

First the artist defines meaning*

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Artists:

**Miles Coolidge (CAN), Ralf Hoedt (D), Joachim Koester (DK), Peter Piller (D),
Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch (A), Christine Würmell (D)**

Texts on the artists

Miles Coolidge



Miles Coolidge, Observatory Circle, 2001. Installation view Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Courtesy: Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York.

It is now commonplace in photo-theoretical reflection that the medium of photography has been completely divested of its implicitness (if, that is, such a thing ever existed): there is no unobstructed view of the world, no direct legibility of pictures, representation is an intricate process of culturally codified communication. A younger generation of photographers is working against this backdrop, in the framework of an understanding about the documentary nature of photography as a context of description for political and cultural symptoms in the construction of which photography itself has long been involved. For Miles Coolidge, in this sense photography becomes self-reflective in that it observes itself, as it were, producing pictures, constantly questioning the method and form of this process of production: the pictures of places and architectures, reminiscent of the sobriety of Dan Graham's "Homes for America" or the incidental nature of Ed Ruscha's pictures (but not of their amateurish pictorial make-up, as Jeff Wall described it), that tempt us to regard them as allegories of social isolation, thoroughly rationalised urbanity and standardised architecture, turn out – as in the "Safetyville" series (1994) – to be pictures of an artificial, downscaled city built for children's road safety education.

The documentarism and the conceptual aspect of the series put us on the wrong track, or do they?

The shifts to which documentary practice is subjected in Miles Coolidge's work become evident in the "Mattawa" (2000) series: precisely the obviousness of the subject and the directness of this representation create vast "gaps" in the process of reading, the meaning of the pictures – a key aspect of conceptual practice – have to be filled in by the viewer, and the pictures have to be questioned specifically with regard to these gaps. The description of an architectural context by means of photos that (recurrently) depict the same details and only slightly shifted perspectives, introduce an aspect of redundancy, an aspect of overdetermination of the picture, if you will, that remains ambivalent in terms of its meaning. The trend to aestheticising the photographic aspect, the large-format, framed prints, essentially overstep the claim of a – now historicised – documentarism, in which the projects nevertheless remain rooted. Aesthetic, format, subjects, picture design, mode of presentation – everything comes "under pressure" in Miles Coolidge's work, appears in contradictory combinations and leads to a kind of postmodern documentarism that is characterised by precisely this recombination of the photographic aspects of a given "genre". Miles Coolidge also exhibits, as it were, the rhetoric of the picture, the rhetoric of a language of

* Dan Graham, "Thoughts on Two Structures by Sol LeWitt" (1966), in: *Dan Graham, Selected Works, 1965 – 72, 1972.*

pictures, the method and object of his interest are inter-related and question each other: the container village for immigrant volunteer harvesters in Washington is in fact part of a complex socio-political field of conflict, with the pictorial representation opposing, indeed thwarting this complexity in the nuanced reproduction of a limited view of this form of political architecture. The series never becomes narrative, does not tell any stories, but rather essentially documents above all the photographic access itself, as it is kept in an ambivalent and conflictual relationship to its subject.

The format-bursting work "Observatory Circle" (2001), depicting a 360-degree panorama of a golf course in Newark, Ohio, that was built on a former burial site of a local indigenous culture, can also be initially read in this conspicuous form – a 60cm high, 27m-long strip of pictures – i.e. in a specific mode of using the photographic picture: as a panorama that played an important role as a visual dispositif in the concretisation of a modern gaze / visual access to reality by the media. The cultural conflict itself, the history of overwriting and deleting culture, remains an unknown subtext at first, that can only be derived by questioning the form and by questioning this specific access.

If "First the artist defines meaning*" is concerned with the field of tension between method, aesthetics and content, between media reflection and image politics, then Miles Coolidge provides an exemplary treatment of this link between the concept of the picture and meaning.

Ralf Hoedt



Ralf Hoedt, from the series: corporate identity01_case Olivetti, 1996 – 2006.

