. The star of the film, Lee Marvin, as ‘Walker’, is, one might say, as hard as nails. In my assessment, the film envisions a new amor-al business-type of crime and punishment in which victims and their oppressors are prone to switching roles in service of the profit principle. Walker wears the mask of affectlessness. The most obvious interpretation of the film is that Walker is living dead, a revenant with unfinished business, who may only act and kill indirectly, adja-
cently. But his ‘revenge’ ultimately enacts a peculiar complicity with the ‘Organization’ which it initially appears he is to bring down. The ghost becomes a puppet. Business embraces spectrality, which it re-munerates in an unusual way. The most significant observation I have to make is that in this film the whole world is a set-up. Not only the actors, but also the characters they play, seem to (hesitantly) voice a pre-written script. Plus, never have I seen so many doors and windows, curtains and staircases, mirrors and other reflective surfaces in a movie. As in a theatre, where one backdrop is always ready to give way to the next, every space (and moment) harbours and is compromised by other adjacent spaces (and moments). Movement and vision is constantly impeded and subject to protocols of access, with the exception, perhaps of Walker’s. Walker surfs the protocols and this is why he proves so good for business. He walks between, as it were. After the movie, I followed the targets as they returned by taxi directly to their hotel and retired at 23:30.

Later that night [This extract is one of several assumed to have been drawn by the agent from his official dream diary, or ‘noctuary’]:

The Captain is screaming, hands clamped around his ears. Voss’s face is melting -- Jesus -- falling down his shirt in a sheet. I cannot string two thoughts together because of the immensely loud and disgusting whistling emanating from the swaying...
transmitter. Moments before, the sky had grown dark, threatening storm, and then the sound had started. Bernd Becher suddenly slumped, like a wound-down automaton. I saw thick grey vines, their ends split into myriad probes, flicking around the structure’s antennas, fibrillating, tasting the air. Then, Hilla is right beside me, her face inches away from mine, yelling at the top of her voice so as to be heard above the whistling transmitter: ‘BRING ME IN!’

I confirm that this is a true and factual record.

**Items of interest** [descriptions apparently based on observation of items found in the possession of Hilla Becher during house search]:

**A. Photograph**
The somewhat grainy black and white image depicts a group of approximately 20 people. They are arranged tightly (most stand, some sit) and many faces are obscured. The majority of the group pose for the photographer, smiling, and several people clutch glasses of wine. Based on their clothing, the image was probably taken some time in the 1940s. The faces of three figures have been roughly circled in red pen: In the centre, a man dressed all in black, with black hair and thick black eyebrows; in the lower right, a woman in military uniform ignoring the camera; standing behind her, a balding man in a three piece tweed suit.
Scribbled handwriting in pencil covers the back of the photograph: Cocktails at de Brunhoff’s. Capa, C-B, Miller. C-B, father of ‘photojournalism’, is (like Miller) disciple of surrealism. Rejects ‘documenting’, ‘reporting’. Not interested in photojournalism label. Capa advises caution. You need an assignment or ‘you’ll be like a hothouse plant’, he says. But in the magic of decisive moment C-B’s surrealism (and his vegetal fate?) persisted. Describes particular intuition for events, fleeting chiasmas when the world extrudes a truth from its flux. Archetype probably the flâneur, detached city wanderer, aimless but attuned to rhythm of urban landscape. Flâneur picks up untimely signals: tracks lost past and anticipates impending future. C-B’s images are seeing devices, not only capture eventful present but also probe its future.

B. Annotations made to working sketches
[sketches made, it is recorded, in anticipation of a project to document British TV and radio transmitters. A field trip in the spring of ’68 did take place, but plans to visit Winter Hill (Lancs), Emley Moor (Yorks) and other sites were abandoned for unspecified reasons]

...Conundrum. Germinal ambivalence. What is it we detect, stirring in the background, infecting and disfiguring technical organs, perverting the very idea of production? Seeing that there is something that we cannot see, throwing evidential inquiry into disarray. Inimical, at least in-
different to our ministrations? An opacity, a phenomenon of thresholds, threatening to infect us, too. Secret devices with unrecognizable, criminal functions -- these noxious flowerings which harrow the technical body are not for us.

