

# Obituary.

## Kim H. Veltman (1948–2020): In Memoriam\*



DOI:10.5771/0943-7444-2020-6-431

Keimpe Henricus Joseph Maria Veltman, aka Kim Veltman, was born on 5 September 1948 at Workum, Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands to Petrus and Maria Veltman. Oldest of five children, Kim grew up with his brothers, Jack, Norman and John, and sister Margaret. They moved to Canada in 1951. The family settled in Malton later moved to Caledon and other suburbs in the Greater Toronto Area. His father, a farmer by vocation, was predisposed towards philosophy and learning, which Kim, born precocious, inherited at a very early age. Stories of his fearlessness, religious bent and seeking truth became folktales of the town when he was only two. These became his lifelong underpinnings, which went well with his name since Keimpe means horizon. True to the meaning of his name, he devoted his life to understanding the horizon lines of perspective and, more importantly, to expand horizons and break boundaries of his fellow humans.

He received his bachelor of arts degree with distinction from the University of Toronto in 1969, followed by a master of arts degree in renaissance history with scholarship from the University of Toronto in 1970. In 1975, Kim was awarded a doctor of philosophy (D. Phil.) on perspective in the domain of history and philosophy of science from the Warburg Institute in London.

By his twenty-eighth birthday (1976), all the major themes of his work were clear to him. Kim went on to pursue a distinguished lifetime research and teaching career in the fields of perspective, Leonardo da Vinci and new media. Kim was one of the few people who got access to all the

writings and drawings of Leonardo in the Vatican. Studying Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), the face of the renaissance, was his main activity for nine years from 1976-1984. Gradually, both perspective and Leonardo heightened his awareness, which led to a wider study of image making, culture and religion merging into one. He read all about Leonardo when he served as a senior fellow at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London from 1975-77. He was one of the pioneers who was able to study all the writings of Leonardo Da Vinci. He continued this work until 1984 at the Herzog August Bibliothek (HAB) in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, a library of international importance for its collection from the middle ages and early modern Europe. Encounters with many great minds there made him describe this library as an invisible intellectual headquarter of the west, a fortress of the soul and spirit. He had already earned his scientific spurs in the late 1980s through his work on Leonardo da Vinci's "perspective theory." In his view, perspective and optics were the keys to understanding of the western art and science. His research explained how the linear perspective had evolved into a key new method, changing ways of image making in western art and science during the renaissance. As an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology from 1984 to 1986, Kim taught courses on Renaissance science, Renaissance culture and Leonardo da Vinci. During his three-year appointment from 1992 to 1995 with the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto, he explored applications of technology in

education, leading to two undergraduate courses: “new media and new approaches to knowledge” and “internet and new knowledge,” themes with which he remained engaged for the rest of his life.

### Power of the new media

In the mid-nineties, he became increasingly fascinated by the accessibility of knowledge and the role of new media in facilitating it. Kim, following Leonardo, was a striking example of a polymath. All his life he remained fascinated by searching connections between different scientific fields and finding ways to access global knowledge in an all-encompassing way and exploring the boundaries of culture. By this time, he had become a known author and consultant on implications of new media for scholarship, culture and society. He worked as a consultant in new media for the CEO of Bell Media Linx (1996-1998) and for the director of advanced technologies at Nortel Networks (1995-1998). His work was on the frontiers of virtual reality/augmented reality, search techniques, user interface, conceptual navigation, next gen browser tech, mobile apps, 3D scanning, art tech at Vatican, British Museum, AT&T Bell Labs, Canadian National Research Council, Florence Ufizzi, CANARIE, SGI Labs, Microsoft 3D Labs, Nortel Labs and Bell New Media, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, and Senior Advisor to Kulenovic Museum, Karlskrona. He gave presentations at three G7 Tech Conferences (Brussels, Johannesburg, Halifax). Later he advised and helped the European Commission (EC) on their MOU for Culture and their MEDICI programme and was in turn invited to join its delegations to Egypt (1996), Japan (1998) and China (2002).