Douglas Huebler described his works as "systems of documentation", although the term documentation referred not only to the object of the work but also always to the work itself. The "actual work" (e.g. contexts of time and/or geography) was often enough beyond the scope of visual perception, at least outside of a representational context that may be described or defined by pictures alone. Also with regard to Ralf Hoedt's works it would seem appropriate not to refer to documentary projects but rather to a system of documentation that he implements by using photography (and usually over a period of several years). He deploys a wide range of forms of the photography medium in this process: his own photos, material from magazines, visual reference material from various publications. The series he creates have the character of an archive created on the basis of long-term research without pursuing any idea of completion; the aim is not to accumulate and systematise the entire material, or as much available material as possible, under any one "theme". Ralf Hoedt's archives owe their existence much more to a specific interest in pictures in which the co-ordinates of the object under scrutiny condense, acting as switching moments of a narration that is open to many sides and that cause the series to appear as visual fields of analysis in which representation, politics, economy, history and aesthetics interweave. An ostensibly photographic documentation becomes a context of representation that refers to contexts of representation that have always existed and that are inscribed in architectures, publications, public spaces, and gazes. Ralf Hoedt's analyses have thus always referred to a politics of pictures and gazes that he picks up, inscribes in his own work, and at the same time subjects to analytical and critical comment. Ralf Hoedt enacts, as it were, a discourse of pictures about pictures, in which their various contexts of use are inter-related.

In "corporate identity01_case Olivetti", Ralf Hoedt processes the history of the Olivetti group as an exemplary, also cultural-historical "case study" reflecting economic and political history and the interlink of technology and aesthetics. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the group was a leader in corporate identity development and presentation, employing leading designers and architects, featuring in many cities of Europe with highly symbolic headquarters. However, the advent of the computer in the office machinery sector sounded the knell of the group's demise. For "corporate identity01_case Olivetti", the artist also uses material from official company documents, material from magazines, his own photos of the office buildings, their interiors and lobbies and of products, comparing it with picture material (again found or produced himself) of contemporary architectures or product developments and design strategies of other companies.



Ralf Hoedt, from the series: corporate identity01_case Olivetti, 1996 – 2006.

Again and again he focuses on supposedly incidental aspects, disregarded details or unpredictable links, leaving or circling round the "centre" of the narrative, without, that is, losing sight of it. In a work such as "corporate identity01_case Olivetti", he exemplarily demonstrates how the meaning of such a narrative changes by rearranging the sequence of pictures, how the focus shifts – "corporate identity01_case Olivetti" has no fixed form, but is rather constantly being re-combined. In this shift we also see that Ralf Hoedt works not only with the picture material itself but also with gaps between the pictures, missing, left out, non-existent, impossible pictures or attempts to re-construct them. As such, Ralf Hoedt essentially refers to the question as to possible strategies of constructing a system of documentation based on photographic pictures. This media-reflective aspect ultimately describes the core of Ralf Hoedt's conceptual strategy.

Joachim Koester

Interestingly, writings on the work of Joachim Koester often contain the observation that the past, present and future converge, gelling into an (imaginary) image in his photographs. This observation may possibly be due to the circumstances from which Koester develops his interest in the photographic image: his pictures are preceded by extensive research, the places to which he attaches relevance in the course of his preliminary studies are subsequently the destination of his journeys and – in some cases – expeditions, and finally the subject of the photographic image. The places he visits, then, are always already inscribed with specific (micro) histories which he investigates with the aid of his pictures – well aware, presumably, that a kind of layered knowledge is deposited on the surface of the picture he creates, that is indebted to the presence of the process of creation – that is perforce subordinated to the original field of interest. Visualising precisely this link of past reality, that adheres to the specific place in the form of its history and the reception of its image, with a form of presence that lends the specific place its current character, is what interests Koester. In his documentary practice, he is concerned not only with demonstrating the historical – cultural and political – inscriptions of the specific places, but above all with visualising the deposits of time in the picture. Specifically, he is extremely interested in the construction principles of the image itself. He lays them bare, be it in accompanying text material, be it by means of visible technical interventions, or – as in most of his works – by means of his serial work: "Something that has interested me a lot is how ideas and narratives take on a physical form, how stories and histories materialise." At this point, Koester's work also exhibits a

narrative potential that accompanies all of his pictures.

