

NEWSLETTERS

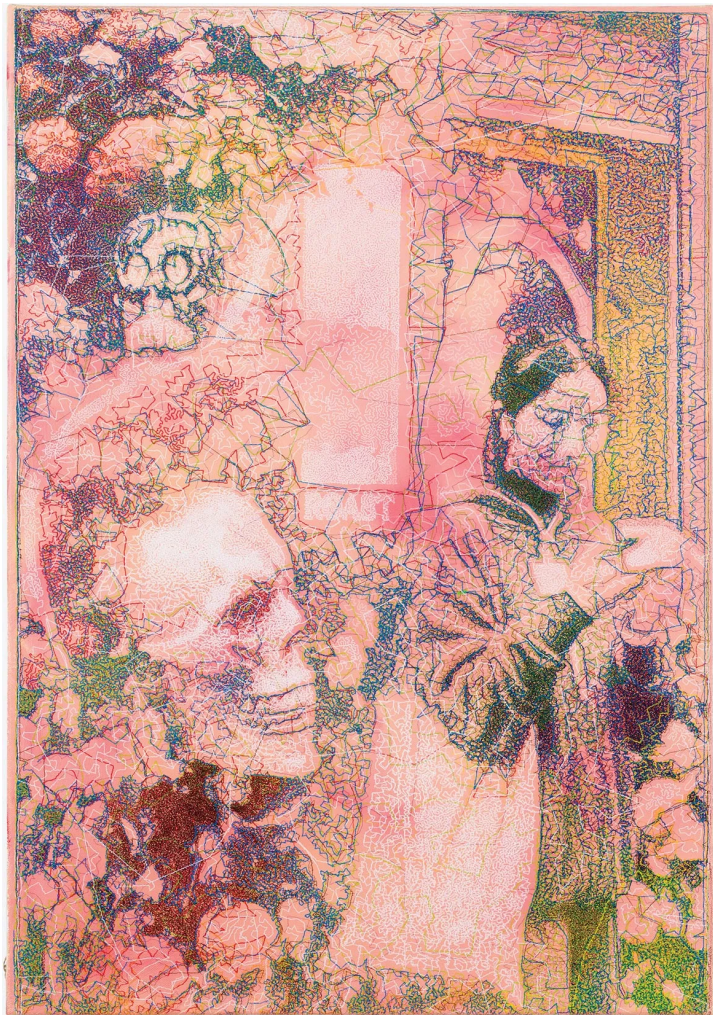
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REVIEWS LONDON

Matthias Groebel

Modern Art

By Alex Bennett



Matthias Groebel, *untitled*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 39 3/8 × 27 1/2".

Matthias Groebel’s exhibition “Skull Fuck” featured three



Mel Bochner, *All or Nothing* (detail), 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, two parts, 100 × 85".

MAY 2025

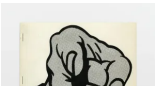
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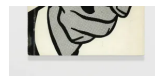
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TOP TEN
ALEX DA CORTE

of the television paintings he made between 1989 and 2001, along with three new monochromes, a trancey video, and two multipanel paintings from the early 2000s. Preserving pastness, the television canvases now broadcast nostalgia. The series emerged from the advent of twenty-four-hour, private satellite broadcasting in West Germany in 1984. Unprecedented access to a thick flow of roguish programming gave the Cologne-based artist, surfing at night, the subjects of these works in which snowy apparitions return through pointillist static with a distinctive gravelly sheen. With a glint in her cathode-blue eye, the woman in *untitled*, 1992, is a fascination of pewtery pixilation. Who is she? A halftone honeytrap, a lonely punctum, an orphaned siren whose doleful gaze bores into a classified beyond? A déclassé Greta Garbo, whose visage Roland Barthes venerated as “a moment of transition . . . an Idea”? In any case, this unnamed *she* is an effaced *someone*, hazed by the freeze of efflorescing electrons.

Desiring “a clean path from the electronic signal to the canvas,” Groebel fashioned his own painting machine in 1989, a decade before the widespread adoption of multicolor plotters. A Fischertechnik painting toy was its skeleton structure, which Groebel modified by assembling it vertically, scaling up its surface area, and replacing the toy’s original pencil with an airbrush. In cyberpunk spirit, Groebel robotized the apparatus with salvaged detritus: windshield wipers, plastic rollers, and bike chains. Select footage was then processed through software that converted analog signals to digital pixels that could be sprayed in acrylic, dot by dot, across the canvas. But consider: Such a machine demands tender maintenance. It does not fetishize the abdication of the hand so much as ventriloquize, to lushly narcotized effect, the very technicalities of painterly dexterity.



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As television broadcasters shifted to subscription models in the early 2000s, Groebel returned to his own photographs and videos as source material. The vertical triptych *virgins*, 2002–2003, features tightly cropped images of shelved skulls whose cavities are shrouded by embroideries, their craniums exposed.

Displayed in individual niches and bordered at the right by golden scrollwork, the skulls appear as hallowed yet anonymized relics. Here, the gauzy texturing of Groebel's machine deftly captures the atmosphere of stale temporality. Dank chiaroscuro intermingles with filmy blue, lending the composition a moldered delicacy that exacerbates the impression of senescence while assuring fidelity to its lensed source. It's a lossy, nauseous, and timeworn iridescence accomplished by liaising machines. Conceived from video stills, the nine-paneled *collective memories*, 2003, multiplies surfaces as dissonant interfaces with entropic translucency. Reflections spectrally overlay a proto-humanoid skeleton in a natural-history museum, with vitreous passages of calcium yellows and Hammershøi-esque shadows. The surgeons in *untitled*, 2000, backlit by the chronic glare of halogens, peer into the canvas's center: With perception itself under operation, the painting-body hacks the viewer.

Three fractalized monochromes (all *untitled*, 2024) originating in analog photographs of street life—roughly painted panels of pink, green, and turquoise—are encrusted with diagramming lines. To make these works, a scanner rendered Groebel's photographs into datasets, each comprising tens of thousands of points, and an algorithm directed colored pens to connect set points. These optimized paths sketch themselves into tortuous obscurity: Densities of vermiculation imply a sunlit skull, planar surfaces, and abstracted architectures, while hyperactivities of black describe a texting figure and

clustering foliage. Addling the eye, exhaustive hi-res ultimately ensures the paintings' encryption. Unlike Groebel's other works with their absorbing torpidity, these paintings nevertheless provide an alternate view of his informatic materialism: strategized line work as algorithmic craquelure.

Groebel's necromantic technics shows a wicked empathy for digital desuetude. These are paintings of electrical traces and lo-res lyricisms with results glacially indeterminate. Continual transitoriness—transmitting, receiving, translating—imparts solemnity for incognito presences slipping from view, allowing that what touches us deepest is likely already lost, or wholly numbs us to its ~~more~~ **more** act.

Reviews

GHOSTS AND THE MACHINE ANNA SINOFZIK ÜBER MATTHIAS GROEBEL BEI SCHIEFE ZÄHNE, BERLIN, UND DREI, KÖLN



„Matthias Groebel: Chemical“, Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 2024

Mit maschinengestützten Malereien, die in den Neunziger- und Nullerjahren auf Basis von TV- und Videostills entstanden, wurde Matthias Groebel in den vergangenen drei Jahren viel Aufmerksamkeit zuteil. Nun haben zwei Galerien die ältesten und neuesten Arbeiten des Künstlers gezeigt: Bevor Groebel begann, mit seiner selbst gebauten Maschine und Tools digitaler Bildbearbeitung Stills auf Leinwände zu übertragen, bediente er sich einer Kombination aus fototechnischen und malerischen Verfahren. Inzwischen zeichnet er mit einer neuen, algorithmisch gesteuerten Maschine. Anna Sinofzik nimmt die Einzelausstellungen in Berlin und Köln zum Anlass, um über Groebels späten Karriereschub sowie das Geisterhafte in seinen Bildern nachzudenken.

Die aktuelle Erfolgsgeschichte von Matthias Groebels Malerei folgt manch klassischen Regeln der Kunst. Zum Beispiel gibt es eine zu Legende taugende *Story* im Cyberpunk Style, geprägt vom Künstler Andreas Selg, der Groebel – überzeugt von dessen Arbeit und ihrer Bedeutung – 2021 eine eigentlich ihm selbst zugeordnete Galerierolle überlassen hat ^[1] und der wenig später als Co-Kurator an der Ausstellung im Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen beteiligt war, in der ich Groebels sogenannte Fernsehbilder das erste Mal sah. ^[2] Schlüsselszenen der Erzählung um Groebel werden seither gern aufgegriffen – dieser Text stellt keine Ausnahme dar – zu anekdotisch und einprägsam sind die Motive: Groebel als Outsider und Nerd, der in den späten Achtzigern damit begann, in Schrottplätzen nach Bauteilen für eine Malmaschine zu suchen; die im Geiste des DIY entsorgte Elektrogeräte zweckentfremdete und daraus eine Apparatur konstruierte, die aus Airbrushpistolen Farbe auf Leinwände schoss; der Open-Source-Strategien nutzte, um jenseitig zunehmend verschlüsselten Privatsender zu hacken, die ihm in den Neunziger- und Nullerjahren als primäre Bildquelle diente. Dass Groebel jahrzehntelang weitgehend außerhalb des Galeriesystems agierte, passt ins Narrativ, das derzeit aktiv weitergeschrieben wird. Dem Presstext zu Groebels jüngster Berliner Ausstellung – der ersten seines Frühwerks aus den Achtzigerjahren – lässt sich zum Beispiel entnehmen, dass der gelernte Apotheker seine ersten Bilder mit einer Fotoemulsion herstellte, die auf einem Rezept aus dem frühen 20. Jahrhundert basierte. Während die Schau bei Schiefe Zähne eine Lücke in Groebels Ursprungsgeschichte füllt, wird bei Drei in Köln mit neuen Arbeiten eine konzeptionell konsequente, ästhetisch jedoch überraschende Erweiterung seiner künstlerischen „Produktlinie“ präsentiert und anschlussfähig gemacht. Die narrative Rahmung der Fernsehbilder durch die aktuelle Präsentation und Vermittlung von Groebels ersten und neuesten Arbeiten, scheint mir für die nachhaltige Etablierung seines Werks wesentlich. Denn während die etablierte Logik des Galeriesystems zunehmend von alternativen (Selbst-)Vermarktungsmethoden herausgefordert wird, werden einzelne Werke oder Werkreihen weiterhin vor allem im Kontext von Werdegängen und Gesamtwerken kommuniziert, vermittelt und schließlich wertgeschätzt. Mit wachsendem Konkurrenzdruck und

erweiterten medialen Möglichkeiten nimmt die Bedeutung von Ursprungsmythen als „tales turned into a selling point“ ^[3] dabei sogar zu. Einen Bogen zwischen Groebels jüngsten Ausstellungen spannend, widmet dieser Text sich der Frage, welche Rolle die hauntologische Dimension, die mit Blick auf die Fernseh- und Videobilder vielfach angedeutet, nicht aber unter Einbezug weiterer Werkreihen erörtert wurde, in Groebels verspäteter Erfolgsgeschichte spielt.

SCHIEFE ZÄHNE: SPÄTER EINBLICK INS FRÜHWERK

Schon der Farbigkeit nach ist es unverkennbar die „braune“, wahlweise „graue“ oder „erbsensuppengrüne“ BRD der frühen Ära Kohl, wie sie die Goldenen Zitronen besangen, die uns in Groebels frühen Malereien begegnet. Als Pharmazeut mischte er Mitte der Achtzigerjahre eine Emulsion aus Gelatine, Eiweiß, Halogensalzen und Silbernitrat an, um eine Auswahl hochskalierter Kompaktkameraaufnahmen auf 95 x 95 cm große Leinwände zu übertragen: Das Porträt eines Punks (der in seiner schemenhaften Übertragung auch als Skinhead durchgehen könnte) vorm Kölner Dom. Snapshots von pogendem Konzertpublikum. Ein Landschaftsbild mit windschiefer Verkehrsschild an einer Bundesstraße. Die Tonalität des Vergangenen geht in den gezeigten, ausnahmslos unbetitelten Arbeiten, die Groebel zwischen 1986 und 1990 herstellte, zunächst auf die Bildgebungstechnik zurück; in ihrer stumpfen Farbarmut ähneln seine Motive historischen Lichtbildern, etwa Ferrotypen. Aus heutiger Sicht kommt der Abstand tatsächlich vergangener Jahrzehnte hinzu, der dazu verleiten kann, den muffigen Konservatismus der Zeit verklärend beiseitezuschieben. Einen Großteil der Bilder hat Groebel mit malerischen Abstraktionen versehen: mit kurvigen Formkonvoluten, die häufig wie behelfsmäßige Markierungen aussehen und die figurativen, fototechnisch aufgetragenen Motive mal verdecken, sie dann wiederum partiell hervorheben oder ergänzen. Einige von Groebels Gesten erinnern an kollabierte Signets oder kryptische Codes – und damit an eine weitere Zitronen-Zeile: Das alte Westdeutschland, das sich in diesen Bildern diffus genug darstellt, um trist und verheißungsvoll zugleich zu erscheinen, barg – in den Worten der Band – vielfach die „Gewissheit, Träger[in] von Geheimwissen zu sein“.



Matthias Groebel, „Untitled“, 1987

Als Groebel seine frühen Arbeiten produzierte, war „Geheimnis“ in der Kunstwelt noch eine veritable Währung als heute. Grundlegende Chiffren der Malerei ließen sich nicht ergoogeln, sondern vor allem im sozialen Kontext erlernen. Im Rheinland, wo Groebel bis heute lebt, boomte der Kunstmarkt damals wie nirgendwo sonst in der Republik. Groebel verstand sich als Maler, agierte jedoch am Rande jener Kreise, in denen die gerade angesagte Malerei entstand. Es war der zeitliche und räumliche Kontext, in dem Martin Kippenberger den Insiderwitz zum zentralen Prinzip seiner künstlerischen Strategie machte. Dieser Witz, der sich von Betrachter*innen zwar als solcher identifizieren lässt, aber nur selten vollständig dechiffrieren lässt, spiegelt die oft exklusiven Mechanismen einer Szene, die in Groebels Werk hereinspielt, während er selbst ihr Outsider blieb. Sein betont unartikulierter, grober Strich mag eine gewisse Verwandtschaft zum Bad Painting aufweisen, doch seine malerischen Referenzen weisen weiter zurück.



„Matthias Groebel: Chemical“, Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 2024

Gerade in Kombination mit den farbarmen, alltäglichen Fotografien wirkten Groebels Abstraktionen wohl schon in den Achtzigern weniger neu und wild als vielmehr etwas altbacken, vorsichtig, melancholisch. Wenn die BRD in seinen Bildern vorkommt, dann wird sie nicht im Zuge eines ironischen oder zynischen Zeichenspiels verhandelt, das scharfe Kritik am damals aufkommenden Neoliberalismus formuliert; als Lebenswelt des Künstlers war die westdeutsche Wirklichkeit für ihn vor allem naheliegender Bildgegenstand, um malerische Techniken zu erproben. Auch sein Strich scheint weniger herausfordern zu wollen, als affirmativ auf vorausgegangene Künstler*innengenerationen zu rekurrieren – zum Beispiel auf Kompositionen des Informel, von denen viele der sich als progressiv begreifenden jungen Maler der Zeit sich dezidiert abgrenzen wollten. In einem Bild der Ausstellung,

dem frühesten und einzigem aus dem Jahr 1985, sieht man pastose, breite Pinselstriche ganz ohne fotografisches Motiv auf der Leinwand, deren Format sie zwar füllen, wo sie aber dennoch ein wenig verloren wirken; zudem zugleich suchend und (fremd-)bestimmt, als wollten sie die eines K. R. H. Sonderborg sein. Erst im Dialog mit der figurativen Bildebene wird Groebels malerischen Gesten etwas Eigenes, geisterhaftes zuteil: Wie Spuren persönlicher Erinnerungsdurcharbeitung werden sie scheinbar zum malerischen Mittel, sich mit Momentaufnahmen aus seiner Vergangenheit auseinanderzusetzen. [4] Zugleich lassen sie sich – Elemente der figurativen Motive hervorhebend, ergänzend, markierend oder maskierend – als überzeichnete und analoge Vorläufer jener Werkzeuge der digitalen Bildbearbeitung lesen, die Groebel sich Jahre später in seinen sogenannten Fernsehbildern zunutze machen würde. Letztere waren es, die dem Autodidakten, der vom Kunstmarkt lange mehr oder weniger ignoriert wurde, kürzlich vermehrt Galerieausstellungen und Repräsentanzen verschaffte. [5]

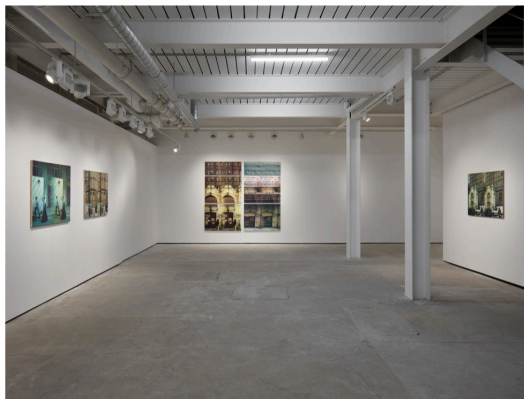
EXKURS: VON DER BROADCASTING-ÄRA ZUR BESTEN SENDEZEIT

Auf den ersten Blick haben Groebels Arbeiten aus den Achtzigern mit den Fernsehbildern der Neunziger- und frühen Nullerjahre vor allem das Format von 95 x 95 cm gemein. Vor dem Hintergrund der malerischen Bezugnahme auf das Informel, die im Frühwerk durchscheint, mag Groebels künstlerische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Medium Fernsehen den Vergleich mit K. O. Götz' Rasterbildern der Reihe *Density 10: 3: 2: 1* nahelegen. Doch während Götz die einzelnen Bildpunkte seiner formalästhetisch und konzeptionell gänzlich anders gelagerten Reihe von Hand zeichnete, um Bildlichte und Modulation modellhaft darzustellen, sind Groebels Punkte maschinell gemalt und übersetzen TV-Stills in figurative Malerei. Als Quelle nutzte er das Privatfernsehen, das damals noch weitgehend unreguliert das heterogene Material internationaler Broadcaster in westdeutsche Haushalte sendete, [6] manchmal auch gerippte Filme oder Workout-Anleitungen auf VHS. Die Standbilder, die Groebel wählte, schnitt er gern zu Close-up-Porträts unterschiedlichster, größtenteils unbekannter Protagonist*innen zu und farbseparierte sie mit einem Vorläufer von Photoshop, um die einzelnen Bildebenen in seine selbst gebaute Maschine einzuspeisen, die – Layer für Layer – Farbe durch frisierte Airbrushpistolen auf seine Leinwände schoss. Das Prinzip lässt an einen Inkjet-Drucker denken und wenn das Groebel auch kaum zu einem Proto-Wade Guyton macht, sind gewisse Parallelen unverkennbar. Wie Guytons Malerei lebt Groebels von charakteristischen *glitches*. Während bei Guyton defekte Druckköpfe und Papiereinzüge Schlieren erzeugen, gehen bei ihm Bildstörungen häufig auf Fehler in der Datenübertragung zurück; in anderen Fällen lassen unsaubere Sprühköpfe Bildpunkte bluten und die aufgrund schlecht aufgelösten Ausgangsmaterials ohnehin unscharfen Motive seltsam bewegt erscheinen. Bei beiden Künstlern sind die Spezifika (und spezifischen Unzulänglichkeiten) der Maschinen entscheidend, zudem greifen beide immer wieder manuell in den automatisierten Prozess des Geräts ein, das Groebels Fall selbst Produkt kleinteiliger Handarbeit ist. Wie die grundlegende Rolle der Fernsehbilder für die mittlerweile rege Rezeption von Groebels Arbeit bekräftigt, hat der Künstler auf Basis seines maschinell gestützten Verfahrens gefunden, was er in seinen frühen Bildern noch zu suchen schien: eine besondere malerische Handschrift.



