

Peter Piller Returns to Nature

F [frieze.com/article/peter-piller-there-are-couple-things-that-bother-me-2023-review](https://www.frieze.com/article/peter-piller-there-are-couple-things-that-bother-me-2023-review)



During his student days in Hamburg in the 1990s, Peter Piller earned money as a press clipper, cutting out articles from newspapers and magazines. This process became the base of his artistic practice: sorting through archival sources, finding repetitions, enlarging, rearranging and collecting. For his retrospective exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 'There Are a Couple of Things That Bother Me', Piller presents 15 series of works from the past 25 years that continue this tradition. Rather than forming a claim about collective memory or the archive as a site of power relations, however, the retrospective tells the story of one man's way of seeing – a man with a quick-witted eye who enjoyed pointing out the cracks and glitches in the world of images, until that world became so complex it forced him to shift focus.



Peter Piller, 'There Are a Couple of Things That Bother Me', 2023, installation view, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. Photo: Katja Illner © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023

Perhaps it is the nostalgic flare of legacy media and the tangible quality of enlarged prints from books and newspapers, but the exhibition feels from a different era. Black and white and low-saturated prints hang, mostly frameless, in constellations on the walls. In line with 1920s German New Objectivity, known for its critical lens on everyday life, and the 1970s Düsseldorf School of Photography, which emphasizes a subjective yet categorical approach, Piller's main body of work consists of compiling found footage into series, where semantics are formed by connections and associations. In 'Dauerhaftigkeit' (Durability, 2006), for example, Piller presents images taken in the Dutch city of Nijverdal between the 1950s and '70s, compiling them into an eerie study of mundanity. It is Piller who waded through 1,500 images to select just 66, thus it is his image of the city that we see while the actual photographer remains anonymous. Such is the case in all of Piller's work: he has an intentional disregard for authorship, regarding these images as found materials to use as he wishes.



Peter Piller, 'Afghanistan Field Research', 2013–14, installation view. Courtesy: Capitain Petzel, Berlin;
Photo: Katja Illner © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023

The ostensibly more politically charged series recount, in most instances, fairly straightforward narratives. 'Afghanistan Field Research' (2013–14), for instance, is a grid of nine images taken from a botanical publication depicting Afghani flowers growing in rocky terrain; at the centre is a photograph of an open palm holding blood-red berries. In another engaging series, 'Nachkriegsordnung' (Post-War Order, 2003), Piller cut out various reproductions from different publications featuring an image of a US airstrike in Bagdad and attempted to place them precisely at the centre of a blank page. The artist then measured and wrote down the distance of each corner from the border of the page, commenting on the impossibility of precision – in the air as on paper – and the inherently misleading nature of the photographic image.



Peter Piller, *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Captain Petzel, Berlin, and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Several years ago, however, a shift took place in Piller's practice. His most recent series rekindle two childhood passions – ornithology and prehistoric cave paintings – with little trace of the socio-political topics that previously occupied him. In 'Behind Time' (2017), the artist travels the world to capture images of endangered birds, yet the images depict them fleeing the camera, as if the shutter went up a second too late. Indeed, Piller's turn to the natural and the prehistoric seems to align with a historical moment in which sense-making is being challenged, appropriation questioned and the white male gaze criticized. It is hard not to see this shift in his practice in relation to the rise of post-truth populism, the decline of legacy media and the tectonic cracks in Western self-perception. Perhaps that is the self-reflective core at the root of 'Behind Time': the desire to flee into the sheltered realms of childhood, to hide in undergrowth and caves, where things are simpler, and one might turn back time.

Peter Piller's 'There Are a Couple of Things That Bother Me' is on view until 21 May.