

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.





Formerly, death was a condition for making the skull visible; now, it is simply done by a scanner. Nobody touched the skull, but it is a skull and it is definitely mine.

KDJ: You want your work to live beyond your death, but at the same time you have made works that are self-destructive, such as Vase (2005) and 100 Years. These works show a continuation that seems finite.

KM: I am a product of my time. I prefer to be formally boring and interesting in terms of content, rather than vice versa. Sometimes my work is self-destructive, but maybe that is a part of me. But it is also about creating: when something breaks it might be the condition for something else. It may be the condition for creation in general. Every time I smash a vase and glue the pieces back together, it is turning into something else. It is not a beautiful vase anymore, but something different. The original form is taken away and replaced by thoughts.

KDJ: The continuation of something through repetition and slight changes seems to question its end. For example, in End Points (2004) you removed final full stops from a number of books. These open ends put classics, such as Dostoyevsky's The Idiot in a new perspective. How do you understand this change? What do you think happens to these classics? How do you look at the end? Can you speak of an end?

KM: I often wonder about that. It depends on your perspective, of course. If you see life as linear then you can speak of a beginning and an end. If you imagine it is circular, then you are part of a continuity. Because of our mortality, we constantly deal with the end. But: the end could also be a condition for a beginning. The work *End Points* is in fact ongoing: when I read a book that is important to me, I cut out its endpoint and fix it on a sheet of paper. The piece indicates the very importance of literature in general: a good book changes you after reading. The end is a condition to reflect. Only after you have gone through the story, it starts; it starts after the full stop.

KDJ: When it starts only after you are finished reading, would you say these full stops are both end and beginning at the same time?

KM: Yes, after the full stop you may have thoughts that you never had before. Having these thoughts means that the book changed you: you are not the same person you were before reading. It is these slight differences that I try to provoke. Not more than that, though: I am quite realistic.

With my work I try to give a certain emptiness: a space to look or think. At the beginning of my career, I made a picture of an empty box which I had found on the street. It was a sort of terrarium. I showed nothing, on purpose, but people were looking at the picture without being bored. The viewer was able to fill in—or not—something for him or herself. I captured this ability and use it in my work. It is not out of humbleness that I claim not to make more than 50% of my work; the other 50% is fulfilled by the viewer. In that way, the object lives its life. It is impossible to complete something. An open end can be a beginning.

KDJ: How do you see the future for your art?

KM: Better and better... I grow older. I am now 35. A man of 35 is not able to say things that are as interesting as the words of a 70-year-old. The 70-year-old has seen more of life. That I see my future positively also has to do with content. The pieces I made eight years ago—when I started making art—are much weaker. I am proud of them, because they are made by a mind of twenty-something. But I do hope that when I am 45-years-old I will have the same opinion.

KDJ: You often use the title Mandi, followed by a number. The addition of 'III' or 'VIII' to Mandi seems to indicate a sequence or series. How do you understand these numbers? How does the number stand in relation to the name Mandi?

KM: I force myself to give every piece a title: 'untitled' is too easy. It is sometimes difficult to name a work: the title may be too loaded, it can change your focus, or it makes you think differently about the piece. I don't want that. One of the titles that I use is Mandi. Mandi is in fact a greeting which I learned by coincidence in Friuli, a region in the north of Italy. I was there to make the flip board (*Mandi III*, 2003). In the evening I went to a pub. Everyone who left said "mandi". Someone told me its meaning: 'man' comes from 'mano' and 'di' from 'dio'; in the hand of God. It is like a farewell, you use it when you don't know whether you will see each other again. I thought it was beautiful. Mandi: there is a destination, there is a time, but you give it out of your hands. It is a red line throughout my work. Whether it is the flip board or another piece, Mandi covers the content.

KDJ: You have mentioned that the flip board does not show information, but to me it does: the absence of information on the flip board is information, too.

KM: Yes, I am sure. That is the gap I show. Within this gap you can fill in something of yourself. That is in fact the best example of my attitude towards the audience. In this piece it is very clear that I need your imagination, your time and effort to reflect. I don't give much; I just give a frame. I dare to touch the big questions of life, because I don't oppose you to think in a certain direction.



To create a work is a big responsibility. It is a decision. If I decide that the pen I have here is a piece, people will consider it to be a piece. When the pen is sold, I praise myself lucky, but the pen will haunt me later. One day someone will come up to me to ask what it is about. If I cannot explain the 'work' at that very moment, I am in trouble. When do you decide something is a piece? This is a great responsibility. On the other hand, you need the work to be made in a spontaneous way. The responsibility and the need to be spontaneous are in fact in a constant fight. You constantly need to think and re-think your attitude. It is only attitude. I never have the feeling I make something. I always have the perception of something happening through me; I feel as if I am a medium. I am not a writer and I am not a text. I am a pen and I act like a pen. The only thing I can do is make images.

KDJ: You see your position as an artist mainly as a medium. Does that mean you have the same importance as the material you work with?

KM: Yes. I am just observing, taking something, and giving back. Maybe in a different form or a different context, maybe with other connotations, but that is all. I am an observer. I don't have the feeling I make something. It is more about discovering and choosing things: you have one million objects and you extract one. Therefore, I am really happy with an *objet trouvé* or a ready made, because I don't have to touch it, it is like the canon ball I told you about.

KDJ: One could say that you touch these objects with your thoughts.

KM: Yes, with my mind. Absolutely. That is what I try to do. Something happens between people which is provoked by my little gesture. I will show you one piece that is about religion: *Idiot IV* (2007). The piece is very important to me as it shows a lot about my religious feeling. The cross seems to close its eyes. It is as if it is saying: "I don't want to see it anymore. Give me a break, I am just human." The piece is shocking: I use an icon. It is far more difficult to use this icon than the *Laocoön*. I mean, billions of times people

did something with crosses. And it still happens in contemporary art. This simple gesture of closing its eyes makes the cross a key piece. Is there a god? You are left deciding for yourself whether there is a God or not.

KDJ: If one does not know that you are a religious person, this piece could also be about disbelief or the death of God. It seems the work is open for contradictory interpretations.

KM: Yes, absolutely. Maybe Nietzsche would have loved it. I am fine with that. Both interpretations are good. Normally, images do not work in so many directions. That is what I am trying to force myself to do: to make an image that could work in many, many directions. The complexity is dealing with the complexity. Allowing it and not making it easier by simply focusing on your own little opinion.

KDJ: We have now discussed several aspects of time, such as the time of history, the time of the artwork, lifetime, the time on the clock, etc. Are they all the same for you or would you say they are different?

KM: Maybe it is all the same. We try to understand time and capture it, but it simply is not possible. As a consequence time is so interesting and so beautiful. Everything that we can control becomes uninteresting; the things we cannot control are still the most beautiful ones. You cannot control sunset, but everyone likes it. With time, it is the same. Everything is time and we are just part of it, I think. I am a product of my time.