„Matthias Groebel: A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001)“, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2021/22

Groebels Fernsehbilder wurden zunächst vor allem im Kontext der Medienkunst wahrgenommen. [7] Dabei weisen sie durchaus formalen Prinzipien der Konzeptkunst auf, etwa das Verfahren der Appropriation oder das Prinzip der Serialität. Dem kunsthistorischen Rückgriff steht die Antizipation neuer Bildtypen gegenüber: Das quadratische Format gleicht im Seitenverhältnis einer Instagramkachel, zudem legen die vielfach mit dekontextualisierten Textfragmenten kombinierten Motive den Vergleich mit Memes nahe. Mal überlagert Groebel das Porträt einer desillusioniert dreinblickenden Person mit der Phrase „Instant Relief“, mal das einer wie leblos daliegenden mit den Worten „Private Place“. Neben obskuren Botschaften und düster rauschenden Bildpunkten sind es die extremen Nahansichten unbekannter Gesichter, von denen eine unbehagliche Intimität ausgeht, die aus heutiger Sicht weniger mit der Erfahrung nächtlichen Zappens, als vielmehr mit der des Doomscrollings durch endlose Social-Media-Feeds korrespondiert.



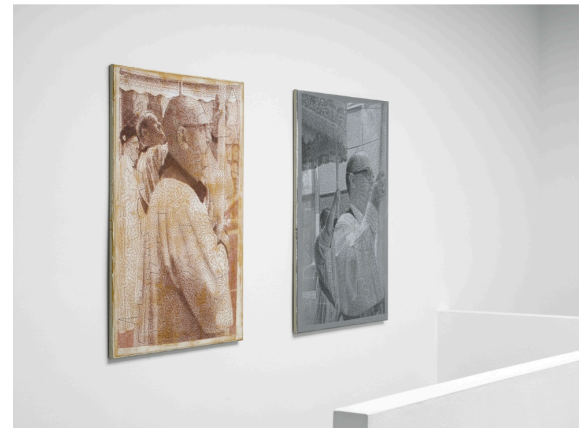
„Matthias Groebel: Phantoms All Around Me“, Gathering, London, 2024

Im Frühjahr letzten Jahres wurde bei Gathering in London eine Reihe von Bildern aus den Nullerjahren ausgestellt, die Groebel mit derselben Malmaschine hergestellt hat wie seine Fernsehbilder, die im Gegensatz zu diesen jedoch nicht auf Found Footage basieren. Wie die ganz frühen Arbeiten gehen die der Londoner Show (die Hannes Schmidt, der die Galerie Schiefe Zähne führt, kuratiert hat) auf eigene Aufnahmen Groebels zurück. Anstelle des persönlichen Umfelds, das der Künstler in den Achtzigern porträtierte, sieht man hier Passant*innen vor viktorianischen Fassaden des Londoner Viertels Whitechapel, die er mit dem Camcorder gefilmt hat. Die veränderte Aufnahmetechnik bringt ästhetische Unterschiede wie eine verminderte Bildschärfe und eine flachere Farbigkeit mit sich (und die spürbar bleibt, obwohl Groebels Bearbeitung ihr offenbar mit erhöhten Kontrasten entgegengesteuert). Zudem hat der Künstler sich vom bisher vorrangig von ihm verwendeten Format gelöst und, im Gegensatz zu den bislang hier besprochenen Arbeiten, bisweilen mit multiplen Panels gearbeitet. Die besondere Handschrift seiner Apparatur bleibt jedoch unverkennbar. Wenn man so will erweiterte die Londoner Show also die 2021 erfolgversprechend eingeführte „Produktlinie“, ohne allzu offensichtlich mit ihrer Ästhetik zu brechen.

DREI: PROGRAMMÄNDERUNG? ZURÜCK IN DIE GEGENWART

Nun ist Groebels Maschine kaputt. Wie er mir im Gespräch in seiner Kölner Ausstellung berichtet, versucht er noch, sie zu reparieren. Indes hat er begonnen, mit einer anderen Technik zu experimentieren und die Zäsur im eigenen Werk zur Tugend zu machen. Einige Ergebnisse sind nun eben in der Galerie Drei in Köln zu sehen. Den Anspruch, die Wiedererkennbarkeit seiner Praxis weiterhin zu gewährleisten, hatte Groebel bei der Entwicklung seiner neuen Malmaschine offenbar nicht. Zwar nutzt er erneut eigene Aufnahmen als Ausgangsmaterial, doch bringt er sie diesmal weder chemisch auf noch über maschinell gesetzte Bildpunkte.

Stattdessen übersetzt er die Fotos per Scan in einen digitalen Datensatz aus zigtausend Punkten, welche seine neue Maschine zeichnerisch verbindet: An elektronischen Steuerelementen führt sie verschiedene Sets von Stiften über monochrom bemalte Leinwände – und zwar mithilfe eines Algorithmus, der sicherstellt, dass sich die Linien nicht überkreuzen. Immer wieder unterbricht Groebel auch hier den automatisierten Prozess, um manuell einzugreifen. Manche der resultierenden Bilder muten von Weitem fast fotografisch an (mal erkennt man eine bischöfliche Prozession, mal einen Jecken beim Karnevalszug), bei näherer Betrachtung diffundieren die figurativen Motive jedoch zu wirr verdichtetem Strichwerk. Wie bei Groebels erster Maschine sind es nicht zuletzt die technischen Unzulänglichkeiten der eigens konzipierten Apparatur, die den Duktus dieser Bilder bedingen, der hier jedoch ein gänzlich anderer ist. Wenngleich sich die neuen Arbeiten formalästhetisch fundamental von Groebels früheren Maschinenbildern unterscheiden, setzen sie sein malerisches Projekt aber konsequent fort, indem sie analoge mit digitalen Verfahren zu Kompositionen verschränken, die mediale und technische Bedingungen so weit ins Zentrum rücken, dass sie als informationspraktischer Materialismus [8] gelten können.



„Matthias Groebel & Jean Katambayi Mukendi: New Technologies“, Drei, Köln, 2024/25

Die eingespeisten Motive sind für Groebel vor allem formal und weniger inhaltlich von Interesse. Und doch rufen sie Kontexte auf, in die sich viel hineinlesen ließe (Karneval, Katholizismus). Gleiches gilt für die Paarung mit der zweiten, zeitgleich bei Drei gezeigten Position: Kurator Martin Germann hat Groebels Arbeit mit der von Jean Katambayi Mukendi kombiniert, was sich in puncto Künstlerbiografie sowohl als *perfect match* wie als identitätspolitischer Counterpart lesen lässt. Auch Mukendi, gelernter Elektroingenieur und Mathematiker, kam als Quereinsteiger zur Kunst. Seine Zeichnungen (*Afrolamps*, 2024), die an Totenmasken, Schaltkreise und Produktzeichnungen erinnern, thematisieren den massiven Kobaltabbau in Katanga, der Heimatregion des Künstlers, wo sich die Ausbeutung der Kolonialzeit fortsetzt, um den immensen Bedarf an Lithiumbatterien in den Industrienationen zu decken. Dass sich Groebels neue Bilder auf den ersten Blick leicht Mukendi zuordnen lassen, mag zum einen daran liegen, dass sie kaum Ähnlichkeit zu früheren Werken aufweisen. Andererseits an den stereotypen Vorstellungen, anhand derer Besucher*innen die verschlungene Linienführung der neuen Malmaschine möglicherweise vorschnell kategorisieren, exotisieren: Ihr Duktus lässt sich leicht mit traditionellen afrikanischen Mustern in Verbindung bringen, deren *zigzags* in populärwissenschaftlichen Texten gern als Symbol für unstete Lebenswege gedeutet werden.



Matthias Groebel, „Untitled“, 2024

Groebels zackiger Strich hat tatsächlich etwas mit komplexen Wegen zu tun, allerdings in ganz anderer Art: Der Algorithmus, der ihn steuert, ist vom sogenannten Traveling-Salesman-Problem inspiriert, einer Optimierungsaufgabe aus der Unternehmensplanung und theoretischen Informatik. Ihr Ziel ist es, eine Sequenz für den Besuch mehrerer Orte kombinatorisch so festzulegen, dass keiner (außer der Ausgangsstation) mehr als einmal besucht wird, die Route des Handelsreisenden also möglichst kurz ist. Das Traveling-Salesman-Problem bzw. dessen Lösung dient der Effizienz und Optimierung und kommt damit zwar potenziell der Nachhaltigkeit zugute, aber auch dem Kapitalismus als vielleicht größtem Problem unserer gesellschaftspolitischen Gegenwart ohne greifbare Lösung. Gerade in Verbindung mit Mukendis Thema lässt sich in Groebels Technik eine kapitalismuskritische Komponente hineinlesen, die er selbst wohl kaum so beabsichtigt hat. Und wer den *Traveling Salesman* Willy Loman aus Arthur Millers Klassiker kennt, dürfte sich daran erinnern, dass sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart für ihn auf ähnliche Weise vermischen, wie es alte analoge und neue digitale Verfahren auf Groebels Leinwänden tun.

EPILOG: SPECTERS OF GROEBEL

In Texten und Gesprächen zu Groebels Fernseh- und Videobildern ist immer wieder von Geistern die Rede. [9] Ausstellungstitel wie „Phantoms All Around Me“ (die Londoner Show) betonen die gespenstische Dimension, die in vielen seiner Bilder aufscheint. Bei den Fernseh- und Videobildern vermittelt sie sich recht offensichtlich durch Screen Glitches – Klassiker des Horrorfilmgenres, wo flirrende Bildschirme und gestörte Programme nicht selten als Gateways für spukende Seelen fungieren. Doch auch in Groebels frühen Arbeiten ist das Geisterhafte als wesentliche Komponente anwesend. Hier kommt es vor allem durch verwittert monochrome, chemisch erzeugte und alchemistisch anmutende Abzüge zustande und durch Gesten, in denen vergangene Generationen von Maler*innen herumzugeistern scheinen. Auch historische Rückgriffe – in den frühen Bildern auf das Informel, später auf die Konzeptkunst – lassen sich als Aspekte des Hauntologischen lesen. Die *uncanniness* der aktuellen Arbeiten mag mit den Gefahren emergenten maschinellen Bewusstseins zunächst wenig zu tun haben. Doch wenn Groebels Technik verglichen mit jüngsten Entwicklungen im Bereich der künstlichen Intelligenz auch harmlos wirkt: In der Malerei seiner Apparatur, die wie von Geisterhand Stifte führt, verbinden sich Mensch und Maschine auf frankensteinhafte Weise, suggerieren im Rekurs auf Historisches eine Untersuchung heute relevanter technikethischer Fragen.

Groebels Werk hat also nicht nur in Teilen, sondern in seiner Gesamtheit etwas Hauntologisches an sich. Und zwar vielleicht weniger im Sinne von Jacques Derrida, für den die *Specters of Marx* in den frühen Neunzigerjahren zu spuken begannen, als vielmehr im medienarchäologischen Verständnis von Mark Fisher und Simon Reynolds, für die musikalische Verweise auf verschwundene Medien wie das analoge Fernsehen nicht bloß eine Faszination für eben diese signalisieren, sondern vor allem eine gewisse Melancholie. „The tracks bleed into one another (...), like failing memories“, [10] so Fisher über Sound, der von Verlorenem erzählt, ohne den Verlust als solchen zu thematisieren. In Groebels Maschinenbildern aus den Neunziger- und Nullerjahren sind es Bildpunkte und Farben, die bluten. Ihre aktuelle Anziehungskraft lässt sich auf die nostalgische Verklärung vergangener Jahrzehnte zurückführen. Zugleich sprechen sie jedoch den Geist einer Gegenwart an, in der sich der Optimismus von Open Source ebenso erschöpft hat, wie die Subjekte des Spätkapitalismus es sind. Während Derrida in *Specters of Marx* noch auf die progressive Allianz der „New International“ setzt, zerlegt sich die Linke inzwischen zusehends, die Hoffnung auf neue Technologien hat sich längst in Horror vor ihnen verkehrt. Unabhängig davon, ob solche Gedanken für Groebel eine Rolle spielen, können sie helfen, den Reiz seines Werks und dessen späten Erfolg zu erklären.

„In hauntological music there is an implicit acknowledgement that the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible“, [11] schreibt Fisher in Bezug auf den Verlust von Zukunft, den er in den Nullerjahren vermehrt aus der Musik heraushörte – und der heute in vielerlei Hinsicht unsere Gegenwart prägt. Groebels Malerei gelingt es durch die Verschränkung von historischen Rückgriffen und antizipatorischen Momenten, den Nerv dieser von (gefühlten) Verlusten gekennzeichneten Zeit zu treffen [12] – und zugleich über sie hinauszudeuten. Die Bereitschaft des Künstlers, nicht am Erfolgsrezept der Fernsehbilder festzuhalten, sondern die Erprobung dessen fortzusetzen, macht deutlich, worum es ihm eigentlich geht: einen malerischen Bildgebungsprozess, in dem Mensch und Maschine konstruktiv, wenn auch nicht störungsfrei

zusammenarbeiten. Dass Ersterer dabei am Ende doch meist die Oberhand behält, mag heute tröstlich erscheinen. Und vielleicht ist auch Groebels Karriere, die gegensätzlich zu der Willy Lomans verläuft, gerade in vergleichsweise düsteren Zeiten eine schöne Erinnerung daran, dass das „acknowledgement that certain hopes have evaporated“ auch im positiven Sinn von der Realität eingeholt werden kann.

„Matthias Groebel: Chemical“, Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 13. September bis 25. Oktober 2024;
„Matthias Groebel & Jean Katambayi Mukendi: New Technologies“, Drei, Köln, 6. November 2024 bis 16. Januar 2025.

Anna Sinozik ist Autorin und Senior Editor bei TEXTE ZUR KUNST.

Image credit: Courtesy of Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, und Drei, Köln; 1-3. Fotos Julian Blum; 4. Foto Cedric Mussano; 5. Foto Ollie Hammick; 6-7. Fotos Cedric Mussano

ANMERKUNGEN

- [1] <https://www.galeriebernhard.com/exhibitions/matthias-groebel>.
- [2] <https://kunstverein-duesseldorf.de/ausstellungen/a-change-in-weather-broadcast-material-1989-2001>.
- [3] Ana Teixeira Pinto, „The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality“, in: *Texte zur Kunst*; 2024.
- [4] Der Titel der Ausstellung bei Schiefe Zähne, „chemical“, der auf das analoge Verfahren verweist, mit dem die Motive aufgebracht wurden, lässt sich auch auf die molekularen Vorgänge beziehen, die menschliche Wahrnehmung und damit auch das Erinnern und Vergessen steuern.
- [5] Bei Schiefe Zähne und Drei ist Groebel seit Anfang 2022 fest im Programm, mittlerweile repräsentiert ihn auch Ulrik (New York); Gathering (London) führt ihn unter den *exhibited artists*.
- [6] Als die privaten Sender wenig später verschlüsselt wurden, um Bezahlmodelle einzuführen, programmierte Groebel eine Entschlüsselungsanleitung, die er Open Source zur Verfügung stellte, das entsprechende Booklet wurde als Teil der Düsseldorfer Ausstellung gezeigt.
- [7] Vor knapp zehn Jahren war er zum Beispiel in der Gruppenausstellung „TeleGen. Kunst und Fernsehen“ im Kunstmuseum Bonn vertreten.
- [8] Als praxisbasiertes Gegenstück zum informationstheoretischen Materialismus Friedrich Kittlers.
- [9] Vgl. zum Beispiel: „Caitlin Doherty im Gespräch mit Matthias Groebel“, in: *The New Left Review*, 2024; Andreas Selg im Presstext für Galerie Bernhard; Astrid Wege, „Goebel's Ghosts“, in: *Frame*, 2, 2007.
- [10] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, Arlesford/Hampshire, UK 2022, (Kindle Edition), S. 150.
- [11] Ebd., S. 21.
- [12] Andreas Reckwitz' neues Buch *Verlust: Ein Grundproblem der Moderne* ist nur ein Beispiel, das diesem kollektiven Gemütszustand Rechnung trägt.



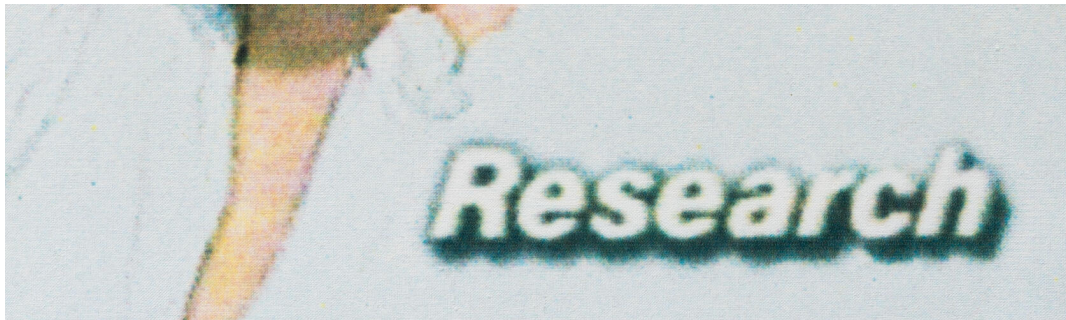
Featured in
Issue 245

Matthias Groebel's Monuments to Uncertain Memories

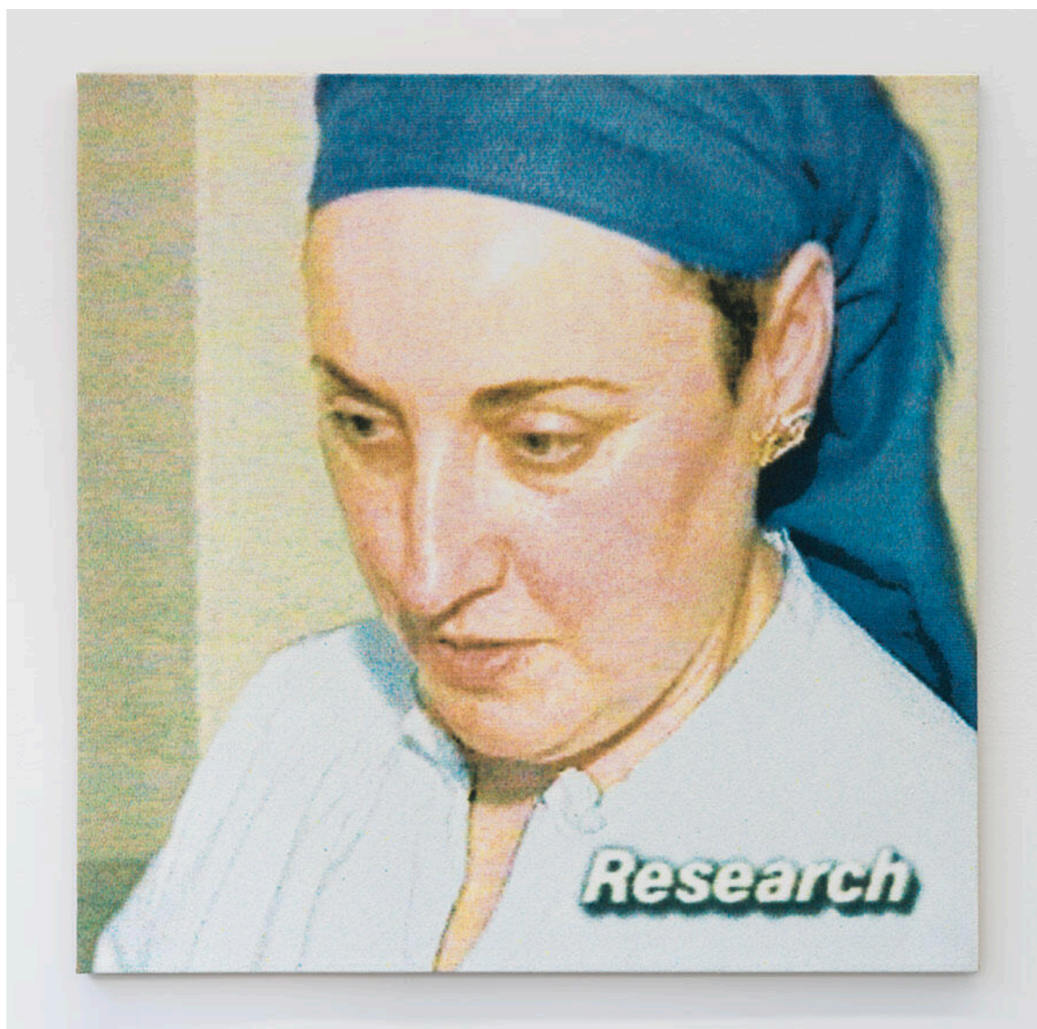
The artist's paintings, featured in the upcoming Gwangju Biennale, are strikingly familiar yet elusive, offering a challenge to decode

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BY JEPPE UGELVIG IN OPINION | 28 AUG 24



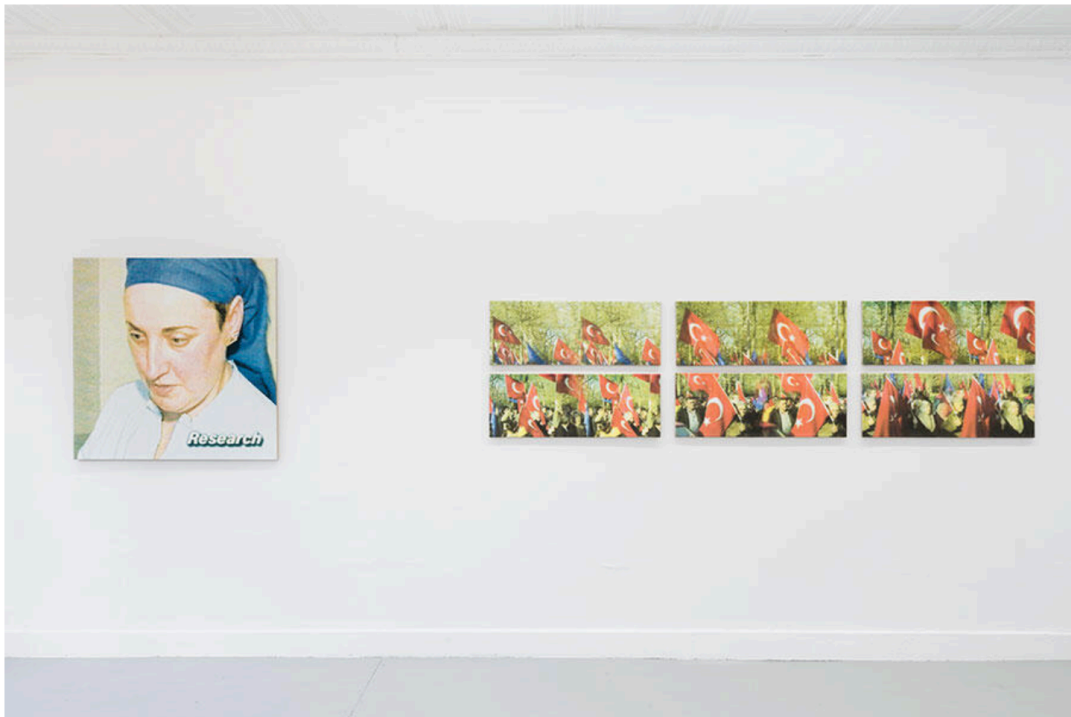
I swear I have seen the woman in Matthias Groebel's painting *Untitled (069)* before. Her downcast eyes gaze from under hooded lids to a point beyond the compositional frame; the skin on her face is starkly illuminated by harsh flashlight from a camera held a little too close. The woman looks troubled and fatigued; some unspoken disaster hangs about her trembling lips. Something has happened, and she has decided to address it in public.