He had taught at the universities of Göttingen and Rome and at Carleton, was Director of the Perspective Unit, McLuhan Program, University of Toronto (1990-1996) and was finally invited to become Scientific Director of the Maastricht McLuhan Institute (MMI, 1998-2004), an institute for new media, named after the famed media theorist, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) with whom he and his family had close relations. The MMI was envisioned as a base for a new European network of excellence in digital culture. The short lived institute explored the “historical effects of new media on the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium” (geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and music)—or the arts and sciences—and implications for those effects on knowledge and culture then and today. Its successor Virtual MMI (VMMI) continued these explorations, with a new focus: knowledge organization and cultural computing. At the time of his death on 1 April 2020 due to Corona virus, Kim was Scientific Director of VMMI (Virtual Maastricht McLuhan Institute).

### New means of access to knowledge

During his research visits to national and big European libraries, Kim realized the limitations of print media in presenting the results of his research. He began writing on new media with respect to scholarship and culture and on the new means of access to knowledge. This included the need for a world electronic library on a new scale. His pilot project was to harmonize, that is to make interoperable, the author catalogues of five European national libraries. It took shape as Distributed Euro Electronic Resources (DEER), which eventually paved the way to the integration of network of forty-nine national libraries and many big libraries called The European Library (TEL) launched in 2004 at the intervention of the President of the French Republic who was approached by the Director of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Regretfully, his work and the vision of his dream project was not credited when the European Library saw the light of the day under the aegis of the European Commission. But it did not make him dejected, and, ever resilient, he said to himself *Io continuerò*. Europeana, established in 2008, continues to work with national libraries to ensure that their digital materials are well represented in the Europeana Collections Portal.

### System for universal media searching

At the University of Toronto, McLuhan Program, Perspective Unit, his project was to create a System for Universal Media Searching (SUMS) as a first step towards a Knowledge Engine Pilot project of the G7. Like Vannevar Bush (1890-1974) and Paul Otlet (1868-1944), Kim had a vision of electronic encyclopedia of all knowledge for enabling universal access, and democratizing human knowledge. In fact, the idea of a sort of a SUMA goes back to 1961, but it took concrete shape in 1981 in a paper. It has four components, namely capture, archive, display and navigate corresponding to acquisition, organised storage and dissemination of knowledge in libraries. The first step was to develop a Ubiquitous Museum (UM) with a consortium including the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN). It anticipated Google and search engines. His initial prototype of SUMS represented Canada at the G7 exhibitions in Brussels and Halifax (1995). In 1996, SUMS was chosen as part of the G8 pilot project 5, Multimedia Access to World Cultural Heritage, and represented Canada at the G8 Information Society and Developing Countries (ISAD) Conference in Midrand, South Africa. In conjunction with Twincorp (Smolensk), this prototype was extended to include perspective, new media and new models of culture. This led to experiments with omnilinks and to new interplay between printed books, electronic books, databases and internet resources. SUMS had a nine-language interface and allowed multi as-

pect and varied level search and retrieval based on the simulation of actual experiences of scholars in libraries. Cost effective and having more features than available in similar machines, it demonstrated how it could be linked with culture, not just with heritage monuments and paintings but also with (textual) information about them. It became evident that museums and libraries could be interlinked. Thus it became a forerunner of what we now call integrated memory institutions (MIs), namely galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAMS).

Kim had a deep vision of the impact of the incipient computers on the society at large. His work was to open new dimensions of a deeper world of learning. That was not an easy task for even a man with a mission and a strong belief in its realization. The vistas he developed were too distant for the average university administrator, which not infrequently brought him into conflict with them. He could not muster full support for the SUMS in the MMI. It was the classic conflict between idealism and feasibility. For Kim, the long-term perspective of idealism was more important than the perspective of the feasibility in the short term. As time passed, Google and Wikipedia accomplished (in their own ways) much of the task of cataloguing the world's knowledge, and the chances for SUMS to be the world's standard diminished.

