

# Like the Sum of an Elementary Arithmetical Problem

## Interview

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BS: You decided to base your exhibition in Hamburg on one of the most important novels in the German language, “Buddenbrooks”. This is very complicated because the book itself and the topics it deals with are so big and multi-faceted. How do you handle it in the exhibition?

KL: My idea was never to embody something else, but rather to ask some questions about embodiment. I know there is no such thing as translating one aesthetic expression into another, but I have always wanted to know more about how — or if — a literary experience can have a direct impact on life after the reading is done. If it can be something more than a memory. Buddenbrooks is interesting since its narrative engine is run by characters whose lives are determined either by how well they succeed in finding their place in their family or at work. They are situated in a very high commercial and bourgeois context, almost like sculptures.

BS: The exhibition at the Kunstverein follows the logic of a poem. So there is a certain fragmentation. You have to

piece the different objects together or you don't. It's always up to the audience. And you have to use the information in a very creative, or intellectual way. I consider it to be the same with poetry.

**KL:** Poetry is of course very intellectually demanding — if you want to understand it. But the first step of poetry is that you don't understand it. The first step is that it's a broken prose, that it's words that don't make language transparent. People say they don't know how to approach poetry because they don't understand it. But that's the whole point, or let's say initial primary experience.

**BS:** I find it interesting that you talk about broken prose. Looking at the history of literature, everything started with poetry, or at least verse meter.

**KL:** Of course it was playing a different part in society then. Sentences were broken, meter was added as ways to remember. Today we live a life where we have to

remember, as long as we store information. Our poetry today has a different function. It must react upon a language that is considered super efficient and enough in its self.

**BS:** Can you give a short description on how you define prose?

**KL:** Very short: complete sentences. Longer version: the semantic structure in which our daily lives in society is constructed. An authoritarian framework that decides what makes sense and what doesn't make sense. A capitalistic interface which is mimicking transparency...

**BS:** What does this say about our contemporary life? Our language is so efficient. People hardly read anymore. Texts have to be short and pragmatic. We don't take time to think about meaning, about our environment and what we see. I think of your work as a reaction to that. Bringing poetry back means bringing critical reflection back. I think your work is highly political.

KL: I am happy you say so because this is the whole point.

BS: Let's talk about art and the political act of using poetry. You are quite on the point when you write – your view on the art field, capitalism, etc... How does this exhibition reflect upon, or extend, this thinking?

KL: The simple fact that things are occupying space in a room is actually quite a big thing for me. This is something writing could never do, as it unfolds in time rather than in space. I see the sculptures – even though the exhibition title is North Western Prose – rather as things that happen to be stuck in a North Western Prose; things that are just like you and me, moving with and through this contemporary language climate. We are not always speaking. We are not always constructing our thoughts in prosaic ways. We are also silent and inventive and creative and critical and alone. These more untranslatable, less communicative or efficient aspects of life and language are things that I would like to address.

BS: For many people it's totally difficult to embrace openness. They don't know what to do with it...

KL: The other night you asked me about my relationship to Beuys. This is of course a very uncomfortable question, especially in Germany. I also couldn't come up with a very comfortable reply. Then I remembered having read some of Beuys' ideas on teaching where he mentioned wanting to postpone understanding. And this I like very much... The idea of making work that encourages you to postpone your understanding. To wait with a judgment, and to think that there might be something more to find if you stay a bit longer. I know it's much to ask for and also that it currently isn't a very successful formula. But for me this is a possible way to think about things right now.

BS: You started out as a poet. When did you decide that you also wanted to do art installations?

KL: I studied art, but art academy was more of a social thing for me. The interest in making sculpture on a professional

level came after graduation, during the work with “Form/Force” and “Nightsong”, my first and second books. I have always felt poetry is the ultimate exercise for triggering change and creativity in a human mind. But if you want to be a part of society, in a let’s say more active, or even activist way, there is a problem with the position of readers and authors. And it’s actually a question of posture. You have to sit down, pacify your body and look away from the rest of the world when you read and write. So, after you rise from your chair, what do you do with the fantastic change that just occurred to you through the poetry? My naïve answer was: let’s do something with the body! Let’s do something that reader bodies can approach in reality. And then sculpture is logical because a sculpture you have to approach spatially.

**BS:** In all of your work there is a question of translation. Perhaps the most apparent is the one from literature to sculpture. But for North Western Prose you also talk about a certain language area. Still, you have read the *Buddenbrooks* in English, not in the original German.

Every translation changes something, and you don’t read the original text – why?

