

Stil In Berlin : 'Interview: Gregor Hildebrandt', by Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, November 2, 2010.



Portrait: Trevor Good

Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel sat down with artist Gregor Hildebrandt to talk about his work, relation to music and the sacrifice of art.

Gregor Hildebrandt is a German artist living and working in Berlin since 1999. He works with a multitude of materials, best known for his use of cassette and video tape for use as a material in paintings/collages. His work ranges from small intimate works on paper to canvas paintings to very large installations using cassette tape, records and granite. In almost every work is embedded a song to which the piece's title is generally derived. He is represented by Wentrup in

Berlin and Almine Rech Gallery in Paris.

Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel is a french Berlin-based art critic, advisor to art collectors and an independent curator. Working with international young and established artists, she co-curated the show Art by Telephone in Paris during the Fiac, which will have a second edition during Miami Art Basel in December. She writes about the German contemporary art scene for french magazines, and is a permanent collaborator of Particules.

Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel: The works you proposed in the last few years have, for me, a very strong obsessive dimension, close to artists like Pierre Soulages, something dealing with a systematic, quasi-maniac practice.

Gregor Hildebrandt: Since 2000, I've been working on the tape collages, and this is one of the most important elements in my work. My collages always follow the same construction; the tape bands are glued on a big canvas, vertically, from left to right. Nearly every work is linked to a song and its length builds the composition. So, one could say that I'm obsessive, but I think that this is something every artist shares.

RLV: Every artist operates indeed with his own symbols set, but the elements you use reoccur often enough, couldn't we consider them as a real identifying vocabulary, a lexicon?

GH: Could be. But other works, using different materials exist even if this research is the basis of my work. For example, I've also done collages with toilet paper, or collages with my own eyelashes.

RLV: The toilet paper collages, which oscillate between humor and provocation- how would you connect them to the tape collages?

GH: The link is formal. I consider both for their ornament qualities. The toilet paper sheets are placed one after one so every element on the edge of the band forms a motif with the next one.

RLV: Do you consider your work tapes bands belonging to the history of painting?

GH: Yes, painting is the term that I use. I think that my work is directly derived from it. There are no colors per say, in the direct or conventional sense of the term but these recorded tape ribbons could be considered a musical painting. The support remains a canvas, the glue is applied with paint brush, and the placement of the glue always plays an essential role in how the cassette tapes will therein be organized. When you really get down to it, it really consists of painting. But I often call them collages, as I find the expression more chic. I see myself as an artist, rather than a painter. But I can't disown painting, it is the root of my work. I mean, during my studies, I was painting a great deal.

RLV: More than being close to the history of painting in general your work seems to be particularly close to the history of the monochrome, that "officially" started with Malevich at the beginning of the 20th century.

GH: Yes, I would say so. I feel close to Manzoni or Yves Klein, for example. My link with these artists is built on a reflection about space and painting. When someone looks at one of my larger collages, they can see there an evocation of the firmament. The small white marks, which are the material beginnings and endings of every song, can refer to stars. And clearly, the space is the

black surface. Klein was a kind of wild type and everybody used to tell him that above is black, not blue. I would say, who cares? For an artist, the idea builds the legitimacy, which is crucial. I've been thinking about paying homage to Klein. I would like to take on the idea of the Anthropometries, with the naked women covered in paint, who whored themselves on the canvas. Klein realized this work while an orchestra was playing, it would make sense considering what I'm focused about in my own work. Yeah, well, I still have to discuss that with my girlfriend...

RLV: You produced a certain number of art works that we, the spectators, can walk on, even trample. Is there something purposefully symbolic behind it - a desecration of art?

GH: You cannot walk on the tapestries, however you can tread on the imitation parquets. No, no, no. I absolutely don't want to desecrate art. For me an artwork is even more holy if people can walk on it.

RLV: I'm thinking right now about installations like Plan B by Rudolf Stingel's wall-to-wall carpet at New York's Grand Central Station in 2004. People were walking on it, damaging the work step by step. Makes it seem like walking on an art piece isn't irremediably holy.

GH: Yes, but my work deals with another symbol. For me it's like the people can do a promenade on music, they're walking on tapes, songs. I would rather compare that with a walk on a mosaic, in a temple or a church. I would say it's a total sacralization of the art piece.

RLV: What kind of relationship are you maintaining with music?

GH: Song's lyrics remain one of the most important dimensions of my work.

RLV: How do you manage to represent lyrics and music? Isn't it paradoxical that we only can face the material surface of music through the tape ribbons? Can we consider that as a materialist reduction?

GH: We don't hear them but they are still present on the canvas. For me there's something dealing with failure, in the fact that it is pictorially impossible to represent a song, contrary to what video allows, for example. The material remains filled with music even if it's not manifested. Music is, whatever happens. And the process that includes this transformation of music from sound to material particularly interests me.

RLV: What links the spectator to the works? Is it then about empiricism, a shared memory of a sound, a song, lyrics? In the end, is it something that exists outside of the art piece?

GH: The viewer is free to interpret the piece. Some of them don't know the songs evoked, and in this case don't have any memories associated with. I almost always give clues through the titles.



RLV: Where and when are your works meeting us?

GH: In the proportion and the surface.

RLV: You often use monumental proportions and dimensions. I remember facing your work at the Berlinische Galerie few months ago, a huge and very impressive piece, Großer Kassettensetzkasten. Has the relevance of an art piece to deal with its size?

GH: No, it is just that the greater in size a work is, the greater the failure is. It is a wider gesture.

RLV: One of the most striking dimensions of your work seems to be the notion of archive. Your pieces can appear as a meticulous grouping of sources. A material trace, like historians use documents to rebuild history.

GH: Yes, I'm concerned with nothing being lost. I never throw out anything myself, I keep everything.

RLV: So would you consider that music can be one form of History? A track of a social context, an historical period, a kind of collective memory?

GH: It is more about a feeling's state, someone's emotion, which can also be considered as historical. It's dealing with a personal and singular history. People are always listening to new music, whereas I still listen to the same old songs.

RLV: What is your relationship with the past? I find that lots of your pieces have a strong melancholic resonance, a kind of neo-romantic dimension. I'm thinking of one of your installation, "Das Schachspiel", which shows a chess party surrounded by the bodies of emptied bottles. Almost like a crime scene, we are the witnesses of a revolved instant.

GH: Yes, I feel this as well. But having grown up during the 80's, for me tapes are not as retro as they appear. When I discovered them, in the 90's, they were everywhere. Everybody had a tape recorder, made his own mix tapes, it was totally plausible to work with this material.

RLV: When I refer to the past, I'm thinking about your use of materials that can be the effigy of one's singular history. Songs can be considered as signs of the past paraded in the present. Are your works seizing an instant, a bit like the Tableaux-Pièges by Spoerri, who glued the rests of a dinner on a table, and demonstrated the ruins of a meal, the taste of it remaining fantasized by the viewer?

GH: Yes, it's true. My works on paper are even more impregnated with this reality. What we see here, represented, isn't my life but a universal experience that anybody can identify with. This happens with the images I source from movies but also with the tape bands that I organize on the canvas. The tape bands can reach the conscience- it is almost the same process than when you walk on the street with some song in your mind.

RLV: Would you consider music as a religion?

GH: Yes.

RLV: ...And The Cure are holding court like gods in this pantheon?

GH: I wouldn't say it like that but one could say that in a way, The Cure are sacred.

Interview: Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, photography: Trevor Good