

Gregor HILDEBRANDT

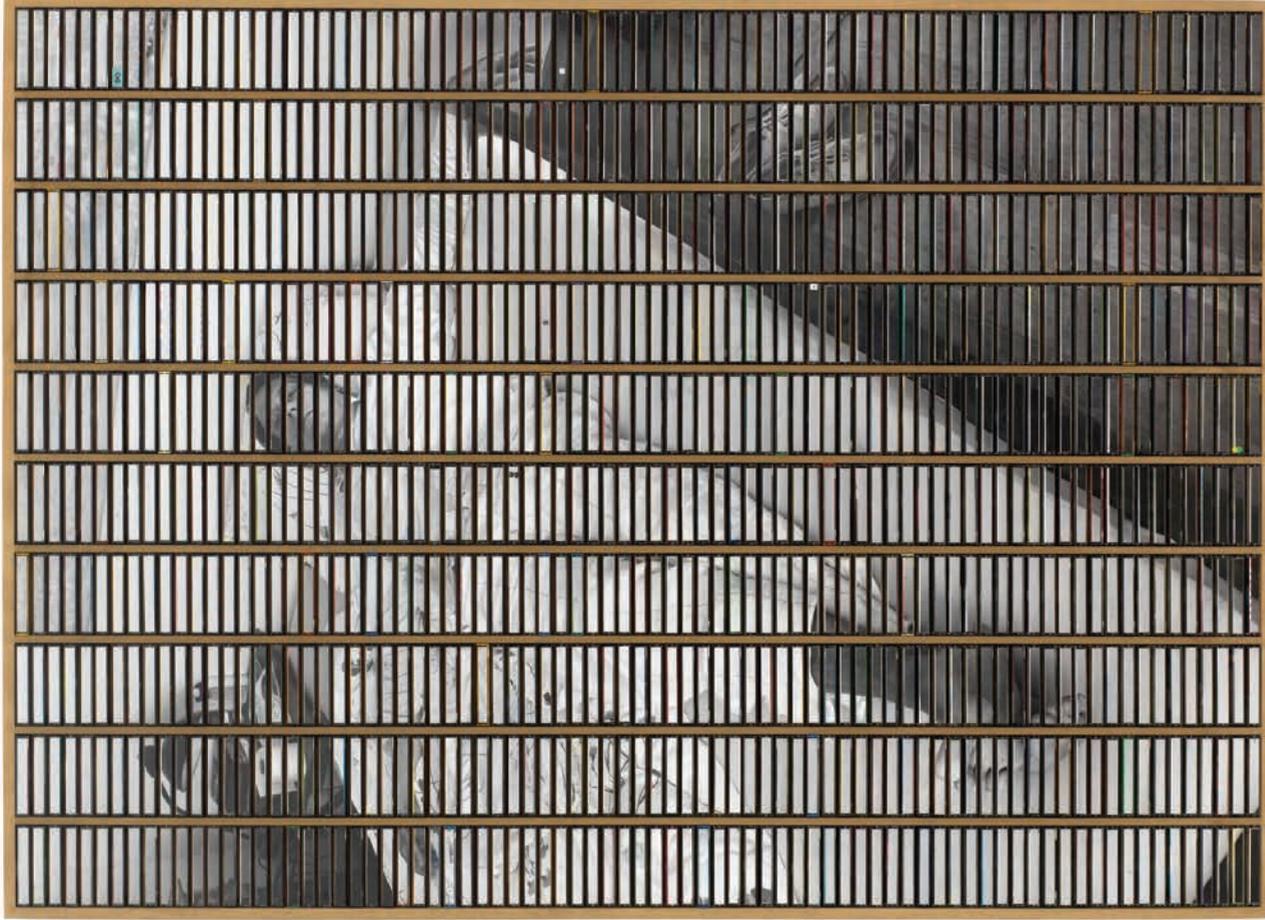
A House Made of Songs

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Gregor Hildebrandt: A House Made of Songs

GREGOR HILDEBRANDT, *Im Zimmer die Decke betrachtend*, 2018, inkjet print, inlays, and plastic boxes in wooden case, 170 × 125 cm. Photo by Roman März. Courtesy the artist and Wentrup, Berlin. Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



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BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

FEATURES

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GREGOR HILDEBRANDT, *Blaue Tage*, 1997, oil, dispersion, graphite on canvas, 222×370 cm. Photo by Michael Jensch. Courtesy the artist.