Matthias Groebel, *Untitled (069)*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 95 × 95 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Ulrik, New York; photograph: Stephen Faught

The azure scarf she wears to cover her head marks her as a woman of faith, but Groebel otherwise depicts her in an unmarked room in a nameless place. Undoubtedly, however, the source image for this painting has come from a television screen: the oversaturated colours and the flickering whites of the walls produce a texture that could only ever stem from analogue moving image. This is further asserted by the italicized font in the lower right-hand corner, which spells out the word 'research'. The appearance of the word locates the woman in an archive not of portraiture, but of footage. I swear I have seen that woman before. Or perhaps it was someone else, from some other show, on some other channel.

Groebel's canvases are monuments to uncertain media memories. They are the embodiment of *in media res*, with the artist offering no precursory context, instead relying solely on the narrative potential of the images themselves. Approximately the size of old-fashioned television monitors, Groebel's paintings from the 1990s pair found images with words applied to the canvas in a font that is instantly evocative of television: their juxtaposition produces a disquieting cognitive dissonance in which we scramble, and fail, to decode images that are most vividly marked by their hyper-familiarity.



'Matthias Groebel', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Ulrik, New York; photograph: Stephen Faught

But familiarity to what, exactly? Groebel reminds us – reminds me – of hours spent sitting too close to the television screen as a kid, watching disasters unfold in languages unknown. Satellite television revolutionized media consumption in the 1980s by ushering in an era of constantly flowing imagery from far-flung places, which was consumed indiscriminately, excessively, with little resistance or criticality. Emerging right before the internet became widespread, satellite built the phantasmagorical structures of perception dominant in today's TikTok age. I would like to think that little has changed since then for Groebel, whose works speak to a single, pressing point: when any flow of moving images is arrested, as in a painting, their meaning dissipates and erodes, pushing us into media's uncanny valley, where images are nothing without their signals.

Matthias Groebel is included in 'Pansori, a soundscape of the 21st century', 15th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, September 9 – December 1

Main image: Matthias Groebel, Untitled (069) (detail), 1996, acrylic on canvas, 95 × 95 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Ulrik, New York; photograph: Stephen Faught



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Issue Eleven



Artwork by Matthias Groebel

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Matthias Groebe

Interview

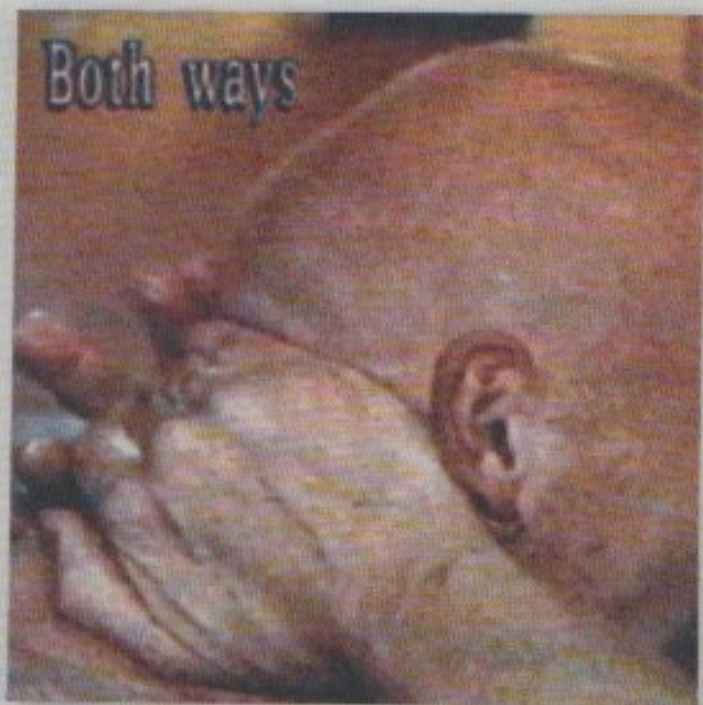
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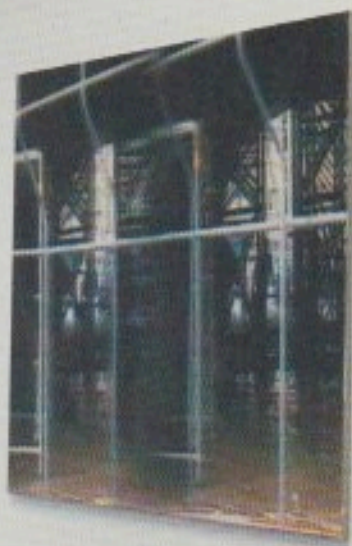
Hayes

Born 1958

Matthias Groebel (b. 1958) is a German artist, and currently based in Cologne. Groebel has worked with photography, video and digital image processing, using different home-built or modified devices. These works are produced using a painting machine built by Groebel.



L/599, 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 95 x 95 cm
Satellites Cast No Shadow* February 10 - April 16, 2022 Courtesy of the artist and Drea, Cologne.



Untitled, 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.
Images courtesy of the artist and Drex, Cologne.
Photos by Simon Vogel.

Critics often make reference to the fact that your artistic career started later. What do you think about that?

Better late than never! There is an interest in my work now and the people I work with are in many cases a generation younger than me, that much is true. The artist Andreas Selg helped launch my career, writing and curating shows with my work from 2021. I know what has happened since, but I can not tell you why it happened. If someone has an explanation, I would be interested to hear it...

Like many other painters since the 80s, you've 'abandoned brushes' and found other ways to make work. You've also involved various machinic processes, which I think take on different connotations today with AI, etc. – how do you understand the relationship between your agency as an artist and the machine?

Applying the paint to a canvas using a home build machine or using a brush from the art supply store can be pretty similar practices. But also, the hybrid is not a new

idea and the machine part of it follows a rather simple set of rules. There is a change in language though as a result of the incorporation of the machine. Some of today's AI programs try the contrary, they create fake images within the existing visual language.

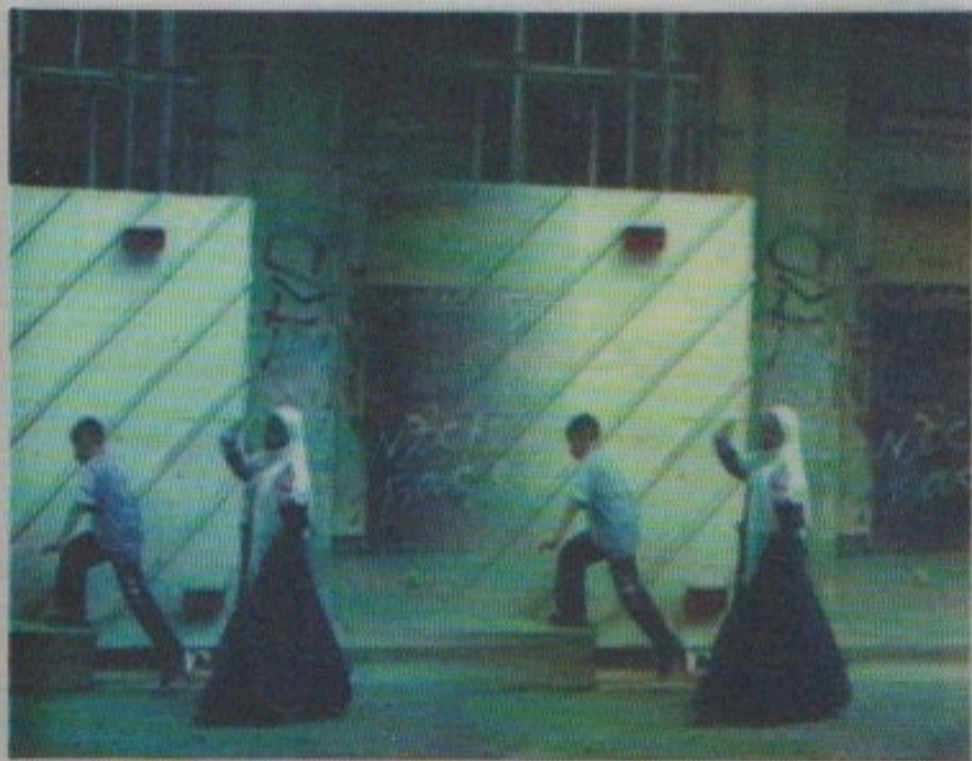
I wonder if you could speak about your interest in new media, particularly TV and early software programmes, like Deluxe Paint?

When I was a kid, there were three state-run TV channels. All black and white, and there was no service at night. Within a few years, we had dozens of channels that blasted colour images around the clock. A Pop explosion that changed the way we look at paintings. I reacted to that, and I developed artistic routines. I used to run the tape for an hour or so and turned off the sound and listened to music instead, an attempt not to get dragged into the narrative of the TV programme. Afterwards I would turn off the screen and try to remember – what images could I recall? Those were the ones I then went looking for on the tape. Sometimes I could find them and sometimes my mind had invented combinations. That's where digital imaging came in. Deluxe Paint was a tool to paint the images that I had imagined rather than the ones that were actually transmitted.

... and perhaps you could expand on what interests you in a particular image or reference? The challenge for anyone working with found images is choosing, editing and selecting from such a vast archive of possibilities.

To make one of those paintings took about a week. You don't decide to spend that much time and work on a motif unless you are really interested. Looking back my path through the early TV metaverse appears to be one big *dérive*. My later walks with the camera were a similar form of drifting.

In 1994, you spoke about not wanting to work with images from TV that people had seen. Do you still think about temporality in this way? Things are much more fragmented now because of the internet...



Untitled (067), 2006, Acrylic on canvas (computer-assisted painting), 90 x 110 cm
Matthias Groebel: phantoms all around me! Gathering, London, 1 December 2023 - 13 January 2024.
Photography: Matthias Groebel Studio. Courtesy of the Artist



Untitled (192), 2004, Acrylic on canvas (computer-assisted painting), 80x110cm
Matthias Groebel: 'phantoms all around me' Gathering, London, 1 December 2023 - 13 January 2024.
Photography: Blythe Thea Williams. Courtesy of Gathering, London



Untitled (194), 2003, Acrylic on canvas (computer-assisted painting), 70 x 100 cm
Matthias Groebel: 'phantoms all around me' Gathering, London, 1 December 2023 - 13 January 2024.
Photography: Blythe Thea Williams. Courtesy of Gathering, London



L0895 (1995), L0793, (1993), installation view A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001),
Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022, photo: Cedric Mussano

It is true that I did not want people to recognize a politician, an actor or their favourite soap. TV images can be remembered very well. I used the obscure channels, the programmes that were transmitted late at night, the cheap productions that nobody saw. Things are different today, the late night internet is clearly different.

How did you first become acquainted with Whitechapel? It's interesting how closely tied this body of work is to the area, yet this is your first solo in the UK.

My friend Thomas lived around the corner on Brick Lane. I stayed with him whenever I came to London. The neighbourhood was different then; there were less tourists.

I'd like to hear more about your interest in British psychogeography, and how this informs your practice and this exhibition.

At the time when I was working on the Tower House I was totally unaware that a thing like British psychogeography existed. It is one advantage that you have when you are working in a town that is not your own – you have nothing to get romantic about. My idea of psychogeography has always been that of a scientific method that includes chance. Like the Situationists, I lack the otherworldly layer.

There's, of course, a strong emphasis on working-class histories in this work, too. Why was this important for you to explore? It's quite tragic that Tower House has been replaced by expensive apartments, a single story that reflects so much else going on in London right now...

It's important to say that I did not choose the topic necessarily. My first encounter with the Tower House was on the way to an Indian restaurant in our neighbourhood. It looked like ancient ruins dropped in a modern cityscape. I started investigating and working from there.

I'm interested in the fact that this body of work comes from the mid-2000s. We've seen a lot of changing conversations about painting, the role of tech, etc., since then. How has your perspective on this work changed during this time?

I was always interested in the ways that painting automatically references everything else in the tradition – yet at the same time, you can never make the same painting twice. Or, if you do, it becomes something different. It is good to see this series of works together, a premiere for me, and it feels important that this happens in London. But the best thing is that these paintings don't make me feel nostalgic.





Untitled, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, Four parts, each: 95 x 95 cm policing and regulation. "Sattelites
Cast No Shadow" February 10 - April 16, 2022 Courtesy of the artist and Dree, Cologne.



Satellites Cast No Shadow, Installation view, February 10 - April 16, 2022
Courtesy of the artist and Drei, Cologne.



Satellites Cast No Shadow, Installation view, February 10 - April 16, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist and Drei, Cologne.





A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001), Installation view, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022, photo: Cedric Mussano



Interviews



A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material) 1989-2001 | Installation view, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022, photo: Cedric Mussano



Voyeur of Himself

Matthias Groebel in conversation with Hans-Christian Dany

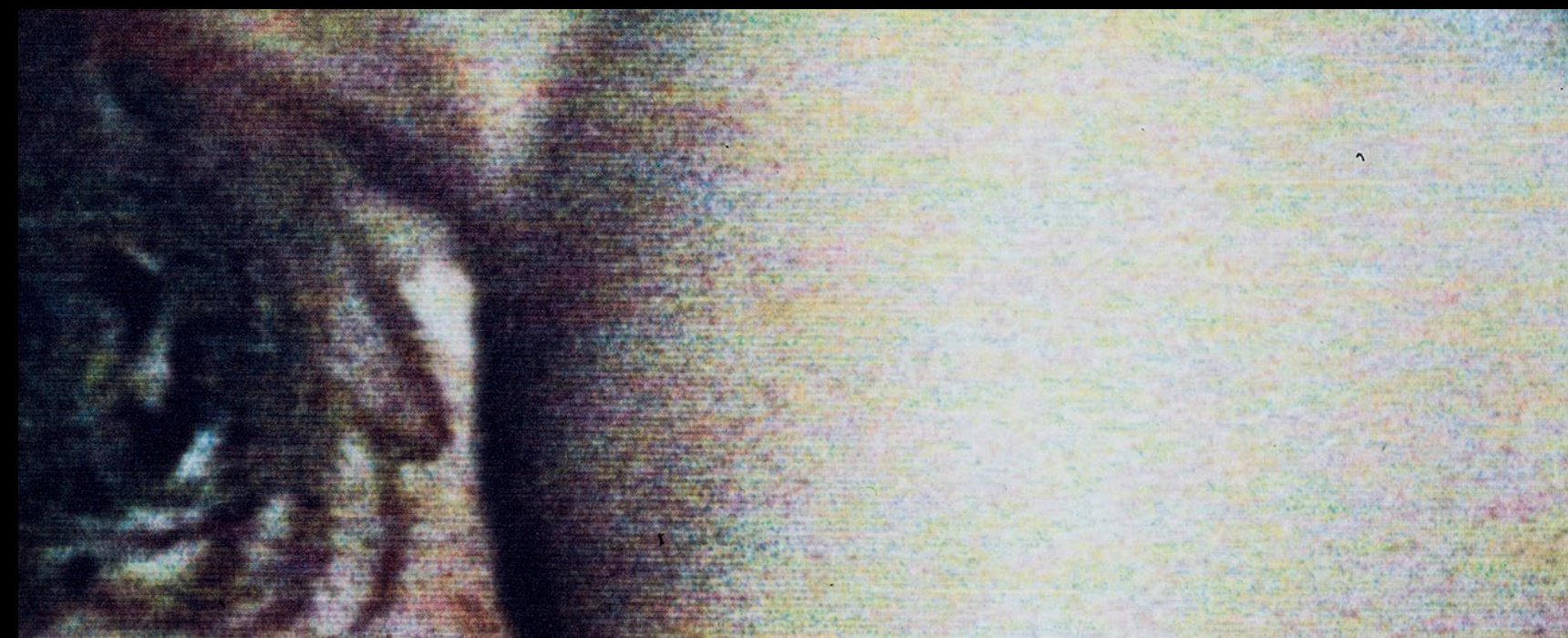
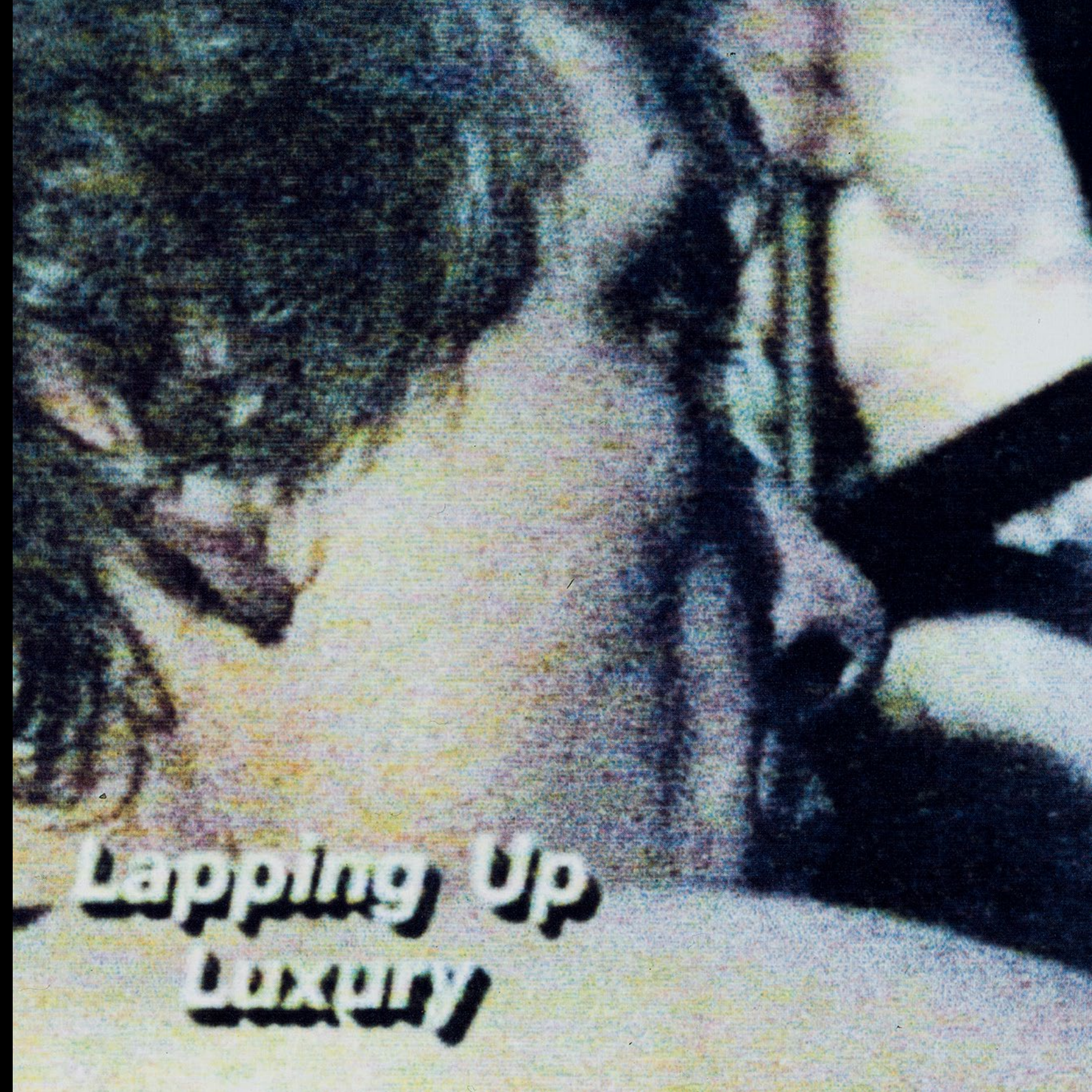
Witness



UNTITLED, 1994
 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
 95 X 95 CM



AMERICAN BEAUTY #1, 2001
 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
 100 X 100 CM





ABOVE:
UNTITLED, 1992
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
95 X 95 CM

BELOW:
UNTITLED, 1992
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
96 X 95 CM

Matthias Groebel picks up the phone in a London hotel at 7 o'clock in the morning. It is March 14, 2024, one day before his 66th birthday. While others retire at this age, Groebel finds himself in the acceleration phase of an unusual career. It began 35 years ago on the fringes of the art world and remained in the shadows until, three years ago, Swiss artist Andreas Selg curated an exhibition of Groebel's paintings from the 1990s at Galerie Bernhard in Zurich. All of a sudden, paintings that were in some cases over a quarter of a century old resonated with the times. Exhibitions in Cologne, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Paris, and New York followed in quick succession.

