

## Grégory Sugnaux - Post Scriptum

### Bibliotheca Hertziana

Tristan Weddigen

#### Paintings Not Dead

While art is commonly thought to be *painting*, criticism has survived on declaring it dead. Grégory Sugnaux, instead, adopts the post-punk strategy of skillfully painting defunct, low, bad, and non-art. Behind the flat, ostensible figures – the walking dead, the mocking fool, the derided crucifix, the flamboyant freak, the evil clown, the hollow mask, the stick figure, the scapegoat – painting reenters the stage from the depth of the background. Programmatically, in one of his new works, a smirking cadaver emerges from the interstices, left blank within the purple brushwork that coats a refrigerator door.

As an Art Fellow of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Grégory Sugnaux has ingeniously navigated the challenge of finding himself locked in a grand cemetery of art history by adopting the strategy of *after-painting*: both painting after templates and post-painting that asserts itself through self-denial. As if hiding in plain sight from vampires, he adeptly mimics us art historians by tapping into our scientific resources, digging at the margins of Italian visual culture, and rummaging through the legacy of Henriette Hertz, the founder of the institute. To the scholars' bewilderment, he unveils an assemblage of overlooked or repressed visual remnants, such as that mountain of sea foam mixed with ashes, its shape gradually shifting into Henriette Hertz's deathbed portrait, tipping *la mer* into *la mère*, the *sea* into the *mother*. *Shapeshifting* – an early project title – encapsulating a monstrous metamorphosis, not only alters the motifs but also the institute in its distorted reflection, scattered with visual *clichés*, anecdotes, puns, masquerades, grimaces, and tilting figures.

Consistent with his previous work in Rome, the grotesque and its facial expressions remain a leitmotif in Grégory Sugnaux's inquiry – for crossing the doorstep of the Bibliotheca Hertziana's hellish *mascherone*, which he has previously portrayed, also meant facing the dark side of art history. The truth about the fanciful, permuting, meaningless Renaissance grotesques is that they are uncanny. Similarly, both the individual bizarre motifs and the disconcerting combinations of paintings in the present series let *das Unheimliche* creep into the institute's art historical imaginary, suggesting that the grotesque is interwoven with the fabric of reality. When Grégory Sugnaux executes a painstaking, but elongated replica of a famed caricature by Gianlorenzo Bernini on a scrap tabletop – possibly in a nod to Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* – the baroque joke, retold at length in an estranging pitch, turns worrisome. Intentionally referencing Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*, which both evokes and exorcizes cultural psychic energies across ages and peoples, Grégory Sugnaux chases, paints, and repaints haunting images and visual memes from childhood television, such as *Thomas the Tank Engine*, or the internet and books, treating art history as a cultural technology of psychological excitement and appeasement, and presenting his paintings as addictive tranquilizers.

Grégory Sugnaux's undisciplined, yet methodical artistic research is eye-opening by virtue of mimicking art historical practices. For instance, the old scholarly game of identifying historical visual references in works of art is carried *ad absurdum* when motifs – like the jester giving the finger – are borrowed from digitized anonymous Italian fanzines, which themselves systematically pirate visual sources. By deftly mixing styles from a diverse palette, for instance, by reproducing Federico Zuccaro's *Temples of Virtue* fresco of the Bibliotheca Hertziana in the frivolous style of Raoul Dufy, Grégory Sugnaux questions the inherent essentialism of the history of style as a methodological construct. His strategy of demonstrating the power of painting through its ability to paint non-art can be seen as exacerbating the *paragone*, that rivalry between the visual arts, which has emerged as a paradigm of early modern art history.

Grégory Sugnaux's works also reinterpret basic modernist notions of painting, such as the figure-ground relation, which here follows the principle of the tattoo: primitive, simplified graphic motifs, anthropological icons from antique anti-Christian wall drawings to baroque cartoons and countercultural logos etched into the acned, scarified, and feverish, painterly epidermal organ of the canvas. Although the *superflat* and lunatic icons are brushed with viscous *alla prima*, they still signify irreversible self-stigmatizations, painful self-exposures. Misdrawn lifelines.

The exhibition at the Bibliotheca Hertziana bifurcates into two distinct perspectives. One part of the series is displayed in a white cube, installed beneath Federico Zuccaro's mannerist, art theoretical frescoes. The other lot is dispersed throughout the institute's offices, mostly supplanting existing works of art, as if to cope with the impostor syndrome that an artist might experience at an art history institute. Finally, the faux art historian transmogrifies into a faux curator: in *Post Scriptum*, a video collaboration with Paul Fritz and Virginie Sistek reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project*, Grégory Sugnaux stages a ghostly exhibition of his paintings in the derelict shell of a former fine art gallery turned discotheque, soon a new premise of the Bibliotheca Hertziana. In doing so, Grégory Sugnaux preemptively captures a layer of our institutional history before it comes into existence, akin to the antique frescos in Federico Fellini's *Roma*, which fade and vanish in the very moment of their discovery, lost at first sight. In his earlier works, Grégory Sugnaux portrayed the dematerialized, ubiquitous figures of popular culture across different eras that contaminate the internet and whose hypnotic stares haunt the collective subconscious, embodying global angst in paint. In the *Post Scriptum* series, Grégory Sugnaux shifts his method of exorcistic appropriation and spots potential memes of art history and visual culture, mostly in the grotesque drolleries found at the margins of the great narrative, which they comment on, taunt, and desacralize, to divert the attention and open the door to painting, undead.