1. John Miller, "Excremental value: Piero Manzoni's 'Merda d'artista,'" *Tate Etc.* (May 1, 2007), <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-10-summer-2007/excremental-value>.

2 "With Hidden Noise or A Bruit Secret," *Tout-Fait*, https://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/Hidden%20Noise.html.

In painting but also in sculpture, visibility and invisibility, outwardness and concealment, go hand in hand. A painter puts some color on a canvas: the canvas is covered over. A gallerist or collector mounts the painting on a wall: that part of the wall is lost to view. Let the painting hang there for a long time and then move it to another location: the formerly covered spot will look different from its surroundings, its own paint a bit fresher, more robust.

Time flows at different speeds for exposed surfaces and concealed ones. Hidden things may outlast those seen. A painting can patch over an absence—making, for instance, a convenient cover-up for an unsightly hole in a wall. It may render invisible another painting, as was the case when the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan commissioned his brother-in-law André Masson to create an abstract painting to fit over Gustave Courbet's provocative close-up of a woman's crotch, *L'Origine du Monde* (*The Origin of the World*) (1866), the true gem of Lacan's collection. This was not the first time Courbet's notorious canvas had been concealed by another; it was previously hidden behind a landscape of his own.

Does anyone really know what is inside the 90 cans of *Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*) signed and numbered by Piero Manzoni in 1961? There have been various rumors over the years—some say the tins are filled with plaster—and these are justified by Manzoni's reputation as a wag and a trickster, but that reputation is also the best argument for believing that the cans' contents are precisely what he said they were. As the artist and writer John Miller has observed, "since no one reportedly has identified definitively what lies within Manzoni's cans, this ostensible transmogrification by critique may be nothing more than a chimera, yet it reflects rules that we all live by, like it or not."¹

And what about Marcel Duchamp's *A bruit secret* (*With Hidden Noise*) (1916)? This, you'll remember, is a ball of twine pressed between two brass plates, joined by four long screws. Before tightening all the screws, Duchamp asked his friend and patron Walter Conrad Arensberg to place at the heart of the piece a small object—the identity of which Duchamp claimed to have never known. Arensberg, the artist said, "never told me what it was, and I didn't want to know. It was a sort of secret between us"—an unusual and perhaps suspicious phrase, for when people share a secret, it normally means that they *both* know the secret, which

they keep from everyone else. But here—unless Duchamp was contradicting himself—he seems to imply, that he and Arensberg were connected precisely by the fact that one had a secret from the other.

In any case, both Duchamp and Arensberg went to their graves without revealing what it is that makes a noise when the object is shaken—though I suppose it's been a good many years since anyone has dared to try this, which is unfortunate. "Listen to it," suggested Duchamp. "I don't know; I will never know whether it is a diamond or a coin."² The two opposing possibilities the artist held out suggest he saw the contents as existing above all on a gamut of value, from great to small. After all, Arensberg, a wealthy man, could have easily afforded a diamond in the cause of his friend's art—especially for a work that would become part of his own collection.

Most of Gregor Hildebrandt's artworks, likewise, contain something unseen—concealing a hidden noise, you might say. His practice is varied, but what he is best known for are paintings, sculptures, and architectural elements such as walls made of legacy recording media including vinyl records and cassette tapes, which were sound encoded, or so we assume. Once incorporated by Hildebrandt, these sounds will never be heard again. The art object becomes a tomb for the music it memorializes.