In the "histories" work on show in Graz, he negotiates at least two histories parallel to each other: on the one hand, the history of now historical conceptual photography, and the time-induced transformation of places and sites, on the other. In this series, Koester visited various places already photographically documented by prominent exponents of concept art such as Ed Ruscha, Robert Adams, Robert Smithson, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Gordon Matta-Clark and Hans Haacke.



Joachim Koester, from the series: *histories*, 2003 – 2005.

As viewers, we have long since internalised traditional artistic conceptual practices, consisting above all in (supposedly objective) researching, recording, documenting, systematising and archiving, to such an extent that we can seamlessly and without resistance embed various paradigms of the concept, e.g. the fundamental refusal of form or individual style, in a specific aesthetic of conceptual art. In stark contrast to the original intentions of their producers, today, even just by looking we find ourselves in a constant process of allocating and canonising their works, which only demonstrates that the first exponents of concept art already established a specific aesthetic concept, even if they did want to bring the *idea* alone to the fore, while *form* was meant to stay if not superfluous, then purely expedient.

The works of historical concept artists that Joachim Koester focuses on in this series also have an emblematic character by dint of the history of their reception, that Koester highlights by photographing their works from books. At the same time, however, Koester juxtaposes these exceptional works of concept art with his own photos, that depict exactly the same places, decades later, from exactly the same distance and from exactly the same camera perspective. This act of re-photographing not only re-awakens the social and political contexts of description that the historical concept artists sought to spotlight with their documentary practice, but also re-tells history/stories differently: "Take for example the house Ed Ruscha photographed in 1965 as part of his series 'Some Los Angeles Apartments'. Right above the main entrance there is a sign, 'Now Renting'. In my photo taken 40 years later a slightly bigger sign says, 'Now Leasing'. The house seems to be haunted by vacancy. But the subtle difference of wording reflects a change in society. Renting is considered less and less attractive. (...) On September 30, 1967, Robert Smithson paused on his walk through Passaic, New Jersey to have lunch at the Golden Coach Diner and reload his instamatic. From the window he had a view of Passaic center, which Smithson described as a 'no center', 'a typical abyss or an ordinary void. What a great place for a gallery!' The theater and the diner from Smithson's photograph have now been replaced by a Dunkin' Donuts and a McDonald's drive-thru, emphasizing the sense of 'void' or non-place." (Joachim Koester)

Juxtaposing historical pictorial documents with their re-photographed current versions creates varied intertextual references that – in view of their histories, that (once again) become visible – also call for a re-politicisation of now aesthetic discourses. Koester's work is driven fundamentally by a strict body of rules, that historical concept artists already established, among other things with their forms of documentarism. But Koester goes one step further by openly exhibiting and questioning these very rules, also by challenging their appropriateness with regard to the object under scrutiny. In this context, what we see is a kind of reversal, in that the picture appears not only as a document, but rather opens up with an imaginary, phantasmatic space for past and future (hi)stories: "Perhaps we might consider Koester's practice, then, as the 'documentary fantastic', a practice (...) in which an imaginary site is paradoxically investigated through its material reality." (Jeremy Millar)

Peter Piller

Peter Piller's picture archive project, that has been under way for more than ten years, seems to confirm not only that the idea of a meaningless picture is untenable, but rather (at the same time) that we must abandon the notion that there are pictures that can be excluded from the grid of aesthetics. Rather, in regional newspapers, in company archives and on the Internet, Peter Piller finds pictures that he "had always wanted to make" like that, i.e. pictures that are simply good or that remind him of the works of other artists; but he also finds pictures that assume a veritably sociological quality in their multitude, depending on their allocated context or iconographical pattern, that seem to suggest an unpleasant, nondescript collective unconscious, manic behaviours to which a host of people seem to be constantly exposed and that they are compelled to perform (touching cars, looking into holes), pictures that tell us something about the mechanisms of society, in a word: that are meaningful.



Peter Piller, aus / from: *Dauerhaftigkeit*, Archiv Peter Piller, 2005. Courtesy: Frehrking Wiesehöfer, Köln *Cologne*.