## Annabelle Hirsch

### Grotesque Reloaded

In the fifteenth century, an anonymous artist penned his observations about working in the recently discovered "chambers" of the Roman Domus Aurea: "The summer feels cooler here than the winter... Along with supplies of bread, ham, fruits, and wine, we crawl on the ground, presenting a spectacle more comical than the grotesques."

Anyone who witnessed the Swiss artist Grégory Sugnaux emerge from his personal Domus, his *grotto* in recent weeks, ascending, coughing and panting, from the basement of via Gregoriana 9 – the main setting for the video central to this exhibition – wearing an almost startled expression, as if he had lost awareness of both the temporal and spatial dimensions to which he had been transported, will inevitably recall those early reports. You might find they are evocative of those Renaissance painters who descended through narrow shafts not far from the Colosseum, stumbling upon a perfectly preserved past just a few meters beneath the floor of their own time. Enthralled by the frescoes of antiquity, these artists were captivated by the grotesques—hybrids of human, animal, and plant species—to such a degree that they conjured forth these beguilingly disquieting monsters onto the surface, recreating them within the contemporary context, even to embellish the rooms of the Vatican.

Forming a central theme in Grégory Sugnaux's artistic approach and practice are elements of descent, digging, retrieval, and breaking of boundaries between yesterday and today, between the sacred and the profane, as well as integrating figures and elements that seem disparate or incongruent upon first glance. Equally significant is the bewildering simultaneity of emotions that this process evokes. Fear, affection, mockery, disgust, attraction, and repulsion are feelings that simultaneously sustain and fragment in face-to-face encounters with his art, as

well as in the process of creation. This holds true for his works around the so-called “cursed images.” Those images that have surged to the surface from the depths of the internet since 2016 distinguish themselves not only by their questionable quality and disconcerting content (usually involving cuddly toys, food, disparate body parts, teeth, animals, nothing is where it is supposed to be), but mainly because they evoke a sensation within us that we do not fully grasp or comprehend. A diffuse pleasure in agitation, a hunger for the ambiguity embodied in the image. This holds true for the series created during his four-month scholarship at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, as well as the video and exhibition titled *Post Scriptum*. Where the Swiss artist would once have typically immersed himself in the internet for his research in preparation of his artistic endeavors, seeking hovering, floating ghost images, lost visual souls, and providing them, if only momentarily, for the duration of a show, with an anchor, a sense of a place, a contextual backdrop, he has now plunged into the seemingly endless expanse of the Bibliotheca Hertziana archive, allowing images to unfold before him.

At the beginning, there was a word, a search term: *grotesque*. The Bibliotheca Hertziana’s library catalog responded with over 3500 results. Grégory Sugnaux kept scrolling, looking, sifting, and feeling, until something concrete began to take shape. Certain patterns. Connections spanning epochs and genres. Figures and gestures that served as an echo of his experience in the city of Rome, its layers, its decadence, its irreverence. As was customary for him, he quickly and intuitively replicated initial elements: a caricature of Pope Innocent XI, seemingly smoking in bed, by Gianlorenzo Bernini, which he sketched in an elongated form on a wooden board found on a street in Rome. A naked old hag pulling her hair like a curtain, which he painted over a preexisting image depicting the Halloween disaster in Seoul. Harlequins, punks, witches. Many of his characters stem from magazines of the seventies and eighties. Others, like the *Alexamenos Graffito* (depicting Jesus as a donkey, one of the earliest caricatures of its kind), derive from books that researchers left lying around in the library, the pages of which the artist secretly leafed through in their absence. They are often the unloved protagonists of the visual memory of art and pop culture, the quirky fringe characters, those images, which Grégory Sugnaux has chosen in an affectionate gesture as they are rarely sought after, represent an attempt to elevate the comedic. They are the so-called Roman fools. Grégory Sugnaux’s artworks seldom exist in isolation; rather, their true potential is unveiled in dialogue with others, in the juxtaposition within the context of an exhibition. It is the encounter with elements that do not seamlessly align that propels movement for the artist, revealing truths that already exist but seemingly lurk and are often overlooked by us. In the case of *Post Scriptum*, Sugnaux’s images came together for the first time even before the exhibition, shielded from the gaze of viewers. The clandestine gathering took place in the mentioned *grotto*, into which he disappeared for days—a location fittingly named for this mysterious convergence. Its name is *La Cage aux Folles*. This modern ruin is nestled in the heart of Rome, just a few meters from the Spanish Steps, and a short stroll from the Bibliotheca Hertziana. Like almost everything in this city, this abandoned, forgotten structure has lived through several incarnations. In the twenties, it housed an art gallery, whose founder became a notorious smuggler and forger in history. Later, in the seventies and eighties, the Roman youth gathered here to dance and lose themselves in the night. In the future, the overflowing library archive will find a new home here.