Hans-Christian Dany_Did you get a good night's sleep?

Matthias Groebel I'm just having my first cup of coffee.

HCD_Later tonight, your exhibition phantoms all around me, curated by Hannes Schmidt, opens at Gathering, London. It's your first exhibition in England, but you already have a longer history with the city.

I would often visit a friend here in the early 2000s. I was traveling a lot at the time. What I had been doing up until then wasn't working out anymore and I was looking for new avenues. After transforming found footage from television for over ten years, I bought a simple video camera and started filming. You could say that television had become dull, so I started recording my own program. After a while, this home-made TV program evolved into an experimental approach to convert stereoscopic photography to video using a home-made attachment for my Canon camera. In a second attempt, I got myself a somewhat obscure adapter from Japan that did a better job than the one I had made. The slightly offset stereo photos were intended to create a spatial image in the viewer's head when they were reassembled with the appropriate viewing device. It was a technical construction that attempted to reproduce what was there but more vividly, while at the same time creating another layer of reality.

HCD_This viewing apparatus that allows the offset stereo images to be combined in the viewer's mind, how come you didn't use it for the video recordings transposed to paintings?

As a painter, I was interested in the paradigm shift at the end of the 19th century, the moment in art history when the pointillists began to paint pictures whose color effect only emerges in the mind. This was a major step in the history of painting, towards a picture that first materializes in the eye of the beholder and engages them as an active voyeur.

HCD_Many of the technological developments at the beginning of the 21st century were much more regressive in comparison. The voyeur, in charge of forming their own image, was once again disempowered, deprived of agency in the face of ready-made suggestions.

Which is why I don't supply the device used to recombine the offset stereo image. Viewers have to construct this tool themselves, so to speak. At first, I took pleasure in the incomplete suggestions depicting their own reality. Beneath this joy of pictures where the spatial element fades in the fissure of displacement, the stereo images were intriguing to me along the lines of a much older aspect of painting – the central perspective of the painter as observer, whose point of view defines the picture.

HCD_Why did this artistic innovation from the Renaissance become relevant to you as an artist working in 2005?

In the years before, I translated television images into painting through a series of manipulations. This transfer into another medium involved a technical where I connected myself to various machines, serving as both the initiator and observer of this transformation.

HCD_In German, “to translate” (übersetzen) also means to ferry across from one shore to another.

This ambiguity, the different worlds on the two sides of a river, can be taken literally in this case. Image production occurs at a completely different velocity in painting than in television. The flood of television images surging in the 1990s was fascinating, but also frightening, precisely because of its speed. At the same time, I wanted to undermine the myth of painting, the assertion that there is someone who alone wields the brush. That’s why I built a machine to take the place of the painter, whose point of view in relation to the central perspective defines the image. It was supposed to produce something that has a lot to do with pointillism by transforming shimmering dots into a material image. The information contained in a TV image is rendered visible via cathode ray, firing thousands upon thousands of tiny dots onto the screen. Many artists tried to capture this fleeting information, characterized by its constant disappearance and replacement with other constellations of rays, by taking photos of screens. But I thought this was too unrefined. At that time, the first programs were released that made it possible to digitalize the on-screen flurry of light at a certain moment and fix it in place. I could capture the fleeting specter of the television image as a mathematical snapshot of a moment – zeros and ones – which, in turn, I could translate it into painting.

HCD_Just listening to you explain it really paints a picture of how much effort must’ve gone into inventing and setting up this contraption to catch a quick moment in the flow of images. Your studio still looks like more of a lab than an artist’s space. Did all of this spring from the mind of a researcher tinkering away on a particular problem?

Protractedness doesn’t seem to me all that unusual in the field of painting. It takes place on a completely different temporal level. Perhaps it’s precisely this deliberate pace that gives the paintings a renewed relevance today.

HCD_Why would this slowing down of the ephemeral be relevant right now?

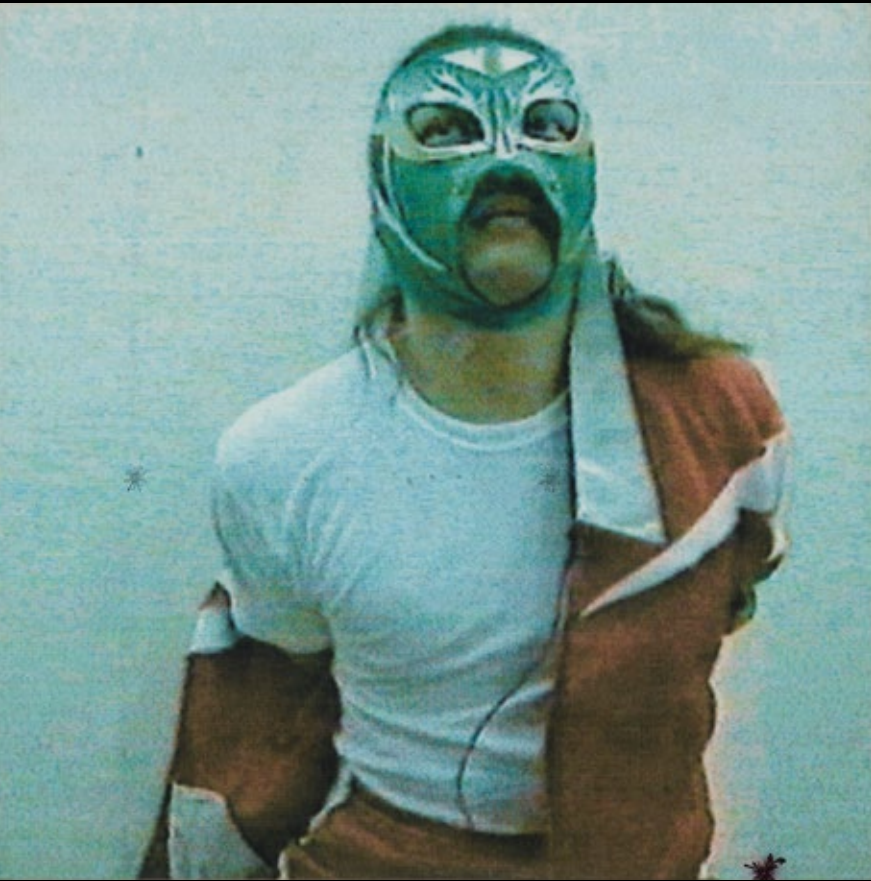
The younger generation is no longer familiar with the shock of television airwaves. The speed of images has become so commonplace that someone who takes the edge off this normalcy by slowing it down attains an astonishing aura. This is so deviant a behavior that it can even be felt through Instagram, currently the dominant channel of image dissemination. The threat that was still associated with the shockwaves of television at the time the works were created has faded from the images. Television is no longer threatening today; people watch it, if they watch it at all in a hotel, as a nostalgic memento of a bygone era. But in the paintings, it’s transformed into a return to the future, because the images give an idea of what can be done with technical images in the future.

HCD_Does this also touch on another anachronism of your work, tinkering? Which has also gone somewhat out of fashion, as today’s technologies appear to be so self-contained because of their modular nature and micro-scale fabrication. Hardly anyone tinkers with their devices anymore.

I learned a lot about accessing the inner workings of machines from the punk mechanic who was helping me out. I still think tinkering is a productive path in art, because in art, whatever I build only has to work for myself; it doesn’t have to be perfect.

HCD_Was punk your first access to the wider world?

No, I grew up in a small town, Münster, where everything happened a bit delayed. It was still the hippie era there, but there was also a disrespectfulness for the older generation, who had been traumatized by fascism in Germany. That’s why it seemed impossible for us to do things according to their rules, which also applied to technology.



ABOVE:
UNTITLED, 1992
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
95 X 95 CM

BELOW:
L0395, 1995
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
95 X 95 CM

HCD_Using devices against the user manual sounds like hacking.

It was still more of a gray area. Back in the late eighties, many things still didn't come with operating instructions. People just did things the way they thought would work. There were also none of the restrictions that we see everywhere when it comes to technology today. And not least, it was much more common back then to write programs yourself. If it didn't exist, you had to build it yourself, and you went about this like more of a tinkerer than an engineer. Trial and error until it somehow worked the way you wanted.

HCD_In what context did you find yourself building your first machines?

Alternative counterculture. There were artists there too, but it was mainly an open field. And the particularly experimental branch proved to be only partially compatible with professionalism, but also with art. Before the Internet, people had to rely on informal channels of counterculture to access new tendencies. These structures hardly exist today since most things are at one's fingertips online.

HCD_The first time I saw an exhibition of yours, I thought you were a Gerhard Richter student trying out something different.

I actually saw a Richter show very early on and that was a very important experience. But I wasn't part of those circles. I started going to galleries when I moved to Cologne in 1989. When I saw General Idea or Jeff Koons, those were epiphanies to me. But Robert Filliou, the Fluxus artist, was perhaps even more important, even if you couldn't tell from my work. I was working on abstract paintings at the time, but they were still pre-machine-made. Different experiments with photography then led to the painting machine.

HCD_In a way, it was appropriation art, because it was based on a consumer product that you misappropriated as a painting machine.

Actually, it was a toy. The Fischertechnik company had launched a mini plotter for teenagers keen about technology and this became one of two components for my device. The other was an interface that could convert video signals into digital code, a video grabber. The experimental setup didn't earn me much credit from serious painters at first.

HCD_Living a double life as a part-time pharmacist meant you weren't in such a hurry for recognition, you simply had plenty of time. Now, almost thirty years later, your paintings have been discovered by a much younger generation. Do you ever wonder what it is about your paintings that appeals to them?

Not really. I think age plays a different role today. Younger people don't have to distance themselves to the same extent as previous generations. The reaction is also extremely affective and therefore contemporary. It's basically: I like these pictures. People hardly ever ask how old they are. There is something similar in music, where old songs can suddenly rise to the top ten on streaming sites. But it's usually only younger people who are really enthusiastic about my paintings, older people remain skeptical about what they actually are. I don't have an explanation as to why this is, someone else will have to explain it to me.

HCD_The exhibition in London has a somewhat gloomy title, phantoms all around me.

It's a misread line from a song. But it's also the phantoms of the past that lurk in the houses shown in the paintings. The phantoms' memories are held together by the houses.

HCD_These phantoms, looming from all directions, provoke an insight: You're constructing a hybrid of painter and machine, a third person, a cyborg. And in turn you're watching it as a non-cyborg, as a voyeur of yourself, so to speak.

I have ceramic in my knee and could also go on about the lenses I rely on, but I know what you mean. It's a hybrid of myself as a painter and the calculating machine that assists the painter. The numbers in particular, the mathematical nature of the zeros and ones of the digital code, blur the distinction – what is painted by the human and what by the machine.

HCD_But doesn't the construction of this hybrid – the division of yourself into the artist Groebel and the painting machine Groebel constructed by you – also allow you to assume the role of a voyeur of yourself? You are watching a model of yourself.

I would expand on that a little: you see something of me, but also something else, this apparent duplication of myself into a machine that could be me, but which, strictly speaking, is only a partial displacement of my possible self into the mathematical. This slightly offset self, almost a stereo image, creates a model for many duplications – a doppelganger casting doubt on the original, which is always just a hypothesis, always already in the process of vanishing.



UNTITLED, 2003
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
95 X 95 CM



1 You ate

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Matthias Groebel

Ulrik

175 Canal Street, 3rd fl.

September 21, 2023 - November 11, 2023

By Madeline Casteel

October 11, 2023 2:36 pm



Late one night in Cologne circa 1989, Matthias Groebel had his television on mute in his home—it was in this moment that he found the images that would come to occupy his paintings. At Ulrik, a selection of these haunting works are on view—the artist’s first New York exhibition in twenty years. For these pieces, Groebel eschewed depicting celebrities or recognizable figures, opting for anonymous characters, rendered in grainy detail, from low-budget broadcast programs instead. For instance, *Untitled (156)*, 1995, shows a man, hair slicked into a ponytail and (presumably) naked, save for a gold chain. He appears to be wincing, but the expression on his face is indecipherable—it could be ecstasy, or even pain. The words BIRD MAN and a circular fluorescent light linger over his shoulder. To make the works in this presentation, Groebel input TV footage into Deluxe Paint, an editing software that can be programmed to separate an image into layers based on traditional painting techniques. He then processed this information into a machine of his own design fitted with airbrush dispensers to sequentially build his one-meter-square canvases. Television allowed for Groebel to access all manner of subcultural detritus, guided by an impulse to hold onto something fleeting: a form of memory that lasts only briefly.

A group of later works here, based on photographs taken by Groebel himself, continue the artist’s granulated, low-resolution language. In *Untitled (061)*, 2003, a shirtless musician is adumbrated by a greenish glow, his sweat palpable via glistening pixelated dabs of paint. Even though his “hand” is mitigated by the machine, Groebel’s presence is felt everywhere. A lurking familiarity pervades *Untitled (176)*, 2002, which is based on a picture that was taken near the gallery, but two decades prior. Pinkish-gray fish rendered with a lifeless sheen are amassed in a plastic container—a yellow price tag reading 1.99, written in faded black Sharpie, is wedged into the composition’s right-hand corner. The work funnels us back into a slippage of ordinary memory; it reflects our own accumulation of images, ingested yet forgotten.

MATTHIAS GROEBEL

Matthias Groebel produced, since 1989, hundreds of computer assisted paintings with a machine he created: a life working out of the spotlight. Today, his art found a renewed resonance to the epoch.

Matthias Groebel a produit, depuis 1989, des centaines de peintures assistées par ordinateur au moyen d'une machine qu'il a créée : une vie à travailler loin des projecteurs. Aujourd'hui, son art trouve une nouvelle résonance à l'époque.



Could we see the machine? It was broken right and now it's working again?

Almost. I have to admit that the airbrush is not installed. In general this thing works. You can see the little thing that controls the airbrush. As we stand in front of the machine activating the mechanism, MG comments the movement of an airbrush kixed to a moving metal arm:

So this points at the canvas. The basic construction is from the old days.

I have recently replaced all the motors and of course electronics are different now, with new programming so that's what's going on. Is there a software behind the machine ? Yeah, at the beginning the first computer I bought to control this thing didn't have a hard drive, you know. The operating system worked from floppy disk and it was a very basic machine. Now it's more sophisticated?

A lot of things have become much easier over the years. The system does all the planning on the computer and you push it through the microprocessor and then it controls the machine. Within this kind of work you always have a timeframe for something. In the beginning the computer was a computer and the program was controlling the computer to perfectly find the control of the motor that needs a certain rhythm. Then you have a multitasking system. This kind of rhythm would be interrupted by the computer itself like “ did someone send an email ? no let's go”. Deadly for controlling real life. After that I had to rebuild the system adapting to the new situation and this microprocessor controlling the motor thing. Things that were easy in the beginning became complicated in the middle and became easy again. it's shifting all the time, you are adapting to technology.

It has been working for quite a time?

?? The whole thing was constructed based on the resolution of the TV Screen that was fixed for decades : every TV screen was the same That was a while ago and i had these points ranged the size of the canvas based on that resolution. The moment that high resolution tv came in, it became high res 4k, dzzzooom: you couldn't do that anymore. And at the same time you had these high resolution printers availables. When I started there was one in London that could apply color on canvas. You could

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Have you tried?

One of my friend was in the staff and I thought my machine was cooler and cheaper.

When was it?

Late 80's. I haven't done a deep research about it.

How does it feel now that it's working again?

Pretty good, haha. I mean it was always a

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When was it?

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How does it feel now that it's working again?

Pretty good, haha. I mean it was always a tool and as a matter of fact you don't start something like that if you don't like technology. I worked with somebody who was really good with mechanics for the construction. You see (pointing at the machine): these are parts of a bicycle . I also worked with somebody who could work with metal. They were like “you will never get the mechanics to work” I said shut up and you do what you can, haha. And I had studied a bit of programming at university so it was based on a toy for children. like an operating pen over a piece of paper that was for a 6 years old. And the idea to make it bigger and to replace the pen with the airbrush and to put it in front of the canvas didn't sound like a big problem. It took me two years to build it. It worked, in a sense. I didn't need to apply for a rent or something. I could do it with the help of friends and using the leftovers toys or stuff; i never bought high end machines for anything. Where did you find the parts?

We actually went to the stretch places and

tool and as a matter of fact you don't start something like that if you don't like technology. I worked with somebody who was really good apply to it and you can only do one color at a time.

You can choose the color yourself and mix them the way you want?

What I use is acrylic pigmented color and it's a very classical way of painting in a way. One layer on top of the other.

How long does it take for a square painting (???)?

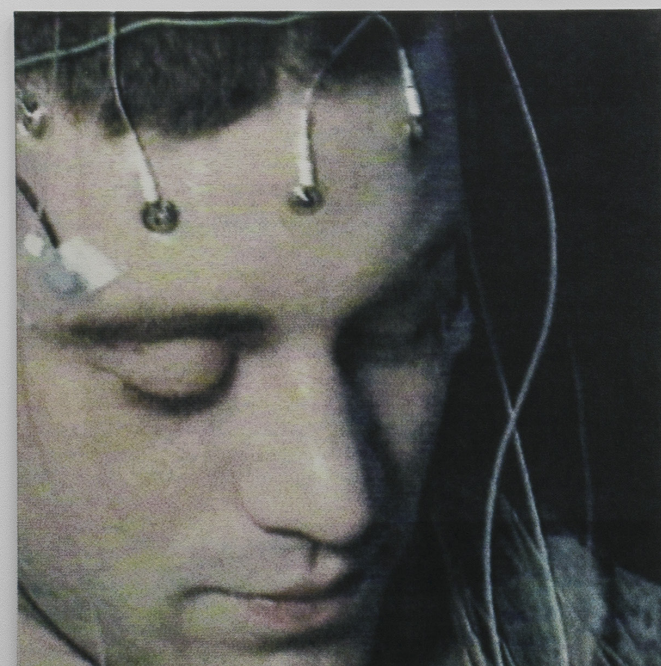
A square painting is almost a week. One layer of color was like 10 to 12 hours then you have to take it apart, clean it, mix the next color and start over again.

