

## Collective Memories Online

*Collective Memories* is [Matthias Groebel](#)'s second one-man show at [Universal Concepts Unlimited](#), in New York. The gallery exhibition will run from 15 November to 23 December 2003. *Collective Memories Online* complements the exhibit by presenting background material to Groebel's work, including details of his primary sources and the paintings' thematic backdrop.

Much of *Collective Memories* comes from the tradition of the danse macabre, and in particular its use by three artists: Simone Baschenis, James Ensor and the Grateful Dead. The paintings were created from Groebel's video footage of the church of St Ursula in Cologne, Germany, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Teruven, Belgium. Both places were built to preserve memories. St Ursula is homage to 11,001 martyred virgins. The museum showcases Central African art.



### The Danse Macabre

The danse macabre is grim and festive. Like the related motifs of memento mori and the triumph of the dead, it began as a form of religious expression disengaged from biblical stories. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as the black plague spread across Europe, it gained widespread popularity. In those days, there was a thin line between fervent entreaties for transcendent relief and the no less enthusiastic celebration of the fleeting moments of worldly life. Skeletons, merrily engaged in all aspects of life from dancing and drinking to fornication, were the ultimate symbols of the danse's ambiguity, and were soon adopted as its mascot.

Many artists have found the danse macabre to be a useful expression of ambiguity and contradiction. In turn, this has often made it a convenient disguise for sharp critiques of society.

## **Simone Baschenis**

It has been a festive existence for the skeletons of San Vigilio, ever since Simone Baschenis painted them in 1539. From their two-dimensional world on the outside church wall, they prance, dance and play bagpipes to those lying below them in the cemetery.

Baschenis came from a family of itinerant fresco painters that travelled from village to village for nearly 100 years. Sometime in the early days of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he will have climbed the small road that winds into the mountains above the lake of Garda and leads to the village of Pinzolo. Fresh in his mind, and in those of the villagers who commissioned him to decorate their church, will have been the Sack of Rome. Some 12 years earlier, on 6 May 1527, Charles V had ordered his troupes to invade, loot and burn the Holy City. Churches, shrines and monuments were destroyed, and by the end of the summer, 45,000 men, women and children had disappeared, either to their final rest or to take refuge far from their fated homes.

In Pinzolo, Baschenis painted the emperor and his knights, the pope, the monks and the bishops, and even Christ, as symbols of everything powerful in this world. He sent them all to their identical fate with one arrow, then contrasted their static figures with the nimble elegance of rejoicing skeletons.

Up in the mountains and far from the wrath of politics, Simone Baschenis used the danse macabre to spell a manifesto of pure anarchy. No doubt the villagers were easily convinced their new fresco was a religious painting. And if they ever woke up to its hidden message, it will have only been once its author was long gone down the winding path.

## **James Ensor**

James Ensor's paintings and masks, like Baschenis' fresco and the Grateful Dead's music, were a deliberate attack on the society he lived in. Like Baschenis and the Grateful Dead, he took cover behind the ambiguity of the danse macabre.

Ensor lived in Belgium in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, not far in time or place from the construction site of the Royal Museum for Central Africa. Like many of his contemporaries he was an outspoken atheist, and his use of various religious motifs, including the danse macabre, is an expression of that. His social criticism went beyond the church. Ensor disliked doctors, judges, the bigoted priests, the king of Belgium and the woman next door (who laughed about his paintings), all with the same intensity. From the privacy of his attic, he turned them all into carnivals of grinning skeletons and grotesque masks.

But what sets Ensor aside from Baschenis, and brings him closer to the Grateful Dead, is his double use of the danse macabre. Baschenis used the danse in what could be called a classical way: he hid behind a religious theme to express anarchic sympathies. Ensor and the Grateful Dead also used the danse macabre as an attack on the powers that were in their respective societies. But in doing so they conformed to the tendencies of their times. Their ingenuity was to double-bluff the atheists and the anarchists.