Before the impending arrival of books with their categories, styles, and epochs, the artist liberated their overlooked heroes. He welcomed them to wander through these spaces, intermingle, expand, adhere to the walls, and claim the ruin entirely for themselves. Much like parasites. In a way, akin to the artist himself. It is conceivable that he and his subterranean fools will persistently linger in the scholarly halls of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, even after their departure, intermittently disrupting the established order.

Lara Demori

## Uncanny Images

Coming across Grégory Sugnaux's paintings, the viewer is immediately overwhelmed by a sense of unsettledness and displacement, mirroring the disturbing and hallucinatory visions that inhabit the artist's cosmos. Attempts to interpret such a world are bound to fail, suggesting aphasia — the inability to comprehend or articulate something — and a general lack of unity. Yet, the deeper we delve into this magma of phantasmagorias, the more it resurfaces. Suddenly, a carousel of figures materializes, akin to a postmodern *danse macabre*: boorish fools, screaming punk kids, grotesque stock characters, and a grinning skeletal pope. With prolonged looking, however, patterns emerge. They ground the relationships between these personalities, revealing Grégory Sugnaux's approach to painting and visual culture and situating his creations across various art historical genres, notably caricature and the postmodern trend of "bad painting."

As the fifteenth century drew to a close, Leonardo da Vinci, fascinated by the peculiarities of human faces, created a series of grotesque heads. What emerged was a collection of caricatures *avant la lettre*, in which the artist, with a scientific eye, imbued every fine line and facial feature with human emotion, exploring ugliness through the radical exaggeration of physical characteristics. Since the Renaissance, caricature has evolved, abandoning mimetic and realistic intentions in favor of exaggerated forms used to emphasize physical deformities that reflect moral corruption. Thus, it became a tool of political satire, as seen in Britain and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it was associated with the rise of illustrated magazines and newspapers, and ultimately mass media.

Since the early 2000s, caricature has embraced digital technology, resulting in the creation of cartoons, animations, and memes, often based on illogical yet always ironic and entertaining relations between language and mass visual culture. Grégory Sugnaux works with similar associations, drawing from the same mishmash of contemporary images, accentuating their every facet, and playing with the grotesque. His paintings act as explorations of both the human soul and its external appearance, thus questioning the leitmotif of portraiture.

For instance, the work that serves as the face of this exhibition, entitled *Did You Enjoy It?*, depicts an archetypal court jester—red and white with a tacky, spiked hat—but placed in our contemporary reality to the point of adopting our (crude) gestures and customs. The title does not explain the subject, but it elicits a hidden laugh from the visitor without fully revealing its mystery. The figure originates from the Bibliotheca Hertziana's digital collection of countercultural fanzines from the 1970s, specifically from the archive of Pablo Echaurren and Claudia Salaris. During his four-month residency, Grégory Sugnaux meticulously dissected the Bibliotheca Hertziana's vast collection of books and archives in search of protagonists for his images. This cast of characters will also live in some of the building's offices during the exhibition, intermingling with the people who inhabit those spaces. A video made in the long-defunct nightclub La Cage aux Folles is slated to close the show in the Sala del Disegno of the Bibliotheca Hertziana. La Cage aux Folles, via Gregoriana 9, the showroom of Ludovic Spiridon at the beginning of the twentieth century, transformed into a disco club in the seventies and eighties. Temporarily installed there, Grégory Sugnaux's paintings gave life back to the place and, with a spooky twist, materialized the memories of the club's past.

These images are in keeping with the seventies tradition of "bad painting," a trend that grouped painters who departed from modernist and classical norms to explore "bad subject matter," like Anselm Kiefer in *Heroic Symbols*, or an "aesthetic of ugliness," which involved a deliberate process of deskilling. This approach included a child-like style of painting (akin to the work of Jean Dubuffet), animistic and primitive figuration, and deliberately imperfect or crude painting technique.

Grégory Sugnaux's pastiches, often relying on ugly and kitsch imagery, enter this postmodern tradition and engage in a meta-discourse that reflects on the medium itself. They analytically deconstruct painting as a medium to reveal its potentialities, limitations, and, possibly, its very "end"—potentially foreseeing the Hegelian concept of the "end of art." In a work displayed in one of the Bibliotheca Hertziana's offices, a painted and framed door of a refrigerator—an *objet trouvé* the artist discovered on the street—Grégory Sugnaux depicts an old skeletal figure emerging from a coffin. The eerie subject, rendered with an unrefined technique of messy brushstrokes, parodies modernist painting and its aspirations for purity, introducing disruptive elements such as the fusion of high and popular culture. The cheap material support, paired with a figure high up in the religious aristocracy, blends elements of pastiche, imitation, appropriation, political nihilism, and commercial complicity.

