

SOUL & Co.

Matthew Gregory / Marisa Argentato / Pasquale Pennacchio  
in conversation

**MG:** With our collaboration, which was discussed and completed over the internet, something I realised was that a big part of it was simply the nature of meeting in a kind of *nowhere*, in the spaces of our inbox, and enacting a dialogue.

Weldon Kees, who seemed to step off the edge of the earth, exists in a cultural space which remains a kind of void, out of spatial and temporal clauses. He is neither officially disappeared nor dead, and remains unspoken for, unless his poems are read or he is invoked, as we have done. I think there's a resonance between his orientation in this venture and the medium through which it was accomplished. The internet is similar to the space in which Kees exists.

Sometimes it seems like the most disaffiliated way of communicating. When you do communicate, even when commenting in social forums or spaces of supposed sociability, you're uniquely an isolate figure, boxed-off by the parameters of your message. It's as if we are speaking solitarily from a nowhere, to a recipient also in a nowhere. In between, there is digital blackness. And Weldon Kees, lost as he is, in text, in literary mythology, is a kind of cipher that embodies that feeling, of being in *limbo*. And we meet beside him.

**PP:** It's true that Kees' work still exists in a frozen suspension, that can be reactivated any time. To me it seems that also his entire life was held in a form of suspension, activated by a constant friction between failure and success. He was a poet, a painter, a critic, a short story writer, a filmmaker, a photographer and a musician, but he never achieved success in his lifetime, although he was associated with the celebrity environment in New York, where he was a friend of the abstract expressionist painters, of the literary elite and jazz musicians. The way he performed on the social stage, the flexibilities of his work and all the rules that he occupied makes him a forerunning figure of today's post-capitalist society, where we all share the desire to be successful and the frustration that inevitably sooner or later comes with it.

**MG:** Really interesting that you say Kees is a kind of precursor to a figure in our post-capitalist or late-stage capitalist society. I think that's actually one of the most thrilling modern readings of his work. There's a specific anxiety, which sometimes reaches the pitch of terror, like in some of the Robinson poems. It's the persistent anxiety of an isolated figure in vast, wild, fly-loose America – where expectation and promise are limitless, and failure, without a support-structure, is actually a catastrophe, materially and psychologically. There's that memorable passage in '*Relating to Robinson*', when the shadow man turns to the speaker in the Manhattan dusk and articulates that horror. I receive the concentrated dysphoria in his poems as a kind of shock – it's a kind of Hammer Horror equivalent, black-humoured, garish, tasteless, gothic, but necessarily all of those things, as its resonance is in precisely that overstatement. A lot of 'finely-tuned' sensibilities find Kees too much, I think, but in his case, being *too much* is precisely the point.

**PP:** Weldon Kees for us was a starting point to begin our dialogue, a subject with which we share some conditions, but there is soon a moment where our dialogue departs from the initial subject and we take our own way....

**MG:** The dialogue between your sculptures and my poems has been a kind of revelation for me actually. As the sculptures arrived first, I had a precedent to which I could respond. Beginning with a form that wasn't a poetic form, by mirroring in some way the shape and repetitions of your sculptures, and having those as parameters, presented a new kind of formal engagement for me. It's not ekphrasis – a description of the artwork – but writing in response to both the material and abstract constitution present in your sculptures, something that is able to define poetic form. It's allowed me to consider other new 'forms' when engaging with an object - a photograph, a building, a person, or anything manifest. Of course, you can extend this to the abstract and questions of poetic form in general – and you could say that the poet should always consider form in relation to the content, but often, when I'm writing, form and content suggest one another. Here, I'm concentrating on potential form quite distinctly in relation to an object's *dimensions*. There have been precedents for this all throughout poetry, as you would expect – from the shaped poems of Ancient Greece, the Concrete poetry of those like Augusto de Campos, to more recent experiments, like Alice Oswald's giant book-length poem 'Dart', mirroring the shape of the River Dart. You can begin to ask yourself wonderfully absurd questions like, *What is the form of pineapple? What does a dugong look like as a poem?* Or as we've done, how does Weldon Kees' vanishing manifest as form?

But back to our collaboration. I know they came first out of the dialogue, but the dialogue really began in our respective inboxes. How did you find it responding to what we might call 'literature' here, with your sculptures?

**MA:** Weldon Kees for us is a "specific case", we don't necessarily relate to literature in our work, actually this is the first time we do. With Kees, we are mainly concerned with the interplay between absence and presence, that Kees has interwoven into his fictional character Robinson, and in his real life.

Robinson is a "portrait in absentia", because there is never a moment, in the poem, to meet Robinson face to face. The character is almost dissolved into his own home and between his own personal objects, objects that do not carry any trace of their owner.