Hidden in Ensor's paintings is the signature of a romantic daydreamer who built the castles of a fantasy world with his paintbrush. Behind the mask of the danse macabre, he created a space which was beyond the reaches of the industrial revolution that surrounded him. He fooled them all, the system and the atheists and then was left alone, a dreamer, painter and sculptor in an attic full of his creations.

## **Grateful Dead**

The Grateful Dead claimed to be part of a social, cultural and political movement on the cutting edge of their time. When the psychedelic movement went public in the mid-sixties, they were part of it. But listen closely, and you will hear hum of religious fervour.

Recently, a couple of recordings from the mid-sixties surfaced on the internet, outside hardcore collector circles. Out of the chaos of the 8 January 1966 Fillmore Acid Test, one track caught Groebel's attention: 'Death Don't Have No Mercy'. The song was originally written by Reverend Gary Davis (1896-1972), a black blues musician and an ordained Baptist minister. Pigpen, one of the band's founding members, holds back the original hallelujah. But, as a reasonably precise translation of *media in vita morte sumus*, it remains a religious song.

The Grateful Dead are, in fact, the perfect counterpoint to Simone Baschenis. Baschenis used the religious veil of the danse macabre to convey anarchic sympathies. The Grateful Dead, by contrast, used the motif as a tool to remain within an anarchic movement while expressing their religious zeal.



### **Primary Sources**

My paintings are compositions created from video images. For more information on the process, and the robots that assist me, please refer to my [homepage](http://www.eyewithwings.net)  
( <http://www.eyewithwings.net> )

Over the last three years, I have shifted away from using television as my primary source of images. After more than ten years of working purely with TV pictures, the limitations of this method have become increasingly unbearable to me. I now work from my own videotapes, and this is my first show that contains no broadcast material whatsoever.

For *Collective Memories*, I used my footage from my visits to the church of St Ursula in Cologne and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium). More importantly, both differ greatly from my television material in their intent to prolong memory. Previously, I went to great lengths to exclude material that my audience would remember or recognise when they looked at my paintings. Movies, repeated programmes and politics never found their way into my primary sources.

This show is different. I have purposefully placed 'layers of memory' one atop the other, both in terms of the tradition which the paintings fit into and in terms of the physical objects and places I used as my primary sources.

## **St. Ursula**

It is risky to turn down the marriage proposal of a Hun. But what can you do when you are a Christian virgin on a pilgrimage to Rome and the Hun is not willing to get baptized? You just may get killed in Cologne.

According to the legend, that's what happened to St. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins who accompanied her in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The number may have been a medieval misreading of original roman documents, but it looks like there was an unbroken local tradition based on real happenings. At least the church St. Ursula was built - and several times rebuilt - upon a roman cemetery. As a result, enormous amounts of human bones have been found over the centuries.

It is naïve to project our contemporary concept of evidence onto the medieval world of ideas. Maurice Halbwachs (1877 - 1945) developed his theory of the collective memory by examining how pilgrims to the Holy Land over the centuries evoked very different images of the events of Jesus' life. All memory is an ongoing reconstruction of the past. In that sense, St. Ursula was built as a place to keep memory alive - and it did so in an effective way.

The Golden Chamber there is located in a separate aisle of the church. If you enter it, you find all the walls covered with bones. And behind golden tendrils and old glass there are hundreds of skulls, each carefully wrapped in a precious scarve.

If you add the relics the people of Cologne sold, you may end up with eleven thousand in all.

## **Royal Museum for Central Africa**

The Royal Museum for Central Africa was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a showcase for the Belgian Congo. It was meant to attract potential investors. Belgium became a sovereign country in 1830 and the acquisition of colonies was considered essential to its economic independence.

The museum displays native art, articles of daily use, stuffed animals, conserved amphibians and insects, mineralogical collections, and relics from early expeditions. Most installations have remained unchanged since the museum's inauguration in 1910. It is rumoured that the stuffed bodies of natives were removed in the sixties. The museum's best display, however, is itself. Intended to exhibit central African art and life, what it does best is present a raw vision of colonial Europe. This, of course, is one display that is likely to disappear in the upcoming reconstruction.

The skeletons I used in my paintings, except for the single trophy skull, are from primates. The images were taken from a display on evolution.