Grégory Sugnaux's images play with these features without resolution, leaving the viewer with an ambiguous sense of unease. Upon closer inspection, however, they seem to whisper: "There is only bad art because there is no such thing as art."

## Grégory Sugnaux - Bio

Grégory Sugnaux (b. 1989) lives and works in Fribourg. His work is generally concerned with the status of the image through the mediation of exhibiting and painting. In extracting the familiar image from its existing pictorial codes, he rejects hierarchical values in art history and tries to turn the attention to the representation of alternative systems of image-making. With curation alongside his artistic practice, Sugnaux investigates the conditions of the exhibition in his varying approaches. From 2016 to 2020, he was co-curator of the project space WallRiss in Fribourg, and since 2017 co-curator of Backslash Festival in Zurich. In 2015, he received the Kiefer Hablitzel I Göhner Art Price, and was a finalist for the 2020 Swiss Art Awards. Recent solo exhibitions include *Into the Wolf's Mouth* at Lateral, Rome, *Mental Mask* at suns.works, Zurich (2023), *data romance* at Château de Gruyères (2022), *heute denken, morgen fertig* at Display, Berlin (2020), and *Définitif, donc provisoire* at Kunsthalle Friart in 2019. During his stay at the Swiss Institute in Rome, 2022–2023, he continued his investigation into monstrous figures by creating two new series of paintings. In 2024, Sugnaux is a finalist of the Swiss Art Awards, Basel.

## Grégory Sugnaux – *Lost Flock*

For *Lost Flock*, his solo exhibition at the project space POST EX in Rome, Grégory Sugnaux has produced some 20 new paintings, all in the last three or four months. I am tempted to write that he paints 'like wild'. In fact, Grégory has a remarkable rhythm of productivity. In the morning, he prepares his studio; in the afternoon, he paints. "A painting a day," he laughs, and I almost believe him. Since September, Grégory has been a fellow at Istituto Svizzero in Rome. His studio there is located in an outbuilding that looks onto Sant'Isidoro a Capo le Case, a church complex where the Nazarenes (a romantic-religious German artist colony) lived and painted in the early 19th century, and which today serves as a monastery for Irish Franciscans. Rumours abound that the monastery is haunted, with lights flickering behind the windows at night. I don't know if Grégory knows about that, but somehow it fits to his work. The afternoon sun shines through the windows into his studio, where we have had many conversations since autumn about his paintings, about his oscillation between abstraction and figuration, about future exhibitions, and about the stories and faces in his images.

Grégory lives in Fribourg – a very Catholic city with a medieval centre and a Goethean cathedral – and since autumn, in Rome. He also lives in the history of painting and in the never-ending stream of online digital images, both of which inform his work. At his studio, I am surrounded by faces looking at me. Some of the heads and figures seem like they want to break out of their frame – and sometimes they actually do (where Grégory continues the painting on the narrow sides of the stretched canvas). They make me shudder and grin, smiling mischievously, or grimacing and showing their teeth.

*Lost Flock* is what Grégory calls this exhibition, which he has thoughtfully composed for POST EX. For him, the moment of the exhibition is key; this is where the individual paintings come together and form a narrative. The confused, lost sheep. As Grégory explains on WhatsApp, the title refers to a task in the video game *Black & White*. It also alludes to his interest in the biblical iconography of the 'lost sheep', and, last but not least, to the individual lost in the world – perhaps lost in the flood of digital images as well. I recognise a sad Tom the cat (from the cartoon *Tom & Jerry*), a manga-like face, an emoji crying black tears, and Super Mario dissolving into a blur. And I see many more characters that I don't know (having grown up without a television in the 1980s and '90s!) but who somehow seem familiar and whom I suspect are from Grégory's immense pop culture reference system.

The motifs, traditions, and techniques of the history of painting specifically and the history of art and culture in general also play a role in his work. In one of the new paintings, I recognise the grotesque 16th-century entrance gate at Via Gregoriana 30 – not far from Istituto Svizzero and inspired by Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo – and in another picture, a carnival mask (perhaps from Grégory's hometown of Fribourg?). When asked about painters important to him, Grégory answers me with at least 20 WhatsApp messages. Jean-Frédéric Schnyder, Nicole Eisenman, Miriam Cahn, Nora Kapfer, Marlene Dumas, and Amelie von Wulffen are faithful companions, and their influence can be felt in his paintings. The different visual references circulate in his mind without hierarchy, and are stored in his digital image archive.

Grégory's painting, for me, is closely related to the debates on the status of the image, of images, in their real and digital presence or absence in our contemporary world. Both access to and the production of images have exploded in the vastness of the World Wide

Web. We are bombarded with myriad images decoupled from their original context and accompanied by ambivalent information. Take, for example, the phenomenon of “cursed images” – which Grégory is particularly interested in, and which became popular around 2015. The term refers to online images with mysterious or disturbing content, usually of poor digital quality, which fundamentally question the reason for the image’s existence in the first place. Grégory plays with this omnipresence of weird, confusing, funny or uncanny images that pop up in our Instagram feeds or on Tumblr blogs in the depths of the WWW. They are images and motifs that often seem familiar but can also be unsettling or irritating. I see the crucified Mickey Mouse in one of his new paintings before me.

