

X·TRA

Angel of History, or Canary in the Coal Mine

Miles Coolidge

ACME.

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By Jan Tumlr

Miles Coolidge's recent exhibition at ACME. gallery featured a monumental mural photograph of the meeting point of a river and an early industrial power canal system, four photographs of coal taken inside a mineshaft, and two photographs from a series of so-called "architectural mockups." The last of these resume much the same ground the artist has covered for the best part of his working career. As with his *Safetyville* project from 1996, which centers on a scaled-down model city built in the early eighties in Sacramento, CA, for purposes of childhood training in the correct use of the built environment, Coolidge here again points his camera at a simulated architecture that, in his highly refined pictorial treatment, becomes nearly indistinguishable from the real one. Shot at University of California construction sites, the recent pictures, which Coolidge has been compiling since 2010, present head-on views of building facades—in this case, an alumni center and an eye institute. In their detailed construction and generically institutional character, these structures are initially glimpsed as drearily status quo, just more of the same mock-grandiose design that we experience every day in our urban centers. One might be tempted to write them off as object studies in postmodern boredom, and as such basically interchangeable, an inventory of increasingly exhausted signs for the civic that demand our attention only in their rote accumulation as opposed to any particular quality each might want to impart. Certainly, a dismal logic pervades this work and lends it a somewhat cynical edge, but that is not all there is to it. More closely examined, a range of off-putting, uncanny details intrude: Windows that should offer interior views instead peer out at the sky, and objects in the landscape behind the built structures—electrical poles, ornamental shrubbery, streets and cars, as well as the left-behind tools and materials of construction—push in, compressing background and foreground relations to an impossible extent and undermining our sense of scale. The pictures are titled after the buildings that have ostensibly been raised on these sites, as if to corroborate the illusion that they are already there, when in fact these are merely false fronts, two-dimensional tests for a coming architecture. This

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element of theatrical artifice is divulged gradually, and only to those who take the time to look carefully.



Miles Coolidge, *Alumni Center*, 2013. Pigment inkjet print, framed; 46 1/2 × 58 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.



Miles Coolidge, *Eye Institute*, 2013. Pigment inkjet print, framed; 50 × 64 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

That said, the mockups are instantly recognizable as a certain kind of picture. In their centrality, frontality, and expressionlessness, they are closely related to the New Objectivity movement in German photography, which emerged in the Weimar era and extends into the present largely through the efforts of Bernd and Hilla Becher and then their students from the Dusseldorf Academy of Art—Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Candida Höfer among them. The typological principle in picture making stresses a clear isolation of the referential object from the distractions of its context, a sharply focused view of its most characteristic side, typically its “face,” and a reduction of subjective-aesthetic input on the part of the artist to the bare minimum. The photographs of Coolidge, who studied with Bernd Becher in Dusseldorf between 1993 and 1994 on a German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) stipend, shortly after graduating from CalArts, meet all of these criteria, and yet their aim is not strictly informational. Or rather, what they inform us about is not only the thing in itself, whatever it might be that has come before the photographer’s lens, but also the relation between this apparatus and a particular order of things—things that are in some way analogous to photographs. The architectural mockups greet the camera as images already, as things that are one-sided, sheer appearance, all face, and therefore eminently suited to the flat space of the print. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, this perfectly reciprocal fit between substance

and form actively undermines visual understanding. Were we to encounter these structures out in the open, we might find them curious, but not as confounding as they are here. Even if we know from the outset just what they consist of—and the information is generally made available to the gallery-goer, whether by way of the artist's statement or word of mouth—photography provides them with a kind of camouflage, a way to hide in plain sight.

