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"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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