I guess you are not watching it the entire time? At that time I was actually living in the place and I could tell when it would stop at night: I woke up and knew something was wrong.

You can't work horizontally because of the airbrush. Does it add some theatricalisation to the creation process?

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The machine is genuinely operating an airbrush?

Yes. You have three things you can control: how wide you open the airbrush like shhh or s, how long you open it and the distance to the canvas. For every shade of gray you have a set of numbers: that distance, that kind of opening for that time. And these are the set of data you can apply to it and you can only do one color at a time.

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So you did not shape an aesthetic on purpose?

No, that really happened in the process.

Still, we could see it as an artwork itself.

I was constantly working the machines; it'd be modifying, repairing. That's an ongoing thing. It has always been integrated in my personal practice of making art. There is a major difference than all the guys these days who have a production process that they pay for and give it out to. It's totally legitimate but it was not what I wanted. My obsession was controlling everything in the process, driving myself a bit crazy sometimes.

I guess at the beginning there was a TV somewhere and that the TV was plugged to the machine ?

To get the TV and the image was the other part of the original setup. There was one of these cards that you could put into the computer like you open the thing up and there are these slots where you can put in a specific electronic card for several purposes. And I somehow learned that there was something that could convert it into a digital image, a pixel image. That was apart from the toy, the other part that I needed. At the same time what you needed was a still

image. Over the years this became a totally different thing because that TV was analog and when it became digital it was a different thing again and yet you had to convert it.

How long has it been working again?

I didn't use it for a while and then I saw it was a waste of a beautiful thing. I wanted it to work again. It turned out that one of the big motors we got from scratch in the late 80's was ruined and there was no replacement for that. This will be a big makeover.

The relationship with you and the machine and your art. Did you feel like you were working on your art when you were repairing and making the machine ?

In the beginning it was a very conceptual idea. I had no idea what it would look like and there was nothing to compare it to. When the first images came out I was like "I'm not sure I like it". But that is also an important element because

I didn't go for a specific aesthetic it developed out of the process.

The process of making the image is so different from, let's say, you have something in Photo-shop and you want to print it. You give it out to a printer and do a colorproof, it's all perfect, it's all fine. With this machine I wasn't really able to do the same painting twice.

Impossible. There were always differences. I tried. The needle in the airbrush was adjusted differently, a bit more yellow... The only way to create identical paintings was to put two canvases in there at the same time to do identical images at the same time.

Does the painting process change the image?

I mean even if you watch the same program on different TV screens the color is never the same. The color of a TV screen, especially on the tube, is totally different from a painting. And the impression of the painting is something I developed out of the process. Like at some point I said "it should have a little bit more red in the upper left corner". Then I would go to the computer. Make one set of data with a little bit of red for the upper corner and then put red in the airbrush and do some red.

Why do you use linen canvases?

I was already working as an abstract painter at the time and I was actually using the same kind of square format. I came in with these stretchers and material so I basically built the machine around my format.

The format didn't come from the TV?

Obviously not. It came out of my painting practice and, you know, for a painter it's usual-

ly landscape or portrait and then you have the fucking square. The square for composition is always tricky and I always liked that.

So you were doing abstract painting before?

It was abstract and also photography on canvas.

Then at some point this thing developed a life of its own and consumed every other activity.

What got you into making art back then?

I made a decision very early when I was still at school between becoming an archeologist or an artist. And I had a vague idea that an artist would work more for the future. This was what I wanted even though I had no idea what it meant. ahah

Then you've done pharmacy studies right?

Yes. Turned out to be a perfect ally because as a pharmacist you can work any hours you want to. As an architect for example, if the house is in the process of building you have to be there full time. As a pharmacist you sell your pills and you leave it to somebody else to sell in the afternoon.

You have never studied art?

No. First of all I didn't understand how the system of studying art functioned. When I took a closer look I really didn't like the hierarchical structure from these professors and their students. It was after my studies and I was like I'm not doing that, I don't want anybody to tell me what I should do and what I shouldn't do.

And in the 90's you started the computer assisted paintings?

The first painting is from the end of 89.

And you got shows in New-York at that time?

A bit later. I moved to Cologne, I installed the machine and started doing the very first paintings. The machine was under construction and by the end of the year I had it up and running. I started to do those paintings and at the same time I slowly got into contact with people from the arts.

How did you network?

For me it was really difficult to come without a network or a background. I didn't speak the same language as the art scene. In Cologne at the time, I mean, a group of older artists were doing videos. For all these new media people the fact that I was thinking practicing painting was very suspicious. And then you had the painters, these minimal color field painters who

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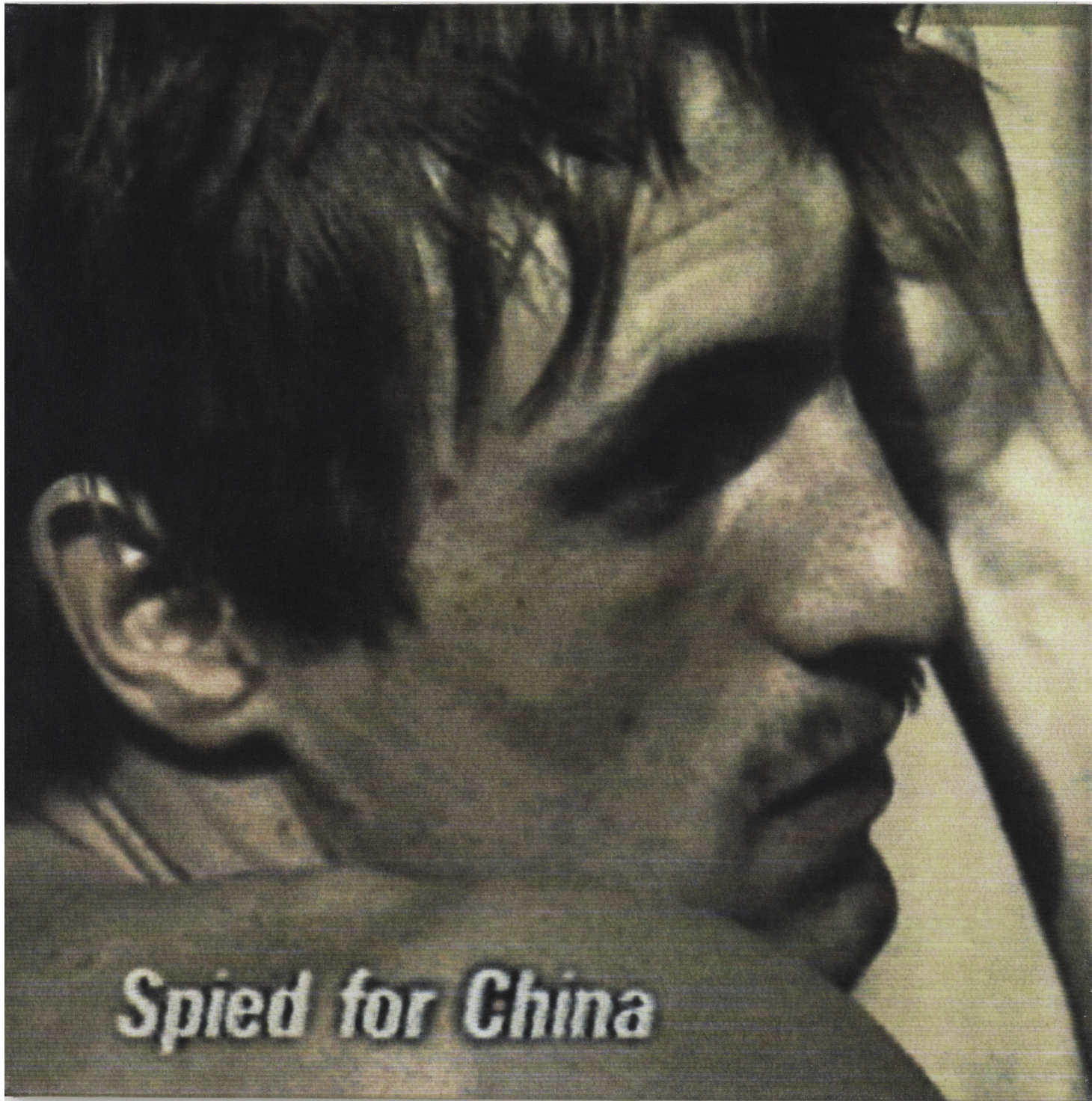
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62, 95x95cm, 1994

were really strong at the time.

To them, I was somebody fooling around with toys.

It was just disgusting. And somewhere you have these Kipenberger guys. So I didn't fit in anywhere at the time and, as a result, I showed my work in a small gallery here. Nothing happened. And then I was represented by the infamous universal concepts unlimited in New York.

Why infamous?

Haha! You know these guys were in the middle of Chelsea at the time. It was the same old Gagosian on the block and we had this ground floor space that they rented from an old Italian guy who had been repairing taxi cabs there and running a gas station forever. They started a gallery and they had some people there in the media field and it was not all wrong. But there were... the drinking habits were a bit out of control to put it mildly.

And it never went anywhere! I had two solo shows in NY. I thought that was fantastic : the New York Times recommended to go and see it for three weeks in a row. Didn't sell anything, nobody picked me up for any curated shows, nothing.

It didn't feel right to you?

I mean for many other artists I had a bit of visibility and nobody was really interested so at some point. I showed with another gallery after that in a group show.

And that was it. When you do something you kinda expect that other people will appreciate what you do, it doesn't always happen. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't.

What about today?

A totally different story. See there was one guy I met in the early days in Cologne who was the head of the museum in Lichtenstein and at some point they were talking about this show TeleGen about art and technology but without video. So I was part of the show with 4 or 5 paintings. There was the artist Andreas Selg who went to the show and was like "wow, this is interesting". So he came up to me and said "I'm an artist. I work with a gallery in Zurich and I want to take one of my slots and not show my own work but yours" Great! Because the result of the museum show had been zero. There were no reviews of the show, there was no press, no nothing, nobody contacted me, it was just like "ok sure, another line in my biography and that's it" and Andreas said let's do that and maybe we can publish a book. Let's see where it goes. He became sick, I broke my leg, corona came and took forever. But they talked to Patrick Frey for a publication and he said we are making a book so that became a

bigger thing. Then we set up that show at Galerie Bernhardt and the moment it opened the doors something changed. Another generation of people - all half my age - were really interested and then all of a sudden Hannes asked me to be in a show with Schiefe Zahne in Berlin, the guys from DREI here in Cologne asked me to do a show with them.

And all of a sudden there was an interest in things that I had done twenty five years ago.

Based on this TeleGen thing. Of course it was the TV images. And that became a very interesting story, I mean, first of all, for me it's like losing control : it is the same paintings, I haven't changed too much on my behavior and something happened out of my control.

Like, the opposite of your behavior with the machine?

Yes, haha. Nonetheless, it's absolutely fascinating. You don't expect things like that to happen, you really don't.

After that you got some more shows.

The major thing was of course the show at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf. Again I learned about the structures and the network of the next generation, all stuff I didn't know and if I talked to people from my age group they normally don't really understand these networks. But that is a generation thing. And let's see how it goes.

Are all the paintings in the book?

No. The book is pretty good indeed at covering the early years because I used roughly television material for ten years including the abstract ones and then I got bored with television and got myself a camera.

When was that shift?

Beginning of the century, in the 2000s.

What were you filming?

I got one of these cheap consumer video cameras that I was carrying where I was going. As a matter of fact I ended up not only doing paintings from the tapes but also doing videotapes.

Now the paintings are based on your camera work?

Roughly: it has been ten years working with television and ten years with video cameras.

How did you choose the TV images?

I mean I was taping the TV and I was taping the world that I was living in.

What draws you into a specific image? Because, I personally think that there is almost an esthetical transgression or misappropriation almost humoristic sometime?

There was a lot of what it was not about. And that goes back to the TV and it is also true for my own tapes. First of all, I didn't want people to recognize what they were looking at. It is specially important if you talk about television stuff because if you have a certain soap opera actor, a politician, everybody would be discussing content which I didn't like so I avoided that. There was another rule: I never used documents of real violence. If I have violent content it's always staged.

So you had rules in your image choosing?

I would turn on the TV and watch one of these programs that I knew would be fulfilling my needs in terms of not. Turn the sound off so as not to get dragged into it and then tape it. And I would turn it off and think about what I remembered and then I would go and look for the remembered images on the tape. Sometimes they were there, sometimes not. That is where photoshop came in hahaha. It was sometimes a reconstruction of remembered images that were not on the tape.

About this choice by the no, does it apply to your camera work?

If you think about it a bit, I was working pretty similarly with my own tapes. Like I have the camera with me and let it run as soon as I get interested and then the resulting image will always have a certain kind of distance to the source. It's not about the content of the source.

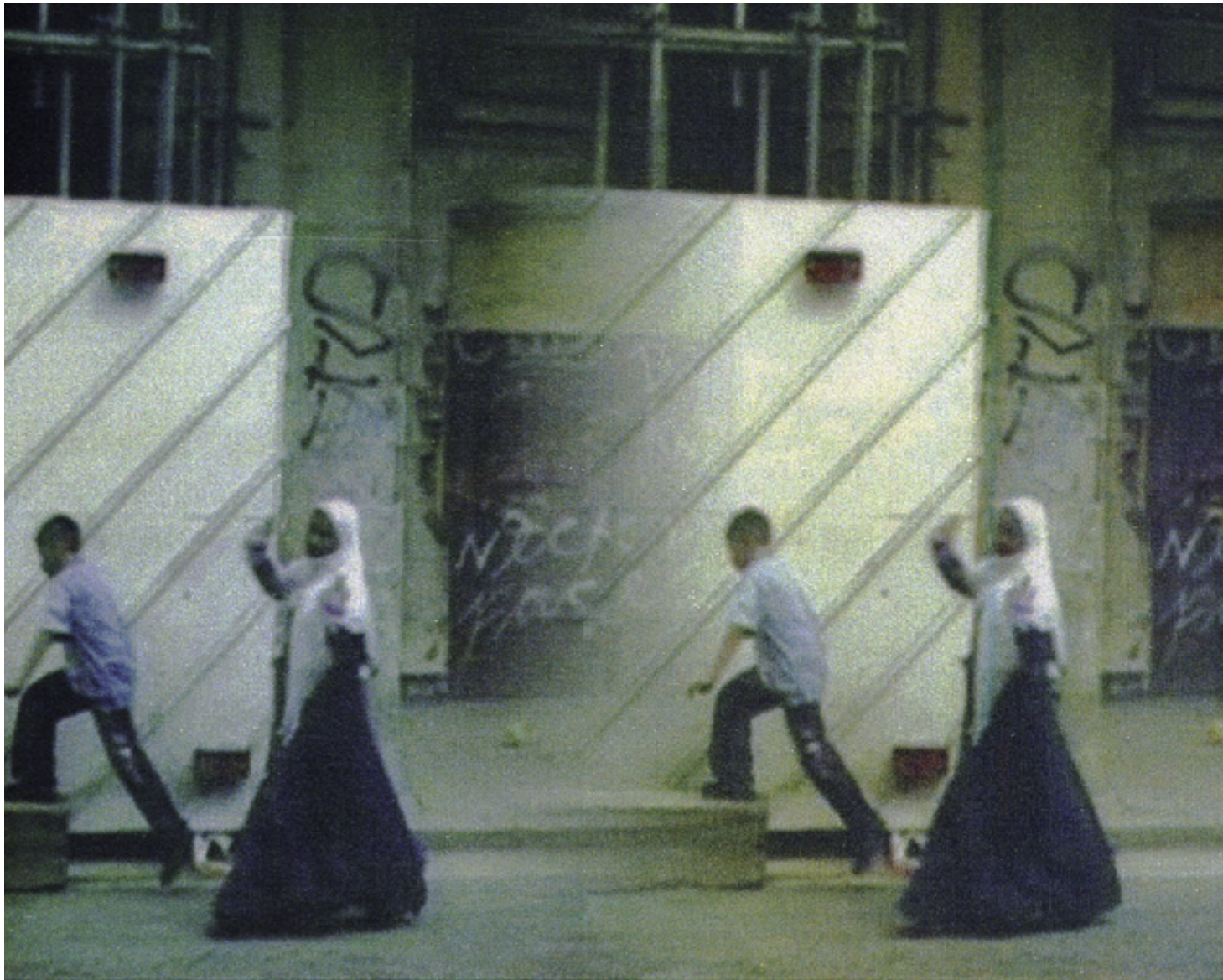
Like with the TV: you wander around until you find something you like?

Yes, something that gets me interested. If you take the decision to put a week of work into a painting, you better choose something that you are interested in. Sometimes, I have made mistakes and I chose boring things, images that I thought were relevant for one reason or the other and was not a good idea.

And I just wanted to say something about the look offscreen of the character. Is it something that you look for?

It is always a certain kind of balance: what gets you interested / what gets me interested. It's not like "Ok I do a painting about a certain content thing" and that was something that was even harder to get across in the old days. People would tell me "you have to define what you are talking about" I said I don't know. That was a certain kind of in between thing that I was interested in and that I was trying to define in a form of a painting.

I really didn't like the idea of making a painting that could be explained.



2/2, 90x110cm, 2006

were really strong at the time.

To them, I was somebody fooling around with toys.

It was just disgusting. And somewhere you have these Kipenberger guys. So I didn't fit in anywhere at the time and, as a result, I showed my work in a small gallery here. Nothing happened. And then I was represented by the infamous universal concepts unlimited in New York.

Why infamous?

Haha! You know these guys were in the middle of Chelsea at the time. It was the same old Gagosian on the block and we had this ground floor space that they rented from an old Italian guy who had been repairing taxi cabs there and running a gas station forever. They started a gallery and they had some people there in the media field and it was not all wrong. But there were... the drinking habits were a bit out of control to put it mildly.

And it never went anywhere! I had two solo shows in NY. I thought that was fantastic : the New York Times recommended to go and see it for three weeks in a row. Didn't sell anything, nobody picked me up for any curated shows, nothing.

It didn't feel right to you?

I mean for many other artists I had a bit of visibility and nobody was really interested so at some point. I showed with another gallery after that in a group show.

And that was it. When you do something you kinda expect that other people will appreciate what you do, it doesn't always happen. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't.

What about today?

A totally different story. See there was one guy I met in the early days in Cologne who was the head of the museum in Lichtenstein and at some point they were talking about this show TeleGen about art and technology but without video. So I was part of the show with 4 or 5 paintings. There was the artist Andreas Selg who went to the show and was like "wow, this is interesting". So he came up to me and said "I'm an artist. I work with a gallery in Zurich and I want to take one of my slots and not show my own work but yours" Great! Because the result of the museum show had been zero. There were no reviews of the show, there was no press, no nothing, nobody contacted me, it was just like "ok sure, another line in my biography and that's it" and Andreas said let's do that and maybe we can publish a book. Let's see where it goes. He became sick, I broke my leg, corona came and took forever. But they talked to Patrick Frey for a publication and he said we are making a book so that became a

bigger thing. Then we set up that show at Galerie Bernhardt and the moment it opened the doors something changed. Another generation of people - all half my age - were really interested and then all of a sudden Hannes asked me to be in a show with Schiefe Zahne in Berlin, the guys from DREI here in Cologne asked me to do a show with them.

And all of a sudden there was an interest in things that I had done twenty five years ago.

Based on this TeleGen thing. Of course it was the TV images. And that became a very interesting story, I mean, first of all, for me it's like losing control : it is the same paintings, I haven't changed too much on my behavior and something happened out of my control.

Like, the opposite of your behavior with the machine?

Yes, haha. Nonetheless, it's absolutely fascinating. You don't expect things like that to happen, you really don't.

After that you got some more shows.