**KL:** I wouldn’t like to transmit the message that I am talking about a certain North Western Prose from the North West of Germany, or “*Buddenbrooks*” as a piece of modernist writing seen through such a lens. If I do, I think the show is really a failure. What I believe is that society is fundamentally prosaic. This means it is promoting and reading itself as a place where accumulation, complete sentences, horizontal movement, great stories, sense, legibility and further on, conceptual operations, allegory, etc., are absolute narratives and economical driving forces. Just like in traditional prose.

**BS:** So, of what relevance is this “*Buddenbrooks*” metaphor? Is it just a carrier? Is it something people know, that’s why they can approach some other topics through it?

**KL:** I think that this great book never can be something people will fully know, but rather keep as some sort of state

of mind. A fiction within fiction. A tale where people become what they are depending on how well they master a certain set of rules, a certain grammar. And if the readers wish, they can look at my work through a similar lens.

**BS:** There is this one object that you wanted to write a text for. Why didn't you do it?

**KL:** Because we included other small texts about the works on the handout. I didn't want the works to be complete illustrations of fixed ideas. The work you're referring to is a concrete piece called "You must be able to interrupt a friendly conversation at all moments". It's a heavy, geometrical figure based on a fragment of a wall and it's really something that would stop a door, a person or even a car. Sometimes when I show it I decide to hide something behind it, squeeze a bunch of papers with a very short text under it. I'm imagining people ripping the paper from this place behind the sculpture and receiving a little note, like a message in a bottle. But now,

for this exhibition, we decided to do small sentences about each work that are more like anecdotal reflections that could have been done almost by any spectator. Do you miss the note from behind the sculpture? Do you miss the idea of it?

**BS:** I miss it. But I am very text-based person.

**KL:** A lot of people said that the small handout text really helped them access the works in the show. But I must say I always dream of works being so direct that any explanation would be redundant. Self-explanatory, like a book that you just open and start reading.

**BS:** But why? For me it's the process of understanding that is meaningful. Understanding can take awhile and that is the most rewarding process.

**KL:** Yes absolutely. Maybe I'm putting it the wrong way. Maybe I rather mean that instead of asking how one can understand a certain thing you can ask what

understanding is in itself. And that this would take – what should I call it... a certain authority? That with a certain authority – at the right time, at the right place – a spectator would feel comfortable just being with the work.

**BS:** Is living about understanding?

**KL:** I think it's about creating. No, it can't be about understanding. Creating and creating with other people, I would say. What do you think?

**BS:** For me, living is about learning. I want to deal with things I don't understand yet, but I want to understand. It is kind of understanding and learning and trying to look at the variety of things in society to see what is going on and to understand different views on the world.

**KL:** If you see at some point something very, very wrong, would you go against it or would you learn more about it?

**BS:** I think I would first try to learn more about it. I am not a revolutionary. For me things have to be done on smaller scale where I can change things and make them better. I am not revolutionary enough to go on the street and fight for the rights of human beings.

**KL:** Is that revolutionary?

**BS:** I have the feeling it is at least an attempt to change the big picture. It's just one way to make life better. My philosophy is that all these wonderful books that are here on this table were written because life is complicated and people try to understand what is going on.

**KL:** But the most wonderful attitude you can have to try to understand what is going on is to be open and humorous and creative with it. This is why I love these books, because they know how absurd it is to try to only explain. It's not like math. "Paratext", this book by Gérard Genette, for example – you could probably explain his ideas in ten A4 sheets. It's just bubbling...

BS: I think the most luxury thing is to bubble. To talk around, and not to be precise and efficient.

KL: Then I guess my work is very luxurious.

BS: “Buddenbrooks” is a story about class and about the position of the artist in class society. It’s also about Thomas Mann and his position. I think it’s a very personal book. In Germany and in Social Democracy, people try to negate class. And nowadays class structures are much more obvious again, people talk about it again openly. How do you deal with it or how do you feel about it?

KL: For many artists, class can be difficult to speak of. One day, you can cook for a friend that doesn’t have any money—or be the one who doesn’t have any money and has to be cooked for—and then the next day you can sit next to a billionaire at a dinner party and talk about exhibitions or horses. It has always been the artist’s position to move in hierarchies, and in an artificial way maybe this

could be considered classless. Sometimes I think that my work has to be implacable, perfect, just because I am constantly elaborating and worrying about the actual worth of it. What would give the right to yet another a white male middle class person to speak? There are much more urgent voices that should speak in public places. But I do think it’s also a sculptor’s job to question why they are where they are, and try to avoid being allegorical because allegory is really not about what is “here”, but what is “there” instead. One of my first sculptures was this lamp called “Emily’s lamp”. It was dedicated to the dash, the mark which Emily Dickinson was using in many of her poems. A black line supposed to signify a break or a space between words, but at the same time also occupying that space.

