

Something from Nothing

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Peter Piller, *Umschläge #10* (detail), 2011-12, Archival pigment print on Alu-Dibond. Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Captain Petzel, Berlin

Lately Peter Piller has rediscovered his childhood hobby, birdwatching. It's a pastime that requires persistence, attentiveness and a lot of patience. As Piller describes it, when you're waiting for birds to come into view, you become more aware of the space in their absence. It's a fitting metaphor for the seemingly vacant spaces reflected in his photographic work since the beginning of his career.

Though he's a photographer, Piller rarely exhibits photographs he takes himself. He relies instead on stores of generic, often outdated imagery from local newspapers or company archives. He collects, edits and organizes these once-newsworthy pictures into new categories, casting them in a new light and lending them fresh meaning. For more than 20 years Piller has been patiently sifting through the more ignored pictures of our image-saturated world and finding its follies, dangers, absurdities, tropes and contradictions. In this way his work falls in line with a tradition of typologies in German photography (from August Sander to Bernd and Hilla Becher and Hans-Peter Feldmann) as well as American Conceptual art (think Ed Ruscha's books). But his practice also foreshadowed the now-commonplace organization of images on the web into Tumblrs and memes.



Peter Piller, From the series *In Löcher blicken 1* 2000-06, pigment print.
Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Piller arrived in Hamburg in the early 1990s to study at the art academy, where he was taught by Franz Erhard Walther but spent much of his time locked away in the school's library. 'The librarian was very influential for me,' Piller told me when I visited his house in Hamburg recently (where his passion for things other than photos – books, maps, feathers, FC Barcelona – is clearly visible). 'She recommended so many books to me. Much better than Amazon could do it today'. Having studied geography Piller had always been interested in maps. So, as a way of getting to know Hamburg, he would take the local bus to the last stop, get off, and explore his surroundings. These excursions, Piller says, were 'about finding my own way to the edge of the city and the landscape'. In his first book, *speiseeiswagen im wendehammer* (1997), he collected a few photos and contributed several shaky, illegible, hand-drawn mental maps of the 337 kilometres of ground he covered in the Ruhrgebiet. The 'peripheriewanderungen' ('Walks on the

Periphery’) as he calls them – which he still continues to take – create a subjective geography, seen by an eye that bypasses the obvious; focusing on the vacant, the unspectacular, or the easily overlooked.

To support himself as a student, Piller took a job working at the Hamburg ad sales agency Carat Hamburg. There, he was left alone in a cubicle for 20 hours a week to sort through newspapers and pick out the advertisements. ‘I was bored’, explains Piller, ‘and no one was watching me’. As a result, he began to notice a similarity between the generic press photographs he thumbed through at work and the images he made on his walks to the edges of Hamburg: bereft of obvious landmarks, points of interest or visual stimulation. So he started cutting them out and saving them. ‘I wasn’t sure if I’d use them in the future, I just started collecting them’.

Bauerwartungsflächen (which roughly translates to ‘Land Awaiting Use’), the first of Piller’s categories was based on a caption underneath a newspaper image: *Noch ist nichts zu sehen* (‘Nothing to see yet’). Around that title he grouped images of areas of land where the text deemed that something ‘will’ ‘should’ or ‘could’ happen: ‘Auf dem Bolzplatz in Süderwalsede soll das Grillhaus entstehen’ (‘The grill restaurant will be built on the football field in Süderwalsede’) beneath an image of a mound of dirt with bushes sprouting out of it, or ‘Hier soll der Handysender gebaut werden’ (‘The mobile phone tower will be built here’) accompanying a photograph of a concrete platform in a field. The irony of *Noch ist nichts zu sehen*, of course, is that there is still plenty to see in every photograph, even if it’s just a grassy field. Piller’s collection of images of empty lot after empty lot after yet another empty lot, all promising something else to come, illustrates how ‘emptiness’ or ‘nothing’ can be artistically conveyed through its opposite.