At the same time, Grégory is concerned with the materiality and techniques of painting. He experiments with different ways of applying paint, for example. Sometimes the layers of paint on his canvases are thin and translucent, sometimes thick and porous. Currently, he tells me, he is particularly interested in the boundary between abstraction and figuration. It’s a topic that touches on the legibility and location of images and their content. In his latest paintings, the actual subject of the picture disappears behind the structure of the applied paint; all I see is what seems to be a blurred face. To what extent can a figure or form be abstracted until it disappears from our gaze? What is it that emerges in this moment of blurring?

Gioia Dal Molin, May 2023

Grégory Sugnaux, *Into The Wolf's Mouth*  
10.2. -10.3.2023

Grégory Sugnaux's solo exhibition *Into The Wolf's Mouth* comprises a new series of portraits developed by the artist during his current residency in Rome at Istituto Svizzero.

Sugnaux paints a range of discernible characters that he has encountered when sifting through art history references, niche internet culture forums, found printed matter, and private photographs. The artist conceptualizes a sort of sympathetic bond with every portrait, giving them names to convey his particular affection towards these renderings and denoting responsibility over the character's selfhood. To add reverence, the exhibition's title *Into The Wolf's Mouth* translates a common Italian idiom, „*In bocca al lupo*“ portending good fortune over every one.

Haunted or cursed images shared online—known for possessing uncanny attributes, unsettling gazes, and poor aesthetics—may represent the metamorphosis of the grotesque. Appearing throughout social media and image sharing platforms, Sugnaux likens their aesthetics to the contemporary and formal use of the term. The etymology of “grotesque” comes from Renaissance-era excavations of the Domus Aurea, the Roman emperor Nero's now-buried temple. Nero adorned the Domus Aurea walls with hybridized human-like creatures bearing bestial features that enthralled well-known painters at the time. Using the Italian word for cave, *grotto*, the grotesque was established and used to describe this stylistic revival of the ornamental ancient Roman figures during the Renaissance. Since, the meaning of the grotesque has evolved to signify unsettling representations of alterity and abjection—synonymous with monstrosity, ugliness, and fantastical kitsch or campiness.

Like the grotto fresco, over time, cursed-haunted images are subject to a similar fate of deterioration via the accumulation of digital noise and distortion the more they are disseminated online. Sugnaux recreates them as pristine images, out of circulation, and returns to antiquated understandings of the grotesque. The cave-like origins of grotesques are restored through Sugnaux's decisive congé... sending them into the wolf's mouth.

Grégory Sugnaux (b. 1989) lives and works in Fribourg. His work is generally concerned with the status of the image through the mediation of exhibition and painting. In extracting the familiar image from its existing pictorial codes, he rejects hierarchical values in art history and tries to turn attention to the representation of alternative systems in image-making. With curation alongside his artistic practice, Sugnaux investigates the conditions of the exhibition in his varying approaches. From 2016 to 2020, he was co-curator of the project space WallRiss in Fribourg and since 2017 co-curator of Backslash Festival in Zürich. In 2015, he received the Kiefer Hablitzel I Göhner Art Price and was a finalist in the 2020 Swiss Art Awards. Recent solo exhibitions include *data romance* at Château de Gruyères (2022), *heute denken, morgen fertig* at Display, Berlin (2020), and *Définitif, donc provisoire* at Kunsthalle Friart in 2019. Following this show at Lateral Roma, an exhibition with artist Peter Schweri at sun.works in Zürich will open in February 2023.

*Into The Wolf's Mouth* is on view until 10 March 2023 and can be visited by appointment.  
For more information please contact: [info@lateralroma.eu](mailto:info@lateralroma.eu)

LATERAL ROMA, Via Ferdinando Ughelli 28, 00179 Roma  
[lateralroma.eu](http://lateralroma.eu)  
[@lateralroma](https://www.instagram.com/lateralroma)



ELSA HIMMER, 2021

*Demain s'occupera de demain*

02.07.2021–02.08.2021

In the brightly lit shop window of La Placette, Grégory Sugnaux offers a virtuously textured surface of painted red and white hues. If we pause to take a closer look at the display, we can see that it is a piece of meat crisscrossed with fine veins of fat. Famous for its tender texture and delicate marbling, this is not just any piece of meat: at a price per kilo of around CHF 450, Wagyu cattle provide the most expensive beef in the world. Given this background, we might be prompted to reflect on the trade of art, the attractiveness of painting on the market, and the sometimes exorbitant prices paid for individual artworks. If we concentrate on the materiality and the beguiling surface, however, on closer inspection its texture turns out to be a mere illusion. The impression of plasticity is owed entirely to the way the artist juxtaposes different colors. A game of confusion that thrives on irritation and provoked pauses is at the heart of Sugnaux's painterly practice.