BS: Is the “dash” maybe the part you assign to the audience?

KL: Could be. Or the dash is every sculpture. Sculptures occupy space, but if that would be all they did then they would be just obstacles. They do something else as well...

**BS:** If you think of a visitor in a space, the visitor comes with certain expectations. And there are some preconceived modes of behavior in an exhibition space. How do you deal with that?

**KL:** Compared to a book it's a little bit more complicated when it comes to space. At some point while writing you have to say "I assume the reader will start with page one, I assume they won't read the paratext as part of the literary work, I assume that they don't think that my name or the title is the first line of the poem". But with space it's different. You can of course quite often tell which work will steal the attention of another, or which piece will be more easily accessible or even how people would be likely to move move and turn. This you can kind of calculate. But I wouldn't say there is a formula on how to address a spectator.

**BS:** What is the relation between fiction and reality?

**KL:** I am a bit like a paranoid Matrix fan who would describe reality as fiction and fiction as reality. Following

the assumption that society is prosaic, our understanding of what is real, or right, or successful, would be what can be read as prose. So the definition of a good day, for example, is a constructive day that will give us something: productive relaxation, a satisfying work result or the most happy prosaic cliché of all — a sunny sky. But when you look at life, very few things appear to be this prosaic, very few love stories always end happily, very few wallets are constantly just filling up. There is not this kind of accumulation and growth and perfect dramatic curve in life. So the question is, what is reality? Is it this kind of image, is it our language that we speak every day? Or is it actually that we have a fiction that makes us discover a sudden reality here and then, when we break with this prosaic structure?

**BS:** How would you define this aesthetic experience?

**KL:** It's a moment of creation, when something breaks the prosaic authority. And when somebody, instead of accumulating knowledge – or fear a potential lack

of accumulated knowledge — produces thought. Thought that begins anew. Like thinking does, when appearing from nowhere to pierce through, cut and separate things believed to be solid or permanent. And this is where the Matrix paranoia comes in. That the capitalistic fabric of every day is a weave of fiction that we must keep ripping, by creating, by starting all over, as often as humanly possible. And when we manage to do so we get very strong sensations in our bodies. When we get ideas, we feel extremely strong, it makes us happy.

There is this description in “Nightsong”, my second book... I will read it to you. It was originally written in Swedish but this paragraph is in English and explains quite well this rip-reading that occurs between different places, materials and times. So there is this guy who’s been playing a computer game called Net Hack. It was originally one of the first dungeon crawlers, which means it was a game where you go through dungeon levels, further and further down and the further you go the harder it gets and at the end you get

some sort of reward. It was made without any kind of computer graphics, only by letters and punctuations. So, for example, a big “L” meant “longsword”. You had to read the letters, translate them into images and react upon that. It was extremely difficult, extremely complex and you die very easily. I was playing it for several years without completing it myself. But when people do complete it, it’s such a major thing that many of them write stories about how they did it and post them on fan forums. It is often really beautiful and funny. So this text in “Nightsong” is taken from one of these forums:

“-- I found my own bones in Gehennom which gave me a second. I learned how to use cancellation to create water. This is a very important trick! I prepared for final run properly for the first time. Read all the books, had lots of holy water and options of healing. On planes I used conflict, until I encountered two Archons on water and decided to charm them. They followed me to the end.”

And here comes the great part:

“Ten years later, when I was in the theatre watching Frodo and his companions march into the Mines of Moria, an eerie feeling of familiarity stole over me. I wanted to turn to the guy in the seat nearby and say: ‘I’ve been there. Those floors really do go on forever.’”

And this is so amazing. There is this guy who has been translating himself into this computer game, creating his own world. Then he is in this movie theater, where he will be exposed to Lord of the Rings. It’s the maximum pacification apparatus. Maximum volume. Maximum Screen. You are just supposed to sit passively and take it all in, just consume the story. Consume, consume, consume. But when he is there, and in one of the most exciting parts of the story, his brain lights up: “I have been here before.” It is like waking up from this prosaic dream. And he remembers something that he created himself. And he falls through these layers of language down to the dungeon of his own struggles.

And he is creating a link between then and now. Then — what is his reaction? He wants to turn to the person next to him and share it. He wants to turn around and say: “Hey, I know something about this”. But he can’t, because his experience is untranslatable. Like any sudden burst of creativity. Like a great feeling of love.

**BS:** Have you ever read the “Invention of morel” by Bioy Casares?

**KL:** No.

**BS:** He was one of the best friends of Borges. Not so known. And his book, “The Invention of morel”, is the basis for “Marienbad”, the film by Alain Resnais. It’s about projection and reality. So what is projected, and what is reality. Its one of the most fantastic books I have read lately.

