

Body as a staged condition

The paintings of Matthias Groebel

It rarely occurs that artists find their real mission via the roundabout route of a completely different vocational training. Dubuffet is in this respect the most famous example in the 20th century. Further names to be added to the list are Rousseau, the customs official, Andy Warhol, George Brecht, Robert Filliou or Peter Campus. Those entering the art scene in absence of the vocational ladder, artists who mostly do not go through art college, are often characterized by a concept of art whose reference to reality is pragmatic, analytical and, at the same time, philosophical.



o.T., Acryl / Lwd, 95 x 95 cm, 1992



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Art for these artists is not a self-referential system as a model of society, but an open field for strategies testing the model "society" or undergoing a poetic analysis. These artists are usually lacking a belief in an eschatological function of art. In a very unspectacular manner they refer to the factual, and as a rule they see their task in making this "factual" element transparent.

Matthias Groebel is just such an artist. Born in 1958 in Aachen, he grew up in Muenster where he also studied pharmacy in the second half of the Seventies. In 1981 he was granted his certificate to practise pharmacy. It was not until a few years later, prompted by personal freindships, that he devoted himself to painting without

having studied art. Groebel's typical combining of painting and modern technologies began in 1988. Since 1990 Groebel has been working exclusively in the field of computer-supported painting.

The paintings of Matthias Groebel are anything but technological expectations of salvation or cynical self-contemplations of art. They are rather multi-medial in a substantial way. Groebel is not concerned with rescuing painting in the digital world. His pictures rather show two technological variants of occidental culture, although from various phases of its development.

Both have an indicative character for Groebel's artistic strategy. For painting represents the world model of modern times which still stamps central categories of human perception in the modern world.

Digital technology, on the other hand, points to the fundamental paradigmatic change which is at present taking place in the Occident (and perhaps also at a global level). It will present man with new ways of perception which will supersede the old categories of the Renaissance.

As the world is undergoing a transition from the old to the new order the present situation is exceedingly complicated and full of internal contradictions. In the words of Lévi-Strauss, we can define painting as "cooked", namely "cultivated", and digital technology as "raw", namely the phenomenon which has not yet become culturally differentiated.



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Groebel makes no attempt at reconciliation when combining the two characterising fields in his art, but provides both painting as well as electronics with its respective

field of action. As a result of their different ways of working, they are not in a centrally complementary relationship to each other but in a complex antinomic constellation: autonomous, complementary, commentating, colliding and counteracting.

Electronics provides the structural framework for a creative process at the end of which is painting. Groebel's concept of art is just as close or distant to technology as it is to painting. The method of creating images and the thought justifying this is rather the place in which art occurs.

In 1991 Groebel described the production process of his paintings as follows: "Pictures from the usual television programme which are no more than 10 years old serve as basic material.