**Agent Wasserman, shift report**
The targets dined at Odradek and took in another movie. San Francisco, featured in *Point Blank*, is a weird city. It’s foggy, things are blurred. Its streets rise and plunge manically. It’s always on the brink of disasters -- fires, earthquakes. *Vertigo*, of course, is a touchstone, as is *The Maltese Falcon*. Tonight, the targets went to see Orson Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai*, which famously situates its climactic scenes in a funhouse, a hall of mirrors. Exterior shots of this building were taken at Frisco’s Playland-at-the-Beach. The film presents reality as a rebus in which sense has fractured and become scattered through a process of multiple and virulent reflection. Who’s aiming at who? The nightmare of mirrors demanded the studio provide nearly 3000 square feet of glass. Scenes were filmed through cleverly situated one-way mirrors. Nothing is seen straight on in this movie. Almost every line of dialogue hints at traps, framings, betrayals. ‘After what I’d been through, anything crazy at all...seemed natural’. Reality is criminal through and through. Reality is reticular and murderous, like cinema itself and sense coagulates only as the network is finally destroyed by a fool.
Later [from Wasserman’s noctuary]:
It starts in a bit of a daze. I find myself in the Odradek at Konrad Fischer’s table. As always when I have visited this establishment, I find the ambience oddly repellent. Fischer, intoxicated, is preoccupied with trying to impress Hilla with tales of his American artist friends. I become aware that Bernd is photographing our group, having managed to set up his plate camera behind a nearby curtain. Hilla is very subdued. Her eyes, I realize, are fixed on mine. She slips me a napkin on which she has scribbled a word or a sign. I discreetly take it and place it upon my lap. Before I can look at it, Fischer distracts us all with a question: ‘So who here is Sektion Null?’ It disturbs me. I am thrown into a panic.

I confirm that this is a true and factual record.

Agent Wasserman, shift report
Odradek and a movie. This time, Aldrich’s Kiss Me Deadly. Set in Los Angeles, the other weird city where life is lived on a knife’s edge. Of course, commentary on this movie is certain to revolve around the question of the ‘Great Whatsit’ -- the enigmatic case containing something which glows very ominously. At the end of this movie, what is within the case reaches critical mass, as it inevitably must, and it makes a chilling racket. I suppose we are all put in mind of nuclear power. But for HB, to paraphrase Mike Hammer, it is connected up
with something even bigger. I am afflicted grievously with a migraine and, as soon as I witness the targets go back into their hotel, I return to my room and to bed.

Later [noctuary]:
I don’t quite know where we are...Oberhausen? Over by the blast furnaces, I seem to see my old school. I feel certain I am late for a lesson...My migraine has accompanied me into the dream. It is as if the world is cracking and splitting. HB, ignoring me, is at work with a camera. It looks like she is preparing to take pictures of the school. But she walks away. When she has gone, I wait a few moments and then approach the large-format plate camera which, as I recall, is the pre-arranged dead drop.

**Record of surveillance, Galerie Konrad Fischer**

[On the evening of Friday, January 3rd, 1969, Null agents observed events and recorded conversations on the occasion of the opening of Robert Smithson’s exhibition at Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf. The targets, Hilla and Bernd Becher were in attendance, as well as the gallery owner. Smithson arrived fashionably late accompanied by a young artist of his acquaintance named Reiner Grossvogel. Smithson led Grossvogel around the two exhibits comprising his show, which consisted of the artworks, Nonsite (Ruhr district), five large steel bins full of slag accompanied by wall panels (map details, photographs, textual material), and Asphalt Lump, simply a
large, dark grey rounded lump of asphalt placed on the gallery floor, with no accompanying material. It was whilst the two were inspecting this second artwork that the first significant conversational extract was recorded as follows:

Reiner Grossvogel: It is a rather prepossessing lump, Robert. Did you have to look for a long time to find it? Refined bitumen from Oberhausen?

Robert Smithson: No, it was just lying there. I liked this particular dollop. You know, it never fully solidifies, it’s always mid-flow, trapping and corrupting everything that touches it. In its natural form, it trapped the mammoths -- in the tar pits, you know? The first photographs were made using asphalt-coated plates...I’m interested in thinking in lumps, piles, heaps. We would do well to think like matter -- do you know the old alchemical maxim, solve et coagula? The world reduced to processes of dissolution and coagulation. All architectures ooze away or turn to stone, even the architecture of the self, the soul. Becoming turbid, foggy and confused.

