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, 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 ‘letterlessness’ 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-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-Kapelle, 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 his-
tory of art and design that has, directly or
indirectly, informed KM’s own approach. I
tell him that the German artist and designer
Kurt Schwitter is an almost unavoidable
reference, as is the Dutch printer H.N.
Werkm. It’s well enough documented that
during the 1930s, when his commercial
print shop fell into decline, Werkm began
using the letters in his type cases for more
experimental prints, which he called ‘druk-
sels’. These were often a combination of the
calligrammes and machine iconography
previously associated with the Dada of
Apollinaire and Picabia – and also connect-
ed in, several ways, to Schwitter’s rework-
ing 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 as much the
work itself, but he represented new
ideas, a kind of energy. Roskam had
much more traditional values, very liter-
ary, 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 paint-
ings, 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 physi-
cal world with an intuition for printmaking
and other graphic production languages.

Henk Peeters was a member of the
Dutch artists’ Nul group, known for empha-
sizing 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, car-
pentry rules, actual tools from a metal or
woodworkers’ workshop, actual printers’
blocks, holwot, 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 pro-
duced 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 anoth-
er 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 proj-
ects, 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-
panelled 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-config-
ured 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 enthusi-
asms 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 jour-
ney 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 pro-
duced 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 some-
thing else, fifty or more of the same
things, a system. And the effect of move-
ment and perspective on these squares
of crops made me aware of the impor-
tance of a frame, and of sets of things
co-operating inside a frame. This hap-
pens with things and it also happens
with colour, just as people react differ-
cently 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 per-
ceptions, are formed by what happens
around us.

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