

“Love Is a Good Place to Start” - Ken Feingold in Conversation with Edward Shanken

I. Introduction

ES: I'd like to talk to you about your work in relationship to some big ideas: love and beauty and the creation of meaning. Regarding that last concept, I'm curious if Gregory Bateson's cybernetic theories, and his *Metalogs* in particular, have been important to you?

KF: I haven't thought about Bateson at all in the context of my work - but I do see how there is a shared territory of dialog and examination of how things are made meaningful, and the struggling with "muddles". But my works, rather than trying to sort out how things become meaningful, attempt to look at how the mind is capable of tremendous confusion and how speaking can carry forward this confusion and confound meaning. I have thought more often about Samuel Beckett and his explorations, maybe even celebrations, of the kinds of "muddles" that Bateson sought to sort out, if I understand Bateson's intent ...

ES: I'm also very interested to discuss your work with respect to a constellation of ideas related to Buddhism, emptiness, and relativity in connection to how meaning emerges in a conversation – the contingency of meaning. Are there specific things you'd like to address, things that haven't been discussed much about your work?

KF: The “thinness” of artificial intelligence is a central subject but not one that bears a lot of discussion. My works are not attempts to create actual, intelligent simulacra. People often think that if something is realistically talking then it must be possible to make it say whatever you want it too. But they're much more theatrical than that, much more finite or defined. There's a lot that can be explored in the play between disguise and disclosure in this realm; between what appears to be a simulation of consciousness and what actually is a simulation of consciousness.

ES: When you say “disguise and disclosure” and bring up the theatrical qualities of the work, it makes me think of the very long tradition of automata, spectacles, and amusements, back to Vaucancon...

KF: Kempelen's Chess Player...

ES: Exactly. Are those things that you think about in connection with your work?

KF: Not really. My work was included in the *Devices of Wonder* exhibition [J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2001-2] as well as *Kempelen - Man in the Machine* [Exhibition organized by the C3 Foundation, Budapest Múcsarnok | Kunsthalle and ZKM, Karlsruhe 2007] but I think the intentionality of my work is really different. I was thinking more about the theatrical staging of a conversation. My works can be seen as a sort of hybridization between a scripted play and improvisational theater. The nature of the conversation has a territory that the works are able to wander around in.

KF: I also think the Buddhist approach you suggest is a really important one, an important aspect of the philosophical underpinnings of the process of making the work, and how the work lives, and how meaning is created in it. That really should be discussed more.

ES: Anything else you would like to add to the discussion of your work?

KF: Humor! (Laughs) There's a lot of humor in these works that is often taken for granted. People presume that they just happen to be funny. But there is really a very conscious intentionality about that destabilization and bringing forward of the unconscious that humor provides.

ES: OK then. Well, I'm pretty satisfied with love, beauty, meaning, and humor – it's hard to beat that! Is there any particular order in which you'd like to address these themes?

KF: Well, love is a good place to start (laughs)

ES: Great! That could be the title of this discussion! (laughs)

II. Love

ES: Your work, especially *Hell*, brings to mind Lawrence Durrell's character Justine's notion of love as "a shared experience at the same moment of time, narcissistically ... like reflections in different mirrors." I'm curious to know your thoughts on love and how that relates to your work...

KF: It's interesting that you picked up the thread about love in thinking about *Hell*. I had even planned that *Love* would be the title of that piece when I started it - but it seemed so hopelessly impossible for me to be optimistic and yet I did not want to drop the subject. I do like the quote from Durrell. Maybe it is through narcissistic identification, the seemingly "true" but substantially "false" shared experience that crumbles when the question "Why do you love me?" is asked. As long as there is only "I love you and you love me" the reflections are felt to be coincident, and when love goes begging for love and the reality is that there are different mirrors after all, we find ourselves in "Hell".

ES: How do you define love?

