



Voyeur of Himself

Matthias Groebel in conversation with Hans-Christian Dany

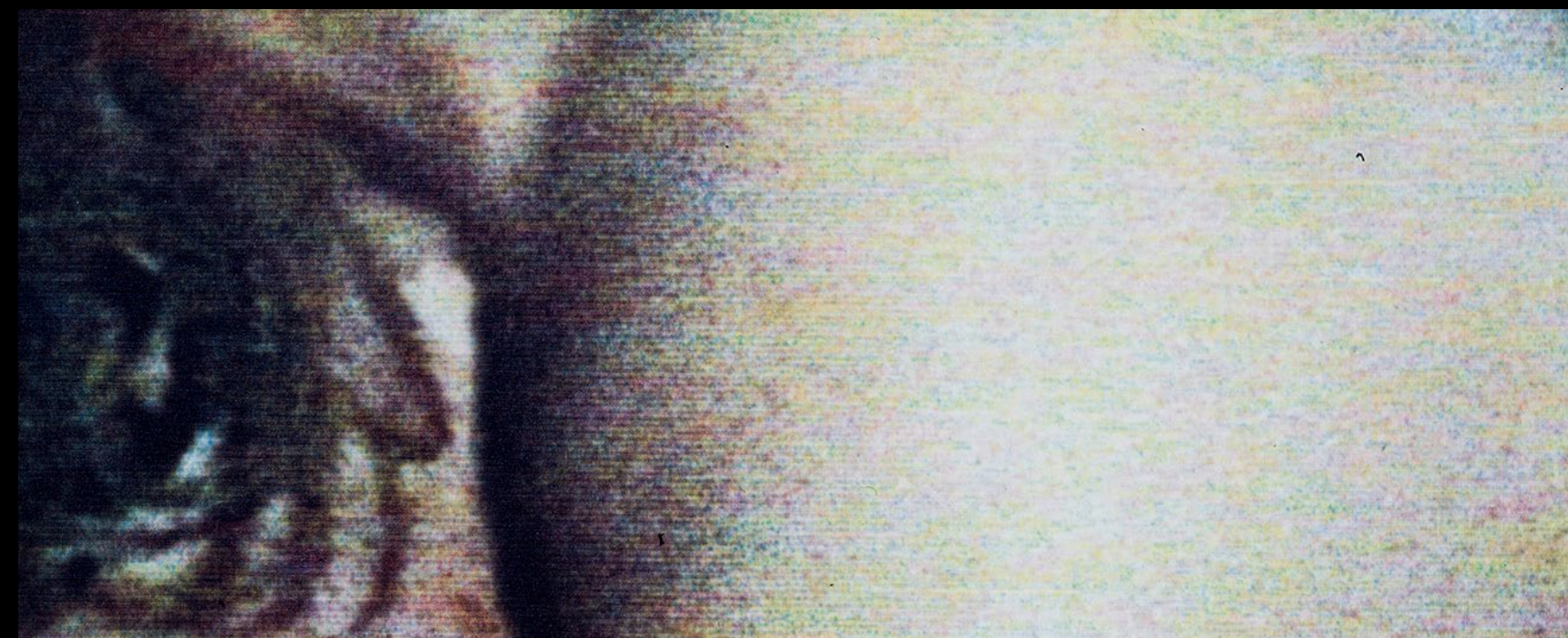
Witness



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
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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?

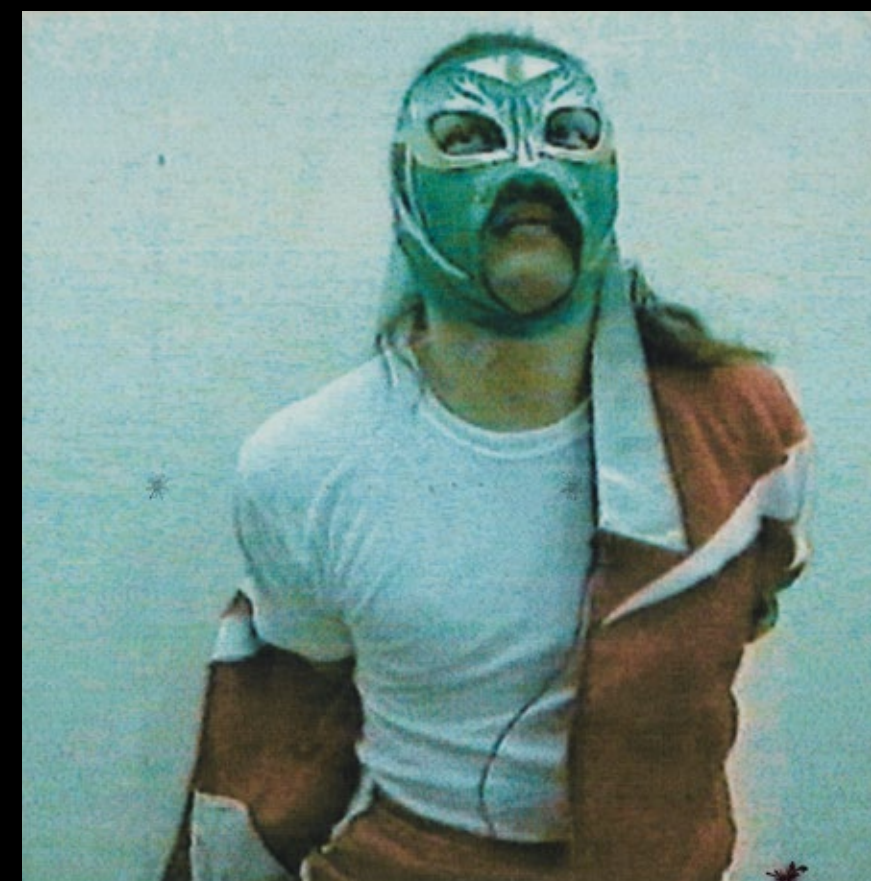
The younger generation is no longer familiar with the shock of television airwaves. The speed of images has become so commonplace that someone who takes the edge off this normalcy by slowing it down attains an astonishing aura. This is so deviant a behavior that it can even be felt through Instagram, 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.