### Meeting Ingetraut Dahlberg and the library connect

In quest of better organisation of his 15,000 item bibliography and to the reorganisation of human knowledge in particular, he was referred to Ingetraut Dahlberg (1927-2017) and the German Classification Society. And thus started a lifelong friendship. Dahlberg became his favourite and also an inspiration, not least due to their common grounds of deep faith in Christianity and spiritual beliefs. He became a member of the Gessellschaft für Klassifikation, later a founding member of the International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO), and was given place on the latter's Scientific Advisory Board. He constantly took an active part in ISKO's political and professional affairs. She encouraged his work, and he responded by presenting papers in her conferences, which culminated in guest editorship of a special issue on "Knowledge organisation in the visual arts" of its journal *Knowledge Organization* (vol.20-1(1993)). In this issue, he was able to rope in many known authorities to write on the knowledge organisation in visual arts.

His general vision of knowledge organisation appeared as *Augmented Knowledge and Culture* (2006), wherein, understanding the tremendous power of new media, he thrashed out social, intellectual and philosophical consequences of the emerging networked environment. Here he developed concepts of a virtual reference room, dynamic knowledge and augmented culture. This included the need

for a world electronic library on a new scale. His keynote at a UNESCO conference on the *New Book of Nature* (2007) explored how objects in the physical world could interact with library and museum knowledge: a semantic version of the now fashionable "internet of things" (IoT) and "internet of everything" (IoE)—the latter was listed as one of the top trends of 2015 by Gartner, Inc. He returned to semantic challenges in the Rome keynote: *Towards a Meaningful Web of Knowledge* (2012), and more recently in *New History of Media, Scales and Disciplines* (2014, www.sumscorp.com). His latest book, *Alphabets of Life* (2,000 pages) offers a new approach to the history of five world languages: Chinese, Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic and Cyrillic. His thesis is that the evolution of alphabets enshrines the DNA of civilizations (www.alphabetsoflife.com). Going beyond the Euro-centric model, he emphasised the need to rewrite the history of human race, in contrast to regional history, based on signs, symbols, images and ideas that are shared around the world.

### Publications

His scholarly work began during 1977-1984 with a standard bibliography on the history of perspective and three volumes on Leonardo da Vinci: Vol. I *Linear Perspective and the Visual Dimensions of Science and Art*, Vol. II *Optics, Light and Shade*, Vol. III *Theories of Vision, Optics and Astronomy* and Vol. IV *Concordance to Vol I-III*. Further work on Leonardo and the bibliography on perspective continued in *The Sources and Literature of Linear Perspective*. In his 1986 book "Studies on Leonardo da Vinci I: Linear Perspective and the Visual Dimensions of Science and Art," Veltman gave a new evaluation of the work of Leonardo da Vinci by focusing upon Leonardo's visual statements as opposed to his verbal ones.

Kim was a prolific author who published four books, fourteen electronic books, eighty-two articles in books, twenty-four articles in refereed journals, five articles, seventy-nine electronic articles, sixteen reviews and ten vision statements. The Ontario Library Association published a series of his lectures as *Frontiers in Conceptual Navigation for Cultural Heritage* (1999). His paper "Access, Claims and Quality on the Internet" (2004) outlined the need for levels of knowledge. His essay "Towards a Semantic Web for Culture" (2004) challenged the current views of the world wide web. He was a vocal critic and also a voluble speaker. In the last forty years, he lectured in five languages on the five continents on the possibilities and dangers of new media with respect to cultural and historical dimensions of knowledge organization, semantics and multiple models of culture. Kim would talk about the threat to privacy and dangers of monopolizing and concentrating information, and the quality of knowledge available online. At

that time it was thought that he was being overly cautious, but now that we have experienced the backlash against tech (the tech-lash), suffered how companies sell our data and privacy, we are under constant surveillance of the agencies, and are seeing how fake news is swinging elections and causing genocides all over the world. The world is waking up to the horror of what the big tech is doing: modifying behavior, controlling our thoughts and emotions. Kim was prescient, if not prophetic.