Well, maybe that's putting it a little too dramatically. Records and tapes are media of storage but also of reproduction. While it's true that to verify if the music of The Cure or whoever is actually encoded in the particular copies utilized by Hildebrandt, as the artist says, one would need to destroy the work, just as one would with Manzoni's cans of *Merda d'artista* in order to find what's inside. But unlike the presumed contents of the Italian artist's tins, record copies featured in Hildebrandt's works are widely distributed—ranging from the bands The Cure, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Sonic Youth (his most cited sources) to Led Zeppelin, Portishead, the Velvet Underground, Jacques Brel, Kate Bush, Leonard Cohen, Arvo Pärt, Georg Friedrich Händel, and Herbert von Karajan's renowned cycle of Beethoven's nine symphonies commissioned from the Deutsche Grammophon label. This partial list serves to demonstrate, by the way, that Hildebrandt's musical references are not necessarily based in



GREGOR HILDEBRANDT, *Niemand schaut mir nach... (Harald Juhnke: Straßen von Berlin)*, 2013, magnetic audiotape coating, adhesive tape, acrylic on canvas, 192.5×139 cm. Photo by Roman März. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech, Paris/Brussels/London/New York/Shanghai. Private collection, United States.



Installation of GREGOR HILDEBRANDT's "Ich bin ein end und ein beginn (George)," 2015, start and end of audiotape, acrylic on canvas, 244 × 140.5 × 4 cm, at "Save the Data!," Kunstpalais Erlangen, 2015. Photo by Erich Malter. Courtesy the artist and Wentrup, Berlin. Private collection, Germany.

underground culture, as often said, but range from the margins to the mainstream. That said, there are some true rarities among his sources. I was curious, for instance, about the words "*La mia mente ha preso il volo*" (my mind took flight) in the title of one of Hildebrandt's paintings from 2016; a Google search revealed this to be the first line of an obscure David Bowie song *Ragazzo Solo, Ragazza Sola* (1970), set to the music of his first hit *Space Oddity* (1969) but with Italian lyrics about a lonely boy and lonely girl—nothing to do with space at all.

Hildebrandt was born in 1974 in Bad Homburg, a historic spa town just north of Frankfurt, and has for many years been based in Berlin although he commutes regularly to Munich, where he teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts. The visual and conceptual acuity manifested in his work is accompanied by a remarkable sense of energy and enthusiasm: this is an artist who loves to make things, not just his art. For example, he has been releasing records since 2018 on his own label, Grzegorzki Records, and he curates exhibitions at Grzegorzki Shows, a tiny space in the courtyard of the building that houses his studio in the multicultural neighborhood of Wedding.

The shows are not necessarily what one would expect to see even at the most experimental gallery. The last time I visited in February this year, it was "Katharina Domhardt. Stila," a display of all the diplomas and certificates acquired by a Berlin hairdresser in the arts of cutting, coloring, and so on. The musician Timon Karl Kaleyta explained in a text a possible rationale for this exhibition, namely that while "an artist could make up whatever he wanted, he could have, just for fun and to fool us, issued the craziest diplomas and certificates to himself and simply declare them as art." He further added that these certificates are "much more valuable than art, these were real, certified documents, they testified to everybody entering this space that everything would be done properly here. This was much better than any art I know of!"³—at least if you need your hair groomed, as we all do eventually.

I was there, though, not to bear witness to Katharina Domhardt's professional qualifications but to learn more about Hildebrandt's own work. One thing I already knew was that a studio visit with the artist was always ceremonial in the taking and exchanging of Polaroids: he takes two pictures with everyone that visits, one of which he signs and gives to the visitor while the other is signed by the visitor and posted on the studio's walls.