KF: The Buddhist definition of love is wanting others to be happy, and an absence of judgment. For me personally it has something to do with the desire for connection and the sort of oceanic feeling that is generated by the experience of that. These works of mine explore the impossibility of creating that through language when there is no reality of the person. So the figures in the works, and especially in *Hell*, have a sort of the appearance of being frustrated all the time. And it's important to note that it's always a referential experience. The work evokes things in the viewer but the figures don't feel anything at all don't really think anything at all. That's not always understood by the viewer. The situation is theatrical and even though it is largely improvised, the conversation is staged. The figures are "as-if" they are actors. "As-if" operates in many realms in this work. So the figures are trying to connect but they don't really have any affect states but only the ability to speak about them. They're constantly searching for something that will reaffirm their desire to connect with the other one. And it's always undermined. It's always thwarted. It never gets to the point where they can settle into a loving conversation.

ES: Can you tell me more about the tragedy of going from *Love* to *Hell*?

In the process of writing the software for it, I considered trying to really make it work, to make a piece where the characters really express love for each other. Many of my other works were cynical or

somewhat sarcastic about humanity. There's a disappointment with humanity that *AVME* gets at, an implication that a plant or a rock could have as much to say about things as a person does. But I thought that in making *Hell*, there might be a way into a loving discourse...

ES: How come your loving intention failed to materialize?

KF: I found, quite by surprise, that a loving discourse between the figures was not something that I could make happen in a way that was satisfying. It was too contrived. And what I felt was much more possible for this work –and certainly part of this is my own state of mind – turned out to be completely different. Each piece seeks a certain outcome. And while I'm not completely aware of the outcome, in the middle of it I can see it's going in the right direction or it's going in the wrong direction and I'll steer it in a certain direction. That notion of love – love begging for love: do you love me? How much do you love me? Why do you love me? This discourse seemed completely empty in the context of this work. Whereas the figures raising those questions and then arguing about why they can't find happiness with each other or what it is that aggravates them about the other was able to produce a much more meaningful state in me watching it. And this is the point where these works have psychoanalytic dimensions that reveal things to myself that are always unknown until the work is there. Love is a tricky topic!

ES: On the topic of love and non-sentient beings, in the Spike Jonze movie, *Her* (2013), a conscious operating system (OS) and its user form a loving attachment but their union is ultimately not satisfying to either partner... they even try enlisting the service of a surrogate so that the human and OS can physically consummate their relationship, at least by proxy. And I'm just imagining – and this would not necessarily be something you would choose to do in your own work; it wouldn't have the endlessly improvised quality of your work – but what might it be like if human actors memorized a segment of dialog generated in *Hell* and performed it with each other? What would that be like?

KF: That would be a very interesting experiment. People are actually able to perceive affect states, because people in the audience have mirror neurons. There are ways that we actually feel what other people feel. If they're good actors, we might be brought into that realm where talking about love as love and asking for love and giving love would be able to be felt. I thought at one point to do something like that in reverse: to take an existing plays and have it enacted by robots. I haven't gotten around to doing that yet, but Beckett's play, entitled *Play*, is actually footnoted in such a way that the play could go on forever, endlessly, with an infinite number of variations. I made some studies and drawing for doing this, but haven't realized it yet. There are always problems dealing with getting staging permissions from the Beckett estate, too. In his original version, on stage, facing the audience, three people are set inside of immovable, body-length urns, so that only their heads are sticking out. A spotlight moves back and forth, focusing on the one that is speaking. In my interpretation, three algorithmically driven heads are mounted in a room's corner, and the spotlight's movement is driven by my computer software. Beckett insisted that the movement of the spotlight was important, that it should not simply be three spots turning on and off. So part of the fun in programming will be to get a "naturalistic" movement of the robotic light.

ES: I can see reflections of that in your work, especially *If/Then* and *What If?* Both consist of two robotic heads sticking out of a packing crate...

KF: Yes! And Beckett actually sketched out a framework that would make it very easy to write the piece for a computer. The language direction was such that there was little emotion expressed, so that the

acting out of the script was more an expression of language than an expression of emotion. Maybe that was the experience he was trying to create for the audience.