RG: Photography and tar? That’s interesting. Somehow primordial, this technology, isn’t it?

RS: I imagine technologies being pulled into the pit, overwhelmed. Or, alternatively, think of the most advanced technologies as animal or insect. Just ripping, biting,
burrowing, fucking. I dream of a world of non-containment. These non-sites are really bits broken off of chaos, tentacles from the abyss. If we can contain the non-contained, however briefly, map it, well...we need a good dose of it, is all I’m saying.

[At this point, Smithson and Grossvogel move on to the Non-site (Ruhr district) exhibit, where they join Hilla Becher and Konrad Fischer. After introductions and several minutes of pleasantries, the following extract was recorded:]

RS: We both want to crack the case, Hilla, but with me -- as I was just telling Reiner -- it’s literal. I want to create fissures in containers, open them up to their internal caverns. With me it’s about applying friction, which is also a matter of fiction. If there has been a crime, I’m seduced by the villain. If this is an aftermath, I think maybe there’s something in the ensuing alarm to celebrate. The collapse of order, it’s a peculiar kind of illumination, like peeling off a rind or crust, or turning rocks over and watching the teeming life racing for darkness.

Hilla Becher: You’re incorrigible! If this is a crime, how will you make the charges stick?!

RS: It will never reach trial, Hilla. It’s not Sherlock Holmes. It’s more like the hardboiled stuff...film noir...with truth running scared like those insects, ev-
erybody compromised. This is a crime that sends us all scuttling.

Konrad Fischer: It’s not just a crime. It’s a crimewave!

RS: Precisely. It’s a necessary evil -- this gallery, these fences we put up around everything...no offence, Konrad...but these non-sites of mine I see as kind of guiltless because they are as much outside the room as inside. They are elsewhere, mapping the entrance to the abyss. They are where the ‘garden’ runs riot, grows extravagantly and weirdly, so to speak. My job as an artist is to make the landscape reel, make the garden tumultuous and voracious.

[The last extract of conversation was recorded towards the close of the evening, after the aforementioned have sought refreshment in a nearby bar. Smithson waxes lyrical on one of his key influences:]

RS: Hilla, do you know of T.E. Hulmes’s work...an art critic, turn of the century? No? He wrote a marvellous essay, called ‘Cinders’, which I think of often. Hulme says reality is ‘cindery’ in nature -- cinders are pyroclastic rocks, full of cavities, formed in volcanic action. So, reality is the temporary coagulation, cooling down, of exploded matter. It’s thrown out and it forms where it lands. Hulme associates cinders with the ‘fringe’ of things. He says, and I can quote this verbatim: ‘Always think of the fringe and of the cold
walks, of the lines that lead nowhere’. And again: ‘Great men, go to the outside, away from the Room, and wrestle with the cinders. And cinders become the Azores, the Magic Isles’. The cinders are a source of friction, an incitement to those who refuse to leave the Room...

HB: When we were at Oberhausen, you were so casual, even careless. No regard for the weather, the light, anything. I thought you were making it up as you went along. Just snapping away! Bernd was so dismayed! Now, I think you are the Cinderman. I think you are not human! [Laughter]

Letters regarding Smithson in Yucatán

i) Entropological Drift

[It is believed that these fragments derive from letters sent to H.B. by Reiner Grossvogel in spring ’69 and relate to Smithson’s trip to Yucatán during which time Smithson ‘channelled’ what is here referred to as the ‘intersection mythos’.]

El hombre’s tendrils are all over this. This drug -- the brujos extract it from the crushed or scraped bark of some vine -- opens a fellow up to ‘insane overwhelming rape of the senses...Everything stirs with a peculiar furtive writhing life like a Van Gogh painting...There is a definite sense

of space time travel...’\(^8\) Coupled with the ‘mirror-travel’ trick -- ever since New York, elsewhere, and all the time on this trip -- this is potent magic. And it’s connected to the plant thing. I call to your attention Burroughs’s ‘autobiography’: ‘I have no past life at all being a notorious plant or “intrusion” if you prefer the archaeological word for an “intruded” artifact...Remember? I prefer not to’.\(^9\) This trick is a way back ‘outside’, extrusion through the mirror. ‘Straight exploration’, Burroughs says -- mainlining the intersection mythos. Bluntly: on this ‘anti-expedition’, RS has made himself into a channel, a medium.

