



The Image-Sweep
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A gloom has set in around Bellevue as Matthias Groebel and I keep a look out for the waiter. We are immersed in a conversation about the machine-made television paintings he created in the 90s, and arrive at a discussion of Brian Eno and David Byrne's 1981 concept album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. But the low-hanging clouds over the Lake Zurich basin and Groebel's impending trip to Cologne signal to us that it will soon be time to go.

Eno and Byrne's album is composed entirely of samples, "field recordings" of English radio talk show hosts, Lebanese mountain singers, American priests, Egyptian pop songs and exorcism ceremonies, all cut and compressed into a jangling, snappy sonic medley. The rhythm of the tracks and the incoherence of the material create a hypnotic effect – a kind of trance in which significance and its opposite blur.

The record has come up because it shares something in attitude, intent, and methodology with Groebel's paintings. Both are about intercepting distant signals, collecting broadcast flotsam and jetsam and mechanically transforming those materials in the studio. Like Groebel's paintings, the songs resonate with technical ingenuity, the gift for extracting and assembling, applied to an infinite range of

material possibilities. They share as their source and subject matter the use of radio and TV signals – invisible waves of content that stream directly into the studio – whose hissing and flickering indicate that what is seen and heard has entered via the ether, ricocheting off some satellite before striking the earth. Groebel's painting is the televisual counterpart to Eno and Byrne's sampledelia or, rather, the album contains the wave-transmitted radiance of Groebel's ghostly stills. In each case, channels and frequencies are zapped up and down in search of what in psychoanalysis is called "the other scene", the collective psychic depth of the medial unconscious.

With Groebel in particular, there is a dimension of Freudian dreamwork at play. He has long had an interest in the dark corners of broadcasting, in the most unlikely programmes running from the smallest stations. His work is that of someone who has wandered into a fairytale forest of depraved media environments and lived to tell the tale; but the memory has degraded and entails only the debris, isolated images and shattered fragments of speech. This garbled dispatch reports on a world where the TV screen functions as a mirror of consciousness and all that lies beneath.

Much of what Groebel tells me – in fastidious detail – concerns the technical construction of his painting machine and the trials and errors of fine-tuning it over the years. His tales are so winding, so unlikely, and so cyberpunk, that they start to sound more like an unwritten Gibson novel than an account of thirty years of studio work.

Groebel's story is that of a painter who studied pharmacy rather than art. He worked as a pharmacist in Cologne during the day, then turned to painting at night. He is a technophile who lost interest in his own abstract works in the mid-1980s, and in abstract painting in general. The pieces were too harmless, he says, the discourse too elitist. He was looking for "paintings that take effect even when you don't want them to". The dominance of television media in the 1980s required a different kind of painting to do justice to the techno-cultural present. For him, innovation was elsewhere. In electronic music, in cyberpunk literature, in the DIY hacker culture of emergent digital media. No longer the canvas. Painting seemed too shackled to its chains of self-reference, trapped in its own history. This self-reference had become a Faraday cage, protectively conducting the brutal current of the outside world around the world of art, instead of allowing a direct strike to its core. So, what was he to do as an artist? Many painters – especially in the Rhineland – posed themselves in front of their own gesturally expressive paintings. This performative strategy, which directed attention to the presence of the artist, was not Groebel's thing. Neither formally nor socially did he belong to the Rhenish chapter of the *Neue Wilde*. He was never, to paraphrase Martin Kippenberger, one of them, among them, with them.

Instead of turning away from painting, Groebel transferred his fascination with technology into it. At first, while he did not have a clear, aesthetic idea of the images he wanted to produce, he had come up with a process through which TV images could be transferred onto canvas. At just the same time as a new tool which could convert analogue wave signals into computer pixels came onto the

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11 market, Groebel happened upon an advertisement for a children's construction set by Fischertechnik. Together, these products led him to the idea of computer-aided painting.

He decided to rebuild the small painting toy with significant additions and modifications. He arranged it vertically, scaled it up to a surface area of one square metre, replaced the pencil with an airbrush gun, adjusted the nozzle opening to control the application of paint, and extended the contraption along a z-axis to determine its distance to the canvas. Circuit boards and plug-in cards became his field of aesthetic experimentation. He then roamed the electrical scrapyards of Münsterland. Together with a mechanic and an electronics engineer, he built the machine bit by bit, piecing it together with old photocopier and windscreen-wiper motors, bike chains and plastic rollers. It was mounted within a steel cabinet, lined on the inside with pressboards and with a double-glazed window through which the painting process could be viewed. With shining steel chrome rods, revolving chains, spiralling compression springs and glowing neon tubes, a machine that was only meant to produce paintings turned out to be an extraordinary sculptural object in and of itself – proof of a baroque imagination. The apparatus was far ahead of its time, operating a decade before the first multi-colour plotters.

