

# **Karel Martens: counterprint**

My own work often involves collections of things. An interest in typography, for example, finds its focus in sets of letters that echo the collective form of society, and a stockpile of small, letter-shaped pieces of industrial debris: hundreds of found 'typographical' characters,<sup>1</sup> whose random sizes and odd forms can never quite be standardized. When I heard that Karel Martens had a similar collection my first thought was that I could at least ask him for his swaps. This kind of thing can't be that far from collecting those Panini football stickers.

Rummaging through KM's box of found (and lost) machine parts, it was clear that the 'letterliness' of a shape is of less importance to him. Most of them are plain geometric figures – appropriately enough for someone who once told me he was more interested in numbers than words. Even the discs, probably KM's favourite shape, remain ambiguous. Are they letters? Are they numbers? Are they just circles? And all of the objects are perfectly flat, at least on one side, which, more to the point, allows the pieces to be used as printing stamps. What has over the years become a repeated typographical motif in KM's work, is constructed not from type as we might now prefer to recognize it, but is closer to its letterpress origins – block-printed from a collection of flat, industrial forms.

We did end up sharing some objects, and being able to identify different motivations is an important part of this. The found letters appeal to me as part of a splintered struggle between technology and language: the world as a giant machine breaking down. KM's small metal shapes, on the other hand, are much more immediately bound up in specific modes of design production – those of printing and the dynamics of colour, its luminosity and opacity, interacting on different surfaces from paper to glass and concrete. The world perceived, far more optimistically, as a printing surface.

A collection is usually an attempt to somehow take hold of the world around us, to control at least a few of its parts. In this way, the wealthy collector tries to arrest things, to separate them from their function, ultimately separating them from a living world through the act of completion. An artist or designer, on the other hand, might prefer the continuity of things, or to mimic the precious collection by reinstalling some of the precariousness of life.

The collection might then claim to have critical value, a way of confronting an over-excessive abundance of sign and object production. It might also be a kind of narrative device, as if it shared kaleidoscopic properties with the use of the list as a

literary form, or theme and variation in music. Or it might just be a pile of things you like and can't let go of.

There's no need to look far to find any of these uses of the collection in contemporary art. Machine-made objects grouped to suggest endless permutations of form, or systematic, room-filling arrangements of everyday items, are more or less art-world clichés. In an early example, Claes Oldenburg's 'ray guns', hundreds of found L-shapes ('the universal angle'), already seem to incorporate an alphabet-minded collection. More recently Mike Kelley's 'radical scavenging' relies on objects sent to him by anyone who knows him or his work. I could add to his sinister collection of bent wire – probably not bad for forming into gun shapes or letters, or, since they apparently come from parking lots, used for what they are used for there: breaking into cars.

And if the role of the designer is quite distinct from that of a gallery artist, the relationship to materials and objects, codes and signs shouldn't be. At what point did thoughts about how our objects are produced, and how this in turn produces meaning, cease to be part of the concerns of the designer?

When Jean Baudrillard, in a book called *Le système des objets*, discusses the shift between use and non-use of the collected object, a certain emphasis falls on the experience of physical objects in active public use or circulation: 'Possession cannot apply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world.'

The suggestion here is that the functional object resists a kind of death by collection, through its ability to make us use it and keep using it. A materialist view of culture is partly this; and that all of our things – including conceptual objects such as words, just as much as physical tools – shape us, the users of these objects, by determining our practices and our perceptions. A collection (or any other form of representation) can be organized as if somehow to deny this aspect of how the world, and all of its objects, works through us. Or it could be a set of living parts that tells us something about how we are put together.

When I asked KM if he saw himself as a collector he said he didn't think so, at least not in any static sense or from a need to acquire things:

- 'It's not about collecting. I don't like to be a victim of my own obsessions in that way. It's more about working with groups of things, their arrangement, how they react.'
- 'Also, I like to work with my own things. It's a kind of recycling of things around

me, partly because I don't want to put a special hat on to be a designer. I like to work in the same language that I talk, to think in the language that I see.'

The back wall of KM's studio, in the Dutch village of Hoog-Keppel, is a great pin-board accumulation of found images and cuttings, printers' registration marks, news headlines, single words, colour charts, odd bits of typography. Such a collection of ephemeral treasure is an example of how we find the things that tell us who we are, even if it gives instead the impression that a parallel universe of KM's own work has found him – by casually infiltrating the most ordinary places: the local newspaper, or the fold of a carton of milk, or the back of a parking ticket. And it clearly is a collection, even if it appears to have neither a beginning nor an end. A landscape of graphic objects, cast like a net of reference points over both a present-day working life, and a recent history of art and design that has, directly or indirectly, informed KM's own approach. I tell him that the German artist and designer Kurt Schwitters is an almost unavoidable reference, as is the Dutch printer H.N. Werkman. It's well enough documented that during the 1930s, when his commercial print shop fell into decline, Werkman began using the letters in his type cases for more experimental prints, which he called 'drukseis'. These were often a combination of the calligrammes and machine iconography previously associated with the Dada of Apollinaire and Picabia – and also connected in, several ways, to Schwitters's reworking of waste materials taken from the refuse of his own graphic design office in Hanover.