The major thing was of course the show at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf. Again I learned about the structures and the network of the next generation, all stuff I didn't know and if I talked to people from my age group they normally don't really understand these networks. But that is a generation thing. And let's see how it goes.

Are all the paintings in the book?

No. The book is pretty good indeed at covering the early years because I used roughly television material for ten years including the abstract ones and then I got bored with television and got myself a camera.

When was that shift?

Beginning of the century, in the 2000s.

What were you filming?

I got one of these cheap consumer video cameras that I was carrying where I was going. As a matter of fact I ended up not only doing paintings from the tapes but also doing videotapes.

Now the paintings are based on your camera work?

Roughly: it has been ten years working with television and ten years with video cameras.

How did you choose the TV images?

I mean I was taping the TV and I was taping the world that I was living in.

What draws you into a specific image? Because, I personally think that there is almost an esthetical transgression or misappropriation almost humoristic sometime?

There was a lot of what it was not about. And that goes back to the TV and it is also true for my own tapes. First of all, I didn't want people to recognize what they were looking at. It is specially important if you talk about television stuff because if you have a certain soap opera actor, a politician, everybody would be discussing content which I didn't like so I avoided that. There was another rule: I never used documents of real violence. If I have violent content it's always staged.

So you had rules in your image choosing?

I would turn on the TV and watch one of these programs that I knew would be fulfilling my needs in terms of not. Turn the sound off so as not to get dragged into it and then tape it. And I would turn it off and think about what I remembered and then I would go and look for the remembered images on the tape. Sometimes they were there, sometimes not. That is where photoshop came in hahaha. It was sometimes a reconstruction of remembered images that were not on the tape.

About this choice by the no, does it apply to your camera work?

If you think about it a bit, I was working pretty similarly with my own tapes. Like I have the camera with me and let it run as soon as I get interested and then the resulting image will always have a certain kind of distance to the source. It's not about the content of the source.

Like with the TV: you wander around until you find something you like?

Yes, something that gets me interested. If you take the decision to put a week of work into a painting, you better choose something that you are interested in. Sometimes, I have made mistakes and I chose boring things, images that I thought were relevant for one reason or the other and was not a good idea.

And I just wanted to say something about the look offscreen of the character. Is it something that you look for?

It is always a certain kind of balance: what gets you interested / what gets me interested. It's not like "Ok I do a painting about a certain content thing" and that was something that was even harder to get across in the old days. People would tell me "you have to define what you are talking about" I said I don't know. That was a certain kind of in between thing that I was interested in and that I was trying to define in a form of a painting.

I really didn't like the idea of making a painting that could be explained.

Because you knew what you weren’t looking for and not what you were looking for kind of.

That’s a good one, haha.

Before that you were really into TV, watching programs until you found something.

I started working with TV because at that time the private stations became big over here in Germany. I’ve been raised with three black and white channels and that was it. And then all of sudden you had one more channel, one more channel, one more channel and they didn’t have enough material so they bought all the old American soap operas and small production films. These groups of ten people, one was holding the camera, one with the mic and you had the director, they would do whatever to come back with something. They would just shoot, haha.

These were the golden days from my point of view.

Because this kind of like random producing that they were doing was kinda subconscious in a way and that was a very good point for me to adapt and then we had the first satellite and I have no clue till today of who made the selection and what channels would go up there.

I guess you found interesting images to say the least. Were you looking for something in particular ? Sometimes it looks like sex or kinda ..

At that time they would do erotic films at night, they would take hardcore films and then they would cut out all the explicit scenes. It totally damaged whatever movie structure the movie might have had hahah. There is this giant wave of images and we have this TV set in every home so that is really changing the way you look at a painting also and my idea was that painting would become something where you have to find a certain position or mindset to look at it or to appreciate it. You have to come up with so many things you had to do to get into the painting and my idea was that people would probably not do that anymore because they were like consuming all these other images and I wanted to give an answer as a painter in the sense that I was working with images and what I wanted to do with the canvas. To me that made sense as a move. And then most of the time when I was looking for something I could guarantee I would end up with something different

What about the text combination, how did it come about because it looks like subtitles when you look at it for the first time?

It started with images that had subtitles haha and ... I liked that! (smiles) and I started to make separate collections just for subtitles,

haha. I mean as a matter of fact I was working with the tapes doing archives of still images to work with and I had within these archives an archive for subtitles. All the text material is from TV except for the American Beauty series that’s a different story. A friend of mine moved into a flat in London and the guy who had lived there before left a big box of video CDs he bought when he was working in China. These were illegal copies of American films. Somebody would go into the cinema and set up a camera, film it from the seats and make a video CD out of it and they added chinese subtitles. I mean I was always missing the first 5 minutes of the American Beauty film because they didn’t turn on the camera until everybody was sitting and watching. And also for me it was impossible to know what chinese subtitles to translate, hahaha.

When you are adding a sentence do you try to make something happen with the image or is it something random?

It is composition. Nothing is really random.

When the screen image evolved to high resolution, how did it change your aesthetic approach?

When the high resolution kicked in and I was like pfff What’s the point in a machine that made paintings when everybody does these high resolution prints. I went on vacation with a pinhole camera and developed a system of taking pinhole images with a film camera and I did a cyanotype from that and these cyanotypes somehow related to the work of a guy named Ted Serios. Ted Serios was a man who was quite famous in the 60s for his ability to create polaroid images by concentrating mind power. He made it into live magazines, the paper, it was a well documented thing.

He never got caught. I totally loved the story because nobody was talking about the content here. He would get drunk, half naked, put up a perfect performance and all of a sudden you had the image. Sometimes they were just black images and, I mean, it was nonsense of course. Certain elements fit perfectly into what I was thinking when doing those cyanotypes. I set up that man’s facebook account and published for the next ten years new photographs that I made under the name of Ted Serios. Nobody knew it was my work, hahaha.

A : I was thinking backwards about something you said: the way you, as a painter, looked at the TV and for a long time without the sound. It was almost like an education of the painter’s look. You wouldn’t be able to do it today with the new media Insta tv shows netflix etc?

I’m actually not that interested at this moment in this kind of media as a source. From using my own video camera to using the pinhole camera to using the film from the analog camera. There is a constant process of taking pictures. I’m recording the images myself.



173, 100x100cm, 2001

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TEXTE ZUR KUNST

Reviews

BORING PAINTING

JOEL DANILEWITZ ON ULL HOHN AT GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK

June 2, 2023



"Ull Hohn: No Great Mysteries," Greene Naftali, New York, 2023, installation view

For the first time in over ten years, the late German painter Ull Hohn, who had trained at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Gerhard Richter before moving to New York in 1986, is honored with a comprehensive solo show in the United States. "No Great Mysteries" emphasizes Hohn's interest in boredom and the mundane as a potential aesthetic register: while previously unexhibited works of enamel and varnish are reminiscent of amateur decorative ceramics, the landscapes on display deploy techniques suggestive of Richter, yet present boring imagery that evokes the televisually mediated comfort of Bob Ross and his painting. While prior exhibitions of Hohn emphasized his interest in degeneracy and abjection, his recent show at Greene Naftali is, as Joel Danilewitz lays out, a banal journey. The title, too, gives into this mission, promising to be so unsurprising and profane as to exhaust any contrived attempts at profundity.

Greene Naftali's recent exhibition of Ull Hohn's work, "No Great Mysteries," curated by the gallery's senior director Monika Senz, underscores the late German artist's interest in painting as a site of banal pleasure. The show features a suite of untitled feces-like reliefs – eight 20 x 26 in. panels covered in a brown, excremental plaster – as well as a series of five small landscapes referencing American painter Bob Ross, and other untitled works of splatter-enamel that invoke – and complicate – the style of Hohn's contemporaries. Hohn lived with HIV / AIDS, and during his care he made subtle responses to the violently passive, neoliberal culture of the 1980s, which have been shown around the world following his death in 1993. The selection at Greene Naftali by necessity reiterates aspects of earlier Hohn shows at Albus Greenspon and American Fine Arts, and a handful of previously unseen works continue to signal his interest in boredom as a potential aesthetic register.

Hohn's landscapes at Greene Naftali illuminate a throughline between the motivations of Gerhard Richter and Bob Ross, contrasting the former – the father figure of neo-expressionist art – with the latter – contemporary painting's beloved yet estranged uncle. Hohn's 1993 *Untitled* series highlights notions of taste by pairing Richter with Ross, who is a celebrated emblem of "lowbrow" American genre painting. Ross's televised landscape painting demonstrations gained huge audiences who could appreciate their accessibility and his comforting presence. Whether out of boredom or obsession, Hohn braids these two styles in his work throughout the show, foreclosing the audience's pursuit of rigid taste through scandalously mundane, terrestrial scenery.

For a 1993 solo exhibit at Colin de Land's gallery American Fine Arts (AFA), Hohn himself had commented on Ross's pedagogy and provided a further appropriation of Ross's philosophy, citing a quotation from him: "There are no great mysteries to painting. You only need the desire to paint, a few basic techniques, and a little practice." [1] Hohn conflated Ross's demonstrations with what was expected of high art at the time, through smudges and smears, deploying aspects of Richter's quotidian facture in provocatively conventional settings such as a remote cabin or a gentle stream. *Untitled* (1992/93) is a 16 x 18 in. generic depiction of a snowy mountain, its peak gently emerging from a rosy haze. It reminds one of Ross's "majestic mountains" with its sloping, alpine-dotted bends and curves. Instead of foregrounding the scene in verdant grass, like Ross would, Hohn effaces the mountain's setting in a white, pinkish abstraction. And where Ross's details sought to emulate nature itself, Hohn deploys Richter's palette knife technique, with its scrapes and smears redistributing the mountain snow. Though Richter has his own set of landscapes, for instance his chilly 1968–69 *Corsica* works, Hohn's inclusion of Richter's technique is more reminiscent of Richter's *Wald* series from 1990 with its horizontal trails of colors. Hohn's depiction of the wild is less the pastoral and austere romance of Richter's scenes and more the rugged, lumbersexual succor of Ross's. However, Hohn inscribed the pictures with allusions to the institutional stalwarts of contemporary painting to blur the distinction between Ross's and Richter's respective motivations. Hohn differentiates himself from these two artists by appearing lethargic in the face of beauty. This attitude can be read in his commitment to depicting subjects perceived as passé in art, such as natural landscapes.

While received art historical paradigms relegate the languid, prosaic works of Ross to kitsch, Hohn's renderings of the Russian landscape amplify their strange ambience, a quality closely connected to the visual culture of broadcast television. The relationship between broadcast TV, painting, and technology's interruptive possibilities can be seen in the work of Hohn's contemporary, the German painter Matthias Groebel, who, in his *Painted Faces* series made throughout the 1990s, evokes television's ability to generate mysticism through ambient imagery. Contrasted with Groebel's interest in the bracketing of vision through media consumption habits, the works at Greene Naftali inspire reverence toward nature, in both its sublimity and its decay. In appropriating Ross, Hohn folds into his appropriation all of the televisually mediated images of Ross: his painting practice, detailed process shots, and closely filmed images of his brush cascading across a canvas, as well as Ross's own appearance, mode of dress, and distinctive voice. They're campy, too, implicit with the marriage of "low" and "high" art. Hohn's landscapes also point to the changing habits of viewing art and painting in a world marked by technologies of recreation. More than two centuries ago, Friedrich Schiller described the artist's changing relationship to nature as a loss: "nature with us has disappeared from humanity and we encounter it again in its truth only outside this, in the inanimate world." [2] Schiller believes that unifying with nature is now an impossibility as humans have delineated a world separate from the natural environment. The democratization of leisure time that resulted from industrialization brought with it ennui and listlessness. This retreat from nature yielded a "contemporary terror of boredom" as literary studies scholar Elizabeth S. Goodstein

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writes, which "is saturated with the post-Romantic resignation to a world in which neither work nor leisure can bring happiness to subjects who no longer hope for divine restitution." [3]

In the exhibition, the "contemporary terror of boredom" comes to its most perplexing manifestation in the eight small feces-like reliefs, their brown plaster resembling sewage and excrement affixed to wooden boards yet hung with a carefulness that is facetious given their content. Hohn's elegant presentation is a sheer veil, exposing the suppressed anxieties of the 1980s regarding HIV / AIDS by public institutions and by the straight consciousness, who submerged its fears through deliberate ignorance, changing the channel when forced to watch millions die throughout the ongoing AIDS crisis. How was this public responsible for a contemporary supposition that art must shun the Real rather than confront it? During the 1980s, the often-invoked "general population" and the United States government under the Reagan regime equated homosexuality with disease. AIDS is "the contemporary moment in a much longer history, the [...] complex interweaving of medicine and morality with surveillance and regulation [...] of sex." [4] Psycho-social fears about anality and homosexuality thus became public policy, as 60 percent of employers by 1989 were forcing pre-employment HIV-testing on potential hires, a practice that in some places still continues today, making them urinate or draw blood to prove their lack of HIV. Lawmakers, both in the States and Germany, also proposed submitting gay people to quarantines. [5] This treatment of sexuality and disease as entwined persists today. Hohn's panels evoke the historical desire of the dominant classes to ignore debility and disease through apparent order. Despite the evident scatological elements in this work, there is also something appealing about it, too, even chocolatey. Hohn questions our instinctive repulsion, and perhaps admires it as a particular aesthetic mode.

Previously unseen works of enamel and varnish on display further edify his intentions. For example, the untitled splatter painting on wood from 1987 is uneasy, gesturing toward painterly tropes with its coagulated swirls of green, white, brown, and cadmium red, which orbit a white semisphere. Glazes and bulbs make these works look like pottery, disguising the wood foundation with assiduous technique. They're notably installed on shelves rather than hung, a framing device that marks a degraded objecthood (apart from the elevated wall-mounted status of painting). Reminiscent of amateur decorative ceramics of the "paint your own pottery" trend that took off in the 1980s, they are also somehow these disagreeable objects, conjuring kitsch inflected by the finesse of Meret Oppenheim – with her uncanny adornment of objects that parody the absence of utility as a betrayal of function.

The exhibition continues the arc of earlier presentations of Hohn's work in its foregrounding of the artist's interest in contemporary hierarchies of aesthetics, encouraging the audience to express doubt in modern painting and culture more broadly. While prior exhibitions at Greenspon and AFA emphasized his interest in degeneracy and abjection with his fecal reliefs and umber abstractions, "No Great Mysteries" at Greene Naftali, with the addition of previously unseen ceramic-like works, is a more banal journey than previous iterations. The title gives into this mission, promising to be so unsurprising and plaintive as to exhaust any contrived attempts at profundity. But Hohn's technical acumen elevates his subjects beyond triteness. Emergent is a dialectic of painting pursuant to a refinement of craft that simultaneously repudiates established notions of taste, resulting in an evocative blend of populist style and genteel sensibility.

"Ull Hohn: No Great Mysteries," Greene Naftali, New York, March 24–April 29, 2023.

Joel Danilewitz works for the *Brooklyn Rail*. He lives in New York.

Image credit: Courtesy of the Estate of Ull Hohn and Galerie Neu, Berlin; photos: Zeshan Ahmed / Greene Naftali, New York

NOTES

- [1] "Ull Hohn: No Great Mysteries," exh. press release, Greene Naftali, www.greenenaftaligallery.com/exhibitions/ull-hohn-no-great-mysteries.
- [2] Friedrich Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," in *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Continuum, New York, 1998), 204–7.
- [3] Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 2008.
- [4] Frank Mort, "Introduction," in *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.
- [5] Mark Kaplan, "AIDS and the Psycho-Social Disciplines: The Social Control of 'Dangerous' Behavior," in "Challenging the Therapeutic State: Critical Perspectives on Psychiatry and the Mental Health System," special issue, *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 11, no. 3/4 (Summer and Autumn, 1990): 337–351, at 343.

The Preserving Machine of Matthias Groebel

BY [STERRE BARENTSEN](#) · [REVIEWS](#) · [MARCH 9, 2023](#)



Matthias Groebel, "Lo895" (1995), "Lo793" (1993). Installation view of *A Change in Weather* (Broadcast Material 1989–2001), Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022. Photo: Cedric Mussano.



Matthias Groebel, *A Change in Weather* (Broadcast Material 1989–2001), 2022 (installation view). Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Photo: Cedric Mussano.

In 1980s West Germany, when public-access channels first began streaming into living rooms, Matthias Groebel started building a painting machine to compete with the captivating powers of a pixelated image. His story feels like something out of science fiction. With the help of his self-made machine, Groebel reroutes the faces in his paintings—each with their own depraved, clinical, and sexual undertones—straight from the TV screen to the canvas. At the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen in Düsseldorf, Groebel’s exhibition *A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989–2001)* featured his motley cast of portraits. Rooted in the gritty world of cyberpunk, Groebel’s paintings explore both the pixelated, blue-tinged aesthetics and the flood of random and “poor” images that accompanied new media’s rise.

Groebel began making art as an autodidact in the early 1980s. A pharmacist by day, he ferreted through electronic scrapyards in his free time and created his painting machine by modifying a children’s Fischertechnik construction set with airbrush pens, windscreen wipers, and bike chains. The machine moves a robotic airbrush smoothly and systematically, row by row, over a canvas, spraying dots of color onto its surface, resulting in portraits that look as if Georges Seurat were working in a depraved cyberpunk technoscape. The faces in Groebel’s Düsseldorf show included a woman with frizzy blond hair sucking the dirt from under her pinky nail; a smirking man, rendered in sepia-blue tones, a vein protruding from his forehead; and a man wearing a blue, collared shirt and a pig mask. It’s as if a director off-screen is telling these figures never to look at the camera: no one meets our eye.

Toward the end of the eighties, Groebel, who was born in Aachen, appeared in Cologne on the tails of an influx of German artists and gallerists. In 1983 alone, artist Gerhard Richter moved to Cologne, dealer Max Hetzler relocated his gallery there from Stuttgart, and Monika Sprüth opened her first gallery in the city. As the decade progressed, more artists and gallerists arrived, contributing to the unprecedented growth of the local contemporary-art market. When Groebel arrived, his painting machine in hand, he found himself in an art capital that was, at the time, second only to New York City. Groebel, more connected to the computer subculture, was at odds with the gestural abstract painters who were dominating Cologne, but that doesn’t mean his figurative paintings should be considered in isolation from the scene. According to a *New York Times* [review](#) of his 2002 solo show

at the UCU gallery in New York, Groebel's work "has a bleak, airless quality that calls to mind Gerhard Richter." Groebel also had an important predecessor in K. O. Götz, a painter and professor of art at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, who, despite being known for his explosive gestural forms, was also one of the first to experiment with painting electronic images. In a series of grid works from the early 1960s, such as *Density 10: 3: 2: 1* (1961), Götz divided his canvas into thousands of small fields in order to imitate the pixels of a TV screen. While Götz's initial experiments in media art were rooted in furthering the formal possibilities of abstraction, Groebel, working twenty years later, was operating in a very different media environment. Even if his methods overlapped with his peers and predecessors, his motivations also diverged.

Until the 1980s, the average German TV viewer could choose between a maximum of three state-owned channels. But by the end of the decade, West Germans had access to dozens of channels that played all day and all night, seven days a week. With this expansion, a host of low-budget soap operas and game shows were made to fill up the hours of viewing time. Groebel spent his evenings rummaging through obscure TV channels and odd programs. A new tool that could convert analogue wave signals to pixels became a central component in this painting machine. It allowed him to gather faces from television images and feed them into his painting contraption. The curation of *A Change in Weather* attempted to mimic the lure, entrapment, and repetition of a television box, by inviting viewers to move in front of and behind floating walls installed in the gallery. It felt as if we, too, were hysterically changing channels and filling our retinas with rapidly moving images.

In the exhibition catalogue, cocurator Andreas Selg compares Groebel's work to "literature, especially sci-fi and cyberpunk stories of invention and reconfiguration." I would argue that Groebel's machine finds an especially apt counterpart in science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick's 1969 short story "The Preserving Machine." Its protagonist, Doc Labyrinth, worries about the fate of culture in the case of an apocalypse, so he builds a machine that turns classical compositions into animals. He releases the slender Mozart bird, the silly Schubert sheep, and the round Bach bugs into nature, only to discover that, with time, their bodies metamorphosize to grow claws and stingers. Likewise, Groebel gathers bits of media culture into a machine only to later find them deformed. His 1993 portrait *L0593* shows a woman against a light-blue background dolefully gazing into the distance. It is an

image we have seen before. It recalls a familiar cinematic trope: Camera A zooms in. A beautiful woman watches her lover depart. She realizes maybe she does love him; she understands it is already too late. But we don't recognize this woman in Groebel's painting. She is an actress, but not a celebrity. Her hair is flat, her fringe badly cut, and she has eye bags made worse by an unflattering light that casts large shadows on her face. She is the degenerate, soap-opera version of the big-screen love story.



