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What Remains of the Image: A Juxtaposition of Disparate Elements

Yes, I have always said that, with any sculpture, you have to be able to say, although this is not a readymade, it could be one. That's what a sculpture is supposed to look like. It must have a certain relation to reality. I mean, not airy-fairy, let alone fabricated, so aloof and polite And I don't see this aspect in many artists' works. Often, my feeling is that they think something up that is supposed to be art. That's not what I want at all. Rather, a sculpture is really a photo – although it can be shifted, it must still always have an aspect that reality has too.

Isa Genzken

It is worthwhile to examine the work of Peter Piller in the context of the debates surrounding the dispositifs of archiving and reworking photographs as currently manifested in contemporary artistic practices. Since the mid-1990s, he has been exploring the field of different cultural and social practices and areas of activity in which photography serves a mediating function. Piller forms his own visual constellations through examining existing, found, and sought-out images. Yet at the same time, through the manner in which he reconfigures these materials, he suggests new ways of reading them. His artistic work – encompassing his artist books as well as his presentation concepts for exhibitions – is indebted to an analytical approach. His works are a very particular form of media reflection. In this sense, Piller draws on a central paradigm of the art of the twentieth century – conceptual art – and develops his visual strategies from it. This also suggests some promising insights into how the paradigms guiding conceptually informed processes have shifted as well as what role the works of Peter Piller have come to play in this context. Core debates about art have long since ceased to center on a departure from the image, liberation from the object, and evading the commercialization of art; at issue instead is the fundamental tension between concept and image, between the visible and representation, and between methodology and meaning. In his extensive *Archive Peter Piller*, the artist investigates the fundamental disposition of photography as a technique for showing and seeing. What (initially) becomes evident in the series of works that he has developed from the archive is a critical and contradictory relationship to the visual that calls into question the event-like nature or documentality (Hito Steyerl) of the photographic image. In the *Zeitung* (Newspaper) segment of the *Archive Peter Piller*, he achieves this, for example, by processing a phenomenology of regional events, rituals, and ceremonies. This is based on a collection of photographs published in local newspapers – whose principles of composition seem to follow an unstated set of formal rules. His practice of collecting and using utilitarian photographs is

often compared with that of Hans-Peter Feldmann. However, up to now, I have only found the obsessive nature characterizing Peter Piller's work as a whole and this project in particular in a comparable form in the work of artist and healer Marianne Wex, who, in the years between 1972 and 1977, collected over 5,000 photographic reproductions for her project *Weibliche und männliche Körpersprache als Folge patriarchalischer Machtverhältnisse (Let's Take Back Our Space: "Male" and "Female" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures)* and, in a book of the same title published in 1979, compiled them into a typology of poses, through which she attempted to demonstrate the difference between the sexes. Coinciding with the rise of theoretical debates (in Europe) around the constructed nature of the photographic image, this work by Marianne Wex formed a basis or point of reference for many woman artists, who subsequently also explored representations of the (female) body in the media. Today – some three decades later and with reference to another debate – Piller is able to use a different point of departure. Like the work of Wex, his complete *Archive Peter Piller* and the *Zeitung* segment thereof are also organized in categories not only encompassing certain themes, but above all, incorporating various specific compositional logics. *Zeitung* shows the almost ritual repetition of formalized and standardized news photographs in daily newspapers accompanying specific events of largely regional significance. They attest to certain representational conventions, as Marianne Wex already observed, although Piller pursued a completely different, one might say more banal thematic focus and, above all, takes a decidedly critical approach to the documentary photographic image. His different categories emphatically express that past notions about forms of visual (i.e. photographic) authentication no longer apply. His phenomenology of regional events, rituals, and ceremonies simultaneously becomes a phenomenology of their visual representation, which he relishes in unmasking as fiction. Peter Piller maintains a tension in his series – and this applies to all the images in the *Archive Peter Piller* – between the visual document and the fictional moment inscribed in it. This is the potential with which he works. The lyrical quality of the titles that he assigns to his categories, which are often derived from the actual captions of the images, cultivates this potential of fictionalization and at the same time lends his work an open, fleet-footed character. In contrast to many of his colleagues working on the interfaces between the documentary and the fictional, Peter Piller refuses – and to me this seems important to the considerations that follow – to present this critical and contradictory relationship to the visual as a kind of *crisis* of the photographic (documentary) image. He instead offensively and ecstatically clings to the visuality of the documentary image, still or specifically tries to wring the unusual from the banal image. Instead of “merely” critically addressing the ways in which visual representation functions, he moreover explicitly explores the *expressive* potential of documentary photography, attempts to discover *what remains of an image*, when having retraced the steps in its making, we come to understand the