Peter Piller, From the series *Vandalismus zeigen*, 2000-06, pigment print.
Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Piller remained at the agency for over ten years, collecting tens of thousands of images, which he assembled into more than 100 categories and an extensive series of books, *Archiv Peter Piller*, published by Revolver, which were compiled into a larger encyclopedia, *Zeitung*, in 2007. Its sections range from the absurd to the deadly serious: *Eis essende Mädchen* (Girls Eating Ice Cream), *In Löcher blicken* (Looking into Holes), *Tanz vor Logo* (Dancing in Front of Logos), *Auto berühren* (Touching Cars), *Protestformen* (Forms of Protest), *Hochwasser* (Floods), *Mensch und Feuer* (People and Fire). Indeed his keen and cunning titles are what give shape, heft and depth to the otherwise banal images they circumscribe. When I asked him how he formulated the groupings, he told me, ‘it may be months or even a year between the first picture I find and collecting other pictures around it ... You know it’s an important image if it comes back to you.’

My favourite groups are ones like *Vandalismus zeigen* (Showing Vandalism) that seem to poke fun at a particularly German characteristic of being mildly outraged by the petty crimes of others, as people point indignantly at a broken fence or a shattered lamp, for example. Some groupings though, like *Protest stehen* (Standing in Protest), *Brennende Fahrzeuge* (Vehicles on Fire) or *Nazis*, cast a shadow on the more humorous ones. There are those that reflect a certain morbid curiosity about the generic locations in which crimes may have been committed, such as *Tatorthäuser* (Crime Scene Houses), which suggests something sinister or disturbing about the banal exteriors of suburban German houses. Through the deadpan repetition of black and white images of these sites, Piller illustrates the flattening effect photography can have on charged locations.



Peter Piller, From the series *Suchende Polizisten 1*, 2000-06, pigment print.
Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Some categories in *Archiv* are determined by a commonly occurring newspaper caption, such as *Stein des Anstoßes* (roughly equivalent to a ‘trigger’ or ‘catalyst’), which is used repeatedly to categorize any number of images, from goalkeeper Oliver Kahn’s bleeding forehead to actual boulders in the road – a play on words with ‘stein’ or ‘stone’ in the title. In the gap between text and image, we see how inadequate the newspaper caption is as a labelling system. Piller goes further, casting doubt on the meaning of any category – and thereby on his own project – with more self-referential groupings like *Ungeklärte Fälle* – which could mean ‘unsolved cases’ or simply ‘unclear’. All of which is to say that Piller’s *Archiv*., steeped in imagery as it may be, is as much about what photographs don’t, or can’t, tell us. Groups like *Suchende Polizisten* (Searching Policemen) or *In Löcher blicken* allude to this condition metaphorically. The obvious questions are: what are the police searching for? And what’s down the hole? But these are questions the photographs can’t answer. A picture can’t show us what’s not there, nor can the artist ‘solve the case’.

Piller’s decidedly analogue *Archiv Peter Piller* continues to resonate nearly 20 years after its inception because it touches on so many tropes of contemporary art (the readymade, the archive, found photographs). Still, the most obvious contemporary correlate is not to art, but to the way mass image culture is shaped and categorized for us online in the form of listicles, Tumblrs and memes. His other best known project, *Von Erde schöner* (roughly, ‘More Beautiful from Earth’), also anticipated new means of digital visibility and categorization. Compiled in 2002 and collected in a book now out of print, *Von Erde schöner* is derived from 20,000 aerial photographs taken in suburban West Germany

between 1979–83 (an uncanny precedent to Google Earth and today’s total surveillance by satellites and drones). Piller inherited every last negative and print in the archive of a colleague of his gallerist’s father, who received them from a company that had photographed family homes from a small plane in hopes of selling the prints to the homeowners. ‘It took me two years of looking at the archive every day; each of the images five or six times,’ Piller says. Flipping through the book, my first impression was how typical and uniform the houses look from above. Piller has sequenced them so that the collection fades subtly from one category to another, triggered by small details: from patterns made by garden stepping stones, to the presence of swimming pools, people with lawnmowers, patterns of perfectly mown lawns, backyard playgrounds, construction sites, schools, parking lots, sun umbrellas, dirt piles, a surprising number of people washing their cars and backyard tents.