There is a notable thematic thread of art-making machines which weaves through and within the tradition of twentieth-century "utopian" literature. One thinks of the fantastical creations in the writings of the Frenchmen Alfred Jarry and Raymond Roussel. In his novel *Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician*, which he himself called "neo-scientific", Jarry describes a machine that sprays walls with primary colours. In *Locus Solus*, Roussel designs a device that, among other things, creates mosaics from human teeth. Painting machines were also developed in mid-twentieth-century visual art, the most famous of which are those of the Situationist Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio and the kinetic sculptures of Jean Tinguely. But the key difference between their practices and Groebel's is that, for both Pinot-Gallizio and Tinguely, their *raison d'être* lies in the critique of various forms of art and the sales logic behind it. In both instances, the machine is the centre of attention as a sculpture-turned-painting critique. This is not the case with Groebel; the machine is not on display, only the paintings are.

Ultimately, the works themselves speak to the artist's fundamental concern with the problem of painting. The fact that they are square is a carryover from his early days as an abstract painter, a time when the "one metre high, one metre wide" format posed a far greater challenge to him than landscape or portrait formats, which he felt had "inherently aesthetic and associative settings". And even if his choice of motifs – which are effectively portraits – seem specific and associative at first, they come from sources so obscure that they are essentially anonymous to us. In some cases they have been digitally morphed so that the figure is never "quite right"; the images almost turn abstract again, compelling us to reflect on the picture itself, to ask how it is made, to speak about painting.

Only by working on the machine did he confront the formal and aesthetic demands his paintings made, with Groebel concluding that his pictures should have the same trancelike radiance as the cathode-ray-tube screens of the time. Eventually,

he turned away from his first attempts at “pixel pointillism” and moved towards the colour-laden, oversaturated wave-blur: the cold, flickering, backlit aesthetic and the beguiling effect of the monitor. So, what do we need to understand about television to understand Groebel’s painting? Or rather, what do we need to know about painting to understand what interests the artist about television? After all, his fascination with it seems almost like a feverish obsession.

If one ambition of twentieth-century abstract painting was for an immersive, contemplative, visual experience, it could be no match for television, a medium that forced itself upon – captivated, effectively bound itself to – its viewer. In Groebel’s words, it is effective, even when the effect is undesired. But beyond its totalising effects, what captured his interest was the way in which early TV images were blurred, composed of a mosaic of multiple, individual colour elements, brought into focus by the act of looking. Perception made the image in the same way that the late nineteenth-century cinematograph produced the illusion of motion from a fast-running sequence of film stills.

If television exploited this gap between perception and cognition, it meant that every image contained fragments that the eye could not register, but which were absorbed at a certain level, subliminal or otherwise. The viewer is submitted to a torrent of highly charged semiotic fragments. Soon, it was clear that these charged images could be harnessed to generate revenue through advertisements; thus, by the 80s, the advertorial arm of the television industry was in full swing.

Crucial to that decade was the advent of the satellite dish, which had a significant impact on the distribution and consumption of media, in both public and private sectors. In West Germany for example, the first private stations went on the air in 1984, and this marked the change from state-programmed television, with time-limited broadcasting windows, to an around-the-clock, seven-days-a-week unrestrained “flow” of broadcast material. Television audiences would henceforth have to live with incessant advertising, even if they were blissfully unaware of it. In the parlance of the Frankfurt School, television has become a “dreamless dream”, one that doesn’t so much take us where we’ve never been before, as shackle us and make us once again what we truly are, only more so. The amnesia and anonymity TV created are the spectres of Groebel’s paintings.

But Groebel’s artistic practice needn’t be limited to the narrative of a culture-industry dystopia. In fact, it has much more in common with literature, especially sci-fi and cyberpunk stories of invention and reconfiguration. His whole practice could almost be seen as analogous to J.G. Ballard’s 1960 short story “The Sound-Sweep”. In this work, all audible music has been made obsolete by technology, and all sounds have been deposited in solid surfaces. When acoustic sediments trickle out of these surfaces, people are triggered by emotional flashbacks, so professional cleaners are deployed to suck up sonic residues with “sonovacs”. One such sound-sweeper is a mute boy, Mangon. He befriends Madame Gioconda, an opera singer who lives in an abandoned recording studio, made destitute by the invention of an ultrasonic music that can only be felt. Over the course of the story, Mangon leads her into a (very Ballardian) landscape of sonic dumps where acoustic waste piles up:

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A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.¹

Here, in the midst of this huge heap of sound remnants, the mute finds his voice.

Matthias Groebel’s story as an artist is almost a visual counterpart to Ballard’s fiction. A pharmacist roams the electrical waste dumps of Münsterland looking for components with which to build a machine. He thinks differently about technology, against its predetermined, profit-driven use, and comes up with a form of expression born of the technical scrapheap of society. He then sits in front of the television late into the night, surfing through all its channels, losing himself in the flow for days on end, image-sweeping an abyss of uncharted material. Then, in his waking hours, he sifts through the images in his memory. Those that stick out get resuscitated through the machine and find their voice on canvas.

¹ J.G. Ballard, “The Sound-Sweep”, in *The Complete Short Stories: Volume One* (Fourth Estate, 2014), 164.