ES: This idea of humans acting like emotionless robots is really intriguing in relation to *Hell*. It seems to parallel the way you've described how your works empty out the emotional aspects of a conversation in order to examine the limits of language qua language to communicate ideas, feelings, and, in the case of *Hell*, love. I suppose that a computerized version of *Play* would result in a certain idealized realization of it. However, human actors would inevitably project affect states and trigger mirror neurons in a way that robotic actors could not. So there would be different sorts of tensions between the audience and the protagonists, depending on if the actors are human or robot, or a combination of the two.

KF: Yes, I agree. And what I discovered in the process of writing *Hell* is that the absence of affect makes a discussion of love incomprehensible.

ES: When you were describing *Hell*, Alan Kaprow's notion of "communications media as non-communications" sprung to mind, because the robots really can't communicate with each other. In connection with his own closed-circuit video work, *Hello*, 1971 (the title of which is very close to *Hell*) he claimed that the most important message was the idea of "oneself in connection with someone else." In my mind, love involves a very deep form of communication or communion, so *Hell* complicates these ideas. There seems to be a lot riding on that letter "o" at the end of Kaprow's title! Following Kaprow, perhaps the most important message of *Hell* is the idea of that connections between human beings demand forms of communication that cannot be mechanized by language, that demand emotion, affect, and physical engagement.

KF: Absolutely. Also that non-communication, because we experience it in its various forms as desire that goes away from the object, rather than towards it, creates frustration and a sense of meaninglessness.

KF: It's interesting that you raise the idea of Alan's work and thoughts because he was one of my teachers at Cal Arts. There was a kind of, not a split, but a difference in approach between the Baldessarian conceptual artists and the Kaprowian conceptual artists. Alan was always trying to bring humanness, humanity into the experience into the work, to make that central. The Baldessarians were more ironic, keeping things at a distance. Alan always trying to make people feel something, while Baldessari was always trying to make people think something or puzzle over something.

ES: And where do you see your work fitting into that framework?

KF: I think at the time I felt more inclined toward the Baldessarian intellectualization of meaning rather than the affective and more unconscious or consciousness-changing experiences that couldn't be as easily described or charted, that Kaprow was after. Later on I came to realize the significance of Kaprow's approach. That's a very good reference point that you hit on.

ES: These big concepts like love and beauty – what place do you think they have in the Baldessarian modality?

KF: Well, I think for Baldessari there's a kind of aesthetic principle that operates to create the work. That is his notion of beauty. I thought it as very ironic that he called the retrospective catalog from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Pure Beauty*. On one hand, it's an ironic reference but on the other hand,

it's one that he can't let go of. So it's there; the work is always impeccable in a sense, that there is a beauty in its perfection, in its opacity or, alternately, in its obviousness.

ES: How fortunate to have both these mentors, representing very different attitudes! Kaprow could be a good segue to Buddhism or Beauty... Although if it's not too personal, I would like to ask if there's some sort of connection between *Hell* and your personal circumstances?

KF: I think it reflects on my experiences in general with partners: a kind of impasse that's reached during a breakdown of communication. It's a recurring territory that couples wander into from time to time and have to find their way out of it. The territory itself is frightening. It's hellish. And being stuck in that frame of mind when communication has broken down and it's not possible - because of personal shortcomings or, at that moment, the inability to see things from the other person's point of view - to mentalize the circumstance that created it, what it was that led to that discord, is something that I've personally definitely experienced, and the work comes out of that, for sure.

ES: Due to improvisational nature of the dialog that your work generates, you've said that you learn something from it. So what have you learned from *Hell*, for example, about that impasse you described and the seeming impossibility of getting through it?

KF: That so much of it is about reacting to language and how language has this power to create not only meanings on an intellectual level but deeply emotional responses, even when the figures have no real affect states. And the impasse in a way is made up of blockages that are created by certain word constructions, where things are held at a distance or are unable to bridge a distance because there are words in the way that made the other figure respond defensively or reactively. In these pieces, they pay attention to the text that the other one says. So these machines have a kind of association and linking that operates along the same lines as the kind of unconscious mental functioning that we have in terms of links and associative connections and when I see them going through their - I'm never quite sure what to call it, the software is running - so when I see them running and whatever goes through them is happening, it's been possible for me to see how wrong things can go because, for example, someone paid more attention to one word in a sentence than another word in a sentence.