There has always been a historical-materialist side to the modernist demand for medium specificity, although it is often obscured in media with a long human history, like painting. To reduce a medium down to its constituent properties, or in more idealistic terms, its "essence," is also to present it as a material fact, a thing that is made to disclose itself as a made thing. On this point, photography has always had a certain advantage, as it emerged side by side with the artificial "second nature" of the urban-industrial landscape and was straightaway implicated in its productive machinery, as well as all of the critical debates it has given rise to. Here, however, the zero-degree of mediumicity cannot any longer be sought through the gradual elimination of outlying subject matter, since reproduction is precisely the most intrinsic command function of photography. Yet to reproduce something, as the camera does, is not necessarily the same as representing it, and it is largely due to photography's structural ties to the order of mass-production that it was so ardently seized by those artists affiliated with the New Objectivity as a means to familiarize us with an increasingly machine-made world. Since a photograph must always show us something other than what it is in itself, medium-specificity would come down to a choice of appropriate, mutually revealing content. In the seminal work of Albert Renger-Patzsch, for instance, pictures of factories and their output, typically shown stockpiled in identical units, alternate with pictures of landscapes, plants, and animals. The camera serves as a kind of mediator between the endless profusion of organic forms and those of precision-tooled standardization; it compares and contrasts the two in order to explain the one through the other, and this explanation, which cannot be delivered by any other medium, is therefore specific to it. Coolidge cites Renger-Patzsch's book, *Die Welt ist schon* (*The World Is Beautiful*, 1928), a user's manual of sorts of the New Objectivity, as a crucial precedent for his own practice, as he too believes that art can be both aesthetically rewarding and informative. In other words, beauty in art need not be non-purposive, as per Kant; photography shows that it can have educational function.

In his decision to photograph a coal seam in the Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel mine just outside Essen, Germany, Coolidge returns to the old stomping grounds of Renger-Patzsch and the Bechers, and does so with a pragmatic-formalist agenda that is related to theirs, while also veering off on new tangents. Certainly, one aim of these pictures is simply to afford us views of an obscure, subterranean world generally hidden from sight, and in this sense they can be considered enlightening. The camera extends the eye into this buried space of labor so fundamental to the workaday standards of life up above, and exposes it to visual scrutiny. However, by focusing strictly on the raw material—the black coal itself, in the absence of any infrastructural detail related to its extraction, transportation, or refinement—Coolidge also departs from the category of documentary photography or reportage to make contact with a whole other, largely antithetical, tradition in painting. On first look, that is, these pictures resemble nothing so much as black monochromes, the emblematic instance of medium-specific reduction to the zero-degree. Like the near-serial works that Ad Reinhardt produced toward the end of his career, these are initially glimpsed as undifferentiated fields of darkness, and only become visible gradually in their unique variegation. Likewise also, in the time that it takes to actually see them, they mobilize our perceptual mechanism

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in such an emphatic way as to render it perceptible in turn, so that in the end we see ourselves seeing, but this process of phenomenological sensitization here occurs in relation to a subject that must also be read for its historical, social, and political meaning. Whereas Reinhardt famously described his black paintings in terms of absolute negation—in regard not only to mimetically referential form, but also to expressive, imagined, and constructed form—here instead we are faced with an informational surplus. Accordingly, then, Coolidge’s pictures of coal may be understood as problem objects that recapitulate a long-standing argument between these two mediums. As Renger-Patzsch puts it in a 1929 text for the annual journal of photography, *Das Deutsche Lichtbild*: “There is not the slightest doubt that graphic art has been obliged to surrender to the camera much territory in which it was previously absolutely sovereign, and not only for reasons of economy, but because in many instances photography works faster, and with greater precision and greater objectivity than the hand of the artist. Whilst art used often to be concerned with representation...modern artists have drawn the right conclusions from the changes which have taken place, and have logically attempted to fashion art in absolute terms.”¹ Painting becomes “about nothing,” or nothing but itself, because photography steals from it everything else. Conversely, however, painting also marks the limit of the properly photographic photograph, for medium-specificity here demands a rejection of the painterly, of an imitative pictorialism. “Time and again, people (photographers) have been only too keen *to compete with art*,” Renger-Patzsch writes. “They perfect what they regard as high quality printing processes...in order to turn a good photograph into a bad picture.”²



Miles Coolidge, *Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel 4*, 2013. Pigment inkjet print, framed; 57 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

In citing the monochrome as the terminus point of this drive toward the “absolute,” Coolidge would seem to have committed a cardinal sin against the natures of both mediums as defined in strict opposition to one another. But he does so from a perspective where such oppositions no longer hold: Painting today resumes all of its old representational functions right alongside its newer abstracting ones, and photography is no less confined to any one way of working, whether with or without the