Hildebrandt explained that the camera was given to him by his dealer Emmanuel Perrotin, and it was then that the artist started to take pictures of those who came to see him. "It was Christoph Tannert from the Künstlerhaus Bethanien who said, 'Oh, that's a great idea! I'll sign it for you, and you sign one for me as well.' And I realized that's a good idea. It's an exchange," he recalled. "And then I have the name. Because, you know, sometimes people come in a group and I can't remember all of their names. For instance here"—he says, pointing to a group of pictures—"you see a group that came from an organization called Outset. It's a charity that supports contemporary art. They buy pieces to give to museums. Michael Sailstorfer, another artist from Emmanuel's gallery, came here and said, 'Oh, that's a great idea, I also want to do that.' Here, I'm super proud, it's John Bock! Here's Anselm Reyle . . . Isa Genzken . . . my girlfriend Alicja Kwade . . . here's my daughter . . ."

To kick off the studio visit proper, I asked Hildebrandt about his beginnings as an artist. "It really started when as a teenager I went to a kind of summer academy where I got to know some people who were involved with art. I started studying in 1995 in Mainz, with Friedemann Hahn as my teacher. I moved to the Berlin Academy in 1998."

And what was his work like in those days? "At school I started making a series of paintings that looked like black abstract paintings, but they were based on the view of a wooden table top.

3. Timon Karl Kaleyta, "Art & Customer Service," Grzegorzki Shows, <http://grzegorzkishows.com/en/shows/katharina-domhardt>.



Installation view of GREGOR HILDEBRANDT's "In meiner Wohnung gibt es viele Zimmer," Perrotin, New York, 2018. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, New York/Paris/Hong Kong/Tokyo/Seoul/Shanghai.

I was very interested in how people would scratch things into the wood—a kind of graffiti. I didn't exactly copy the graffiti—I wanted to do them in my own way. The paintings were one by two meters—that was the size of the real table in the bar. I decided to make 21 of them, because I was 21 years old. But I got a little bit bored after the fifth one. Then I decided to do a polyptych of four by four of them, that is 16. So, I had five big ones and 16 small ones to arrive at the number 21. After that I did a self-portrait—22."

He explained that the phrase "Tönend hallt die Jugend," which also later became the title of a 2018 exhibition of his recent works at the Kunsthalle Recklinghausen, has been a part of his work since the early days. Hildebrandt conceived the phrase, which could be translated literally as "youth echoes resoundingly," as a rendition of Sonic Youth—but, as he explained, "in German that's so totally from another time that it sounds like something from the poetry of Stefan George, or something like that."

George was a symbolist poet whose linguistic technique later led philosopher Theodor Adorno to speak of "a poetry of invented ornamentation" in which "the compulsion to invent that ornamentation made it more than merely ornamental; it was the expression of a need both critical and hopeless." As Adorno also said, this was the product of "an embarrassingly self-proclaimed doctrine of aristocracy, born of a will to style and visibly lacking in tradition, confidence, and taste."⁴

There is something odd and ironic about translating Sonic Youth into George-esque tonality, making out of it a phrase that, as Hildebrandt says, "is totally not cool—it's old and pathetic and a little bit out of time." The artist considers Sonic Youth, by contrast, "totally of our time, and we were all listening to them. But to use that as a title would have been boring. I didn't want to paint like Cy Twombly. I wanted to paint like The Cure or Sonic Youth." What would it mean to paint like that? "It's something that doesn't exist," he answered. But for Hildebrandt, at the time, it meant something like the paintings he began to make out of rolls of audio tape: "a dark, cold surface with something poetic inside."

Hildebrandt doesn't believe that his usage of records and tapes destroys the music within, as he works with blanks on which he



Installation view of GREGOR HILDEBRANDT's "In meiner Wohnung gibt es viele Zimmer," Perrotin, New York, 2018. Photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, New York/Paris/Hong Kong/Tokyo/Seoul/Shanghai.

4. Theodor Adorno, "Stefan George," *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 189, 181.



GREGOR HILDEBRANDT, *Daddy, you and I (PAAR)*, 2018, cut vinyl records, acrylic, canvas, wood, 292 x 840 cm. Photo by Trevor Good. Courtesy the artist and Wentrup Gallery, Berlin. Arngrimsson Collection.

re-records the music to fill the space he needed. Likewise, in the pieces using vinyl, he explains, "The records are pressed by us; it's so crazy but we're really doing it. The first ones with black records, no, those were made with old records that people didn't want any more. A lot of them also had scratches in them. Then, I was starting to make records in different colors, and then white records—and to buy a hundred white vinyl copies of the Beatles' *White Album* would have been too expensive—so we decided to press them ourselves."