mechanisms of the way the image generates meaning and factor in its exploitation logic. What is there then left to see in the images? Peter Piller has the unique ability to wrest something from these images and create “something” productive within them, even if they appear utterly hollowed out. This is the point at which he departs from the beaten path of contemporary conceptual art – in which the photographic series continues to function as a key variable in a critical but, above all, logical interpretation – and, so to speak, heads into the thicket of the manifold overwritings of photographic images in order to find something else to bring to the surface and give it another space – a type of poetological approach.

Peter Piller would, however, never add anything to the images as a means of providing something “more” to see than is actually shown. On the contrary, his collections of images have the character of a matter-of-fact and dry presentation of things that were once purposely photographed for a specific purpose. At the same time, in the “space” of his books as well as in his exhibitions, he works toward lending the images a kind of *physicality*. The *Archive Peter Piller* not only offers pictures to see but also to *experience*. In an inversion of the introductory quote from Isa Genzken, the images turn into a kind of readymade, not airy-fairy or fabricated, not aloof and polite, but with a certain relation to reality – that then shifts toward something else.

This is as unique to Piller as it is consistent. The archive does not function (any longer) as a storehouse of photographic source material that serves as some kind of objective knowledge or proof. The sheer amount of photographic material with a consistent sameness of visual rhetoric works against conventional forms of perception. Despite its wealth of images, it empties itself entirely on its own. Instead, from each individual series develops a kind of corpus with the potential to distance itself from a clear identification of the objects depicted – a corpus in which each serial stringing-together consistently yields new formations. They retain their mutability because the individual images themselves, as accessible and ordinary as they initially seem, also consistently bear witness to a blithesome, strange, or ominous coexistence of people and things. Whether planned or unplanned, something in the images that does not belong together a priori comes together. Through his processes of selecting and compiling images into categories and series, Piller directs the viewer’s gaze toward these curious-ominous and equally fantastical moments. The *Archive Peter Piller* thus has a performative character. It is a speculative project, an appeal to viewers to engage with these compilations. In this sense, I therefore understand Peter Piller’s work on the *Archive* not only as a means of working with photographs or with the documentary as a form of critical reflection or political practice, but largely as an investigation into the specific physicality of photographic images.

To a certain extent, the archive articulates the formation of a photographic corpus of images, comparable with the work of a sculptor, who creates a new relationship between forms in order to

communicate a specifically physical, spatially oriented experience to the viewer. The photographs of plots slated for development, in German so-called *Bauerwartungsflächen* (Future Building Sites) which are brought together in the category *Bauerwartungsflächen (Noch ist nichts zu sehen)* (Nothing Yet To Be Seen) would be one example of this, as are *0 bis 100* (0 to 100), *Wilder Müll* (Abandoned Garbage), *Regionales Leuchten* (Local Glow), *Einweihungsbänder* (Ceremonial Ribbons), *Projektionsflächen* (Projection Surfaces), *Bedeutungsflächen* (Surfaces of Meaning), *Schandfleck / Schmuckstück* (Eyesore / Gem), *Vandalismus* (Vandalism), *Gefällt* (cut), *Trist, traurig, trostlos, Tristesse* (Somber, Sad, Bleak, Sadness), and *Ungeklärte Fälle* (Unsolved Cases). At the same time, not only the images from the *Archive Peter Piller: Zeitung* offer themselves up to such an interpretation; many more from the archive as a whole might be added: *Hintergrundfarben* (Background Colors) from the category *Internet* includes such images and in particular also the photographs in the series *Nimmt Schaden* (Suffers Damage) and *Dauerhaftigkeit* (Permanence) as well as certain images from *Von Erde Schöner* (More Beautiful from Earth).