With the "Peter Piller Archive", however, the German artist also operates in the ever ambivalent borderland of the photographic image between recording reality, i.e. (more or less) cultural irrelevance, or, on the other hand, a media specific formalisation of reality, i.e. the establishment and continuation of institutionally generated, perfectly relevant cultural codes and standardisations. But how can institutions catch, as it were, and channel the meanings of pictures if they are sorted according to (ostensible) common features beyond their original authorship and turned into a narration? How can we understand the role of Peter Piller himself as the author of this "displaced" narration?

The artist's archive manifests photography, as Michel Foucault put it, as a nameless and scattered practice. The role assumed by Peter Piller himself consists initially in expropriating pictures of their history/stories – in a sense, in the production of "homeless" pictures. This process appears to resemble uncovering and disposing of conventional patterns of meaning in order to trace down "something else", as in a pinpoint or exploratory archaeological excavation (and one obvious aspect of the work as a whole is without a doubt archaeological work on our collective visual memory). But what does he bring to light? What still justifies this process of context transfer that belongs to the standard repertoire of contemporary art?



Peter Piller, aus / from: *Dauerhaftigkeit*, Archiv Peter Piller, 2005. Courtesy: Frehrking Wiesehöfer, Köln *Cologne*.

The obvious systematic approach (and this obviousness is already part of the strategy) that allows us to refer to a conceptual strategy, not only intervenes in (specific) contexts and consists not only in transfers (from the newspaper into the archive into the exhibition and into the publication), it also consists in the concomitantly induced intervention in contexts of object, representation and contextual knowledge, or, as Allan Sekula described it, in the result "of an interplay of iconic,

graphical and narrative conventions". Peter Piller initially uncovers these conventions, subsequently reworking them, parting with them, in some cases inverting them (e.g. by means of the peculiar beauty that becomes visible in some of the pictures, or, in some cases, by means of completely new connotations that emerge: surveillance, terror, subversion, politics, drama, indifference, etc.). By eliminating contexts and working out new connections, Peter Piller demonstrates to what extent photography is inalienably accompanied by and embedded in a manifest or hidden "text". His operations on visual material demonstrate its connection with numerous other cultural and social discourses (home, property, safety, beauty, security, etc.) and thereby uncover the mechanisms of the construction of meaning through pictures. Peter Piller's projects suggest the reverse conclusion that mass media operate with their picture material in a way that is equally absurd, contingent, manipulative, indifferent, formal or unimaginative as it would appear to be on the surface of his works. The fact that it is ultimately about a process of great depth of focus may only become apparent at second glance, although: the traces he leaves are obvious. You might assume, finally, that the real field of work is not so much the pictures themselves but rather that it is the connotations, the narrative conventions, i.e. the accompanying texts that also describe the picture as a kind of cultural text, that are the real "target" of Peter Piller' interventions.

Nicole Six und Paul Petritsch

The works of Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch are always closely linked to the question as to the role of the artist subject and the status of the art work itself and its disposition in the field of art. The respective situational context in which they find themselves as personae and that demands that they operate (strategically) as acting artistic subjects is key to the development of their process-oriented works. These works are characterised by a critical self-questioning within which the artists deal, among other things, with specific role allocations and with the concomitant expectations of a "body of work". This reflective approach to their own being-there and doing is once again the focus of a three-part work in Graz: this piece methodically combines questions of their own constitution as a subject with "emplacements" in space, in the truest sense of the word.



Nicole Six und Peter Piller, aus / from: Raumbuch, 2005.

This work was created in the course of a six-month stay in New York, a time in which Six & Petritsch were able for the first time to work independently of commissioned works and, to a large extent, "free" of economical constraints, being granted the status as artistic subjects on the basis of a scholarship. Their first break-away from "working life" began with their decision to distance themselves by means of the factor of time, physically to experience the distance between Europe and America by crossing the ocean by ship: leaving space behind them in order to create space for new things. In order to visualise these "co-ordinates", they created, among other things, a (fragmentary) photographic documentation of the journey and an email report ("Longitude / Latitude", 2004, not on show at the exhibition). On the one hand, the studio they found after arriving in New York offered them a kind of retreat from a thoroughly capitalist art industry – a market that seemed to have no place for marketing their work. On the other hand, the studio itself is overloaded per se with cultural

