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A JOURNAL OF PERFORMANCE AND ART



INTELLIGENT STAGES
DIGITAL ART AND PERFORMANCE

\$12.00

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A Journal of Performance and Art

ART IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM

The Paintings of Matthias Groebel

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Matthias Groebel, <http://groebel.eyewithwings.net/>. Represented by Universal Concepts Unlimited, New York. <http://www.u-c-u.com>.

Matthias Groebel's body of work has been made for reading through its process as much as from the paintings themselves. In this sense his work is very much of its time. Groebel, who lives and works in Cologne, Germany, sets up tensions that are a function of the seemingly oppositional techniques used in making the work; and along with many of his contemporaries, complex interplay between image and concept sets up paradoxes within the pieces. On another level, the work very definitely deals with areas that are being largely neglected in the visual arts currently. He is quite interested in aspects of art history, and his work is anything but anti-intellectual. He is not interested in "one-liners" and as a practising scientist as well as a painter, he wants to approach his work as an experiment with hypothesis, method, result, and conclusion. This makes for a welcome depth of engagement and debate for the audience.

The tension created in Groebel's work is one of its most significant features. The viewer is initially drawn into what at

first glance is an image/text piece. A playful invitation to search for the various canons typically present in that kind of work is presented, with questions being raised around whether the pieces are an inter-referential view of the art world, a political statement, a comment on consumerism, or an examination of the globalization of the media. These are just a few examples of extensively covered debates and points in this type of work and aspects implicitly present in these pieces. But Groebel's work demands a poetic response as well as a conceptual one.

Although Groebel's work is made up of stills grabbed from a screen, and the painting process is machine driven, it is heavily interwoven with the textural and gestural nature of painting. The works function in relation to their existence as art objects with an author as much as to the techniques used and pluralistic subject matter and concepts present in the pieces. Groebel appropriates much of the language of performance, cultural activism, and ephemeral arts and yet is quite openly making

objects for consumption by the art market, and perhaps, more importantly, to be positioned within the conventions of art history.

Groebel began engaging with new media in 1988 and since 1990 has worked producing painting with the aid of computer imagery. In contrast to a number of his colleagues, it has been painting rather than the computer that has been the central basis of his work. Its roots lie in a study of Renaissance workshop traditions and of the use of scientific method to aid painting. Vermeer's use of camera obscura to aid clarity and scale in his paintings is relevant to Groebel's work. Until recently, art historians (vide Philip Steadman's *Vermeer's Camera*) were reluctant to acknowledge Vermeer's potential tools, partly through lack of evidence but perhaps, also because it does not fit the Enlightenment model of a painter or author. By using a machine, incorporating the much maligned airbrush at that, and image transfer Groebel completely transgresses the rules of painting even in today's climate.

Computer aided packages have challenged perceptions of the image, texture, and truth in painting, photography, and moving pictures over the last ten years. Groebel is one of a growing number of artists whose work deals directly with this. His work derives from another point in history when the nature of representation was being radically re-evaluated. Using the Renaissance workshop model in the sense that the work exists as an idea within the artist, which is then transferred to painting, Groebel adopts a similar approach using contemporary tools. He prefers not to work with a studio of assistants but instead has built a painting machine that will

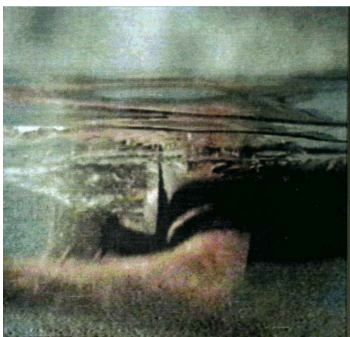
do much of the work. Like the Renaissance head of a workshop, Groebel still directs and controls within certain parameters. The work then deals very directly with ideas around single authorship while challenging its value system.

