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Schmelzer, Paul. "Laugh At Death: Kris Martin on Mortality Silent Bells and the Skeleton He Buried in an Art Museum's Front Lawn." *Huffpost*. December 6, 2017.



As spring again sputters into being and we witness another revolution of the life/death/life cycle, a recently installed artwork in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden stands as a marker of this type of transition. In tandem with the hourly chiming of bells at the Basilica of St. Mary across the street, Kris Martin's lone, bronze bell — at the center of his sculpture *For Whom...* (2012) — swings soundlessly, a wordless meditation on time's passage. Taking its name from John Donne's famous poem of 1623, the work is emblematic of the kind of meaning-of-life questions Martin ponders through many of his other works, from a human medical specimen buried in an unmarked grave on the Walker campus to a new piece in which he wrote the word "Somebody" on a piece of paper using only his finger and human cremation ashes. During a recent conversation — first published on the Walker Art Center homepage — the Belgian artist met me in the garden to discuss the strategies he uses in his art — including humor, absence, and shock (or the lack thereof) — as well as a favorite film, fittingly, Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*.

SEANKELLY

Paul Schmelzer: One thing I'm struck by in your work is the element of absence. For Whom ... is a bell without a clapper. In Anonymous II, there's a body but no tombstone. In All Saints, you feature empty glass bell jars but no saints. Something is often missing or removed, which creates a gap. This idea of what we're not seeing reminds me, on one hand, of the Nicene creed in Catholicism — "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and Earth, and of all that is seen and unseen" — and of Duchamp, on the other, who is attributed as saying, "It's not what you see that's art. Art is the gap."

Kris Martin: Exactly. The gap is essential in two ways. First of all, visually. When you lack something, it's part of the invitation. You can complete the image with your imagination. And secondly, the gap is also important to make space for your reflection and for your imagination. I try to give viewers an active role in the confrontation with my work without feeling forced, so they can just get active by looking or by thinking about it.

Schmelzer: In an interview with art, Das Kunstmagazin (May 2009), you discussed this open-endedness:

The more you want to tell, the less you should reveal. If, for instance, I came into the bar here and called out, 'please pay attention, my grandfather has just died,' then people would think 'poor guy' and after a moment or two they'd go back to their talking. But if I came in and cried out 'death!' it would have a much stronger effect.

By shouting "Death!" — it changes the dynamic.

Martin: Well, they'd still think I'm a weirdo, but they can't help thinking, even for a split second, about death in a personal way. That's the reason, for instance, why I have such a big admiration for an artist like Félix González-Torres, because more than anybody else he was able to lift a very personal story, a very intimate story, which is by definition trivial, to the world. It's horrible, but that's normal. We are eight billion, so your personal story is completely trivial unless it's affecting a lot of lives, like some politicians or dictators can do.

That's the big question: how can you elevate this personal story, this trivial story, to a universal level? It's by shutting up — and time. The best example is the billboard Felix made after his partner died from AIDS, the billboards with the empty bed in New York ("Untitled," 1991) — it yells very loudly without sound. Actually, that was a big inspiration for the bell, because in your imagination the sound is amplified. It's only in your mind. It's in your head that it's happening, but there is no noise. It can be seen as a deduction. I might admit that this has been a huge inspiration for me. But nothing is more intimate than your bed, and then you make a picture of it and you make huge billboards. But nobody feels forced to look into your private life. You just show it and people are passing by without paying attention.

SEANKELLY

Schmelzer: When you talked about the global insignificance of an individual's death, that's tied in with the name of this work, For Whom..., from John Donne's Meditation XVII of 1623, which presents the idea of inter-connectedness:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.

So, yes, one death might be insignificant, but at the same time it's significant in that it's related to this higher interconnected web of humanity that spans through time and space.

Martin: Yes. For that reason, I'm also very happy that this work is here [outdoors, in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden], because when making works for a public space I tend to think in a different way. It's totally different than making your stuff for somebody who likes it. You don't need to be a specialist to connect with this piece. Many visitors to the park are maybe totally not into art, but I know, just by having shown this very bell for a year in three public spaces that people connect very easily to it, because a bell is sounding during people's most important stages of life. They are tolling when somebody's born, and they are tolling when somebody dies.

Schmelzer: For Whom ... is situated a few hundred yards from your work Anonymous II, a human skeleton buried on the Walker hillside with no grave marker. I was curious about the "conversation" between those two works.