With *Peripheriewanderungen* (Periphery Walks) this dimension of a reception directly linked to the physicality of the photographic images is much more palpable. The *Archive Peter Piller*, which works exclusively with found images, is still “photographic” to a certain extent – more photographic than the *Peripheriewanderungen*, which comprise a corpus of images consisting of photographs and drawings by the artist. (Something that is already interesting in and of itself: we would generally ascribe fundamentally higher standards with respect to the photograph as an image to photographs by artists than to the image as a utilitarian photograph. But this is merely an aside). That the images from the *Archive* are more “photographic” is due, on the one hand, to the fact that they offer something clearly identifiable, which is by no means always the case in the *Peripheriewanderungen*. On the other hand, in Piller’s *Archive* the fixing of a moment in time is also clearly important – an aspect fundamentally inherent to the photograph and to the archive in particular. In *Peripheriewanderungen*, the fixing of space is shifted above and beyond this fixing of time and – as is underscored by the title of the work and the knowledge of the viewer – it becomes clear that a space was traversed and that the photographs and drawings are thus traces of this experience; temporal axis versus spatial axis, so to speak.

Peter Piller visited the outskirts of various cities and visually documented these areas. His walks around Hamburg, the Ruhr region, Barcelona, Graz, and Bonn are compiled into series. In doing so, Piller was not concerned with locating the official city limits as indicated on the map, but with discovering and passing through zones where one kind of space transitions into another. If we assume that Peter Piller, with his images from *Peripheriewanderungen*, is not pursuing the idea of systematically gathering information guided by logical parameters in order to, for example, cohesively depict an area, but is instead interested in discovering something that is undefined, that

involves something different than his usual perceptions – then, in this case, the outskirts of a city are certainly appropriate areas to explore. Here, one no longer sees anything that might immediately indicate urban life, nor does one see anything that might suggest the notion of rural life.

Nevertheless, the images from *Peripheriewanderungen* have characteristic qualities: they reveal a juxtaposition of disparate elements.

As in the *Archive Peter Piller*, the artist also makes productive use of this juxtaposition of disparate elements in *Peripheriewanderungen*. With his camera, he focuses on details, goes between the kinds of phenomena that often appear on the periphery. Things become manifest everywhere and purposefully and objects are organized in a makeshift manner or painstakingly, seemingly part of a larger plan – a plan to which no one is privy and that therefore can easily be thwarted by other plans. The things do not coalesce; a sense of order and oversight is not asserted. Spaces remain open-ended and largely undefined, or layered over by other spaces that insert themselves in-between. Here, something constantly tries to take form, but ultimately remains unstructured. The view is obscured. It is therefore a superb place for Peter Piller to turn his camera to, as unworthy as the things there appear. Since, here he can impose his own logic onto the images free of any conventional ascriptions. In his images Piller makes use of this literally unworthy potential. Thus, in his photographs, unconnected things enter into a liaison, forming a corpus of their own with its own expression. In their compositional logic, the drawings interspersed throughout

Peripheriewanderungen and through which the artist recalls what he has seen at times have a similar function. In this case, however, they follow a similar idea or a similar pattern: recording something that is real because it was seen once, recording something that has a real basis, but is free of the usual attributions. This is what remains of the image. It is this type of figurative nature of documentary images that Piller offers the viewer. *Although this is not a readymade, it could be one. That's what a sculpture has to look like* – this thought comes to me when I look at the photographs from Piller's *Peripheriewanderungen*. This thought is indebted to the physicality of his images, which comes into being when he brings together the juxtaposition of disparate elements in the image.