This seemed like the moment to ask Hildebrandt about the function of humor in his art. "Humor?" he repeated coolly. "It's not funny. Some funny things happen because it's life, but for me it's more a poetic way to have a wall of sound, and a house made of songs to move into. And then the small, colorful pieces?"—he said, referring to the small geometrical paintings he makes out of strips of colored tape. "That means the beginning and the end, because it's the starting tape from the cassette and the ending tape from the cassette." He cites a line from a poem by Stefan George, "*Ich bin ein end und ein beginn*" (I am an end and a beginning), from George's 1914 book *Der Stern des Bundes* (The Star of the Covenant)—which reminds me in turn of TS Eliot's 1940 poem "East Coker," the second of his *Four Quartets*. The verse starts, "In my beginning is my end," and concludes, "In my end is my beginning," eating its tail like the legendary ouroboros, the emblem of eternity. "I was beginning something new with these ending paintings," Hildebrandt added, "And for me it was very special because I was starting to make these colorful paintings around the time my mother died, so that represented the end and the beginning in that very personal way. When I was starting out as an artist, my mother always wanted me to make colorful paintings because I was making black monochrome paintings, and she felt they could never succeed."

But it seems wonderfully absurd, I said, to make paintings by such indirect means, as does the sheer quantity of labor that

goes into them. "Yes," he responded, "sometimes it's a bit of an overdose. But why do you have to do it simple when you can also do it complicated?" With that in mind, I told the artist of the difficult time I had trying to understand his creation process for his "rip-off" paintings, such as *Niemand schaut mir nach...* (Harald Juhnke: *Straßen von Berlin*) and *Es fängt zu regnen an. Taxis fahren vorbei. Ich werd heut laufen.* (Harald Juhnke: *Straßen von Berlin*) (both 2013), for which he makes both positive and negative versions of the same gestural imagery on surfaces made of strips of VHS tape—I wanted to get a clearer sense of what the process is. I reminded him that when I was reviewing a show of his work for *Artforum* I emailed him about it, and he had suggested we talk on the phone. When he explained the process to me, he made me understand it, but soon afterwards I realized that I already couldn't understand it anymore. My review made do with the most minimal explanation.⁵ Now, I asked him again, why is it that sometimes the pairs mirror each other, and sometimes not. "It's really complicated!" he admitted. He clarified it again, a long, complex explanation: the process has something to do with placing the VHS tape onto adhesive tape, making his painterly gestures with a brush or roller, and then pulling the two strata of tape apart—but there are intricacies that remain inexplicable to me.

Perhaps that's just as well. Art should keep some of its secrets. Hildebrandt's work keeps many things tacit within it—and yet does so in the most open spirit imaginable.

Gregor Hildebrandt lives and works in Berlin. His works have been shown internationally in numerous renowned institutions and galleries. His recent solo shows include "Tönend hallt die Jugend" in 2018 at Kunsthalle Recklinghausen; "In meiner Wohnung gibt es viele Zimmer" in 2018 at Perrotin, New York; "Der Raum ist die Miete (The Room is the Rent)" in 2019 at Almine Rech, Brussels; and most recently, "Fliegen weit vom Ufer fort" in 2020 at Wentrup Gallery, Berlin.

Barry Schwabsky is a poet and art critic based in New York. His most recent books include *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (2019), *Landscape Painting Now* (2019), and a monograph on the work of the British artist, *Gillian Carnegie* (2020). His new collection of poetry, *A Feeling of But*, will be published in 2021.

5. Barry Schwabsky, "Gregor Hildebrandt," *Artforum* (February 2019), <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201902/gregor-hildebrandt-78453>.