codes that in a way compel artists to become "productive" and to position themselves in it as subjects acting in an artistic manner. So how should they appropriate this space? In a logical continuation of their already documented traversal of time/space (the Atlantic), in this case Six & Petritsch opted for the protracted process of measuring space: meticulously they measured the studio piece by piece, creating documentary photos and subsequently translating it into an object, a book – the "Raumbuch". Instead of the usual square metres, they chose the DIN A4 page as the fundamental unit of the space, that – according to the actual result – comprises 2478 such units and is reproduced on a 1:1 scale, piece by piece in the book. The aim was also to be able to "take the space along with them" after their stay: "Six and Petritsch respond to the challenges of the new city with a siting. With a simple survey of their immediate environment and by transforming the space into a book, they create a mutual ambivalent relationship between the physical entity before them and the detached representation, the comprehensive superimposition and juxtaposition and the linear succession, the whole and the detail. Page by page of white wall. In this repetition of what seems to be always the same, the space begins to disintegrate. This process of abstraction, the dissolution of the objectual challenges the investigative eye. The eye finds its points of anchorage in the minimal bumps and irregularities in the plaster, and in this expanse sockets, wall projections, water pipes and wires become events. The studio, that was designed as a white cube in anticipation of a later presentation of art that would be made here, loses its neutrality at these points – the space becomes this space" (Annette Südbeck). The fact that Six & Petritsch were concerned not only with recording the space itself in a supposedly objectifying process – the photographic document – but also with physically measuring it, is demonstrated not only by the realisation of the Raumbuch itself, in which – due to the camera technology – we see shifts and duplications at the edges, but also becomes visible in the documents accompanying the Raumbuch: in the course of this painstaking work, they created a video tape, "I'm too tired to tell you", that documents nothing but exhaustion (and contradicts the notion of the creative, productive artist as much as it conversely maintains clichés of the artist as an idler). What is more, there are photographic documentations of performative acts in which the body of the artist "fitted in", as it were, to the space with the aid of a commercial surveyor's staff (called "Two by Four" in the U.S.A., which provided the title of this work). In their methodical approach, Six & Petritsch orientate themselves among other things by the formal aesthetic strategies of now historical concept artists. In some of their works, for example, they directly quote prominent works of concept art: the video work "I'm too tired to tell you" refers to Bas Jan Ader's video work "I'm too sad to tell you", while in this context "Two by Four" is reminiscent of VALIE EXPORT's "Body Configurations". Further links can be found, referring for example to "Mail Art", that was beginning to emerge in the 1960s/1970s also in the context of concept art. The painstaking documentation of specific, in some cases pre-ordained sequences of time and action for lengthy periods is another common concept art practice taken up by Six & Petritsch. Taking up and continuing conceptual strategies, that the artists sometimes combine with performative acts and that – according to Thomas Trummer – in some cases are accompanied by consciously induced "states of danger", serves them as a kind of self-questioning and self-assurance as visual artists.

Christine Würmell

The work of Berlin-based artist Christine Würmell combines various quotations from the field of contemporary art history and the field of current everyday culture, society and politics to create a compact tableau of narratives with which she constructs new situations and opens up surprising spaces for thought. By thinking and bringing together different systems of reference from art and (mediatised) everyday life in a complex manner, she creates a foil against which to open up space for new narrations of the political and of re-politicising aesthetic discourses.

In this process, Würmell methodically draws on a supposedly objective, partly photographic documentation and material collected in the course of research, that is, in each case, bound to a specific theme but open to many possibilities and that forms the basis for processing the various information. In a critical and reflective reworking and linking of different data material, she inscribes it with meanings that lead away from a fixation of its particular subject and, on the contrary, open up unconventional, complex narrative contexts. At the various levels of reception they play very consciously, among other things, with the aspect of uncertainty of supposedly validated knowledge.

