

## From the Engine Room: Matthias Groebel Moritz Scheper

Among all the painters who have abandoned their brushes, Matthias Groebel occupies a special position. Upon the introduction of satellite television, Groebel began trawling the frequencies of obscure channels, compiling and composing images from their transmissions that he then transferred onto canvas using a homemade device. His oeuvre falls somewhere between the history of painting, cyberpunk, and the flickerings of the cathode ray tube.

No text currently written about Groebel can omit the details of his biography. For instance that he worked part-time in a pharmacy, using the rest of his days to make art for which no audience existed—until, in his sixties, he suddenly found himself discovered and embraced by the art world (in the last ten months alone, he has had solo shows at Galerie Bernhard in Zurich, Drei in Cologne, and most recently Berlin's Schiefe Zähne, with a Kunstverein show coming soon). Or that he at some point wired a new computer program up to a fischertechnik children's construction kit to create the basis of a painting machine, which he would subsequently iteratively refine and modify. Looking at the paintings this device spat out over the years almost automatically places Groebel in a lineup with Taslima Ahmed, Gili Tal, Alan Michael, and Wade Guyton—painters who print onto canvas as a way of forging a new path out of the exhaustion and negation of their medium. Yet anyone who sees this as evidence of Groebel's "ostensibly highly contemporary approach"<sup>1</sup> ignores the fact that these works were mostly produced a decade before the arrival of the first multi-color plotters.

That Groebel's paintings are currently capturing the hearts of so many is not, however, primarily due to how they were made. Take *L1096* (1996), a quadriptych whose four panels splice together close-ups of bodies and faces, as if carving out the element of transgression inherent in any excess. One features the words "Lapping Up Luxury," irritatingly positioned on the picture plane and with a meta appeal that may be purely imagined. The fleshy diptych *L0599* (1999) is similar; somewhere between alternative medicine and sexual deviance, it shows painfully stretched necks, ironically annotated with "Both ways / save us." These paintings equally display features that have characterized Groebel's works from the mid-1980s onward: a strong compositional control over the panels and details, which are additionally furnished with sections of text, and the unbelievably dominant and trancelike picture quality of the cathode ray tube screens of that era, which the artist skillfully transferred into his paintings. Moreover, the chosen footage is itself trance-like and distinctive in every respect. Groebel dug his way through a vast number of underground channels during this pioneer period of analog television, some of which broadcasted extremely bizarre material. This new technology opened up to the artist such strange and eccentric worlds as bodyhacking, cyberpunk, and acid communism, and his fascination with them oozes out of every work.

Groebel straddles two positions: that of the artist as a figure who records the vibrations of the world with highly tuned sensors, and that of the advanced techie (that he was and is). For this reason, the painting process occupies a

central role within his work. The notion of a mysterious machine always runs the risk of taking on mythical dimensions (one need only think of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*) overshadowing the actual sensation of the paintings themselves; this is especially true in the case of Groebel's Cinderella story. In the absence of any established language for describing them, his works are sometimes identified as "computer-robotic-assisted-paintings,"<sup>2</sup> but the notion that he merely had to select a file to be printed is entirely misguided. In fact, he developed a machine-assisted painting process that used a computer-controlled airbrush to apply paint in multiple semitransparent layers—a protracted operation full of artistic decisions, since neither the sequence and frequency of the layers, nor their necessary combinations, could be defined in advance. The results were consequently also never reproducible.

The significance of this process for the works themselves might be explained in light of the historical context in which they were created, for a new condition was becoming established at that time, which continues to this day—namely, that our bodies are constantly bombarded with images in the form of electromagnetic waves without us ever perceiving it. Equally, without painters in the mid-1980s responding in any major way to this new situation: while tech continued to carry utopian potential back then, painting preferred to dwell on secondary issues, with Martin Kippenberger leading the pack. The sense of disillusionment many felt at seeing the new spaces digital technology had opened up becoming increasingly capitalized is correspondingly mirrored in Groebel's oeuvre. When analog television broadcasters transitioned to subscription models around the turn of the millennium, he attempted to hack into their signals.

Worn out and corroded to the point of abstraction, the results would have been unsatisfactory to any TV viewer. But Groebel liked the degraded quality of the images, and transposed their often entirely gray tones into sensational grisailles in his *Hacked Channels* series (1999–2000), which self-evidently recalled the blurred paintings of Gerhard Richter—mercifully forgoing their didactic pathos. The series marks an end point altogether: the switch to payment models terminated the wave bath's massaging stream of images from around 2000 onward, and Groebel's machine correspondingly no longer produces any paintings.<sup>3</sup> His oeuvre, by contrast, is much wider than that, full of pockets large and small that are only now being opened. Above all, it's far from complete, as Groebel is currently experimenting with a new machine.

1 Claire Koron Elat, "The Best Painting Shows to See This Spring," *frieze*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/best-painting-shows-see-2022-spring>.

2 Frank Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 95.

3 It is significant that Groebel's painting process is irreducibly related to the idea of receiving signals. His painting device is ultimately a receiver, which precisely distinguishes his approach from those of other tech-savvy painters who developed machine-assisted painting processes before the invention of multicolor plotters, for example Bogoslav Kalas.

125 Matthias Groebel, *Untitled* (detail), 1994. Courtesy: Drei, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel

126 127 Matthias Groebel, *L0597*, 1997, *the rhythms of reception* installation view at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Schiefe Zähne, Berlin. Photo: Cedric Mussano

128 Matthias Groebel, *Untitled*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist and Edition Patrick Frey. Photo: Simon Vogel

129 Matthias Groebel, *Untitled*, 1992. Courtesy: the artist and Edition Patrick Frey. Photo: Simon Vogel