But talking about the development of his own work, KM always insists on the more direct influence of people he either worked with or trained under. In particular, his teachers Adam Roskam and Henk Peeters:

- 'With Peeters it was not so much the work itself, but he represented new ideas, a kind of energy. Roskam had much more traditional values, very literary, which to me had a richness, and at the time I felt more comfortable with him. Plus he had a kind of faith in me. More, even, than I had in myself.'

Roskam was making woodcuts and paintings, but he also produced a series of prints from leaves and ferns using a heavy Kraus bookbinding press. He asked KM to assist him with these prints. Later, when Roskam became ill, he gave the press, along with his litho stone, to KM. One of the earliest prints KM made, for a kinetic box construction (1964), used a clock movement and two printed dot-screens that reacted optically as one moved across the other. Although very much an object from KM's past, the printed box carries many of the qualities of his future work, combining a belief in the physical world with an intuition for printmaking

and other graphic production languages.

Henk Peeters was a member of the Dutch artists' Nul group, known for emphasizing the human vitality of both industrial and organic materials. Of the two teachers, Peeters may have had the stronger impact on KM's sensitivity to the dynamic textures and shapes of the world around him.

- 'My prints began with metal stencils, carpentry rules, actual tools from a metal or woodworkers' workshop, actual printers' blocks, holwit, solid lead and wood spacers, and I started using parts from my children's Lego and Meccano sets. I also found some metal grilles that reminded me of a Corbusier apartment building, and a few rough pieces of steel that produced an industrial-looking texture. I've always preferred an industrial feeling, rather than artistic. And *drukinkt* is so much nicer to work with than paint.'
- 'The objects I collect have to be metal so that I can lift them cleanly with a magnet, then when the ink is dry I can add another colour. I like to do it – you have to wait one night before you can put another layer on top; four nights for four colours; combinations of primary colours, or a dayglo. I've always loved the mysteries of colour. That yellow plus blue makes green is still exciting to me, still unbelievable.'

Recently, KM's material intuition for colour and form has extended to a larger scale in an impressive series of architectural projects, retaining much of the intimacy of the studio-based studies. A text by the poet Judith Hertzberg appears as a matrix of tiny blue and white LEDs, rendered into the 'leading' of the brickwork for the Sophia Childrens Hospital in Rotterdam. A series of coloured target icons float from the glass-walled panels of the Amstelveen Cultural Centre. And for the exterior wall of the Haarlem Music Theatre, a musical score by the contemporary composer Louis Andriessen is translated into a fourteen-panel sonogram that ricochets along the façade of the building.

In the private space of his own studio, KM's more personal work is characterized by certain, now-familiar qualities and visual ideas: the brilliantly coloured mono-prints, for example, or the series of ascii-configured images, swarming with abstract icons, or the odd juxtapositions of type and colour that seem to refer directly to the collected ephemera pinned to the studio walls; not to mention the sheer charisma of the work, an energy connected, in this case, as much to the personal pleasure of making things as to anything else. Yet all of these enthusiasms inhabit the commissioned work too, even when it happens at the scale of a city centre or in the public space of a building. And the shift in environmental context, as well as in size and tempo, feels appropriate; so much of KM's instinct for printing tech-

niques was, and still is, intensified by what the wider world can show. Perhaps this is also what he means by working or thinking in the language of the things around him.

KM told me a story about discovering for himself the effects of a parallax view – how, seen from the window seat of a train, it set off a kind of *moiré* in the relief forms of the Dutch countryside.

- 'Every day, as a student, I made the journey between Nijmegen and Arnhem, and from the train I would notice patterns forming and transforming in the passing landscape. Outside, in the fields of crops, in the relief made by hundreds of bean sticks for example, my eye would follow the shifting screen effect produced as the angle and perspective changed and the train went by.'
- 'Seeing the fields in this way was an important eye opener for me – noticing how a group of things adds up to something else, fifty or more of the same things, a system. And the effect of movement and perspective on these squares of crops made me aware of the importance of a frame, and of sets of things co-operating inside a frame. This happens with things and it also happens with colour, just as people react differently with different people, one colouring the other.'

In a similar way, KM's improvised tool kit, of spare and junked parts that could be used to print their own story in industrialized short form, also manages to keep its corner of the world alive. A set of objects that begin to tell us about how things are made (and break down), how languages operate; and how we ourselves, our ideas and perceptions, are formed by what happens around us.

Not collections then, but groups of things, their arrangement, how they react.