Grégory Sugnaux's focus lies on the different temporalities of images that collectively form the visual repertoire of our present. The starting point for his paintings is constituted by the stream of snapshots floating around the internet, (pirated) copies, stock photos and memes, some of which have developed a life of their own. What they all have in common is what the artist Hito Steyerl described in 2009 with regard to so-called poor images: they are dematerialized, open to change and modification, and circulate at an enormous speed. Grégory Sugnaux uses software to compile these pictures into a database of ordinary, arbitrary images, which he searches through keywords to find the next subject for his works. Sugnaux's practice slows the pace of these images: he projects them onto the canvas and repaints the motif in rapid strokes with gouache within a day. Any distortions and refractions of light are transferred to the canvas. The colors only begin to mix there, so that a moment of «independence» or «idiosyncrasy» determines the renewed materialization of the images. It is not a matter of old-masterly perfection, instead the pictures (in their incomplete state) are meant to adhere to the canvas. They remain attached to the multiple layers of white acrylic paint with which Sugnaux primes his canvases. The thick base acts like a skin, provides a viscous texture and plays with the common topos of painting as a (physical) counterpart. A border is marked that seems to suggest an interior and an exterior. But the perception is deceiving – the works do not disclose any profound depths, nor do they proclaim the painting's sovereignty among today's images. If the white surface layer develops a tactile sense of seduction due to its seemingly pecu-

liar texture, this is a means to an end to create moments of decelerated reception. Our gaze lingers on this layer of paint, like to the motifs found on it. Consequently, the supposed texture and depth, which, from a distance, seem to be the work of a virtuoso pastose application of paint, become disenchanting. The pictures are flat, their three-dimensionality is an optical illusion resulting from the interplay of the white primer and the densely placed colors.

This conundrum continues on the level of Sugnaux's subjects. His motifs play with a moment of recognition. It appears as if we may have seen this or a very similar image countless times before. The ubiquity of his pictorial templates has led to a situation where these images are hardly ever looked at closely, but are simply registered in their fleeting appearance. They pass in front of our eyes without being given any particular attention. If we suddenly see them on a canvas in the context of an exhibition, it is impossible to say whether we really already know them. Sugnaux's art is strangely familiar to us and yet not at all. With his paintings, the artist thus joins the multitude of image-making processes of our present time. They are characterized by a sense of deceleration and obvious materiality that becomes particularly apparent through the contrast of the chosen motifs, their «placeless» sources and their dematerialized circulation. At the same time, this correlation creates the very moment of irritation and rupture, which challenges our common habits of seeing and thus offer a possibility for pause and respite: the motifs are irritating because, due to their omnipresence, we are used to overlooking them. They are not meant to be contemplated, but flicker at the edge of our attention span. They are the visual equivalent of elevator music rather than an image in the privileged sense. The artist thus understands their painterly sedimentation simply as another stage «in the life» of these pictures. They are by no means preserved in an unchangeable form for posterity. Instead, there is a temporary disruption of the image's circulation, an aesthetic moment of irritation, when the pictures suddenly populate the exhibition space on a canvas instead of on a screen. Likewise, Sugnaux always conceives these works as a group, and rearranges them depending on the exhibition context. This way, he translates the inherent impermanence of his subjects, their susceptibility to modification, to the practice of exhibiting and continuously finds new forms of presentation. The work, despite its painterly nature, is far from being self-contained, but circulates again and again in the context of other paintings. It is an examination of the visual worlds we consume on a daily basis, as well as our habits of seeing, which result from the fluctuation between the digital and the analog. In the midst of today's flood of images that we encounter with increasing indifference, Grégory Sugnaux juxtaposes his paintings with a perceptual experience that is borne by the question of what contemporary images are and how we approach them.

La peinture de Grégory Sugnaux est un art du temps. Au sein de l'étrange éternité sans intensité d'une décennie qui n'en finit pas de ne pas finir, l'artiste vient découper des ralentis et des accélérations, marquer des arrêts et ménager des raccourcis. Infime, le geste ne se perçoit pas d'emblée, et néanmoins, par les distinctions qu'il opère au sein d'un flux qui, précisément, en est exempt, la modalité perceptive s'en trouve changée. L'engourdissement est brisé et la possibilité d'un recul émerge – pas encore la contemplation, mais déjà la confusion.

Grégory Sugnaux part des images, de ce matériau visuel sociabilisé de la sphère de l'apparaître ordinaire. Il y a d'abord le processus de collecte, bégaiement itératif du semblable. Par un logiciel informatique conçu à cet effet, l'artiste constitue une banque d'images répondant aux mêmes mots clés. Le plus souvent, ce sont des émotions qui l'aimantent : #joie, #peur, #amour. Vient ensuite la seconde phase de l'extraction, l'acte de peindre en tant que tel. Projetée au beamer, l'image choisie est fixée sur la toile par touches rapides, le temps d'une journée tout au plus. Sans hiérarchisation, tout est enregistré, glitches et rais de lumière y compris.

