

# IN THE HANDS OF GOD



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**Right:**  
*Still Alive*  
2005  
Silver-plated bronze  
Installation view

**Opposite:**  
*Mandi VIII*  
2006  
Plaster  
220×150×100 cm



## **Kris Martin's explorations of faith and time employ myriad materials – from departure boards and novels to classical sculptures and watches** *by Jens Hoffmann*

'If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him,' Voltaire stated. This premise, as expressed in what is possibly one of the most famous lines in the history of philosophy, perfectly summarizes the paradoxical relationship Western societies have had to the idea of faith or belief in the existence of a divine being since the days of the Enlightenment. While most of us seem to believe that there is no such thing as God, and have by and large accepted the rather bleak fact that there is ultimately no meaning to our existence, many of us are (secretly) still searching for a higher power to provide an explanation

for the mystery, marvel and misery of the world around us. This desire to conceive of a force capable of providing some guidance and direction for the life we live remains firmly engrained no matter how little belief in God persists.

In the sphere of visual art, Belgian artist Kris Martin provides one of the most striking explorations of this dilemma of faith. Martin is a believer, it would seem, and his work clearly challenges the generally accepted assessment of our life as stripped of meaning, without any enduring substance. Most of his practice circles (in one way or another) around the subjects of life and death, and the ephemerality and fragility of our existence. While it seems that a large number of contemporary artists tackle

issues of such significance, it is in fact rather unusual to come across one whose work and artistic motifs are so clearly related to considering these fundamental questions, and whose own position is firmly rooted in a belief in Christian values and the existence of God.

Speaking, perhaps, of the senselessness of most of our pursuits in life is a work titled *Mandi III* (2003). The piece consists of an arrivals and departures board that contains no information whatsoever: where figures and numbers would usually be hectically flipping around to display the constantly changing information relating to plane or train journeys, this board is entirely black and, though





**Mandi III**  
2003  
Mixed media  
Installation view at 4th  
Berlin Biennial, 2006

**This is a blank departure board for an outing from which we will not return, one that began the day we were born and which will end when our time is up.**

moving, offers no choice of destination or departure time. It is, perhaps, an information board for our final journey; for the trip that will take us to our ultimate destination. This is an outing from which we will not return, one that began the day we were born and will end whenever our time is up.

The title *Mandi* is one Martin has returned to for a variety of pieces, all of which could in some way be said to reflect on these fundamental issues of existence. In addition to *Mandi I* and *Mandi II* (both 2002), which are smaller versions of *Mandi III*, Martin has also titled a pile of old wristwatches *Mandi IV* (2003) and a recent work based on the Hellenic sculpture of Laocoon *Mandi VIII* (2006). The title originates from an expression

Martin picked up in Italy, where the departure boards were fabricated, which is a colloquial term for 'goodbye'. The etymology of the expression stems from the combination of the words *mano* (hand) and *dio* (God) meaning to leave 'in the hands of God'.

Martin explores his subjects with a particular mixture of melancholy, playfulness and elegance that is reminiscent of the work of artists such as James Lee Byars, Cerith Wyn Evans or even Félix González-Torres, with their intense awareness of the ephemeral and fragile, their minimal yet decadent visual styles and their Romantic, frequently humorous yet conceptually rigorous method. But it is only Byars who we associate with a similarly bold approach to integrating the spiritual in his artistic practice, and

with whom Martin shares an attraction to the materials and aesthetics of religious iconography. With *Pietà* (2006), for example, a found piece of driftwood cradling an egg-shaped segment of rock crystal, Martin conveys a classical religious pose rarely seen in contemporary art.

Other works by Martin approach the prospect of finitude through an examination of the self. *My days are counted* (2005), for example, is a portrait of the artist presented via a tallying system denoting his age, in which one pencil mark signifies a day of his life (the marks continuing to accrue for the duration of the work's exhibition) while *Still*

*Alive* (2005), a silver-plated bronze replica of the artist's own skull (based on images taken from a brain scan), puts the artist in touch with his own remains, with what he will resemble after death. Although by no means based on the human figure, *Vase* (2005), a tall Chinese porcelain vase that has to be broken and reassembled every time it is displayed in an exhibition (through which act it is slowly but steadily dissipated) draws comparison with the aging and annihilation of the physical body and our own reverence for the perfection and completeness of existence. *Vase* is, in a sense, as much a work of *vanitas* as the artist's skull in *Still Alive*.

Martin's 'End-Points' series (2004) equally contributes to a poetic reading of his work, but also introduces one of the other aspects of his *oeuvre* – his liberal referencing of literary, cultural and art history. For each of the works in this series, Martin has removed the final full stop from a number of his favourite books (ones that, in the main, might be characterized as trying to comprehend human experience): beginning with the end-point of the first novel he read when he was still a child, and continuing through such classic titles as Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868) and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924). While the full stops simply mark the end of the final sentence in these specific novels, once detached they begin to unfold a more complex meaning – it's as

though the entire novel has been subsumed into the vortex of the miniscule black hole in front of us. Somewhat ironically, all that remains of some of the greatest books ever written, of their rich narratives and diverse characters, are these final end-points, which are hardly visible on the large sheets of white paper they have been mounted on. The full stops not only mark the end; they are equally points of departure, marking the process of our own intellectual and spiritual development.

The 'End-Points' series is not the only work for which Martin has used literature as his point of departure. For *Idiot* (2004–5), he transcribed in its entirety Dostoevsky's *The*



**Mandi XV**  
2007  
Steel  
702×136×30 cm



**Vase**  
2005  
Chinese porcelain, glue  
225×60 cm





**Idiot IV**  
2007  
Bronze  
19×13×2 cm

**Idiot**  
2004-5  
Ink on paper  
Dimensions variable



*Idiot* – Martin’s favourite book – accurately by hand. With one exception: he replaced the name of the novel’s hero, Prince Myshkin, with his own, thus turning himself into the *Idiot*, a character that has frequently been described (including by Dostoevsky himself) as entirely positive, and carrying an emotional intelligence greater than that of anyone else in the book. Myshkin has often been compared to the figure of Christ in his endeavour to be good. In *Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis, 2005), Martin literally transforms Franz Kafka’s eponymous novel – of a man who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a bug – into an abstract

work of art by transcribing the whole book by hand in black ink onto a single sheet of paper, making it utterly unreadable. The overlaying sentences form an insect-like black morass, impenetrable but fixating and surprisingly beautiful.

The work that perhaps most vividly embodies the ambiguity of Martin’s assessment of the human condition is *Mandi VIII*. The piece is a replica of what Pliny the Elder described as the greatest of all art works: the classical sculpture depicting the desperate attempts of the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two young sons to overcome a group of attacking sea serpents. While otherwise faithful to the original sculpture, Martin did not recreate the serpents, leaving the three figures to struggle with an imaginary and

invisible enemy. Pointing, perhaps, towards the paranoia and dread in contemporary society of an attack by unknown or hidden aggressors, the artist left the source of this fear open to speculation. As with much of Martin’s *oeuvre*, the work can be read as a metaphor for the inevitable outcome of life, a testimony to our own mortality.

*Jens Hoffmann is Director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco.*



**Verwandlung  
(Metamorphosis)**  
2005  
Ink on paper, frame  
34×27×4 cm



**End-point of 'Of Mice  
and Men' (J. Steinbeck)**  
2006  
Paper collage and pencil  
on paper  
56×44 cm

All photographs this page and opposite: Achim Kukulies