

KRIS MARTIN

Conversation with Karlyn De Jongh

Martin studio, Ghent, Belgium, 12 November 2008



*For Kris Martin (*1972, Belgium) time is the primary motive in his art practice. Martin sees himself as an observer; his work is conceptual. Convinced that material can carry thoughts, he uses well-known or everyday objects in a defamiliarizing way. With these 'little gestures' he tries to infect the brain of his audience: he attempts to show something in a way that you have never seen before and change your attitude towards the object. Open for many interpretations, Martin's work generates an emptiness, a space to reflect on the complexity of life.*

Karlyn De Jongh: In your work you make references towards time and seem to encourage the viewer to reflect on what time means to him. Why is the reflection on time important to you?

Kris Martin: Time is important, because it is so difficult to deal with. For that reason time is an important motive throughout my work. Rather than a subject, it is a motive: something that is ongoing and returns each time I create a work.

There are several definitions of time. So far, the most interesting one that I have come across is a definition by St. Augustine: "if you ask me what time is I do not know, but if you do not ask me I know exactly what it is." In visual arts time is problematic: it is a dimension that is hard to represent; time becomes frozen. Everything is time and time is everything, but you cannot grasp what it is. Time is fluid; it constantly escapes. To give a visual piece a notion of time is a big challenge and that is why I am doing it.

KDJ: You live in this beautiful, historical city of Ghent, Belgium. Does the fact that you are surrounded by history affect your work?

KM: Absolutely. Living in an old city has a great influence: when I go out the door, I am amidst history. Although I cannot say how, the notion of time and the constant contact with time must affect my work in great extend. It is just a coincidence that I was born and raised here. Would I have been raised in Los Angeles, I am sure my notion of time would be different. My environment determines a large part of what I am doing.

I am generally very attracted to matter. Material has the fantastic ability to carry thoughts, feelings and also time. It survives us. Matter

itself has no meaning, but you can give it meaning and that is fantastic. Sometimes I make work with found objects. Recently, for instance, I found a canon ball that was projected during the Napoleonic war, here in Flanders, Belgium. We do not know which canon projected it. What we do know is that this canon ball was...boom!... fired from a canon. Years later at a flea market I was holding it in my hand. The canon ball is here-and-now; I could not make it any better.

I should have a good reason for making an intervention on an object, to change something. It is about choices, generally. Putting this object in another context is not about displacement—we have seen that. Simply in my hands it became art. Not that I am a wizard, but I did have the thought that the canon ball is here-and-now. It is a silly idea, but it does infect your brain. And that is exactly what I am trying to do: infecting a brain. You see something in a way that you never saw it before; afterward you cannot help seeing it in another way.

KDJ: Many of your works seem to be based on the idea of continuation after your own death. For example, the work 100 Years (2004) goes beyond our physical time.

KM: Everyone puts a stamp on life. The stamp you place on life is to show 'I was here'. This is one of the clichés I touch upon. Of course I am ambitious, but at the same time I try to see my existence as something relative. I am 99% certain that in 100 years I will be totally forgotten. In 2104 I will not be there, but ten bombs explode which indicate my existence: Martin existed. There is a chance of 1% that people did take care of the work and then it will be happening: Martin's bombs are exploding. The work plays with time and mortality. I enjoy flirting with clichés.

KDJ: Your work also references icons of art and literary history.

KM: Yes, I like doing that. I don't pretend to make anything new; I make work that is particular: I am an individual. You do things in a particular way for you are you; I do it as well. There are classical themes in art history, such as a skull, that every artist should create. It reveals a lot about yourself, about your time, about how you look at death... You can read a lot from an image. *Still Alive* (2005) is the first skull in art history that is made of a living person.