given forms of the visible world. Moreover, as a consequence of the so-called “digital turn,” photography becomes more inherently painterly at every step of the image-capture, post-production, and printing process, all of which allow the artist endless opportunities for interceding directly into the elementary particles of picturing. For Coolidge, this “turn,” which continues to transform photographic practice at present, also begs its historical reevaluation. As noted, the artist became interested in the coal-mining region of the German Ruhrgebiet on the basis of its connection to the New Objectivity, but also because photography was materially dependent on fossilized hydrocarbon from the outset. This is, for instance, the source of bitumen, a chemical compound that was inherent in the composition of the very first light-sensitive print. Obviously, this fact cannot be gleaned simply by looking at the pictures themselves, which are after all the outcome of a newer ink-jet technology, but some evidence of it remains behind as a material deposit layered into their substance, and Coolidge insists on this with his largely analog process. The exposures were made with an 8-by-10-inch view camera onto black-and-white film and then printed on Epson “fine art” paper, which lends them a subtly exotic, antiquated aura. And yet if these pictures point to photography’s past, it is not with nostalgia or stubborn insistence on old school technique, but rather a desire to rethink its future program from the ground up.

In the course of his research, Coolidge discovered that his association of photography, coal, and Germany might actually run deeper than he had initially suspected. In Esther Leslie’s 2006 book *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry*, which was presented on the gallery desk alongside the artist’s past catalogs, the author details the breakthrough experiments of German chemists like Friedlieb Runge to extract aniline, a material essential to the production of synthetic dyes, from coal tar, a waste product of coal’s refinement into coal oil, in the mid-nineteenth century.³ As it happens, the patented control of this process would insure Germany’s dominance of the global market for artificial color right up until the postwar years. One important consequence of this was the foundation of the corporate powerhouse IG Farben in 1925 from the merging of several smaller companies, including the still-extant Bayer, BASF and Agfa, that specialized in pharmaceuticals and plastics (significantly, in this case, celluloid) likewise derived from coal waste. Certainly, this information complicates Coolidge’s own use of coal as a trope of the medium-specific considered in the most general sense, as well as a means of revising the materialist history of photography in particular. The gallery press release informs us that the pigments in the coal photographs “are almost entirely composed of carbon derived from coal.”⁴ From Nicéphore Niepce’s original positive printing on bitumen-coated paper, we may now proceed swiftly to reverse printing via the intermediary of negative film, and finally arrive at the ink-dye printing of today without at any point breaking the chain of production, as all of these technological stages can be linked to the same material source. In the social and political terms of human history, however, these various transitions are far from seamless.



Miles Coolidge, *Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel I*, 2013. Pigment inkjet print, framed; 57 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

IG Farben was dissolved by the allied powers after World War II on the charge of Nazi complicity, notably as a supplier of the Final Solution gas Zyklon-B, and this too must be factored into Coolidge's pictures of coal. Here as well we are dealing with an order of content not immediately available to the eye, but one that is nevertheless *there* in both the represented object and

its material substrate. Whether or not we have been primed to receive this information in detail, we may sense its presence on a more intuitive level as something hidden, invisibly dispersed across the surface of the print and infusing it with an acutely sinister glow. These dark monochromes cast a fatal shadow over the entire course of our modernity, and whatever follows from it. Coal is the first fossil fuel and therefore also the first cause of our modern technology, which is fundamentally a power machinery to maximize our production capabilities for good as much as ill. Of course, today we might be more prone to experience even the most affirmative and celebratory photographs of Renger-Patzsch and company with a sense of deep foreboding, but what Coolidge adds to this equation is precisely the question of how such a negative reformulation of modernist history might impact our understanding of what this medium essentially is. The suggestion that photography not only is directed toward the conquest and domination of the world as image, but also, perhaps even more oppressively, is involved in its selective occlusion, is here made almost palpable.

The vibrant spectrum that Runge distilled from the darkness of coal would appear to support Goethe's argument with Newton's theory of color, in which Newton asserted that color was purely an optical effect of light and therefore not a quality inherent in the object world. By extension, we might say that there is color as well in Coolidge's black-and-white photographs, even, or especially, if we cannot see it. To have color emerge from substance, from the "innermost light" of a thing, is a highly Romantic wish; but it is not entirely erroneous from a scientific perspective, for what we are asked to consider here is the possibility of color rather than the actuality of it. Coolidge frames this ideal of self-disclosure in a negative manner, by technically "inhibiting" it, while simultaneously alerting us to its quality of hiddenness. His antique-looking black-and-white prints make the most of the colorlessness of coal, rendering its uneven surfaces as a sensuous, nearly tactile topology of deep velvety shadows and faintly glinting silvery highlights. But the formal richness that results from this correspondence between the apparatus of imaging and its referent is also vaguely troubling. It shrouds the coal's social-historical dimension in what the Germans call "beautiful semblance," effectively effacing it from the virtual realm of representation, only to have it reappear at the deepest level of reproduction, as a material property of the medium itself. Like the architectural mockups, which are swiftly imported into the flat space of the print as sheer facades, and hidden there as such, the subject of coal allows Coolidge to engage with the discourse of the medium-specific from a vantage of historical collusion. Of course, self-reflexivity has always implied self-criticism as well, and while, in his choice of subject matter, Coolidge clearly points out his medium's deep implication in the power structures it should be directed against, this is not the ultimate aim of his project. Rather, he seeks to question just how this knowledge might be used to expand the scope of a photographic practice.