ES: I just had that in an email correspondence yesterday!

KF and ES: (Laughs)

ES: I think you're right: it's such a universal experience; these impasses in relationships and how we get caught up in words and in our own egos and desires, and lose the ability to empathize and make someone else's reality our own.... So, on the outside, yeah it's funny - if you watch other people going through it - you can say, Ugggg!

KF: Is there anything funny about love? (Laughs) I think we should go on to beauty (more laughs)...

ES: Before we do that, I'd like to connect your work to the parodic exaggerations that often occur in theater, which allow us to laugh at ourselves. By exaggerating one aspect - the exclusively verbal - works like *Hell* bring into relief other things that are not present, or things that may be invisible to us when we are responding defensively or reactively. Such communication breakdowns are hellishly serious when we're stuck in them but ironic and humorous when we witness robots trying to find their way out of those impasses. We can laugh at the robots and, in a sense, they allow us to laugh at

ourselves, our foibles, vulnerabilities, and insecurities, if not our utter ineptitude at sharing and receiving love!

KF: Yes, I think so. I just remembered Hollis Frampton's great film, *Critical Mass*, 1971. Frampton took footage of a couple arguing about their relationship, cut it up, and looped it in such a way that it broke down the conversation into fragments. Somewhere someone has probably put it on YouTube. It was definitely a funny experience to see the fracturing of the argument because it takes away some of the emotional velocity of it and lets you look at it more carefully. I think some of my pieces can do this also by virtue of their limitedness. They have a kind of Brechtian distance, which is always there, because you know they're fake. You know they're not really thinking. So in a way that becomes humorous in an attempt to be human or be human like, they fail so wonderfully that they get things in a very absurd way. *Hell* doesn't have any jokes, per se, in it, but some of my other works do. Plays on words often are ingredients that I use to make people see the kind of linguistic dimension of the creation of meaning; to keep coming back to an awareness that these are words, these are robots saying words. Words are what you're hearing. Words are what you're thinking about. Somehow the humor in this is meant to give a bit of distance and relief also. So in my work, I hope it's not just the prefrontal cortex that's working all the time. I also want to activate parts of the brain that operate on a more unconscious level, that respond to the way that humor will take a conversation and turn it inside out; where you think it's going one way and it veers off and goes in a completely different direction. So humor is there as a humanizing factor.

ES: Technical question regarding this play of words in your work. When you and I are speaking, the sounds of the words we say open up possibilities of puns and other phonetic associations that enable statements to be interpreted in multiple ways. In your work, is there ever the possibility of that kind of misunderstanding or complexification through the sound of words and their written forms?

KF: Yes, definitely. There was a technical change between the earlier works and the more recent works. The earliest works used speech recognition on an audio basis. So they were actually listening and they would make all sorts of mistakes based on homonyms or words that sounded similar or a lack of context that would not enable them to make a distinction between one word and another that normally we're very easily able to differentiate. They would go off on long chains of associations based on something the other one didn't say. They would really veer very far off. Ultimately, there was a technological problem. The speech recognition software, which had been given away to the Linux community to play with, was taken back by IBM. Essentially they said, "Nobody can use this anymore. It's gone. Erase it from your computers."

ES: Oh no!

KF: There really was no other good speech recognition software that I wanted to work on with Linux. So instead, I switched to a text-based conversation. So in works like *The Animal, Vegetable, Mineralness of Everything (AVME)* and *Hell*, there are text strings going back and forth between the program objects and they are analyzing the text and formulating a response, and then they turn the text into speech. So they're not listening to audio. But the earlier works, like *Head* and *If/Then*, through 2001, were actually listening to each other.

ES: Is there more humor based on word play in the speech recognition works or in the text-based works after 2001? What difference did that technological shift make in the quality of the conversations?

KF: There was more accidental and chance-derived humor based on word play in the earlier works because they were based on the characteristics of the speech-recognition engine, which was a kind of black box – there wasn't much I could do to affect what it understood or misunderstood. The word play that occurs in the newer ones is more constructed, more intentional. The heads don't intend it but I intend it and put it in the software.

