IT IS NO LONGER A QUESTION OF IMITATION, NOR DUPLICATION, NOR EVEN PARODY.

IT IS A QUESTION OF SUBSTITUTING THE SIGNS OF THE REAL FOR THE REAL, THAT IS TO SAY OF AN OPERATION OF DETERRING EVERY REAL PROCESS VIA ITS OPERATIONAL DOUBLE,

A PROGRAMMATIC, METASTABLE, PERFECTLY DESCRIPTIVE MACHINE THAT OFFERS ALL THE SIGNS OF THE REAL AND SHORT-CIRCUITS ALL ITS VICISSITUDES.[1]

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994 (1981), p. 4.

The association of the discourse on the digital in the 1990s with the idea of post-photography – through its expression as a post-medium state as much as its expression as a post-human condition – veils a certain number of productive leads that allow a better understanding of the uses of digital technologies in Düsseldorf, but that have hardly been pursued by its historiography. The aim of this second chapter resides primarily in the exploration of a broader context from which the work of Becher students emerged, focusing on the role and uses of photography in conceptual art in the 1970s, as much in the United States as in Europe. As will be argued throughout this research, these photo-conceptual strategies, in which the "mathematical" formalization of reality (i.e., a depictive process based on set rules and fixed protocols) plays a key role, can be interpreted as a primitive form of computing. The link between Düsseldorf photography and these early "digital" mechanisms is chiefly structural: the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their protocoled depictions of industrial buildings, a systematic documentary endeavor, has converged with the work of these conceptual artists since the late 1960s and has led to the understanding of their typologies *as* conceptual, aesthetically and institutionally.

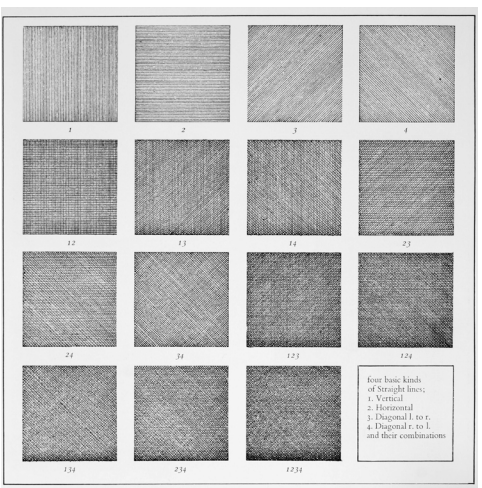

Fig. 34: Sol LeWitt, *Four Basic Kinds of Straight Lines and Their Combination*, 1969 (artist's book)

The genealogy of images produced or retouched digitally in the Düsseldorf context ought to be traced back to that context, because the use of the protocoled depiction deployed by the Bechers considerably shaped the production of Düsseldorf photography, as it outlined its compositional and conceptual strategies and defined its formal output. But clearly the typological work of the couple is reminiscent of a much larger context in which serial imagery, one of the core processes of photo-conceptual undertakings, developed into a paramount artistic strategy. The mechanisms that appeared at that time should consequently be further explored to understand the work of the young generation. A particularly resilient strategy, which can

clearly be accounted for in the Bechers' work and in their students work, indicates a strong interconnection between the two generations: the application of the Becher protocol and its resulting formal outcome. The set of rules applied by the Bechers to satisfy their search for an objectified depiction of industrial architecture – "as objective as possible," they commonly state –, derives from a context shared by many conceptual and photo-conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s and could more generally be inscribed in the nascent mathematical formalization (i.e., digitization) of the world. Klaus Honnef, in one of the first studies on conceptual positions, published already in 1971, programmatically combines these two entities – concept art and an emerging "digital" (i.e., based on digits) codification of reality. In his book *Concept Art*,[2] Honnef dissociates the dematerialized idea – one of the core processes of conceptual art as it was defined by Sol LeWitt[3] – from the material outcome of these strategies (e.g., LeWitt's "structures" or drawings). To state his argument, he uses a metaphor borrowed from computer language (whose implications he could not have been aware of at the time): while the immaterial, the idea, is described through the notion "software," the visual and sculptural output is interpreted as "hardware." Since the period of generalization of computer technology in the 1990s, these two terms have become inseparable from that field: hardware stands for every physical object associated with computing (micro-chips, memory, hard drives, etc.) and software for the processes they sustain (applications, virtual memory, computing, etc.).

This surprisingly early evocation of digital technologies and computational mechanisms, and the dissociation of two poles of conceptual art – the processual and the physical – provides a starting point from which to assess various mechanisms and outputs of such strategies in their relationship to photography and, ultimately, allows the apprehension of a new conception of photographic representation. The production of images, rather than the mere depiction of a physical reality, and the strategies defining the generative processes underlying that production, plays a central role in Düsseldorf photography, whose work has been freed of the duty to depict. While in the context of photography as an institutionally autonomous object this emancipation occurs in the 1980s, in an artistic context the shift happened in the footpath of contextual art, roughly one decade earlier. And it was not achieved by photographers but rather – to use Douglas Fogle's terminology – by "artists using photography."[4]

2 Klaus Honnef, *Concept Art*, Cologne, Phaidon Verlag, 1971.

3 See Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, Vol. 5, No. 10, 1967 and Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art and Language*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1969.

4 See Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show. Artists Using Photography. 1960 – 1982*, op. cit.

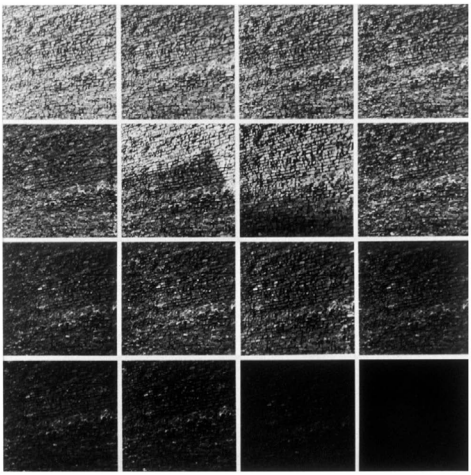

Fig. 35: Sixteen photographs from Sol LeWitt's artist book *Brick Wall*, Tanglewood Press, 1977