**KL:** I have to look at it, absolutely.

**BS:** Let's talk about the form of display in the show. It's a display of reflection, but I think you also thought a lot about how to display the works in the show. They are kind of horizontal. What does it mean?

**KL:** I am not very advanced when it comes to installing art works. I always end up with crude sketches. Someone said they saw one part of the exhibition as being outdoors and one as inside. I never thought of that. It was more like, which work will have what effect on the spectator. I knew that you have to get close to the head of Rimbaud, that it should not remain an image for long. If it were too far away and you just catch a glance of it, you wouldn't get the right approach. You would have to stand next to it and feel the landscape that is in it. It's a three times four meter sculpture made out of beach stones and copper... And then the slide, a bent and worn metal material, should probably be next to it because it has a certain formal similarity but a totally different treatment of the metal. And the umbrella, I wanted it to be something you would meet quite late

in the exhibition, then circle around. It would be something that you would slowly get closer to, then get surrounded by, while reading the texts in the poem. Which is really a super banal poem, but unusually arranged in an umbrella way.

**BS:** Is it right to say that you don't want to create narratives, but instead talk about the direction of narratives and how they are composed?

**KL:** Yes, I think so. For me the worst thing you could say would be: "Karl is such a great storyteller." The extreme importance of streamlined storytelling is one of the things I find hardest to accept in a high capitalistic society. We are told that great stories are what humanity is made of so often that nowadays even authors believe it. Of course we need stories, but we have a problem if they are told in the same way all the time. I believe we need more broken sentences, more broken language. Most people are living their lives day in and day out in languages that are not their own. And those who have

authority – why not call them the North Westeners? – shouldn't be so ignorant about that.

**BS:** It's a bit like in the art field. In the 19th century, there was a very structured set of possibilities. Then it opened up, and now we see individual approaches and we need an audience that tries to understand individual approaches. So it is like different ideas of language come together and try to communicate. Difficult, no?

**KL:** Yes, totally. And especially since we are drilled or forced to look at things and to understand them, we look for a very particular kind of greatness everywhere.

**BS:** What you do is also explaining something by the means of material.

**KL:** This is what I hope that I am also doing. Poetry is an exercise in tactility. You learn about how certain words show fragility or strength in certain contexts. When you detach them from a more prosaic surrounding, you can

investigate them. Perhaps sculpture can do the same thing with material.

There is also a certain translation in the image-making process of my work, since what I make is almost always in dialog with other people. First of all with designers or illustrators and further on, when it comes to the carpets or furniture, craftspeople who translate digital sketches into physical objects. The work is not made by machines, it's made by people who are reading, examining and making decisions.

**BS:** We have deleted craft from the working process of our lives and hardly ever see it anymore. It's hidden behind walls and computers. The most common fabric we are dealing with now on a daily basis is language. All facts in society are established by language. But life itself is a very speculative thing. I mean, everything is speculation. But the power of language creates facts.

**KL:** Totally. Of course, we are very far away from a society where we would all be critical creators making everything

new all the time. Though it is an amazing dream... of floating energy everywhere. Which also sounds quite religious...

**BS:** But that's okay since it's a question of belief systems. We need something to believe in, because the facts don't help. And capitalism doesn't help, because it doesn't make or create sense...

**KL:** It only makes sense if you think it is the law, that it has to be this way and that we are stuck in a narrative so great we can never get out of it or even act against it. But then let's not forget that capitalism is made to be able to assimilate everything, to use everything for its own purpose – everything except one thing. Even though it can include, grow, adapt to almost anything, it can never tolerate its own destruction. It can't go to the end of itself. It has to stop right before the end. So, in the margin between "right before the end" and "the end" there is actually space for something different. And this is a very fascinating idea. That there is this system that can't

destroy itself but if you could reach its margins there would be – at least theoretically – a chance of glimpsing something different.

**BS:** There is this fantastic book called "Zeroville". It was written in 2007 by Steve Erickson, who is also a film critic. The book discusses the supernatural power of films and the main character, who is almost autistic, takes outtakes of films that show nothing. In all kinds of films there is this moment that shows nothing. And for him, these moments become the most important moments in the films. So he collects them and tries to make meaning out of nothing.

**KL:** But what is nothing?

**BS:** The moment of nothing is... something that is in every single film. He calls it the hidden parts of the movie that might say nothing but still say something, that might not even be connected to the movie but are there. And he tries to find this nothingness, these hidden subjects

in the movies, and splice them together to make something new that tells all.

KL: And he hasn't presented the final result yet?

BS: He can't. He goes crazy at the end.

KL: Ah, it's a story!