The process Groebel uses involves watching hours of television programs, usually with the sound turned down. He avoids famous faces such as Hollywood actors or politicians. It is important to the artist that the images are drawn from ordinary contemporary tableaux, without giving rise to any cultural debate around politics or the entertainment industry in relation to particular cultural frameworks. After watching the screen, he recalls which images had the strongest impact for him without direct recourse to the programs themselves. He then goes back to the video in order to find and grab the frame on computer. The stills are manipulated by montaging in other images or by treating the scene with various proprietary packages. Even at this point, the image he has selected from the screen and manipulated is several generations from its original inception. The video still and computer image are as much a part of the mark-making as the painting process in itself.

The process of finding the initial images from memory without recourse to the screen is important in terms of the single authorship argument. The selection of the image does not come with design or composition in mind but rather from the artist's experience of the program as a whole and ultimately from the evocation of the image. The way in which Groebel collects these images means that he often forgets which programs they came from, but they never-



Computer-derived paintings by Matthias Groebel.
Photos: Courtesy of the artist and Universal Concepts Unlimited, New York.



theless invoke a collective experience of television.

In terms of the transfer from screen to canvas, this is largely mechanical, although not without a large element of control from the artist. The canvases are made in the traditional way mounted on stretchers and primed by the artist's hand. Paint is applied using a machine custom-built by Groebel, which sprays paint in layers onto the canvas. These layers each represent a colorway and are calibrated by the artist using a non-proprietary computer package, also self-authored. By using an acrylic binder with very finely ground pigments, Groebel ensures that he is able to control the pigment to maximum effect. At all times the artist holds the finished image in his memory and is able to manipulate the image and the paint to his own ends. Although Groebel built the painting machine to work on a particular size of canvas, this has provided some restriction, as has the screen ratio from the computer and television.

With the final images, a number of curious effects are presented. The work grabbed from the television screen seems flattened and color becomes understated in comparison to the intense color of the photographic image. This is deliberate on the part of the artist. In computer culture, theorists often talk about what is behind the screen in relation to hardware rather than to the image. However, the depth of field in television/computer images is not large, and pixels are known for making images look flat. This is precisely why so many computer images made as artworks and transferred to hard copy often look so unsatisfying. Groebel works directly with this effect. He contrasts the effects of central

perspective with the "room" of the television screen. Central perspective works like a window with things or people represented with a position behind the canvas, thus giving an impression of depth. The depth of Groebel's paintings lies within a small space in front of and behind the canvas as represented by the television screen. He argues that it is the motion in the images of television which represent depth. Working with stills, and subsequently through the painting process, emphasises the limitation of each individual image on television to be representative. By literally visualizing this limitation through painting, he reintroduces a role for painting while pointing out the particularity of the moving image as represented on a television screen.

Color is important in this dissemination. Groebel paints light and shadow first and uses an old artifice, dating back to Sienna in the Renaissance, of mixing a small amount of green within the underpainting to obtain "better" flesh tones. This is as opposed to using just yellow and magenta as is standard in printing techniques. In this way he is challenging the dictatorship of pure color that has arisen with different forms of printing. He argues that the color of film, video, and photography is too intense and talks about how he often feels the need to turn the color on his television down. Groebel is trying to achieve an effect of relative twilight; he has noticed that paintings seem to be able to absorb the last rays of light just before it gets dark. He is able to achieve this observation using his layer technique and, of course, through the paint itself. It is true to say that printed hard copies from computer screens lack this translucent effect, and to date can be

immensely unfulfilling for the viewer. Along with Groebel's studies of perspective and art history, his understanding of color is what distinguishes his work from many of his contemporaries.

This "twilight" effect has an enormous impact on the cultural reading of the work. The figures and landscapes are generic, the province of an unspecified televisual scene. A reading of the images is left to the viewer's choice and experience. The one completely recognizable thing about them is that they are media- or photographic-based, and the viewer is encouraged to engage with the wider cultural reference of the screen image in relation to the painted image. The understated nature of the color could be seen to evoke a suggestion of the darker side in all its contexts of the media and the fascination for reports of a seamier side of society. The images conjure up scenes of suburbia where life continues uninterrupted without contemplation of the incongruous, even unthinkable, events happening next door. Currently film, fiction, newspapers, websites, and television itself are fueling people's insatiability for voyeurism of perceived fetishes and anomalies in other people's lives, but ones which are never knowingly present in their own.