A couple of pointers: ONE -- The reading material he devoured in preparation. Two books in particular: James Churchward’s *The Lost Continent of Mu* and Peter Nehem-kis’s *Latin America: Myth and Reality*.\(^10\) Churchward was an occult writer (big favourite of Lovecraft) who theorized that the continent of Mu, under the Pacific Ocean, was the Garden of Eden (*Garden*, see) and roped this together with a ton of ancient

---

mythology. The Nehemkis volume is an altogether more sober affair. The Churchward is grubby, well-thumbed, while the Nehemkis is barely touched, spine not even cracked. TWO -- RS rents a car, jumps in with NH and VD and tears down highway 261, eventually hitting Palenque (Chiapas). Along the way, frequent stop-offs at various Mayan ruins. These times, he drags out the mirrors and arranges them very particularly, pushed into the earth or lodged amongst roots and vines. Out comes the Instamatic. The mirrors displace everything they reflect, intersecting and calling forth virtualities, cicerones in the form of Mayan and Aztec Gods. So they speak to him, phrases such as: ‘The true fiction eradicates the false reality’. And then it’s all dismantled and nothing left but the pictures.

Alien crash sites, traces of an entropological drift to unhuman time, these sites are death knells, haecceities which plug into other dimensions. Mirrors cracking, ravines in an insect’s carapace. (Not) here and (not) now.

Agent Wasserman, shift report

Rained all day. No activity.

Note: I must record a further development to the sensation described in my previous personal report. This morning, as has become my habit during the Bechers’ stay at this hotel, I went to the café across the street for breakfast. The establishment is ideally situated to allow continuous observation of the targets’ Volkswagen, and
the waitress has recognized my preference for a table by the window. Today, though, as she was showing me to the table, the waitress quietly warned me of the café’s hygiene policy. I really shouldn’t come into the establishment, she whispered, with all those weeds trailing from my legs like that. Perhaps next time I could make sure I have cleaned myself up a bit. She was sure I’d understand -- it’s not fair on the other customers, after all. Well, I was shocked. But surely this can only be coincidence? Even though, before she had even stopped speaking, it was clear that there was -- of course -- nothing tangled around my legs, the waitress insisted on retracing our journey from the entrance, and checking under other tables, in the expectation of finding some knot of vines or creepers caught on café furniture. Needless to say, the incident was embarrassing for both of us, and I will not return to the café again.

This is true and factual.

Agent Wasserman, shift report
Bright sunshine. The light appears to be too harsh for the images of the water tower the Bechers had planned to capture today. They sit in the Volkswagen for several hours, waiting, I assume, for a change to the light, but eventually they give up. Instead, they drive to the office of a local mining company, where they meet with the manager. My interrogation of the manager (conducted later in the evening) reveals that, despite his suspicions of their mo-
tives, he was willing to provide them with maps, schematics, and various other files relating to the company’s activities in the area.

Note: Tonight, making my way back to the hotel after interrogating the manager of the mining company, I saw some kind of weeds growing up out of the street.

I confirm...There is no doubt this time, they were emerging from the concrete in front of my eyes, following me as I moved along the pavement...

**Letters regarding Smithson in Yucatán**

ii) Smoke

...the mind’s secret mindlessness. The mind is like mud, or slime. That’s the general idea. Moved by a force -- a chaos, an infection maybe, something called the Tsalal.\(^{11}\) A sculpting, shaping force that vitalizes everything, alive or dead, organic or inorganic, pushing things apart, eroding and rotting them, and pulling them together, gluing them. Think of any number of processes: putrefaction, or rusting, corrosion, or the action of an earthquake or a geyser, a landslide or a flood. All of