Martin: They are connected, of course. Maybe you could say that this very bell is tolling for the anonymous guy everybody has forgotten. It's also about existence. Everybody's trying to put a stamp on life or on the world, like "Kilroy Was Here." Even the stupid tag of a tagger is dealing with the same problematic. Like, somebody makes an unforgettable recipe for upside-down apple cake, like Madame Tatin back in the 19th century, and becomes immortalized through cake. Another one makes children. Another one makes art. So I don't feel special in trying to do that. It's not unique. I don't have the privilege or the monopoly in trying to put a stamp on life. It's human to try to do that.

It's a way of fighting against mortality. Although you know that you will lose the fight, there are only two options. You get cynical, or you try to use your time doing something that could mean something to somebody else, that makes other people happy. You know that you will lose the fight. That's the reason why I made this bomb [100 Years, 2004] that will explode in 91 years.

Schmelzer: So, it's really a bomb?

SEANKELLY

Martin: Yes. A bomb is made to harm people, so this bomb is absolutely harmless. I don't have enemies — none that I know of, at least — but my biggest enemy is mortality. When I made that piece, back in 2004, I was absolutely convinced that nobody would ever know me in 100 years' time. So going out from the fact that I would be completely forgotten, 10 bombs explode suddenly indicating, hey, Martin was there at some point back in time — which is absolutely silly. I wanted it to be something of a caricature, something comical.

A very important aspect of my work is a small percentage of wits, something stupid, something idiotic. It makes it edible. It makes it digestible. And it's also me. It's funny, sometimes the most cruel happenings in the history of mankind make the best jokes. Is it tasteless? Maybe. But if you think twice, it's only humor that can make you survive. Otherwise you can't cope with it. If it's too big, you have to start laughing.

Schmelzer: Do you think there's humor in these works? A bell without a clapper?

Martin: Somehow — well, I don't know. Everybody has his own concept about humor. Maybe it's a bad joke in the eyes of some people, and maybe it has something slightly humorous in my story, but I leave it open. I won't say, "Hey, this is a good joke." It's not even intended as a joke, but let's say wit is a very important motive throughout my work. When it's getting too serious, I insert a bit of humor to create a balance. I don't take myself seriously so why would I ever take my work seriously?

Schmelzer: You're currently working on a piece called Somebody. Can you tell me about it?

Martin: Oh yeah! For more than a year I've been thinking should I do it or shouldn't I? But in the end I said, OK, yes, because it's definitely — politically and ethically — incorrect. In a way, I'm old-fashioned: I think that an artist shouldn't be correct. But on the other hand, I really try to avoid trying to shock people, to harm people, to make them feel bad. So I think it's not tasteless.

What I've done, simply: My gallery assistant has been searching for human ashes for a year, and it's resulted in five urns filled with the ashes of five people. And on a big sheet of paper, I've written the word "somebody" with my fingers using the ashes of somebody. They are all anonymous, even for me. I have no idea who they are — or were. It results in a document. And just as you see art that's made from oil on canvas, this is somebody on paper, literally.

To burn something to obtain a pigment is something very old, as old as mankind, like charcoal. You have to burn — you have to destroy the tree, or at least a part of the tree — to obtain the charcoal.

SEANKELLY

“Somebody” is also a little jeu de mots, a play with words. It’s a little matter, a little part of a body. Although people call my work conceptual, it ends up with matter. Only matter can carry the thought or the meaning — longer than I ever will be able to. Whether people call my work conceptual or not, I don’t care. In the end I come up with an image, and I wanted to make these images on paper and not on canvas because it’s a document. It’s a real document. It’s somebody on paper. We’re all somebody on paper.

But people hate me for it. But I know with my heart, I dare say, that I didn’t want to shock anybody, and it’s definitely also not shocking. Imagine if I’d painted a skeleton blue and let it turn on the ceiling in the museum, people would say, “Oh yes, blue skeleton, Kris Martin: no big deal.” But just writing the word with ashes is shocking to people, and I’m very happy. You know why? Because people have imagination. So I have triggered their imagination, which I wouldn’t have done with the actual bone and with the face of death. Had I used the skull, the face of death, it wouldn’t have shocked anybody.

Schmelzer: It reminds me of your Edelweiss piece, which of course is not shocking, because it’s the work’s title written in the ash of burnt flowers.

Martin: No, but it comes through the same — the death of the flower is the condition to write the word, which makes the flower immortal, in a way. Same with the forgotten person. Those people are anonymous and their ashes, nobody has ever taken care of them. There is no monument, there is no tomb, so there’s nothing.