ES: That's one dimension of the humor in the work. But it seems that also the formal qualities...

KF: Yes, they're visually hilarious! How did the heads get like that? What's going on with this? How am I supposed to react to these? They're frightening, severed heads... Yet they're also toy-ish. There's a harmlessness about them because it's obvious that they're not real heads that are cut off.

ES: They're delicately poised in the uncanny valley, where the human response to a surrogate being is balanced between fear and desire, repulsion and curiosity.

KF: And the actual setting that the works are put in is meant to be invoke a sort of narrative. *Hell* has been reduced to the minimal trappings of their technology - the heads are locked into a conversation with no other props. But many of the works have a sort of *mis-en-scène*, which provides a narrative that is there even if the work is turned off. And those physical characteristics of the work are intentionally humorous.

III. Buddhism/Spirituality

ES: I wonder if we can somehow segue from discussing beauty and humor to address Buddhism, spirituality, and emptiness?

KF: What really jumps out is the sort of Zen attitude of the moment when you apprehend the real emptiness of things: the Mahayana Buddhist concept that things come into existence because of causes and conditions; that things arise in a dependent relationship with other things; and that the work of art and the audience are inextricably bound up in each other. There is, in the moment of realizing that nothing has any independent existence, the realization that everything is dependent on everything else, a recognition of self-delusion that's pretty hilarious. There is such a strong connection and inseparability between things. So all these attempts to talk about autonomous objects, and discrete experiences, and all so on, become pretty funny when it really hits you that there's no escape. We're all implicated in each other's narratives. Whether we know it or not, no matter how far removed we may think we are, we are all inextricably interwoven. That illusory goal of individuation that we strive for parallels what the robots are working through (to each create a sort of individuality for themselves, to assert their own ideas and their inability to do that, is because they don't really have any ideas, they're just made to act as if they do) reflects our own unawareness of how the language is coming through us, how we use words or make things meaningful without being aware of the interdependence of meaning systems with each other.

The same thing that attracted me to Buddhism attracted me to semiotics and deconstruction. They're all systems in which the making of meaning is explored, in which language holds great power. There's a Buddhist expression about the power of language to generate understanding. My corollary to that would stress the power of language to generate confusion. (Laughs) And there's something humorous in that, too: How we could be befuddled by something that is essentially a puppet, and thrown into an emotional and affective state by an artwork that is so much like us that we identify with it because we

want it to be as meaningful as we want ourselves to be. But when the things falls short of being really satisfying, when it really shows itself to be absurd, then you either have to just laugh at yourself or you have to say, "This is a pile of shit!" For me, the only sensible reaction is to acknowledge that I'm also in some way programmed, also in some way full of hard-wired links and associations, and to get out of that, to see things freshly and to really be aware of what's really going on at given moment, in a dialog or communication or any language-based exchange is really an intensely difficult proposition.

ES: Do you have any tips on how to do that?

ES/KF (grin at each other...)

KF: I think a lot about first impressions. And the experience of traveling and having a sort of intoxication from first impressions and how that feels very fresh and real and alive. My project, in a way, is to be able to walk out of my own front door and to have first impressions of the same place that I've seen everyday as if I'd never seen it before. That's the only traction I've gotten with the problem so far.

ES: I have a two year-old, so I'm constantly seeing the world in freshly intoxicating ways...

KF: Yeah, yeah! I think absolutely for me, having children created a different way of seeing the world through their questions and experiences, and really feeling deeply connected to them. And not just thinking about it but feeling their frustration, seeing their delight... it changes you.

ES: One thing I've started to notice are linguistic confusions, where she takes things very literally. That's the only way she understands the world. Even though she's very funny and says funny things on purpose, she tends to take things very literally and this results in some unexpectedly jarring misunderstandings that are very humorous.

KF: In the works that were listening, that used voice recognition, they were very concrete in that sense. If you hit on something that was in their database that they already had something to say about, they would say that, because they were taking it very literally. But because they could easily misinterpret homonyms in ways that humans would not, they might respond to a statement in a way that seems utterly ridiculous.