*The pages in the books are blank,  
The books that Robinson has read. That is his favourite chair,  
Or where the chair will be if Robinson were here.*

*All day the phone rings. It could be Robinson  
Calling. It never rings when he is here.*

The interplay of presence/absence is a recurring pattern in the four poems that Kees wrote on Robinson. In the same game of seeking and hiding we can inscribe the two striped sculptures, they recall this pattern of absence/presence through a double bind. Having the dimensions of a human body, they can act at the same time as a *paravent* to hide behind as a protective shield, or as a backdrop to a stage. These two conflicting acts of seeking protection and of hunting visibility are both coexisting on the same sculpture, in a way that it's difficult to distinguish one from the other.

The effect of optical fluidity and flexibilities of the shape make the sculpture twist on itself, behaving like an interface that can adjust between different modes of "visibility". This ability to change and adjust the mode of visibility is also the condition shared by contemporary "networked subjects", that articulate themselves through the setting of different identity profiles and security options.

Today it seems that we do our best to erase the idea of death from our consumerist world, but poetry can still engage with death in a productive way. Actually your two symmetrical poems

deal with death in a direct way, using “the end” as an actual starting point to engage in a dance with the unknown.

**MG:** When I found the form and reconciled myself to it, I was taken with the tapering end of each stanza, a kind of diminishing, like a candlewick dwindling down to a *fit* of smoke. And in a similar sense, I’m left with the almost tangible impression that the subject, Kees, has departed the poem. After the brief slash of light, there is a sudden narrowing, the poem tails off abruptly – after there, what happens is anybody’s guess. Yes, I suppose it is a kind of dance with the unknown. And the opening line also, identical in both cases, opens onto the intersection in the poet’s story – the two lanes of pursuit.

I’ll come back to the repetitions in the form in a moment. What’s striking, though, is that after the first line, ‘*and what other kind of ending*’, anything that follows here is imprecise, even if it’s ‘factually’ correct. The divergence, richness and singularity of one person’s journey is impossible to pursue – we can only follow their footsteps to the point where the road reaches a contradictory idea, a random agent in their popular narrative. This is reassuring to me – as although we’ve spoken of the inability to disappear completely while cyberspace holds traces of us, the traces will be fragmentary ‘evidence’ in a fundamentally incomplete picture. And with the internet in mind, there’s a distance between the often rigorously managed, edited self and the ambiguity of the social and private self. That distance, a kind of experiential desert for those seeking to follow us, is perhaps where we find the ability to disappear.

Before these considerations, which I make now as a reader and critic, rather than a writer, the sculptures acted as formal parameters, as I mentioned, shaping the poems, in both their individual aspects and as a pair. I wanted a form – perhaps not consciously – that mirrored the actual ‘vanishing points’ in your sculptures.

I think it’s fair to say that Kees’ predicament was a ‘formal parameter’ for both of us – impressing on the sculptures and subsequently my poems. Duality – in Kees’ work, as you’ve already pointed out with the Robinson poems, and in his death/disappearance – is the most prominent feature. At the Golden Gate Bridge, where we begin, there is a crossroads. This is a formal consideration – it necessitates the number two, quite simply: Kees and Robinson, a bloated corpse at the bottom of a river and the spectral, aging American on his Mexican stoop, Kees and his shadow. That was the departure point.

**MA:** In relation to the idea of disappearance, I’m thinking about the web where each trace we leave cannot be erased and will remain for an apparently unlimited amount of time, floating in the “digital infinity” of data. There is a constant state of presence and ubiquity, once something is out in the net it’s out of control, it starts replicating and travelling on its own... it’s out of our grasp and it generates multiple trajectories. Perhaps our digital traces could function as a multitude of Robinsons lost in the web.

**MG:** This reminds me of something I heard recently. I went to a talk by a theorist, who, for the sake of this, I will call ‘John Bartner’. He told us of a reading-tour in America, where, in the aftermath of one of the events, he was confronted by a man who said: ‘You know who I am, don’t you?’ John replied, ‘No? Should I?’ The man said, ‘Well, I’m the *other* John Bartner.’ This ‘other’ John Bartner had apparently been dislodged from the top of the Google results for ‘John Bartner’, and was visibly displeased. When the theorist John Bartner asked him to demonstrate on a laptop, the other John Bartner began typing, only for the theorist John Bartner to see that he wasn’t searching for him at all and was weirdly circling the issue by clicking through a series of unrelated links. When the theorist John searched, there seemed to be no other John Bartner of note who he might’ve displaced. It was a case of internet-psychoanalysis: a man who perhaps might’ve been called ‘John Bartner’, but had somehow

confounded his own identity with the theorist, through the unconnected, fragmentary information he'd found on the net. Whether or not he was 'sane' - who knows, but the internet had led to this particular situation, where information had reproduced and mutated and led to this sad new configuration in a man hundreds of miles away. He really believed it.

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This conversation was made to accompany the exhibition SOUL & Co. on view 30<sup>th</sup> September - 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2011 at SANDY BROWN in Berlin.