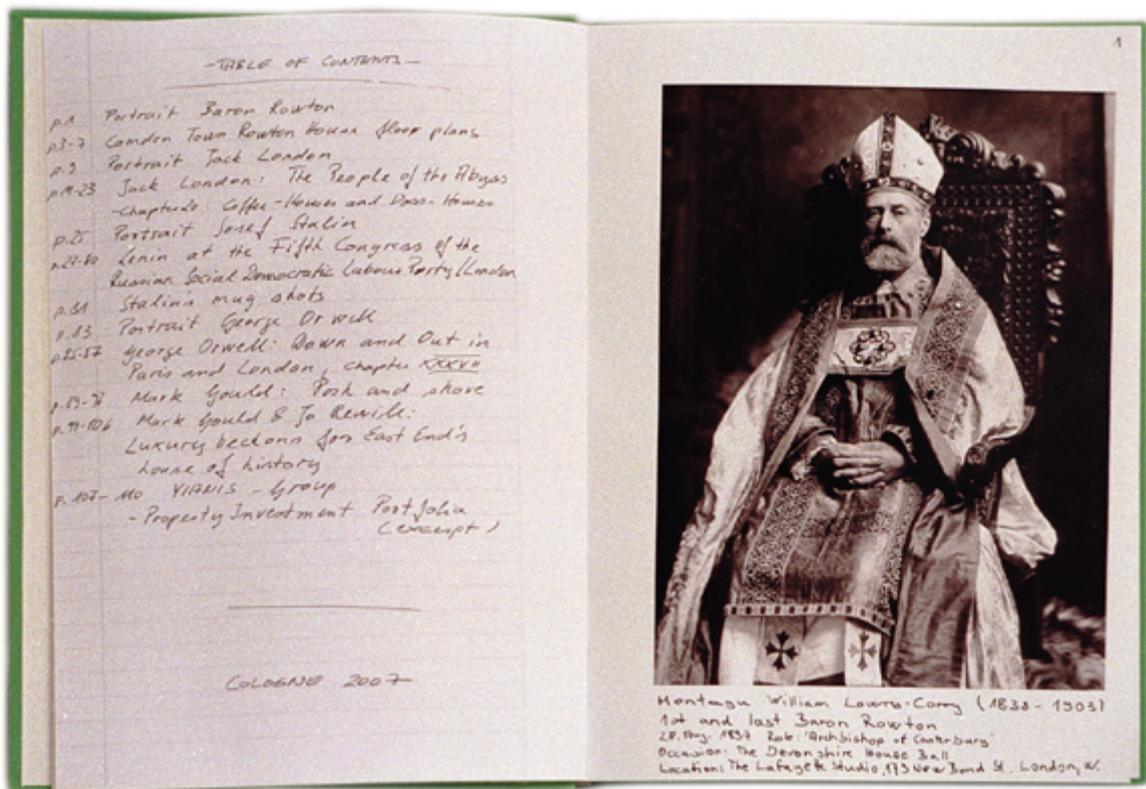


## Groebel's Ghosts

What do the following men have in common: Baron Rowton (1838-1903), philanthropist and private secretary to Benjamin Disraeli, the revolutionary and later dictator Josef Stalin (1878-1953) and the writers Jack London (1876-1910) and George Orwell (1903-1950)? Hardly coevals in the strictest sense - an encounter between them would have been more than improbable, and even if the self-avowed socialist Orwell condemned "real socialism" of the Stalinist mould in his novels, there is no record that any of these protagonists knew of each other's respective spheres of activity. Nevertheless, their lives do intersect at one point, if one were to imagine a possible rendezvous in a certain "Tower House" in London's impoverished east end. Founded by Baron Rowton as a new type of "working men's hostel" or doss house for homeless workers, Jack London, Stalin and Orwell, amongst others, each spent a night there. Whereas Stalin, attending the 5th Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party in 1907, omits the fact of his stay from his memoirs, London and Orwell process their experiences via literature and journalism; the former in his undercover reportage *The People of the Abyss* (1903) about London slums, the latter in *Down and out in Paris and London*, published in 1933.

*Safe from Demons* is the title of Matthias Groebel's latest project, in which he brings together the various branches of these diverse individuals' lives. And yet the present hardly seems to be safe from demons, inasmuch as the shadows of the past - as reported in recent newspaper articles about the building's future - are repeatedly being invoked. Though like Marx's spectre, they may serve as a reference to the idea of social justice, which would be thwarted by the luxury conversion of this long-term derelict building, the naming of these names from a journalistic point of view is guaranteed to grab people's attention. Which demons and spectres are conjured up or suppressed is always notoriously a question of vested interests, the past a permanent invention of the present.