Miles Coolidge, *Francis Gate*, 2010–13. Pigment inkjet print, framed; 92 × 221 inches. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

In the coal photographs, absence of color indicates the potential for invisible presence and draws our attention through the image to a submerged social history, which transitions from the most edenic foretellings of the industrial era to their worst-case fulfillment in the Nazi death camps. In Coolidge's four-part mural, *Francis Gate*, 2014, which measures 93 by 230 inches, this latent content is made somewhat more manifest, for here the blowback—or better, the backwash—of industry is straightforwardly confronted. Shot at the point where the Merrimack River enters the canal system of a textile- manufacturing factory in Lowell, Massachusetts, built in the nineteenth century, this would have to be considered a site of ecological tension by any measure. Water pressure was here employed to power looms and related machinery in the production of broadcloth, suggesting an early mechanical precursor to the hydroelectric plant. In his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” for instance, Heidegger locates the dam as a structure that reveals the “monstrousness” of our instrumentalization of nature, for here we confront its bounty with “an unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted from it and stored as such.”⁵ In order that it supply us with a “standing reserve” of energy, as he puts it, the current of the river must be blocked. Coolidge once again crops out the productive machinery so as to focus on the raw material itself, the water, but the bulk of the image is actually taken up with what this system leaves out—the indicting debris (natural refuse as well as rubber tires, plastic bottles, etc.) that collects at the sluice gate. Via an arduous process that involved sending a remote-controlled camera out on a line that he rigged between the river banks, Coolidge shot the water below in minute increments that were then painstakingly composited into one picture. The resulting photograph is astoundingly sharp and unsparingly detailed. Here, the product of industry is effectively returned to it as unusable waste, which also amounts to a surplus in photographic terms. If, in the name of medium-specificity, we choose to align the dam's aperture with that of the camera, then this is precisely the sort of information that accrues on all sides of the lens without finding a way in. This, then, is also a picture of picturing, a mechanical reproduction of how the world mechanically reproduces itself, yet Coolidge reverses the vantage to include its repressed contents, and in this sense expands our view.



Hand-built apparatus for maneuvering a medium-format digital camera over canal at Francis Gate, Lowell, MA. Courtesy of Miles Coolidge.

In order to stress the unbridgeable rift between ancient and modern technologies, Heidegger contrasts the still symbiotic work of farming to that of mining, which carelessly exploits, or as he puts it, “challenges,” nature. “[A] tract of land is challenged in the hauling out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit.”⁶ Similarly, “The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. ... What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station.”⁷ “The Question Concerning Technology” appeared in the early fifties, when this instrumentalization of life as a “standing reserve” of power reached its own zero-degree in the splitting of the atom, an event that is no doubt largely responsible for the philosopher’s backtracking, Luddite orientation. For the photographers of the New Objectivity, conversely, modern technology was seized as a means of breaking with the occult idealism of the past and fashioning a new unsentimental culture of mechanically checked clear-sightedness. In hindsight, however, we can make out a lingering Romantic strain in the blind spots of their technocratic empiricism. For these artists no less than Heidegger, the promise of the machine has never been only to deliver us from nature, and thereby also from the limits of our own human nature, but also to reveal those limits to us. In an age where the apparatus of imaging offers scant resistance to our fantasy life, this is worth bearing in mind. Coolidge returns us to these sites of industry’s origins as a reminder of what has always exceeded our physical and intellectual grasp, the inevitable gap in perception that opens onto the always accumulating junk-heap of history as informational

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surplus. This is the raw material that he mines in his photographs, not to produce a “standing reserve” for the future, but to determine just where we stand now.

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