

#AloneTogether: Division and Coupling in Felix Kindermann’s Art

Long before Covid-19 struck, forcing people around the world to stay in touch by reconnecting online, Felix Kindermann’s art was exploring people and things cleaved from reality. The worry is that people who disconnect from the world will not achieve their full potentials. After so much societal division, coupling may be conceivable, but is it still possible? Why do we yearn for reunions, knowing full well that may provoke heartaches of a different kind? Kindermann’s multi-sensorial oeuvre has routinely prompted me to ponder these and many other questions.

Kindermann’s approach to sculpture engages various materials and sizes, from photographs and objects cast in plaster, silicone, Fiberglas or bronze to video installations and building-size living sculptures comprised of roving musicians. His employing music as a visual art medium harkens back to Apollinaire’s noting that only music escapes the confines of language. Moreover, photographs of his live performances look more like images of people hanging out with friends (connecting) than shots of singers performing their bit-parts. Unlike artists who make collages or ‘dice, slice and splice’ disparate materials together, Kindermann achieves unfamiliarity by recombining split parts, rather than freezing bits as assemblages do. On this level, his artworks are open systems that capably adapt to fit new spaces and new contexts.

Newly arrived in his empty studio with no materials at hand, Kindermann started reflecting on space per se. Since the infinite universe has no center, he proposed his body as its center. To establish its center line, he cupped his hands around his head, discovering instead the jagged line dividing this space. *The Center of the Universe* (2012) rather juxtaposes the asymmetry between presence and absence, or light and shadow, as the white area gives way to grey. Thus began Kindermann’s life-long fascination with the artist’s loss of control, as well as the openness of artworks, whose repeat presentations reveal new contents, as we regard them in a new light.

The ‘separation and connection’ theme first arose when Kindermann exhibited *Distance Between My Left Hand and My Right Hand* (2012), plaster casts of his hands facing opposite directions. Detached from the body and appearing ill-matched, they prompt unease; yet they strangely signalled his artistic future. A few years later, he hung bunches of bananas scratched with phrases like „Für Euch“ (for you) and coated in resin. With their fleshy armatures rotted and decayed, all that remained were surface impressions, hollowed shells of their former selves bunched together to form the illusion of a whole. Soon after, he cast the corners of rooms in coloured silicone and displayed these malleable segments, split from otherwise square units, as *Six Corner Circle (Blue, Red, Green, Yellow, Black, Pink)* (2016). For *Unstable Room (Blue and Black Corner)* (2017), he suspended two translucent corners cast in Fiberglas from the ceiling, transforming the space into a walk-in drawing whose lines float amidst the architecture.

Around the same time, Kindermann created mesostic poems, such as *Fear, Hate, Hope* and *Love*, which combine the Italian names for metronome speeds such as *presto* and *adagio* to visualize these subjective feelings. This led him to present sculptures featuring musical performances (duos, quartets or 16-member choirs) split from their partners: *Separated (Janáček, String Quartet #1)* (2013-2015), *Separated (Dirty Beaches)* (2014), *Vertical Concert* (2016), *How do You Think it Feels* (2018), *(R)ear (S)tones* (2018), *Choir Piece* (2019/2020), and *Choir Piece (Virtual Edit)* (2019). Whether presented as videos on monitors distributed throughout the room or as living sculptures framed by a particular architecture, these sculptures share several attributes. All are collaborative, requiring Kindermann not only to hire composers, choreographers and multiple musicians, but to trust each performer’s judgment regarding how to perform his/her part. His living sculptures are structural improvisations, presented differently each time without knowing their own sequence. They are performed for a unique audience, within a new architecture, sometimes even in the context of an ongoing exhibition.

Concurrently, Kindermann has been exploring language’s isolating propensity, leaving some people feeling voiceless, which inspired his initial collaboration with New York composer Natalie Dietterich on the four-part score for *R(ear) S(tones)* (2018), whose lyrics connect various subjects, such as ‘I’, ‘You’, and ‘We’, to verbs and their opposites. When the audience arrived, they noticed necklaces hanging in a street-facing vitrine, each sporting a bronze object cast from the inside his mouth as he formed the vowels ‘I’ and ‘U’, singular subjects split from their plurality, thus tying this quartet, the ‘we’ who wore them as they sang in the vitrine, to sculpture. To remind the audience to listen, he left an ear-shaped ashtray for passersby gathering outside.

Similar in effect to *Unstable Room*, Kindermann’s live presentations of *Choir Piece* (2019/2020) are walk-in sculptures that require audience members to negotiate space as they let performers do their thing, which requires them to position (and reposition) themselves so as to grasp all that is happening (different lyrics, changing formations, shifting shadows splashed on the wall/floor) coupled with the mix of different voices, reverberations, and sensibilities. As a result, both audiences and performers move in and out of sync. Thus far presented in three museums, *Choir Piece* has featured the Ghent Singers performing Nathalie Dietterich’s score *Composition for Separated Musicians* (2019), which was inspired by Kindermann’s lyrics. As Kindermann notes, ‘Through rearrangement, fragmentation, and techniques of acoustic distortion, *Choir Piece* creates a feeling of alienation, destabilizing the interrelated appearance and affect of the choir as a familiar cultural asset, blurring the lines which are dissolved through the play with essential opposites like harmony and disharmony, the individual and the collective’.

Given today’s focus on site-relativity, it’s hardly surprising that Kindermann’s living sculptures are framed by architecture. What’s surprising, however, is his move to dislocate architectural fragments such as *Scale Model #1* (2019), the negative space formed by a curving staircase’s absence; *Scale Model #2 (Split)* (2019), a grand staircase divided in two whose presentation on wheels recalls his awkwardly displayed hands; and the gleaming elements of three bronze pools (2020), supremely polished to tempt viewers with the grand illusion of an infinite depth. Entirely split from some whole, none promises reunification with either subjects or objects. Unlike his living sculptures that present coupling opportunities, which participants freely resist/accept, subjects only ever dream of entering these objects, let alone taking part (recalling our virus-divided lives).

Sheltering in place for nearly ten weeks during the 2020 pandemic, Kindermann took advantage of this solitude to create three sculptures that he no doubt would have made, but he might never have gotten around to polishing them to perfection. Born of a moment with no hope of setting foot in a

pool, their sparkling surfaces generate hope for a future, a post-pandemic world, where touch, intimacy and connection are not just conceivable, but possible, even if unlike before.