Matthias Groebel, *A Change in Weather* (Broadcast Material 1989-2001), 2022
(installation view). Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Photo:
Cedric Mussano.



Matthias Groebel, *A Change in Weather* (Broadcast Material 1989-2001), 2022
(installation view). Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Photo:
Cedric Mussano.

Groebel is attracted to the simultaneous interplay of voyeurism and fantasy that takes place on the TV screen. The words *PRIVATE PLACE* are inserted into the painting *L0793*, which depicts a man lying down. Captured from below, his foreshortened face consists mostly of chin, nostrils, and brow bone. Is it a sex scene? Is he even alive? It is hard to tell from his wide-open eyes that are frozen in place as they look to the ceiling. The sexual undertones of many of Groebel's paintings enhance a feeling of an inappropriate, or even perverse, voyeurism. These forbidden glimpses are broken by the often nonsensical text that Groebel includes in many of his paintings. Phrases like *Tour Guide* and *Spied for China* offer small snippets of a story line. Although these faces belong to "real" people, by cropping and grouping them together the artist conjures a new world existing on the fringes of our own.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Groebel—who has been painting for over thirty years in relative obscurity—had his first institutional show in 2023, after a string of recent gallery solo shows in Zurich, Cologne, and Berlin. With the rise of apps like Tik Tok, algorithms have developed an unmatched ability to pull us down the rabbit hole and into a stream of

anonymous faces that we swipe through in endless, one-second cycles. Where do all of these faces go after the algorithm has abandoned them? What does this massive data junkyard on the periphery of the internet look like? Matthias Groebel's portraits of people from the outskirts of mainstream television foreshadowed a complex media landscape of strange digital niches that have utopian potential but dystopian ramifications, where outcasts and strays find themselves and each other.

By **Sterre Barentsen**

Sterre Barentsen (b. 1997) is an art historian and curator. She is a PhD candidate at the Humboldt University in Berlin where she is working on an environmental art history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). She holds degrees in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art and Oxford University. She is an assistant curator at the Barberini Museum in Potsdam, and she co-curated the VII Moscow International Biennale of Young Art.

Inmitten der Körpermusik endlich Seelengesang

Camilla Nylund gibt an der Staatsoper Hamburg ein bewegendes Rollendebüt als „Lady Macbeth von Mzensk“ von Dmitri Schostakowitsch.

Unter Rock, befühl mal! Kneif sie! ... Was für ein Euter, das sind mal Euter! So ein zartes Fleisch! Drück, drück. ... Aus solch einem Arsch macht man Frikadellen. Dem einen den Euter, dem andren den Arsch.“ Eine Szene aus dem heutigen russischen Alltag, wie von Irina Rastorgowa in ihrer eigenen Leiderfahrung – „Wo die Gewalt zu Hause ist“ (FAZ vom 28. April 2022) – geschildert?

Nein, die so betextete Vergewaltigung einer Frau durch mehrere Männer ist die zweite Szene aus Dmitri Schostakowitschs Oper „Lady Macbeth von Mzensk“. Der Antwort auf die Frage, wie dies in unserer Zeit gesteigerter Empfindlichkeit noch auf die Bühne gebracht werden kann, ist die aus Russland gebürtige, seit zwanzig Jahren in den USA tätige Filmregisseurin Angelina Nikonova bei ihrer Inszenierung in Hamburg ausgewichen. Die Köchin wird in ein mit Nudeln (oder Sauerkraut?) gefülltes Glas gesteckt. Das Treiben enthemmter Männer gerät zu einer von quälend-fröhlicher Musik unterlegten Posse, die in der Inszenierung an der Hamburgischen Staatsoper ohne Bezug zum Drama bleibt, das als Folge solcher Geschehnisse entsteht. Die Hauptfigur, Katerina Ismailowa, lei-

det unter der Tragödie einer Ehe mit einem liebesunwilligen (unfähigen?) Kaufmann. Sie vergiftet ihren Schwiegervater, der ihren Ehebruch entdeckt hat; ermordet gemeinsam mit ihrem Liebhaber Sergei, der an dem wüsten Treiben beteiligt war, den Ehemann und wird nach Sibirien verbannt. Von Sergei mit einer jüngeren Strafgefangenen betrogen, stößt sie die Rivalin ins Wasser und stürzt hinterher. Dieser in der Novelle von Nikolai Leskow, der literarischen Quelle, nüchtern erzählten Geschichte von Liebe und Verbrechen, Leidenschaft und Mordlust hat Schostakowitsch einen neuen Dreh gegeben. Die Mörderin wird zur tragischen Heldin in der „grauenhaften Umgebung“ der satirisch gezeichneten Kaufmanns- und Krämerwelt.

Die Ambivalenz dieser durch ihre Thematik und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte berühmt-berüchtigten Oper – nach dem Bann durch Stalin: „Chaos statt Musik“ heiliggesprochen – wird von der Regie zum Verschwinden gebracht. Gerade weil sie verstehe, „dass die russische Kultur ein Ziel der Politik geworden ist“, erklärt die Regisseurin, halte sie es für „ein Verbrechen, Politik und Kunst zu vermischen“. Daran hat sie sich, die Handlung szenisch eins zu eins buchstabierend, strikt gehalten und damit alle quälenden Gegenwartsbezüge der „tragisch satirischen Oper“ aufgehoben – etwa die Inszenierung der Vergewaltigungsszene zu der folgenden, in der Katerina von Sergei übermannt wird. Die „Begleitmusik“, an die hundertzwanzig Takte mit wüsten Affektgeräuschen, ist nichts anderes als die akustische Visualisierung eines einvernehmlichen und doch gewaltsamen Beischlafs. Immerhin, für den längst erschafften Reizwert dieser Szene hat die Inszenierung eine ebenso sinnige wie sinnliche Lösung gefunden. Auf einem

heruntergesenkten Spiegel sind die Musiker bei diesem pornophonischen Treiben zu sehen, das mit dem Posaunenglissando als Metapher für das Erschlaffen von Sergejs bestem Teil endet.

Aber es war nicht einmal der Versuch der Regisseurin zu erkennen, eine Entsprechung zu suchen zwischen Ambivalenz der Musiksprache mit ihren Zitatcollagen und dem szenischen Geschehen, gerade dann, wenn der Text durch die Musik konterkariert wird: wenn der Klagesang Katerinas für den von ihr vergifteten Schwiegervater als Heuchelei erkennbar wird; wenn der geile Greis Boris in seinen Lusterinnerungsphrasen Richard Strauss' Ochs von Lerchenau zitiert; wenn die Ermordung des Ehemanns zu einem Galopp vollzogen wird. In Katerinas Gegenwart tummeln sich Klischeefiguren aus dem Arsenal banaler Komödien: der biedere Ehemann Sinowi, der scheinheilige Pope, der aufgeputzte Polizeioffizier, der verwahrloste Bauer. Ebenso bedauerlich, dass die Darsteller ihre Parts auch gesanglich zu Nebenrollen verblasen lassen. Hinzuerfüllt wurde eine neue Rolle: Vor dem vierten Akt tritt ein Priester oder Prediger auf, der sich vor einem Totenkoffer in einer Klageklänge ergeht.

Überzeugend allerdings die Besetzung der zwei männlichen Hauptrollen. Der aus Belarus gebürtige Alexander Roslavets fand die Farben für die Grausamkeit und die Gier des Unholdes Boris. Obwohl von der Regie unterfordert, konnte Dmitry Golovnin in der Partie des Sergejs, der schon in Frankfurt gesungen hat, überzeugen: mit einem dunkel-mattierten, kräftigen Macho-Klang. Leider war auch Camilla Nylund bei ihrem Rollendebüt als Katerina darstellerisch unterfordert, gerade wenn sie in der ersten Szene den Verzweiflungston unerfüllter Sehnsucht finden muss. Ein solcher Ton kann sich jedoch nur aus solchem Fieber entwickeln. Auf schmerzlich-schöne Art aber wurde sie in den lyrisch-artlosen Szenen den Überzeugungen des Komponisten gerecht, „dass in der Oper gesungen werden muss“. Herzbeugend das Adagio im Finalakt – „Tief im Wald liegt ein See“ – als Vorahnung, dass sie durch den Liebesverrat Sergejs zur Verzweiflungsmörderin werden wird.

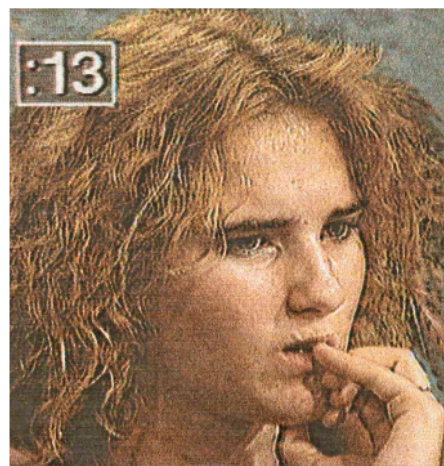
Der Jubel des Abends, durchbrochen von einigen Buhs für den szenischen Platzwitz auch des Bühnenbildes (Varvara Timofeeva), galt dem glänzend disziplinierten Orchester unter dem hochgepannten Kent Nagano. Die vielen steilen Effekte – das Posaunenglissando oder das Todesröcheln der Bassklarinette bei der Ermordung des Sinowi, das instrumentale Rülpsen und Seufzen zur akustischen Visualisierung körperlicher Vorgänge oder Zustände – wurden als virtuose Orchesterkünste vorgeführt und genossen. Offen bleibt, was ein Zeitstück, das ohne Zeitbezug auf die Bühne kommt, uns noch angeht.

JÜRGEN KESTING



Herzbewegend: Camilla Nylund als Katerina Ismailowa.

Foto Monika Rittenbach



Nervöse Kauen an den Nägeln und der Blick der Melancholia als selten zu sehende Pathosformen im Fernsehen: Matthias Groebels TV-Bilder „Ohne Titel“, 1992. Foto Studio Heinz Preite/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023

Eine Malmaschine für die Zeitenwende

Wiederentdeckt: Die Fernseh-Bilder Matthias Groebels im Kunstverein Düsseldorf

Die Vorgeschichte dieser Ausstellung führt zurück in die westfälische Provinz. Ein Autodidakt im Münsterland war in den Achtzigerjahren seiner eigenen, abstrakten Malerei überdrüssig geworden, er fand sie zunehmend belanglos in einer Zeit, da das Fernsehen gerade die Segnungen privater, auch internationaler Sender erfuhr. Phänomene wie Textbild und Sendeschluss sollten alsbald der Vergangenheit angehören, dank Satellitenfernsehen kamen die Privathaushalte in den Genuss entlegener Programme aus fernen Ländern. Die darin ausgestrahlten Bilder interessierten den gelernten Pharmazeuten mehr als die ungenießbarsten Formensprache. Was später einmal Googeln im Internet bedeuten würde, war seinerzeit das Zappen im Fernsehen.

Für die mediale Zeitenwende vor knapp vierzig Jahren entwickelte Matthias Groebel nicht nur ein besonderes Sensorium – mithilfe eines befreundeten Technikfreis auf dem Land erfand er eine Malmaschine, die er bis ins Jahr 2001 rund zweihundert Bilder produzierte. So wuchs ein erstaunliches Konvolut über das Fernsehen heran. Die Schau „A Change in Weather“ im Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen Düsseldorf, benannt nach einem der Werke, kommt einer späten Würdigung des 1958 geborenen Aacheners gleich, wie sie im fortgeschrittenen Lebensalter heute eher Künstlerinnen zuteilwird.

Nachdem er in Köln ansässig geworden war, knüpfte er in der Hochzeit des rheinischen Kunsthandels zwar hier und da einige Kontakte, stellte sogar in einer New Yorker Galerie aus, aber die drängende Zeitgenossenschaft seiner Ideen wollte offenbar niemand so recht erkennen. Es war der Künstler Andreas Selg, der vor einigen Jahren in der Gruppenschau „Telegen“ in Bonn und Liechten-

stein auf Groebel aufmerksam geworden war und ihm zu einer Ausstellung in der New Yorker Galerie Bernhard verhalf. Seitdem werden auch Sammler bei Groebel vorstellend, sein Werk erhält auch diesbezüglich einen Wert.

Seine Apparatur aus Airbrush-Pistole und Scheibenwischer-Motor ging den ersten handelsüblichen Farb-Plottern um einige Zeit voraus, sie ermöglichte es ihm, stehende Fernsehbilder Zeile für Zeile auf die Leinwand zu bringen – als fotorealistische Malerei, die die Aura der Kathodenstrahlröhre wirkungsvoll aufhängt. Groebels Mattscheiben-Asthetik wirkt aus heutiger Perspektive wie Medien-Archäologie. Ohne Warhol wäre sie undenkbar und lässt denn auch spontan an dessen Filme denken, etwa die langen Einstellungen von Leuten aus seiner Entourage oder dem Empire State Building. Zugleich geht sie der Praxis von Künstlern der jüngeren Generation wie Wade Guyton voraus, die mit dem Drucker malen, in seinem Fall abstrakt.

Nicht minder interessant ist die Anordnung, in der Groebel seine Bilder auswählte: Er schaltete ein Programm ein, nahm es auf Video auf, stellte dabei den Ton aus und vertiefte sich bis zu einer Stunde lang ganz in die vorbeiziehenden Bilder. Danach ging er in sich und rief jene Eindrücke ab, die sich ihm besonders eingepägt hatten – in der Mehrzahl Gesichter, die in den quadratischen Bildern als Zufallsporträts erschienen und in ihrer Mimik die emotionale Bandbreite wiedergaben, die man sich in all den Sendungen vom Reality-TV bis zu Doku und Fiction leicht ausmalen kann: Die unbekannten Menschen schauend melodramatisch, aggressiv oder introvertiert, egomanisch, verstört, in irgendeine Aktion verstrickt. Eine Vorgabe setzte

sich der Maschinenmaler kategorisch: Bilder mit Anfängen von Gewalt sollten nur aus Spielfilmen stammen. Dem Kontext entrissen, jeglicher Erzählung und Bedeutung entleert, wirken die Bilder in der Reihe wie Destillate reiner medialer Sichtbarkeit, Augenblicke des Umschaltens, die ihre Story für sich behalten.

Die Düsseldorfer Ausstellung mit ihren gestaffelten Wänden beschränkt sich allein auf Köpfe, die durchaus suggestiv zu einer Porträtgalerie gehängt sind. Neben jenen „Painted Faces“ gibt es aber auch eine kleinere Anzahl verwischter, verackelter Landschaften oder auch von Motiven, die ins Abstrakte abgleiten, als seien Rakel im Stil eines Gerhard Richter über die nasse Farbe gezogen worden. Bei solchen Bildern hatte Groebel verschlüsselte Fernsehprogramme gehackt, was nur mit Störungen gelang. Entstanden sind im Lauf der Jahre auch kleine Bildsequenzen, in denen gestückelte Impressionen wieder assoziativ zusammengesetzt wurden und deren Sinn offenbleibt. Davon hätte man auch gern etwas gesehen.

Dass Groebel nach seinen Arbeiten mit „Broadcast Material 1989–2001“ längere Zeit unter Pseudonym zu Werke ging, hat seinen Ruhm naturgemäß nicht gemehrt: Er setzte nach dessen Tod und unter dessen Namen das Werk der Parafotografen Ted Sero im Internet fort, womit er nach eigenem Bekunden „als Künstler komplett verschwunden war“ – und sich als angestellter Apotheker durchschlug. Inzwischen arbeitet er an einer neuen Maschine, um Bilder zu produzieren.

GEORG IMDAHL

Matthias Groebel: A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989–2001). Kunstverein Düsseldorf, bis 26. Februar. Der Katalog kostet 48 Euro.

Stumme Zeugen der Vernichtung

Im Bundestag erinnern sechzehn Gegenstände an die Verbrechen an Juden

Sechzehn Gegenstände. Sechzehn Punkte auf abgebrochenen Lebenslinien. Sie wären besser unscheinbar geblieben. Nützlich, schön, vergessenswert: eine Handtasche, ein Poesiealbum, ein Stethoskop. Aber im Angesicht der infernalischen Verbrechen Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts wurden diese sechzehn Gegenstände zu anklagenden Zeugen von Misbrauch, Hetze und Mord. Die sechzehn Objekte kommen aus den sechzehn Bundesländern Deutschlands. Nach dem nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen am jüdischen Leben in diesem Land haben sie Zuflucht gefunden in der Sammlung der internationalen Holocaust-Gedenkstätte Yad Vashem, die in diesem Jahr ihr siebzehnjähriges Bestehen begeht. Für eine Ausstellung im Deutschen Bundestag kehren sie nun zum ersten Mal wieder in ihre Heimat zurück. Sie alle gehörten einst einer Familie oder Person, die in diesem Land als unser Nachbar lebte. Und dann wegen einer jüdischen Abstammung oder Assoziation vertrieben, gefoltert, ermordet wurde. Wie Bertha und Jakob Weinschenk aus Winnsbach, die in der Nürnberger Essenerstraße die orthodoxe Synagoge „Adass Israel“ („Gemeinschaft Israel“) mitgründeten und Anfang 1900 zwei „Rimonim“, zwei krönende Aufsätze für eine Thorarolle, stifteten. Als wichtiger Bestandteil des „prächtigen Kleids“ werden diese Kronen auf jene Holzstäbe gesetzt, mit denen die Tora gerollt wird. „Rimonim“ bedeutet wörtlich „Granatapfel“ und erinnert an die granatapfelartigen Glöckchen, die die Hohepriester im Jerusalemer Tempel am Saum ihrer Gewänder trugen. Bertha und Jakob, die ihre Namen in das kostbare Material der Kronen eingravierten ließen, mussten 1938 miterleben, wie ihre Synagoge während der Kristallnacht-Pogrome geplündert und ihre teure „Rimonim“ gestohlen

wurden. Was die Verbrecher mit den Dingen taten, taten sie bald auch mit den Menschen. Am 10. September 1942 wurden Bertha und Jakob von Nürnberg nach Theresienstadt verschleppt. Jakob Weinschenk kam dort am 1. März 1943 ums Leben. Bertha überlebte die Shoah und siedelte 1945 in die Vereinigten Staaten über. 2003 entdeckte ein deutscher Heimatforscher, der die „Rimonim“ von einem Eintrümpelungsunternehmen erhalten hatte, dass sie während der Nazi-Zeit von einer Frau aufbewahrt worden waren, die in einem Schmelzwerk in Fürth arbeitete. Es gelang ihm, die Nach-

kommen von Bertha und Jakob Weinschenk ausfindig zu machen und ihnen die kostbaren Kultgegenstände zurückzugeben. Nachdem sie dann wieder bei vielen religiösen Zeremonien in den Vereinigten Staaten verwendet wurden, wanderten sie zuletzt als Schenkung in die Synagoge in Yad Vashem. Von heute an bis zum 17. Februar sind die Nürnberger „Rimonim“ als einer von sechzehn Gegenständen im Paul-Löbe-Haus des Deutschen Bundestages zu sehen. Nicht als kulturgeschichtliches Ausstattungsstück, sondern als Zeugen einer vernichteten Welt.

SIMON STRAUSS



Zwei Rimonim, krönende Aufsätze für eine Thorarolle, die Bertha und Jakob Weinschenk der Synagoge Adass Israel in Nürnberg spendeten. Foto Noam Prossman/ Freundeskreis Yad Vashem

In aufrichtiger Anteilnahme trauern wir um

Margot Perkuhn

* 30. Juni 1938 † 21. Dezember 2022

Margot Perkuhn war von 1973 bis 2000 als Reinigungsfrau bei uns beschäftigt.

Wir werden sie als eine liebenswerte Kollegin in Erinnerung behalten.

FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

Weissach-Flacht, im Januar 2023

Unvergessen

Claudia Beyer

* 26. 02. 1947 † 25. 01. 2013

Peter Beyer

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LEBENSWEGE

Ausstellung im Düsseldorfer Kunstverein

Zwischen Albtraum und Voyeurismus

Die Kunst des Autodidakten Matthias Groebel liegt an der Schnittstelle von Malerei und Medienkunst. Sie entwickelt den Sog des alten Privat-TV.