Peter Piller, From the series *Von Erde schöner* , 2002-04, digital c-type print.
Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Capitain Petzel, Berlin

‘Looking at the images,’ says Piller, ‘was like a trip to my own past.’ The houses themselves, and the frequency with which certain tropes recur, suggests something about the era. For his parents’ generation ‘rebuilding’ West Germany after the war was a civic responsibility, and, if you had the means, building your own house was a rite of passage. Piller was able to organize these nondescript, generic single-family houses into an archive that reflects that spirit in a way the photographer didn’t originally intend. He also punctuates it with unexpected frames – ‘dirty clouds’ for example – and a bizarre,

anachronistic image that captures a fighter jet in mid-flight. The image reminded him how American F-104 Starfighters often crashed in the area where he grew up – one right next door to his primary school.

That literal collision of military power with everyday life has become an increasingly visible concern in his work. As he explains it, ‘The interest in houses led to an interest in bombshells’: namely, in *Deko+Munition* (2008), which he published as a series of postcards, each one bearing an image found on eBay of some kind of ammunition put up for sale. The images are an *unheimlich* convergence of dirty kitchen counters and pristine rockets, the harmlessness of a quirky World War II buff collectors’ mentality with a zealous interest in weaponry, which conjures something even more threatening. As much as his other series, *Deko+Munition* is about how what’s on display can allude to what’s hiding or being hidden.

The charged imagery against banal backdrops in the postcards possibly serves as a prelude to his series *Umschläge* (Covers), shown at Capitain Petzel in Berlin in 2012 and at Andrew Kreps gallery the following year. The series presents images of the front and back covers of the GDR-era military magazine *Armeerundschau*, which Piller discovered in a military library and purchased on eBay. The front of the magazine regularly pictured an action shot from military manoeuvres, while the back cover featured a female actress or singer. Seen next to each other, Piller was surprised to find that the graphic design seemed consciously related, even if the subjects – a young woman perched in a tree and a sniper aiming his rifle at a target – were not obviously so. *Umschläge* displays found photos that are clearly anachronistic but yet still relevant today in the way they bring together mass culture and war. The series shows us how photography flattens the two into graphic, superficial equivalents. By un-archiving them, Piller wants us to notice the differences between them again.



Peter Piller, Aus der Serie *Umschläge*, 2011-12, Archivbilder als Pigmentdruck auf Alu-Dibond. Courtesy: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Archiv Peter Piller & Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Piller often visits a military school library in Hamburg to look at their rare books from the 1920s: ‘Maybe I like to be surrounded by reading soldiers’, he explains. (‘Reading Soldiers’ is not yet a category.) His most recent series – which will be shown at his joint solo exhibitions at Fotomuseum Winterthur and Centre de la photographie Genève this winter – are similarly about ‘bringing civil life and military life together’. *Afghanistan Field Research* (2014) is a square arrangement of nine images he found in the university geographic library across the street from his house. One of the few books he found about Afghanistan was by a German biologist who visited the country in the 1990s and photographed the flowers that grew in between rocks. In the middle of these botanical studies of delicate and unexpectedly colourful foliage emerging from granite crags, Piller chose a central image: a hand holding berries that have leaked a blood-red juice on the subject’s flesh – an evocative, visceral image among more scientific ones.

In a recent text about his passion for birdwatching, Piller confesses, ‘For the most part, it seems that nothing happens for a long time’. Similarly, about collecting images he says, ‘the best images you never find at first sight’. ‘Noch ist nichts zu sehen’ could still be the motto for what he’s doing. Ever since he sat in a cubicle with thousands of newspapers, he’s known how to make something from nothing, to create meaning from meaninglessness. Even the most obscure, ubiquitous, unspectacular, local, banal images can accumulate meaning if you wait long enough. Something that doesn’t seem to show us anything at all at last reveals something.

Peter Piller’s exhibition Belegkontrolle will be on view at the Fotomuseum Winterthur (12 December 2014 – 22 February 2015) and the Centre de la photographie Genève (11 December 2014 – 22 February 2015). Two books will be published on the occasion of the

*show: Textbook (Buchhandlung Walther König) and Peripheriewanderung Winterthur .
His forthcoming book Umschläge will be published by Dashwood Books.*