ES: I recall an interaction with my brother when he was about five or six, I don't remember the context exactly but I told him a true statement and said "You can take my word for it." He looked at me quizzically and with great concern, and responded, "But if I take your word, you won't have any word left."

ES/KF (laughs)

ES: I'd like to go back to the Buddhist expression about the power of language to generate understanding and your corollary about the power of language to generate confusion. Can you elaborate and perhaps tie that more to deconstruction?

KF: Before it was turned into a religion, Buddhism was more a philosophical exploration of reality. The early writings were very much about logic and how meaning is constructed, about the relationship between words and things. Derrida studied it very closely; he was a real scholar of Indian philosophy. I

was teaching at Princeton at the same time that Gyastry Spivak [a leading scholar of postcolonialism, who translated Derrida's *Of Grammatology*] was there. One day I asked her, What did Derrida have to say about Nagarjuna? It seemed to me that this ancient Buddhist philosopher had laid the groundwork for just about everything in deconstruction. She said that he thought about it all the time. He had a recurring dream that he was standing naked on a stage and the only person in the audience was Nagarjuna, and that Derrida was giving his theories about how things unpack in terms of meaning. So clearly there was some anxiety there!

ES/KF: Laughs...

ES: That sounds like it could be the inspiration for an artwork!

KF: Yeah!

KF: But you know, the philosophical principles of Buddhism are formulated through logic. That construction is incorporated on an intellectual level and then that serves as the basis for a non-conceptual, direct cognition if you attain enlightenment in which you perceive the meaning directly. So there is what's considered a conceptual, non-direct cognition of a phenomenon and that's the level that most of us are operating on most of the time. We make sense of things based on indirect experience of something, filtered through layers of mediation, conceptualization.

Wittgenstein can seem like cozy poetry compared to some of the early Buddhist texts. One text of Nagarjuna is about getting from one place to another. A lot of the discourse investigates the question, When does the going begin? Does it begin with the intention? Does it begin with the first step? When the toes are on the ground or when the whole foot is in the air? It breaks things down in painful detail to show just how much we use linguistic ideas and constructions of meaning like, "I'm going someplace," without thinking about everything that connected with it and without realizing that the beginning of going isn't at the moment of going, that there is an infinitely long chain of being that leads up to that moment that is connected with what happens later on. And that's really hilarious. Because it means that there are pretty much no discrete events. There are things that are punctuations and landmarks and causes and conditions... But things really have no clear beginning and ending; they're all deeply intertwined.

ES: I love the image of Derrida naked on stage in front of Nagarjuna, the notion of Wittgenstein as "cozy poetry," the intricate logic of Buddhist philosophy that leads to the recognition that everything is inextricably interconnected, and the humor you find in the realization of our self-disillusionment, our clinging to and striving for individuation. Perhaps we can now turn to beauty?

IV. Beauty

KF: Beauty... [laughs]... it's got a lot of baggage, doesn't it? There's been so much...

ES: So do love and belief!

KF and ES: (Laughs...)

KF: They were all such taboo subjects when I was in school – didn't want to talk about any of them at Cal Arts in those days (1971-76); It was like "we're done with all that stuff" attitude..." To recover any interest in that, it took me years out of school to find for myself. Of that group [of concepts] beauty is the one that I consciously consider the least. I don't really think about, "Is this beautiful or is this not beautiful." But yet, there is a very definite conscious manipulation of qualities of objects and appearances of things to make sure they look the way I want them to. So what is that? That's my beauty, even if they're not classically beautiful in some sort of idealized way.

ES: Beauty is more than skin-deep. So the formal aspects, the sonic aspects, they have aesthetic qualities. Choices are made. But that's just part of the work. So, the ideas are also embedded with some sort of aesthetic selection, carefully chosen, crafted and explored, modeled...

KF: Absolutely. And I think the beauty of ideas appeals to me. The beauty of a kind of funny moment, or a good retort. If the software comes up with something that surprises me. I find that very beautiful in a sense.