Matthias Groebel, „A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989–2001)“

Foto: Cedric Mussano

Eine junge blonde Frau starrt ins Nichts und kaut selbstvergessen am kleinen Finger ihrer rechten Hand. Ein Mann trägt eine karnevalistische Schweinsmaske, ein muskulöser Mann im weißen T-Shirt eine giftgrüne Maske, die dem Sport dient oder auch dem Fetisch. Ein Mann mit weichem Gesicht und strähnig schwarz gefärbtem Haar schaut aus dick mit Kajal umrahmten Augen auffordernd aus dem Bild heraus, ein grobkörniger Bildausschnitt zeigt eine Frau mit geschlossenen Augen auf dem Rücken liegend, den Mund leicht geöffnet, dahinter schemenhaft der nackte Oberkörper eines Mannes. Eine Sexszene?

Im immer gleichen quadratischen Format 95 mal 95 Zentimeter reiht Matthias Groebel im Düsseldorfer Kunstverein irritierende, zugleich bekannt und fremd anmutende Acrylbilder zu kleineren und größeren Arrangements. Zusammenhängende Geschichten erzählen sie nicht. Jedes Bild präpariert einen scheinbar zufällig gewählten Moment heraus, allein im Kopf der Betrachtenden fügen sie sich eher zu einer Ahnung als zu einer Geschichte zusammen.

In seiner Ausstellung „A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989–2001)“ zeigt Groebel **überwiegend Porträts, die aus größeren Bildern** herausgeschnitten scheinen. Die anonymen Protagonisten stammen aus der Hochphase des analogen TV, als sich die Privatkanäle vermehrten und in rauen Mengen Reality- und Trash-Formate produzierten.

Matthias Groebel ist im Hauptberuf Apotheker und als Künstler Autodidakt. Nach ersten Versuchen in der abstrakten Malerei verlor er das Interesse daran, wollte aber auch mit den damals aktiven Jungen Wilden sich nicht anfreunden. Und er erfand – inspiriert ausgerechnet von einer Konstruktion der Spielzeugfirma Fischertechnik – in den 1980er Jahren eine neue Druckmethode, mit der er erstmals Stills von Fernsehbildern direkt auf die Leinwand bringen konnte; rund zehn Jahre, bevor die ersten Plotter auf den Markt kamen. Die Fernseh-Wellensignale übersetzte er in digitale Pixel und übertrug diese per Airbrush in langen, wiederholten und präzise gesteuerten Arbeitsgängen auf die Leinwand.

Flirrende Bilder

Auf diese Weise entstehen flirrend lebendige Bilder, die im kollektiven Gedächtnis der älteren Semester jenes bläuliche Flimmern des Röhrenfernsehers wieder aufrufen, das eine völlig andere, porösere Qualität hatte als heutige Digitalbilder. Groebels Leinwanddrucke übernehmen das Material der Fernsehbilder dabei nicht rein mechanisch und eins zu eins, er entscheidet über Bildausschnitte, Wahl der Farben, Intensität und Dichte des Auftrags, stellt damit die eigene Manipulation des in sich schon manipulativen Mediums Fernsehen zur Diskussion. Das macht seine Bilder unwirklicher und surrealer als das Ausgangsmaterial.

Die so virtuos bearbeiteten und zugleich roh wirkenden Bilder liegen an einer Schnittstelle von Malerei und Medienkunst. Und sie weisen weit darüber hinaus. Denn sie reflektieren nicht nur die düsteren Seiten, **ja, das Unbewusste des alten Mediums Fernsehen**, sondern greifen voraus auf die milliardenfach angeschwollene Flut privater und öffentlich gemachter Bilder der Beobachtung und Selbstinszenierung auf den heute noch viel präsentieren, vielfältigeren Bild-Kanälen von Internet, Pay-TV und der Streaming-Dienste.

Groebel denkt auch sehr grundsätzlich über das uralte Medium der Malerei nach, darüber, was das Auge der Betrachtenden aus optischen Informationen macht. „Sehen ist denken“ schreibt der abstrakte Maler Jerry Zeniuk und stellt damit die „Arbeit“ des Auges und des Bewusstseins dar, aus optischen Informationen wie Kontur und Farbe Bilder zu „errechnen“.

Was sowohl für die Täuschung des alten Kinos (stark beschleunigt ablaufende Standbilder simulieren Bewegung) als auch für die flimmernden Signale des Röhrenfernsehers sowie für Groebels Bilder gilt, bei denen das Auge die Signal-Löcher und Leerstellen auf der Leinwand bereitwillig „füllt“. (Ganz anders als bei heutigen digitalen Bildern, die bei schlechter Verbindung zu groben Pixeln zerbröseln, sonst aber ungleich kompakter sind.)

DIE AUSSTELLUNG

Matthias Groebel: „A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989–2001)“, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf. Bis zum 26. Februar

Groebels monströser Apparat ist in der Schau nicht zu sehen, nur seine stets quadratischen Leinwände. Auf ihnen wirken die beim Druckverfahren und seiner Nachbearbeitung noch verstärkte Unschärfe der TV-Bilder abstrahierend und zugleich intensivierend.

Die oft mehrdeutigen, unklaren, aber meist intimen Momente, in denen selbstvergessene Menschen von der Fernsehkamera festgehalten wurden, entwickeln auf Groebels Reproduktionen eine sogartige Faszination. Es entsteht ein Gefühl von beruhigender Zufälligkeit des großen medialen Rauschens. Aber auch ein raunender **David-Lynch-Effekt** zwischen surrealem Albtraum und Voyeurismus.

Kultur / Künste

23. 1. 2023, 15:21 Uhr

REGINE MÜLLER

Autor*in

THEMEN

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JANUARY 2023

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

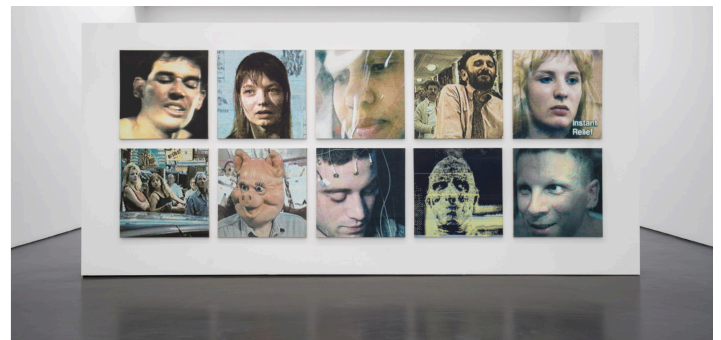
Matthias Groebel: A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001)



Matthias Groebel, *L0895* (1995), *L0793*, (1993), installation view *A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001)*, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022, photo: Cedric Mussano.

A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001) is a great invitation to return to Groebel's source. I was struck by how creepy-hilarious the work still is and how accurately it joins with our cultural/psychological moment. The atmosphere of the show is saturated with dated fun frustration, but like all great art from the past, it also speaks to the absurdities and ironies of our current social media moment. As much as the paintings in *A Change in Weather* are about the colloquial density of faces of usually young people we do not know and will never know, they are about the distributive image technology that shaped them and us (then). For Groebel sticks our nose into the face of clandestine electronic technology until it transforms how we see ourselves within our overloaded image world.

Back in the late-1980s, as a German visual cyberpunk thinker/painter, Groebel did not just push around colors on a canvas in Cologne with a hairy stick like most painters were doing, creating zombie post-minimal decorator-friendly abstractions. He put his techno-intellectual talents to use, fidgeting with parabolic antennas in order to find hardcore outré subject matter on marginal satellite TV channels to paint. He was less concerned with the materiality of paint than with the notion/experience of painting as a transparent/virtual medium. As such, his practice issued pungent diagnoses of many German artistic sacred cows, for a start.



Matthias Groebel, *A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001)*, installation view, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2022, photo: Cedric Mussano.

Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf

December 10, 2022 through February 26, 2023

By JOSEPH NECHVATAL, January 2023

Before masquerading as a dead, heavy-drinking **Chicago bellhop known for his duplicitous production of Polaroid thoughtographs**, Matthias Groebel made between 1989 and 2001 a series of fiercely stylish paintings of the human figure without touching brush to canvas. It partakes in a rather severe media art style I will call reckless realism—and is evidenced in his current exhibition of thirty-five 95x95cm acrylic paintings on canvas at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen in Düsseldorf. **Groebel** painted them with his home-made computer-robotic painting machine—taking as subject matter the (then) new media condition of open-access television.

This smart show, called *A Change in Weather (Broadcast Material 1989-2001)*, has been rigorously selected and hung by Kunstverein director/curator Kathrin Bentele and the young artist/curator Andreas Selg—who recently has taken on the interesting collaborative mission of displaying and re-contextualizing Groebel's airbrushed paintings that, previously, sat in stacks in his studio, largely ignored by the art market for twenty years. Now, through Selg's impetus, the art market has enthusiastically taken notice, and a monograph, *Painted Faces: Broadcast Material 1989-2006*, has been produced by Edition Patrick Frey.

The exhibition made clear again for me that Groebel is an artist-painter interested in fugitive technological cultures draped in cheap swag. His work has something to say about how one discovers the ubiquity and velocity of the technological image world while maintaining persistent curiosity.

A Change in Weather is a wry comic show about the after-death of painting, as well as an extended, international, human-centric mirror. Self-love, trepidation, ennui, and grief are hung on the wall in rows—as well as the weight of social dysfunction. But above all, the gravitas and historical reach of *A Change in Weather* is about where visual image and language don't meet in non sequiturs. Thus a Duchampian/Dadaesque meditation on the near death of coherence—here deployed through painting—so as to obscure and overwhelm puffed-up human egos.

A Change in Weather both expands the powerful constraints of time and place *and* reinforces the dead internet of bots, fake accounts, artificial intelligence, click farms, interest groups, spam, phishing schemes, and disguised advertising. There is here the impression of the self-image of art as a social good, collapsing under the weight of capitalism's lined-up social dysfunctions. And while it is rather satirical, I would argue that *A Change in Weather* is more deeply alchemical as it is about the transformation of technological change. Groebel has noticed and captured the long-ago ephemeral image world in chaotic flux and arranged the phantasmagorical dysfunctions of its messages into a highly delusional form that projects into the gallery a perverted sense of meaning and beauty. He took the readymade visual language of the time—marginal TV narrow cast emissions—and re-displaced as *objet trouvé* human images he found there, thus inventing his own versions of them. Added to that was taking language to an almost unearthly fractured level through the use of startling insertions and juxtapositions—apropos of nothing.



Matthias Groebel *L1095*, 1995 Acrylic on canvas (computer-assisted painting) 95 × 95 cm, courtesy gallery Schiefe Zähne, Berlin.

In the Selg's Kunstverein hanging, the resulting mimetic painted face-images are chosen and arranged for us to sneer at (or with) as in a hardcore punk reaction, but also to look closely at as flat surfaces. The indirect lighting is beautiful and the hanging's stylized minimal art pitch establishes seductive visual rhythms. The steady visual beats tempt the eye from across the room. A beat that we absorb but hardly notice. The louche and jaded characters in the paintings seem to be reacting to this cool beat that both identifies and obscures them while the voice-over narrators seem to have lost their ability to use the English language well in describing them. And so convey little meaning about what is happening in their abysmally small staged worlds.

Thus these vapid people seem degraded and made even more absurd by Groebel, who decided to put them through his technological painting process, but at the same time, they are almost sanctified.



Untitled, 1995 Acrylic on canvas (computer-assisted painting); 95 x 95 cm, courtesy gallery D R E I, Cologne.

A Change in Weather is **Warholian** in that sense, but specific to a more radical post-80s painting ambition. This was when the best post-painting painters realized that in order for painting to be dissonant with consumer culture, it had to risk its very identity as painting. But the tendencies Groebel's figurative paintings portray and describe have only intensified. The same visual attraction-repulsion tensions Groebel mined so eloquently still grip us by the throat as we are *more than ever* overcome by bombardments of narcissistic, poorly speaking faces, that we must sort of absorb but don't care two shits about. More than ever we silently say to these faces: go fuck off. That self-reflexivity may be a central social point of these very un-public, anti-social, machine-made paintings. **WM**



JOSEPH NECHVATAL

Joseph Nechvatal is an American artist currently living in Paris. His *The Viral Tempest* double LP has recently been released on Pentiments, and his new book of poetry *Styling Sagaciousness: Oh Great No!*, by punctum books. He recently exhibited new paintings at Galerie Richard in Paris in a solo exhibition *Turning the Viral Tempest* and is exhibiting early work in the No Wave survey exhibition *Who You Staring At: Culture visuelle de la scène no wave des années 1970 et 1980* at The Centre Pompidou from February 1st to May 15th.

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From the Engine Room: Matthias Groebel
Moritz Scheper

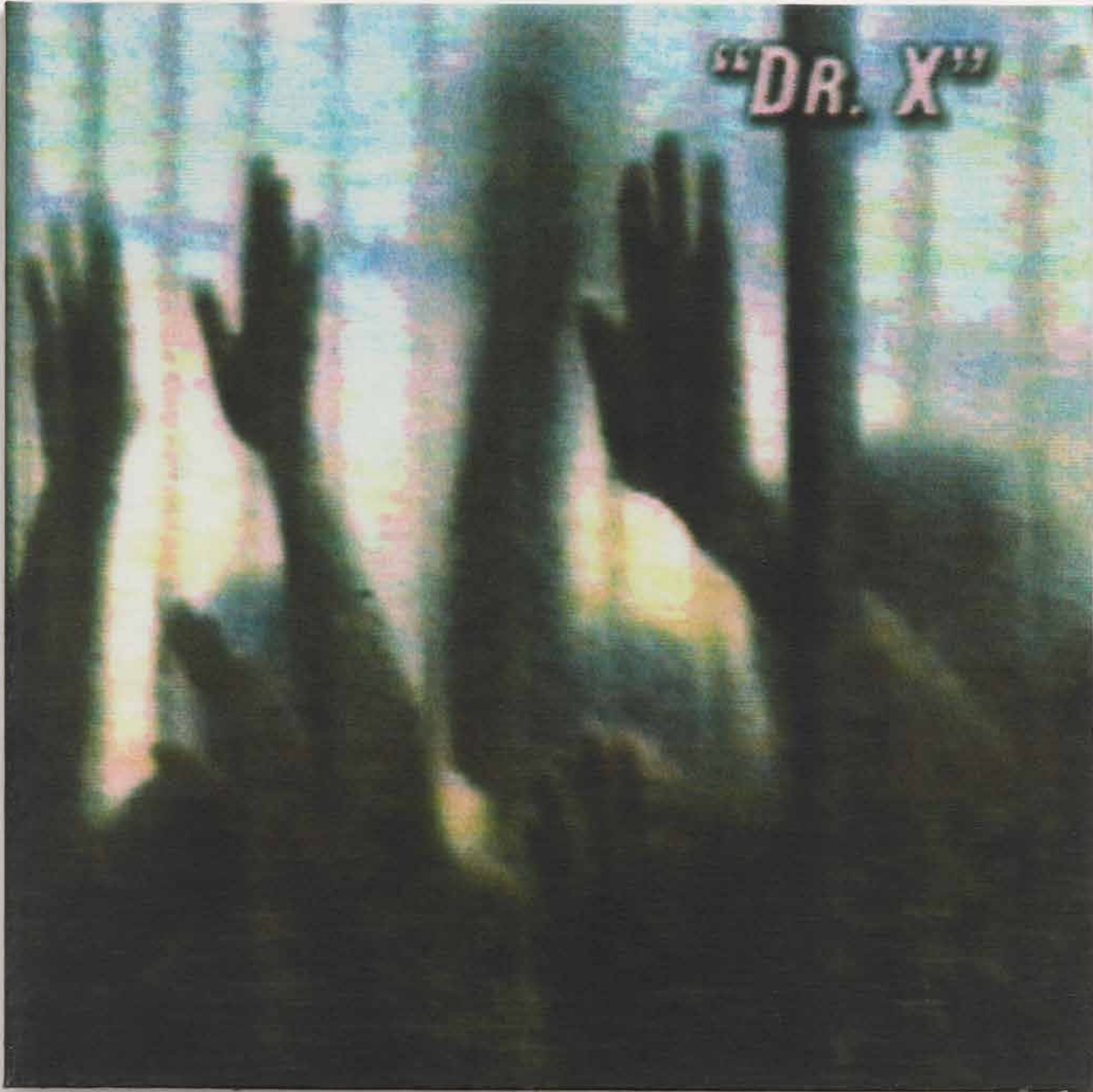
Among all the painters who have abandoned their brushes, Matthias Groebel occupies a special position. Upon the introduction of satellite television, Groebel began trawling the frequencies of obscure channels, compiling and composing images from their transmissions that he then transferred onto canvas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

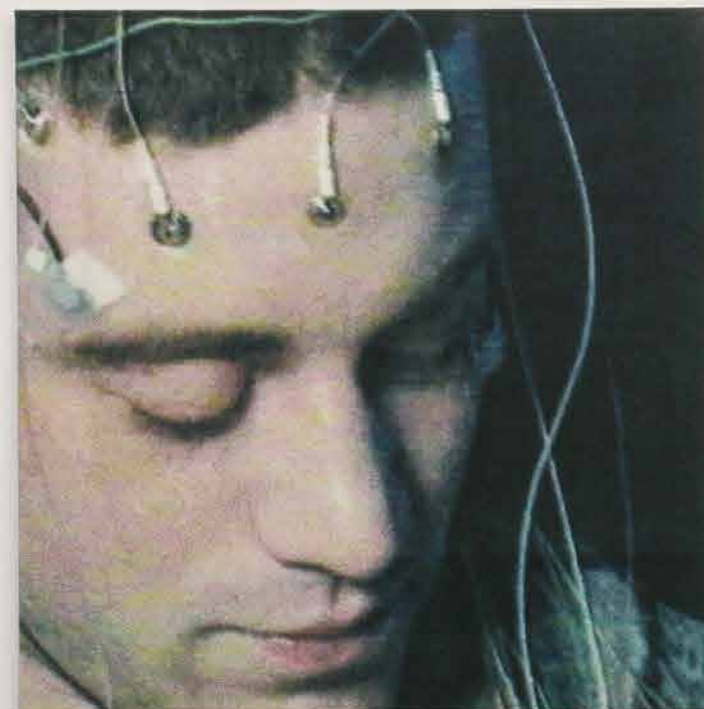
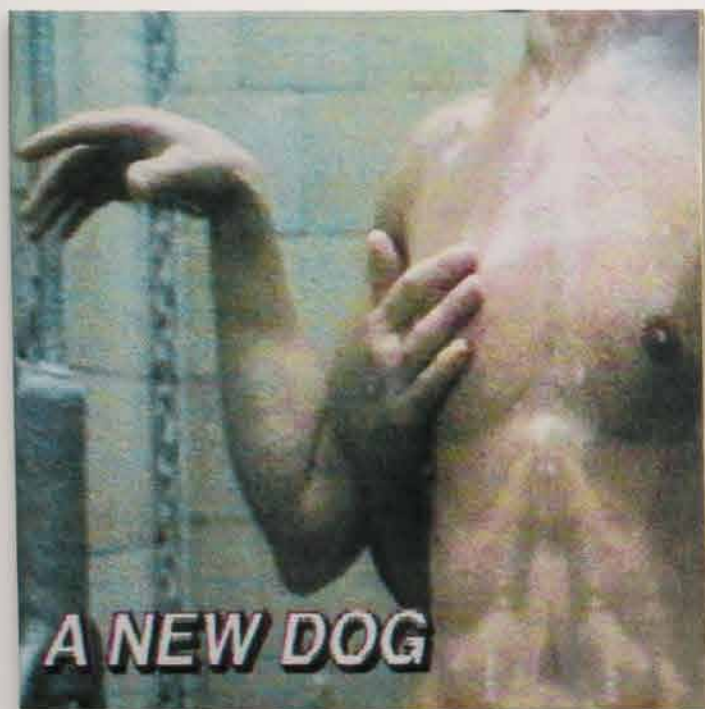
No text currently written about Groebel can omit the details of his biography. For instance that he worked part-time in a pharmacy, using the rest of his days to make art for which no audience existed—until, in his sixties, he suddenly found himself discovered and embraced by the art world (in the last 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”¹ 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 trancelike 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,”² 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.³ 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







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