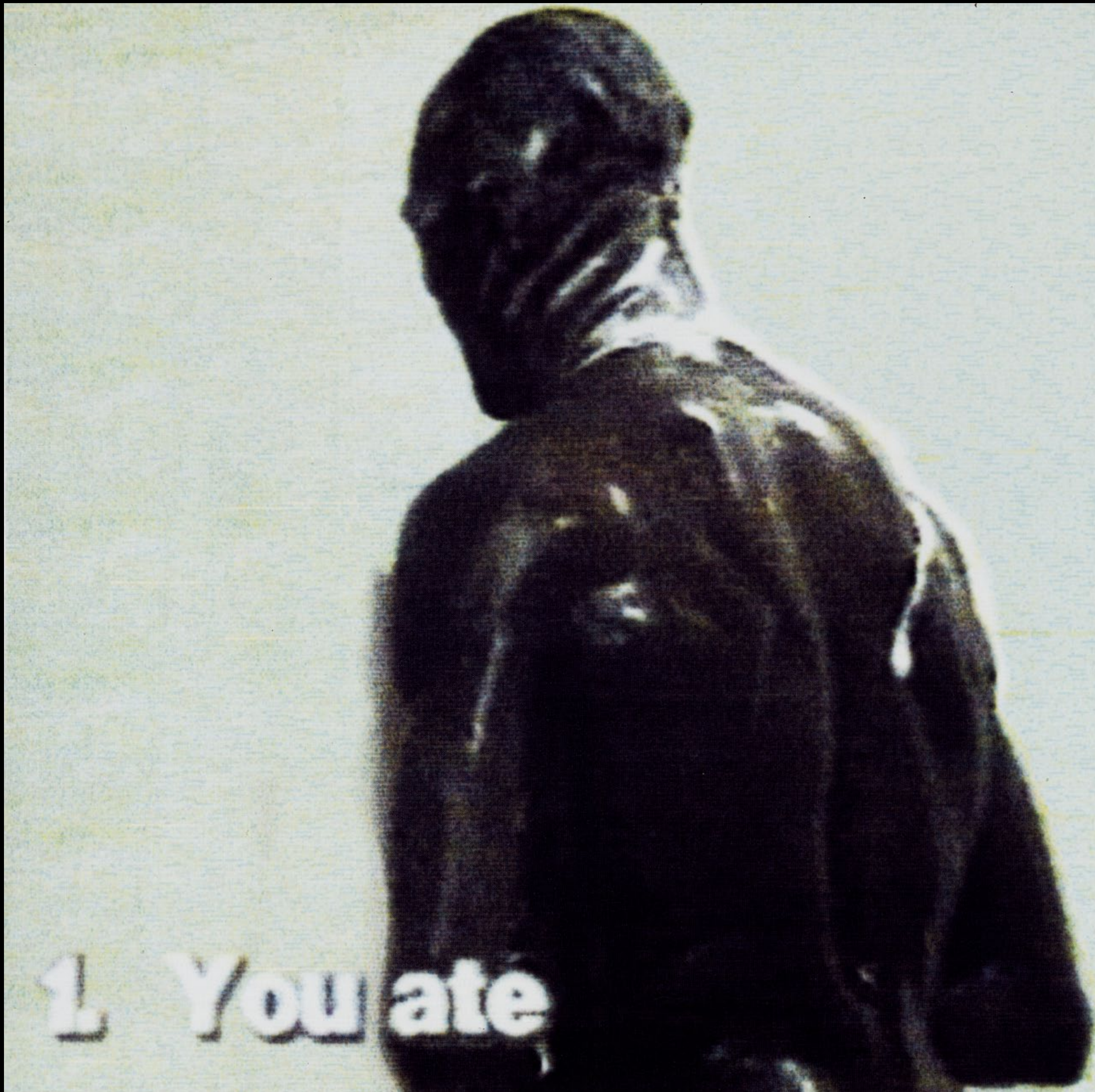
I have ceramic in my knee and could also go on about the lenses I rely on, but I know what you mean. It's a hybrid of myself as a painter and the calculating machine that assists the painter. The numbers in particular, the mathematical nature of the zeros and ones of the digital code, blur the distinction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



L0596, 1996
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
95 X 95 CM