Alors, les émotions commencent à s'infiltrer par la brèche d'humanisation rouverte par la confusion initiale. Car la matérialité importe malgré tout, puisque c'est ici de peinture qu'il s'agit : la touche enlevée est aérienne, la surface au contraire épaisse comme une croûte. Ici aussi, c'est de rythme qu'il s'agit : vitesse et mollesse, torpille et torpeur. L'impression de l'ensemble, elle, converge vers une même joie enfantine de l'infinie simplicité des perversité primaires.

Plutôt que de penser l'image, Grégory Sugnaux pense l'exposition. Tout comme chaque image n'a de sens qu'en tant qu'elle se réfère à un ensemble plus vaste, qu'elle s'enracine dans un système de hashtags et d'hyperliens, ses œuvres elles-mêmes appellent la mise en espace. Ainsi, les peintures décrites, lorsqu'elles apparaissent pour la première fois lors de son exposition personnelle *heute denken, morgen fertig* (2020, Display, Berlin), se donnaient en frise. A hauteur de regard, une ribambelle de motifs similaires, bouches béantes, regards hagards, rictus glacés, de donnaient à nous dans l'espace, dans cet espace que l'on parcourt désormais en y engageant son corps, et non plus seulement par le tressaument d'une rétine lasse d'être surstimulée.

Ce sont alors, plus spécifiquement, ces trois modalités d'apparition conjuguées, la distinction de rythmes, de matières et de parcours, qui permettent de faire saillir l'émotion ; de vérifier, ainsi que le veut l'expression consacrée des Captcha sécuritaires, que l'on est bien humain, trop humain, boule d'affects endoloris et engourdis, mais boule d'affects néanmoins. Chez

Grégory Sugnaux, les affects constituent l'une des constantes d'un processus de recherche qui procède par séries plutôt que par styles.

Il faudrait alors encore préciser que les affects qui l'intéressent sont sociabilisés, par opposition, certes ténue, au registre des émotions, d'ordinaire considérées comme subjectives. Ainsi, au sein du nouvel ensemble que présente l'artiste avec *You talk to me with words and I look at you with feelings* (2020, Fribourg), les émotions fournissent aux œuvres leur sujet, mais les affects concernent quant à eux leur réception. Quelque chose se joue là, face à cette image de peur tout comme face à cette autre de joie, qui a trait à la qualité de l'image elle-même, telle que l'artiste l'a trouvée, mais que nous ne remarquons qu'une fois qu'il nous l'adresse à nouveau.

Depuis leur émergence au tournant des années 1990, les analyses de la culture visuelle se sont concentrées sur les images choc, cet outre-l'image ouvert par la retransmission en direct des conflits des années 1990, cimenté par le 11 septembre et normalisé par le « riot porn ». Or à partir des années 2015, il existe une nouvelle texture contemporaine de l'image qui ne s'y réduit pas. Là où l'image échappait à l'esthétique en la débordant, elle l'élude désormais en se dégonflant ; ne brûle pas tant la rétine qu'elle la fait se dégonfler.

Ces images, les cursed images, images maudites, envoûtées ou hantées, dont le nom laisse déjà présager que le sentiment désagréable qu'elles éveillent (oh à peine dérangeant, et néanmoins si tenace) déborde instant de la rencontre somme toute très banal pour s'installer comme un sentiment diffus qui engourdit les membres. Apparu via un compte Twitter en 2016, fermé, puis plusieurs fils de discussions Reddit, le qualificatif d'image maudite peut tout aussi bien désigner une femme se prélassant dans une baignoire de chips, un chien au sourire dentu, une fête triste envahie de peluches géantes. Jamais de crédit, jamais de légende, jamais d'explication.

On reconnaît une image maudite en la voyant et par le type d'affects qu'elle éveille ; de l'ordre peut-être du stuplime, ce sublime stupide, cette expérience esthétique d'un ennui étonné, diagnostiqué par la théoricienne Sianne Ngai. Est-ce à dire qu'il ne nous reste plus même la distraction de la violence, le frisson de l'épouvante, condamnés que nous serions au calme plat et fade d'affects dysphoriques ? Ces images maudites, ces images paradoxales, Grégory Sugnaux nous les retourne par un procédé d'exacerbation mimétique permettant, sinon de la résoudre, du moins de formuler la question de leur statut affectif – c'est-à-dire de leur signification collective.

s'inscrivent dans le contexte du jeu, ni l'une ni l'autre n'échappent à évoquer toutes les nuances entre bienveillance et cruauté qui caractérise le monde des enfants. Avec l'accrochage périlleux de cette sculpture sur la façade, c'est aussi Fri Art qui nous déroule sa langue de métal.