Schmelzer: How did you acquire the ashes?

Martin: I have no idea, and I don’t want to know. For me, it was just functional. I needed the material to make the piece, so I made a total abstraction myself, but it was no fun doing it because I can guarantee you when you are actually going in the urn with your fingers and you are making this piece with the ashes — it’s not the nicest job I’ve ever done.

Schmelzer: So you didn’t use an implement, a paint brush, say. You worked skin to ash? It’s rather archetypal.

Martin: Yes, I rubbed it on paper. And then you see that all those people have different colors. There was a brown one, there was a light gray one, one is almost black. The individuality is still radiating through the ashes. It’s just strange.

Schmelzer: A moment ago you were talking about the skeleton painted blue and spinning from the ceiling: I’m curious of what your thoughts are about spectacle in art, because there’s a scale with For Whom ... and a sort of a spectacular nature of the skeleton in Anonymous II, but they don’t come across as using spectacle as a device.

SEANKELLY

Martin: Maybe it's spectacular to know about the skeleton, but I didn't want to make a spectacle with it. Yes, I'm using the skeleton to make a piece, but I think, hopefully, in a very respectful way. Again, with this piece, people were very shocked. But how far have we come that people are shocked by the most common act of respect — burying human remains? It's happening now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, now, all over the world. The thing that makes it awkward is simply: it was somebody, so it was pure subject. It was a person. Then the person dies and his skeleton is brought from Asia to a doctor's practice, and it's just a didactic model: "Here, my lady, your arm is broken here and here and here." It's pure object, and then by burying it again, it reminds us of a human person, of somebody, and it turns immediately into subject again. That's maybe the awkward aspect of the piece, to take it out of objectivity and to bring it back to the emotional.

Schmelzer: But it's interesting that anonymity is monumentality, in a certain way. You chose not to erect a tombstone that says, "Here lies anonymous," which is, again, that sort of subtraction or absence.

Martin: It's also inspired by the very beautiful story of the book of Augustinus and one of the books he wrote called *What Can We Do For The Dead?* It's a very interesting question.

It's a letter he's writing to a monk, a friend of his in a monastery far away. We are taking care of people, he asks, but what can we do for the dead? And it's a very interesting question because at first sight you would say, "Nothing, of course." So it's also the illusion of doing a favor for somebody, you know? When I would be totally forgotten and I would have been a didactic model, an object in a doctor's practice, and they put me here in a beautiful garden in a museum environment — it's fantastic. Normally, when I die I will end up in a very crappy, ugly cemetery.

Schmelzer: With a bunch of other dead people.

Martin: Yeah! Like an ugly little suburb. So it's a privilege, although nobody can enjoy it.

Schmelzer: Of course, in the summertime the Walker hillside is activated by a big rock concert, as well as other events. People are dancing on top of the body, dancing on the grave, and it's not a desecration necessarily?

Martin: No, but here it's America. It's different of course, but take every old European city — you are walking on a graveyard. Under my house there are skeletons, hundreds, because the city has been existing for more than a thousand years. So it's a stratification of life and death.

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There's an expression in Dutch; if you would translate it literally, "He's a rich stinker." And you know why? Back in medieval times, the richest family could afford to bury their relatives in the church, but it was just under the pavement so in summertime it started smelling, and from there comes the expression the "rich stinker."

Schmelzer: Wow. [laughs] Speaking of churches, tell me about the history of the bell in For Whom I understand it was made for a church in Germany?

Martin: It has a funny story, because it was cast to be inserted in a church tower, but it was too big. They made a mistake. And I bought it. It also mentions the year 2000. It's the last bell before the new millennium, and it was the year in which I started my practice, so there's a small autobiographical aspect.

Schmelzer: Since your work often ponders themes like existence and death and time, I wonder: Is there an autobiographical element here as well? Did you have a big loss in your life or are you pondering your own mortality? Or is it simply that these are the questions we all can't help but address?

Martin: Both. I'm 40, and the longer you live the more risk there is that you are, on a blue Monday, confronted with death in your inner circle, and it makes you reflect. You cannot help it. You cannot avoid the biggest question in life — the meaning of it — to start.

I'm still fond of this opening scene of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*. It's fish in an aquarium and they have very bad memory. They are swimming in different directions and when they encounter another fish they say, "Morning!", "Morning.", "Morning!", "Morning." So that's like humanity in an aquarium. It's all different stories in a very small aquarium. That's the most hilarious scene of all. I was crying laughing. You see? We're all goldfish.