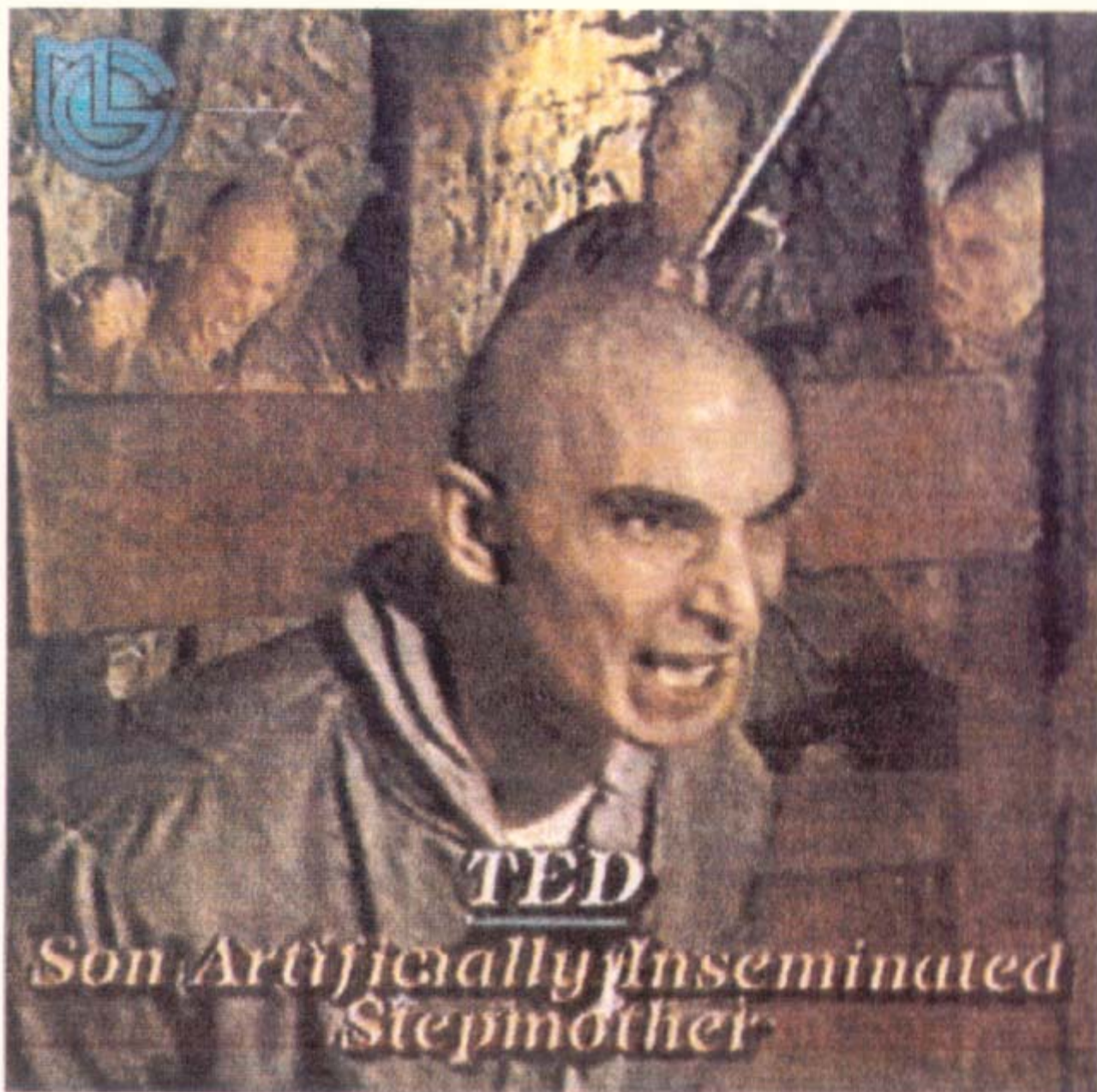
I avoid the use of material which is identified by the observer as self seen. The television images are digitalised and - if I consider it suitable - are then installed in the computer and retouched. Dependent on the image presentation drawn up in this way, the computer controls an airbrush pistol which paints with pigmented acrylic paint on a screen of standardized size."

The image production is as up-to-date as it possibly can be: everything is found and constituted in electronics. It is only the finished picture which, in a simple step, is transferred to a different technique.

The paintings which are produced at the end of this process provide several rasters of perception as a result of the connotation field of painting and these collide with those of electronics. For example: the central perspective which has determined all pictures since the Renaissance, even the construction of the camera lens, has completely stamped our ideas of space, body and surface.

However, electronics has different parameters for portraying space and these are considerably non-hierarchic and fuzzy. For Groebel, the collision of these perception rasters form the basis of his artistic work. He calls them "work hypothesis".

Surprising continuities are also shown in the association of the two fields. For instance, the image finding process described by Groebel and his putting-in-the-picture corresponds to the idea of the Renaissance that the "disegno" first exists as an idea in the artist himself and is merely transferred to painting. Yet these are fringe aspects which cannot conceal the paradigmatic change, and Groebel is therefore consistent when he also devotes himself thematically to this change.



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The human body is the great theme of the pictures. When contemplating the paintings at leisure it becomes evident that, independent of formal aesthetic aspects of composition such as weighting the parts within the framework of the given surface, local colouring and other similar things, the human bodies or the objects made up of them have a high plastic effect, whereas surroundings and background seem definitely flat.

The antimony of surface and body appear here again in the picture avoiding the three-dimensional illusionistic spatial depth. The bodies are no longer part of a spatial order placed above them but themselves define their specific space. For this reason they often appear to be optically in front of the screen.

They present themselves as self-defined, as "authentic" phenomena. And they are surrounded by the expanse which makes up the essence of electronics. It is this

basic conflict which cannot be solved by rash cures which Groebel picks out as a central theme when he says: "The human body is the yardstick". The contradictions discernible in this in view of his own fascination with electronics are a social problem which the artist makes transparent with aesthetic means.

And yet again the aim is not utopian but a committed pragmatic one. Any kind of dramatic overemphasis of the theme would avert our attention from the actual problem. This is all the more real and virulent the longer the electronising of society continues. It frees the human body from its almost archaic functions of work.

Almost all social processes can be dealt with nowadays via the screen. Man no longer requires his body for carrying out libidinous or intellectual needs. Man today needs leisure time for fulfilling physiological processes. They are increasingly being separated from the relevant acts for work. This has fundamental effects on the perception of man which is nowadays largely ignored. At the same time new ethics developed on the basis of this paradigmatic change are urgently needed, ethics in which the human body retains or regains its self-determining existence.

Matthias Groebel is working on this. This is his artistic strategy which has a considerably political dimension and which consciously no longer differentiates between social fields and aesthetic ones. Groebel is in this respect a representative of the extended concept of art in its best sense.

Friedemann Malsch, 1994