Grégory Sugnaux (\*1989) bénéficie à Fri Art de sa première présentation monographique en institution. En réponse à son invitation, l'artiste questionne les relations personnelles et géographiques entre son travail d'artiste, de co-curateur (à l'espace d'art WallRiss), son statut et l'espace urbain. Définitif, donc provisoire regroupe une série de toiles réalisées entre 2018 et 2019 ainsi qu'une sculpture sur la façade. Cette exposition invite à une réflexion sur les frictions entre espaces physiques et imaginaires, entre l'espace de la peinture, qui définit son propre cadre, et l'assujettissement de la peinture à son cadre.

Les peintures s'appuient sur une collection improvisée rassemblant des dessins d'enfants à la craie. Au fil de ses sorties, l'artiste les repère en promenant son regard au sol puis les photographie. Les dessins, créés en toute spontanéité sur l'asphalte, se déclinent dans l'exposition sur des toiles aux rapports chromatiques maîtrisés. D'un plan horizontal, elles sont redressées contre les murs verticaux de la salle d'exposition. Ainsi le sol, associé historiquement à une certaine trivialité, remonte au niveau du regard. Ces dessins sont mis en lumière par un geste opposant la pérennité d'une oeuvre, à celle plus instable d'une marelle effacée par la première pluie.

Tout en conservant la perspective déformée de l'image intermédiaire prise par l'artiste (vues cadrées en plongée), les toiles confrontent le/la visiteur au souvenir d'un univers maladroit, désobéissent aux lois habituelles. Les échelles de tailles respectent le rapport 1 :1 pour le pervertir aussitôt dans d'autres toiles, formant des proportions grotesques. Au même titre, le ciel et la terre, le réel et l'imaginaire se répondent dans un rapport indéterminé.

Cette série interroge la pratique souvent individuelle des artistes. Grégory Sugnaux se confronte aux traces d'une communauté, celle des enfants qui ensemble, inventent pour s'amuser. Les peintures qui évoquent ces liens sociaux créent à leur tour des communautés, mais dans un espace et une temporalité différée, de manière artificielle. Physiques ou virtuels, des réseaux se construisent et se défont autour d'une exposition ou lors d'un vernissage, face à une oeuvre.

La sculpture prolonge avec humour ces réflexions. Clin d'oeil malicieux aux différents artistes qui ont précédemment intervenu sur le bâtiment de Fri Art et au départ du directeur artistique, le toboggan crée un glissement entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur. Il relie aussi le haut et le bas d'une manière sensorielle ou ludique, à l'inverse des outils archivistiques et visuels employés dans les peintures pour obtenir ce même effet.

Si la sculpture et la série de peintures

NICOLAS BRUHLART, 2016

*Les Campagnes hallucinées*

*Les Villes tentaculaires.*

11.11.16–10.12.16

Et les chemins d'ici s'en vont à l'infini  
Vers elle.

Ainsi se finit le premier poème du recueil *Les Villes Tentaculaires* d'Emile Verhaeren publié en 1895, date de l'invention du cinéma. Dans la langue, quelque chose fait image, une spatialité d'une modernité toute classique dessine l'espace dans le texte. De la campagne à la ville ; et la campagne, signe de la ville la plus proche.

Il y a trois ans, la rue portait encore le nom ancien de Walriss. Les recherches Google récentes semblent indiquer que le nom de Wallriss, qui référait en son temps au passage au travers de la muraille, s'impose progressivement. Ce passage reste la métaphore de ce qui est naturellement séparé, de la nature comme de la communication.

Dans l'espace du haut un banc invite et hésite entre le sculptural et le design. Il rappelle en hommage *La forme Intérieure*, oeuvre de l'artiste fribourgeois Emile Angéloz. Ce dernier est aussi l'auteur de la sculpture publique qui se trouve en face du WallRiss, dans le petit parc. Elle invite à s'y installer pour respirer, au milieu de la ville. *La Forme intérieure*, le dedans comme image du dehors. L'herbe et le banc.

Le paysage ne va pas de soi, il n'existe pas sans regard. Le faiseur digital s'inscrit dans une histoire de la représentation qui nous rattache à la tradition d'une peinture de paysage. Alvan Fisher, *Pastoral Landscape* (1854), nous servait d'entente tacite. Si le regard y est construit dans le tableau, le paysage se fait artifice pour lui plaire. Les lacs se font artifices, les parcs indiquent des rationalités. Le plan se construit : le regardeur dans l'image et nos yeux distribuent l'animal et la plante; la montagne et le ciel.

La géométrie nouvelle, les algorithmes au fondement de la science. *Elégie pauvre* du chemin de la campagne qui n'est que ce qui mène à la ville. Dans le brouillard, en train : la découpe des forêts, des champs, des pylones qui rechargent nos ordinateurs. A la ville, dans les appartements et les shops : la campagne en image inversée. On cherche le repos, en ville.

Un peu à l'abri du bruit des newsfeeds  
Un peu à l'abri de la grande machine  
Et le corps avalé des gens de la ville  
La vitesse les précipite.

Des contaminations mutuelles, entre la campagne et la ville, l'image et le texte, de l'un indice de l'autre, il faut dire, pour l'occasion : les monstres sont bien là, et le calme est autant d'artifice.