The media stimulates a desire for limitless boundaries; Groebel's images—with understated color, flattening, and deliberate anonymity—by contrast, leave it up to the viewer to invent scenarios and, perhaps more importantly, to look at the raw material of both the painted and media image. In this respect the work is reminiscent of pieces by Susan Hiller, such as *Belshazzar's Feast/The Writing on the Wall* (1983–6) around reported sightings of phenomena in the

white noise of television that has ceased broadcasting, or *Screen Dreams* (1995) looking at the basic material and gateways on the Internet. It is perhaps Groebel's Hacked Channels series that provides an extrapolation and underscoring of this approach to the work.

Until 2000 Groebel worked with video stills grabbed from network broadcast. Then he began to work exclusively with British Sky channels intended for broadcast only in the UK. Through the Internet, he was able to download free software produced to encrypt these channels. The download of the software, or perhaps the code itself, creates bugs that give a pixilated effect when trying to broadcast the image. His earlier work makes the viewer examine the nature of engagement with the uninterrupted television broadcast image. The Hacked Channels work exposes the raw material of the broadcast image, the nature of its dissemination, and the encryption devices needed to access certain images and channels. It very directly looks at the ad hoc way in which images are distributed and censored for consumption. Inadvertently, the work draws attention to the issues raised by new approaches to broadcasting, monopolies, and the work of illegal broadcasters and free software developers. Groebel becomes a painter broadcasting his own transmissions in broadband.

The artist sees these images as being representational but fuzzy, somewhere between a broadcast of an object or event and a hallucination. This reading seems fitting given the clichés surrounding the people involved in computer subculture and Internet/broadcast activism. But when these images are transferred through the painting process,

they occupy a space within the language of abstract painting. Groebel has pointed out that he used to dislike people “seeing” things in his hand-painted abstract paintings, but that he sees it as a positive reading of these hacked, found, and transferred images.

In contrast to the previous work, the Hacked Channels series does not rely on the presence of the human figure as a point of reference in the work, both culturally and art historically. If the body is present in the work, it is so abstracted as to be almost unrecognizable. The fact that some of the images are scenes from a porn movie adds a sense of bathos to the reading of this already complex work. The finished paintings in the Hacked Channels pieces have more of a strong relation to landscape; they are not evocative of the *picturesque* but are more like glimpses, in the viewer’s peripheral vision, from a car or a train. In common with the earlier work, they possess a dark quality similar to the often incidental but extremely atmospheric scenes from dreamscapes, where there is another more prominent strand. These images are not however hackneyed. As paintings they maintain their translucent and textural quality while displaying the semi-processed material of the hacked televisual image. Their roots seem to be firmly within the expressionist canon. They

are a true merging of the language of visual arts and the virtual.

What makes Groebel’s work so refreshing is its odd positioning between the underground and the traditional. Painting is a medium in which few subcultures have any interest, but this body of work holds its own in both contexts. By developing the techniques and appropriation of images in the way that he has, Groebel uses the devices of computer subculture to place them firmly within the language of art and its history. The main focus is to look at the potential for art, and not cultural activism, to have a role in society and not to be part of the entertainment business. Groebel’s work is far from nostalgic and is not overtly recouring to historical canons. All the images he uses are less than ten years old at the time of making; hence the source material will only date with the artwork. This work is very firmly positioned within the canons of art and is a development (to use a modernist term) of painting. It could be said to be one of the first developments painting has seen in many years. While the context of the work through the televisual image and its contemporary implications are important within the pieces, the main aim of the work is that it functions as good art. And that quality is timeless.

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