A central element in her installation developed for the exhibition in Graz "Who's Afraid of Magenta, Yellow and Blue?" (a title alluding to what is probably Barnett Newman's most well-known painting "Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?") is her work with "paint bombs", that she throws at the wall of the exhibition room. The patches of colour resulting from this performative process serve as a foil for the stories that she constructs. As a painter, Barnett Newman, a sympathiser with anarchism, attempted to "liberate" colours from what he felt to be the dogmatic position of purists and formalists. "Just as I had confronted other dogmatic positions of the purists, neo-plasticists and other formalists, I was now in confrontation with their dogma, which had reduced red, yellow, and blue into an idea - didact, or at best, had made them picturesque. Why give in to these purists and formalists who have put a mortgage on red, yellow, and blue, transforming these colors into an idea that destroys them as colors? Why should anybody be afraid of red, yellow, and blue?" By bringing Newmann's position up to date, however, she also takes up the story of one of his paintings purchased for Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 1982, its controversial public debate and the damaging of the painting by a visitor to the exhibition. In addition, the "paint bomb painting" technique quotes the strategies of Abstract Expressionism – in any case the results of her "painterly attacks" are linked with topics from the realm of art, economy, politics and public allocated according to associative and semantic references, so as to fan out an ensemble of (emphatically) political questions/connotations inherent in art.



Christine Würmell, Buffing, 2004 (left), and detail from Buffing, 2004.

The fact that Würmell – unlike Newmann – does not work here with primary colours only is due to the fact that Deutsche Telekom has registered the colour magenta as a trademark (which is, incidentally, one of the colours in the printing process). To the magenta coloured bomb itself, Würmell applies the photographic reproduction of a poster from a current high-profile advertising campaign in Germany with the slogan "Geben Sie Deutschland Ihr Gesicht" (give Germany your face), the edges of which are sprayed with graffiti including the GDR's Ampelmännchen and the slogan "Defend your Country against British and US Aggression". There ensues an open aesthetic dialogue that raises the question of authorship and copyright as well as of control and national identity.

The "Yellow" paint bomb, in turn, is – associatively – allocated to the art operating system. On this bomb, Würmell applies a Peter's Projection map of the world and details from the cover of the Flash Art art magazine containing a list of the countries in which the "World's Leading Art Magazine" is distributed. In so doing, she focuses our eye on the blind spots and gaps in the system, developing a topography of selection that addresses the non-simultaneities of the market as well as the definitory power of a few select countries. She accomplishes this, among other things, by combining the map of the world with the U.S. flag by Jasper Johns and, once again, photographed adverts from Flash Art (e.g. the Russian real-estate company "SoHo Realty"). To the right of the bomb there is a photo of an advert from an Art Invest brochure displaying a Pollock-style painter (pouring yellow paint onto a wall) with the caption "On the value of vision" below. By combining various quotations and documents with which she consistently weaves her strategy of transformation, Würmell undermines the self-empowerment strategies in the art operating system, embodied here by the Flash Art magazine / the Art Invest brochure.



Christine Würmell, Untitled, 2005 (left); from: Public Library L.A., 2003 (right).

The third paint bomb, "Blue", interspersed with stripes, alludes to the aesthetic concept of one of the most prominent exponents of concept art, Daniel Buren. Here, Würmell opens up new contexts of reference by applying a stencil graffiti of a footballer wearing jersey number 10. The cyan and blue of the paint bomb and the white of the wall leave no doubt that this is Argentine football star Diego Maradona. Maradona – among other things a classic example of a self-merchandise – is also depicted in a photo with a bare upper arm sporting a tattoo in the form of a portrait of Che Guevara – sport and politics, art and revolution intertwine.

In her approach, Christine Würmell very clearly follows in the footsteps of conceptual strategies addressed by such buzzwords as research, documentation, archival and systematisation and an ostensibly "low" aesthetic concept. However, at the same time "she charges them with quasi contaminating elements such as (anecdotal) narration and emphatic presentation, calculated mistakes and sensory aestheticisation (...). That is to say, Christine Würmell incorporates deliberate blurs into her work so as to elude any overly meticulous, merely documentary conceptuality" (Raimar Stange) – but equally in order to uncover the construction principles of politics and (art) history.

Würmell's working method is characterised by a process of an ongoing overwriting of aesthetic and political discourses. By means of simultaneities and links, she succeeds in re-replacing history/stories at specific points in her tableau-like settings. In so doing, she focuses on different methodical approaches as developed by concept art, without working through them mimetically or systematically – on the contrary: with the aid of her strategies of unsettling, she succeeds in "liberating" the idea of the conceptual from its dogmatic contexts of use and making it accessible for a re-politicisation of the aesthetic discourse.

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