---

\(^{11}\) Sources here again include Smithson’s ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in Yucatán’, but also Thomas Ligotti’s short story, ‘The Shadow, The Darkness’, in *Teatro Gottesco* (London: Virgin, 2008), 243–80. Ligotti’s *Tsalal* is inspired by the name of an island in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). Poe took it from the Hebrew, in which it refers to endarkenment and, also, to cover, to sink into, and to vibrate with fear. Poe’s *Tsalal* is located within the Antarctic Circle, close to the abyssal vortex which he, it is thought, imagined to comprise the pole itself.
these and more...the experiment proves that this... force... can be embraced by any willing medium...collusion with the metamorphic designs of the Tsalal. Bob’s insisting that this thing -- it’s everything, things when they’re not fenced in -- voices itself through local Gods. Gods spoke through the air-conditioner of the rental car, through the wind whistling around the car, wind through trees and over bushes, in the tide, in crumbling earth and tumbling rocks, in the click and wind of his Instamatic, in radio interference. As Smoke, it caught his eye in the rear-view mirror and told him to throw away his guide books. It’s an art of wandering and it’s your feet that see the way. Hands that dig without knowing what they’ll touch. Abasement of vision, ‘negative seeing’. Smoke said vision must be made to crawl. The further he went down the highway, the more intense this riff about the falsehood of nature, that nature is a disguise or cover-up which can be made to drop, and that Smoke’s art is this dismantling. Nowhere places, places of dirt, ash, mud -- like a charred field, a stretch of desert, jungle. Horrible places, sometimes. At Palenque, in the jungle, his mirrors reflected the tentacular contortions of the trees, snarling vision up in sacred networks, zones of indecision and indeterminacy. Sight mutated into ‘knotted reflection’. Turning over rocks, photographing the tracks of insects and animal burrows -- ‘gateways to the abyss’, Bob said -- and muttering about animals and insects having their own art, installed in
‘a damp cosmos of fungus and mold’. A tree planted upside down becomes ‘a giant vegetable squid’. Introducing friction into a fenced-in world, rubbing things up against each other, the idea being to make them travel. Travel backwards, he said, but a new backwards, ‘over the unfathomable’.

**Fragment of intercepted letter from HB, Spring 1969, to unknown:**
They say they protect the constitution but are themselves overwhelmed by the scale of that which is emerging. They are intoxicated with it and elect themselves as brokers of the shadows. If it was only a few spies against us, I would not care. I have endured worse in my life. But what if we are not masters even of ourselves? I think, sometimes, my own words merely echo its whispers. Worse -- it takes my work and makes it mute. For all of these paranoid forensics on which Bernd and I have laboured, I fear it cannot be revealed in its very structure. It is nothing that will be positively detected. Nothing that will ever pause for our cameras. I believe it is alive, but I do not believe it can be known. The secret we look for has perhaps today become the ‘constitution’ itself.

**NONDISCLOSABLE**
Seized schizoanalytic records for Becher, H.
Consultant: Dr [redacted]
Date: [redacted]
Hypnagogic therapy -- dream machine session no.8
At the beginning of group discussion, Hilla refers to these sessions as part of her investigative or archaeological process. This process, she announces rather obliquely, is as much about negative evidence -- a ‘gulf’, a ‘limit point’, a ‘void’ -- as it is about detection or discovery. As the group’s recent experience suggests, a confrontation with this paradox is fundamental, even if it takes a toll in other ways. Like any other kind of archaeology, it is a process that can’t be reversed -- by which I mean that Hilla’s perception of the world, her belief in the world -- has been irrevocably transformed. She appears to be cultivating an almost mystical state of consciousness.

As with the sessions of previous days, today Hilla again reports perceptions of industrial forms. She begins by describing a blast furnace, a structure which ‘corresponds to a skinless body.’ Over 25 minutes, we hear of its complex tangle of pipes trapping gases and directing them toward purification and processing, we hear of its cooling system of ducts and boxes, we are made to picture in detail its steel shell, its shaft, its cone. She describes these images calmly and at length before falling silent.

Though she remains positioned in front of the machine, her eyes still closed, she does not speak. After a minute or two, I assume she has simply fallen asleep. Perhaps the sheer unremitting detail of the image has exhausted her (I must confess to fighting the weight of my own eyelids at
PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE MIDDLE

one stage during this session). But as I move across the room to gently rouse her, she abruptly resumes her description.

This time, though, nothing is clear. We have evidently moved to encounter a different form, but Hilla finds herself incapable of describing it. Eventually, amidst a series of discomforted noises, she mumbles that it is a ‘box’, dark and indistinct. Is this a new encounter, I ask, is this a new form? ‘You mean progress,’ she snaps back. ‘Past to present to future. Of course not. No, not new, something old. Ancient. After the future.’ Silence again. And then, just as in session no. 6, she addresses Max, her son. Max is drawing the structure in crayon, an image that reminds her of something she has seen before. But the drawing is just grey, she says -- to him or to us, I’m not sure -- a grey print, flatter than the sky, formless.