ES: Surprise is an important concept in artificial intelligence. In "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (the 1950 paper that outlines what has become known as the "Turing Test") computer pioneer Alan Turing claims that a computer's ability to surprise a human observer undermines the argument (à la Ada Lovelace) that a machine can never do anything new. Although Turing recognizes that such surprise undoubtedly requires a creative act on the part of the human observer, he also wants to give credit to machines for surprising humans, just as one would credit another human, a book, or anything else for generating the experience of surprise.

KF: Surprise reaches into the unconscious mind. Is it an aesthetic or is it a narcissistic experience? That's the part I wonder about.

ES: This brings back to mind Durrell's definition of love, but now applied to beauty...

KF: Yes! Is the notion that it's like me, or it understands me, it sees me, it has some sort awareness of my interiority that makes it beautiful? I don't know. It's something that I wonder about: the conflation of beauty and narcissism. You're able to see a lot in the work but knowing that it's coming through what you bring to it. That old Duchampian notion that the work of art is completed by the viewer and whatever the viewer does to complete the work is what makes it beautiful for them, or not.

But so does the work have any inherent beauty? Well, that gets back to the Buddhist notion of things not having any independent self-existence. So, what do I put into the work that makes it beautiful? Is it the beauty of the ideas? The physical form? But also, the situation that it sets up; the play between the one who encounters the work and the work itself. For me, that's where the real beauty lies, in the interpenetration of the mind of the viewer and the pseudo-interiority of the artwork that is somehow connecting or disconnecting for them. Again, thinking about Duchamp's idea of the 'art coefficient' – the ratio of what was intended but not expressed to what was unintentionally expressed – so that you [the artist] meant for the work to communicate something but it doesn't do it for someone, but that person will see something in the work that has nothing to do with your intentions. There's humor in that misunderstanding, that misperception, but you can't really call it misunderstanding or misperception because the work has enough properties to elicit that perception in a viewer, so that's the reality of the work for them.

ES: Yes, and in that post-Duchampian way of thinking your work intentionally strives to create or exacerbate that tension. It seems that maybe there are multiple levels of these “misunderstandings”: the ones that you intend to create in the viewer and the ones that unintentionally crop up in the viewer.

KF: That’s right. Yeah, exactly. And the ones that happen due to contextualization. Exhibitions don’t happen in a vacuum. They’re in a particular city, surrounded by other works, in an architectural environment – all those things come into play.

ES: How have the different contexts affected the experience of your work? Of course, there are different viewers as well in those different contexts, so you can’t really compare the contexts alone...

KF: Right. And a lot of it of course has to do with the language and whether or not the language is understood. I’ve had works shown in a lot of countries in which English is not the native tongue, so I often wonder, “How are my works understood?” Many viewers may speak some English, but on the level where there are plays on words or the perception of fine-tuned metaphors and so forth, the works become much more superficial if you can’t really understand these subtleties.

ES: It’s very different than if you were to listen to two or three human interlocutors and not fully understand the language they were speaking. A conversation that doesn’t have human affective aspects – gesture, eye contact, pitch modulation – must be very challenging for an audience with a limited understanding of English because so much communicative content is missing.

KF: Right. And it’s been an interesting problem for me because this kind of work gets shown much more in Europe and Asia than it does in the US or UK. Yet, for years I’ve had this English-language based work... The language seems to be simple enough that people get some access to it. But the fact that they’re speaking and that they are set up the way they are seem to be enough of a meaningful configuration for a lot of people.

ES: Have you had your work translated into other languages?

KF: The problem is that it’s not just a matter of translation. Languages have their own syntax and the algorithms that I use for responding to the text need to be based on the syntax of a particular language. So each work would have to be rethought and reprogrammed for each language. I would have to speak that language really, really well in order to do that. I did do that for *Interior*, because it is much more fixed in the language that it uses; the language in a way plays back rather than being invented as it’s going along. There’s one algorithmically generated bit of speech in it, but for the most part it just pulls up text.

So *Interior* has always been presented in English and another language. I’m not positive what language I left it in! It was originally in English and Japanese, but has also been translated into German, Korean, and Spanish.

ES: Thank you, Ken. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. Let’s do it again!

KF: Any time, Ed.