Matthias Groebel likes to trace obscure tales and handed-down stories in his paintings, videos and artist's books, for example when he amalgamated photographs from the Golden Chamber of St. Ursula in Cologne and the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren, Belgium into motifs from the dance of death in his exhibition *Collective Memories* from 2003; or for example in his video *Raymond*, where he associated freely available audio material of a professor of child psychology and an interview with Blackhawk, a colourful, larger-than-life New York figure from the new media scene, to form a parable about conspiracy theory. Groebel is always concerned with the question of how stories originate, how fiction and reality co-mingle and which media and techniques of communication are utilized. In the case of the Tower House it was a passing reference by a friend whilst out walking through London that kindled his interest, the initial spark being delivered in the oldest mode of tradition - oral narration. Groebel resourced all further material for his artists book *Safe from Demons* on the net. He processed all his knowledge about the building and its historical and contemporary background through this filter, including any possible errors in tradition and items of dubious veracity. Stories without a money-back guarantee, so to speak.



In his book Matthias Groebel transfers only the more recent sources by hand, namely two newspaper articles in The Guardian and The Observer about the planned conversion of the house into flats. This seemingly medieval principle of reproducing texts turns the supposed sequence of old and new media on its head, a principle that fundamentally characterizes its artistic aim. Thus the six-part group of pictures, upon which Tower House can be seen, is the product of numerous medial translations. Captured by a stereo camera, Groebel chose stills from all the recorded material, processed them on his computer and transferred them by means of his painting apparatus which he devised himself, onto the canvas by spraying many transparent layers of acrylic paint upon one another by means of a computer-guided airbrush gun. The computer replaces the hand of the artist just as similarly ideas of authenticity and originality associated with it have long since been abandoned.

Of course, it isn't by any means a new insight that the medium of painting - just like any other medium of pictorial composition using technical aids - has always been mediated. The process of distancing, which is associated with the manifestation of the apparatus, is particularly accentuated in the more recent pictures by Matthias Groebel by the use of the stereo camera. The stereo camera, which records two almost identical images in parallel with minor deviations in perspective, does not organize the pictorial space centrally, but from a number of perspectives. As Bernd Stiegler commented on stereoscopy, one is "confronted by the strangeness of another view of the way things are organised. The images do not seem to be simulacra of reality, but rather backdrops and staffages of a theatre with depth of field, but without any corporeality, as two-dimensional figures arranged within the pictorial space".<sup>1</sup> They become stages upon which the individual protagonists, such as two passers by, are able to enact their

performance.



save from demons, 85 x 110 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2006

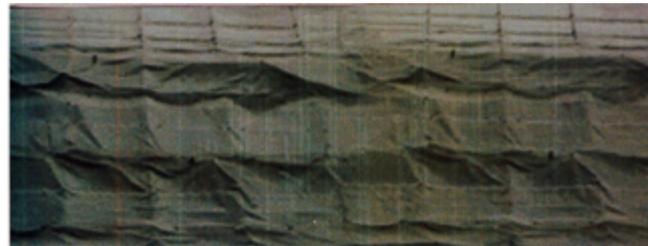
It is worthy of mention, however, that a coherent image develops at first glance - despite the double distancing of perception through the use of the stereo camera and the painting machine, without which such a precise repetition of the motif would hardly be possible. The almost identical doubling of the pictorial elements is not immediately apparent, inasmuch as the artist does not further emphasize the joins. We encounter a familiar pattern here from the psychology of perception: in spite of all the knowledge about the degree to which our eye is mediated and there being a permanent distance to reality, we are nevertheless all too ready to believe the supposed coherence of the compositions.

Matthias Groebel introduces a further feature to Tower House, namely the element of time. In this way about one and a half years have passed between the capture of the images forming the group of pictures on the left and those on the right. If the left column of pictures shows the desolate and already rundown building, whose erstwhile function would have remained hidden without additional information, the right group of pictures evinces further evidence of decay, such as the bollard leaning in the corner of the

entrance. However, now the building is enclosed in scaffolding, the banner of the property developer pointing to its future use. Different time levels and perspectives are superimposed upon one another and it is already possible to discern the demons of the future.

Astrid Wege

1 Bernd Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie*, (Munich, 2006) 67.



tower house, 230 x 210 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2005 - 06