### Awards and honors

In 1996, Kim was awarded the International Capire Prize for a Creative Future in the area of science and art integration. In 1998, he received a Learning Partnership Award (Toronto) and a Prix des Initiatives from Université d'été de la Communication (Hourtin). In November 2009, he was awarded a Silver Order: "Service for the Arts," International Academy of Culture and Art (Moscow). In 2015, he was awarded the Satija Research Foundation in Library and Information Science (SRFLIS), Delhi: World Media and Library Leaders Lifetime Achievement Award with the citation "Thinker, scholar, polyglot, antropologist, science historian, media expert and art connoisseur." In 2018, Kim was awarded a Best Researcher Award by the IOSRD (International Organization of Scientific Research and Development) in Hyderabad, India. Posthumously, a conference on him is planned for September 2021 in Italy, and a friend Michelle Powell, a Canadian classical pianist based in Maasticht <[www.michellepowellpianist.com/opus16concerten](http://www.michellepowellpianist.com/opus16concerten)>, on 1 July 2020 performed an online memorial concert in his honour, where she will perform thirty minutes of a repertoire that he would have loved. Now seven bas-reliefs on evangelical themes for the external walls of the Agathé Center, Mario Dell'Agata House Museum, Pineto have been dedicated to his memory.

### The man

Kim pursued a remarkable life as a leading polymath who achieved world-renown in three separate academic disciplines, and his star now brightly lights the path ahead for us to follow. Described as *homo universalis* by one of his colleagues, Kim brought the origin of the knowledge of the culture and the education back to the world. As a polyglot, he was quite at ease with Dutch, English, French, German and Latin, and had reading knowledge of Italian, Frisian, Spanish, Arabic and Greek. He could talk in depth about the future, the past and the present state of human knowledge from technology to mysticism, across cultures and domains. His inspiration and his teaching were spread all over the world in Europe, Africa, Asia, America and Oceania.

A very personable man, profoundly learned and deeply spiritual, Kim never got married. His intellectual and spiritual pursuits left no time for a wife and family. Kim became aware of the "truth" as a serious business at the tender age of two! Like Socrates, he continued to ask questions and became a defender of truth. As a devout Roman Catholic, his religion meant humility, going beyond the self by helping others and moving towards infinity. He was never orthodox, ritualistic or bigoted though he did believe in some spiritual symbolism and prophecies as described in his book *9 AND 11* (2016). He travelled widely (since his sixteenth birthday) to visit close friends in all parts of the world.

Like Tennyson's Ulysses, always roaming with a hungry heart, he drank life to the lees and would not rest from travel. Forever young at heart, Kim trotted the globe as an adventurous explorer of cultures, local arts, civilizations and a seeker of truth. He was an avid lover of history, music and culture, and was loved for his humanistic vision of the future, infectious smile and his kind and compassionate outlook. Kim was a gentle, kind and inquisitive soul who loved to research and explore. After an illustrious career as a consultant, professor and historian, he gave up formal teaching in 2013. Thereafter, Kim enjoyed long walks, group hiking, attending classical music concerts and visiting friends abroad. With all, he shared his discoveries about civilizations and languages, and with some he enjoyed his regular evening drink—he had started drinking beer at the age of two, upgrading it to wine at nine! Beyond his professional achievements, he was deeply concerned and seriously engaged with something nobler, which is understanding of the deeper mysteries of life and its eternity.

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\* This obituary is based on the numerous condolence messages that poured in, posthumous tributes from all over the world on social media and his autobiography *Friendship, Love, and God* (2017)

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