

## Two versions of infinity: Before and after disaster in Dirk Bell's work

### 1) Pollution

There is a scene in Federico Fellini's *Roma* (1972) in which subterranean construction workers and a film crew discover ancient Roman frescos while shoveling underground. The striking frescos fade almost immediately in front of their astounded eyes; the polluted air that bursts into the underground space destroys them. Apparently the diggers and the filmmakers have ruined the old Roman paintings by exposing them. The machines—shovels and cameras—penetrate a web of historical layers and ultimately bury the Roman Empire. It is a technological force that violates the organic layering of past culture upon past culture while literally paving the way for progress: transportation and the transmission and communication of images for the masses.

Dirk Bell's work is likewise spiritually entangled in the great, exhaustive, disastrous fracture of Modernism. It is calibrated by a "before" and an "after" the transformations and catastrophes of the twentieth century. Yet Bell's starting point is that of an artist who began working in Germany in the early 2000s and whose work, like the work of others of his generation, is constituted through its reflexive potency regarding the "historic," or more specifically, the relation it entails to a German heritage of images and symbols and the specific ways in which they have been contaminated, defiled or profaned.

Within this logic of "before" and "after," Bell's body of work reflects two perspectives of modernity, each requiring adequately differentiated forms and means of transmission. It branches according to the two major flanks of modernity: the discovery of the unconscious and its complementing opposite—the objectification of rational structures. Adequately, it is split where ideas of figuration, the organic and continuity collapse and cannot be applied any longer, having been declared obsolete by the avant-garde of modernity. Bell ascribes abstraction, the synthetic and instantaneousness to the status of the mythical and obsolete; concretely, in the form of low-tech analog media, he utilizes neon constructions, painted coulisses, metal grids, text objects (which he calls notion-objects), and recycled furniture or flea market paintings. All these materials belong to the inventory of modernity. The works that utilize these materials belong to what has been coming since modernity. They are already ruins as they are made.

Two works by Dirk Bell shall be discussed here below. *The Sky Will Sink* (2004) and *Revelation Big Sun* (2009) exemplify, incarnate and encompass the oppositions through which his work is split: horizontality versus verticality, organic circuits versus electric circuits, figures in conjunction with grids, letters and abstract forms, metamorphosing and orbiting, pencil drawings and neon tubes, "before" and "after."

The pollution that is produced by and that belongs to modernity—its industrialization and mechanization processes—is evident also in the films of Fellini's Italian contemporaries—Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci, Luchino Visconti, who were preoccupied with the ambivalent character of progress. Moreover,

their cinema was well aware of its own contribution to what could be called the “disenchantment of the world” at the hands of the illusions created by technologies of the image.<sup>1</sup> In *Roma* ambivalence is intensified as Fellini’s camera goes above ground to hover over young hippies who gather at the piazza to bathe in the open, pray or make love. The director’s voice-over commentary is imbued with jealousy and disdain.

Like Fellini, who unravels his narration first as a young man and then as an older film director, Bell turns twice to his tropes: first as an adolescent believer who detects the magical, arcane, concealed traits he encounters, and then by turning to and dealing with this Romantic heritage after the catastrophe of mechanization (in warfare as well as in image production). However, it is the young hippies rather than Fellini who enable Bell’s point of departure, from which there is no direct access to the archaic, except via popular quotes and samples. It is a treatment that senses today’s mass economy of images and the regime of viewing in which distances have been reduced to zero with a diminishing notion of aura.

## 2) The Sky Will Sink

Dirk Bell’s seven-by-five-meter ceiling work *The Sky Will Sink* (2004) is made of pencil and charcoal on paper. Bell’s delicate ceiling work is drawn in Manneristic and English nineteenth-century Romantic styles. It is filled with dense layers of drawn lines that are at times soft and dark, at times hard and metallic and thus reflective, at times obstructing the view and resisting photographic documentation and at times allowing the view, according to the viewer’s position. It brings to mind the scene mentioned above from Fellini’s *Roma* in which the mural paintings are exposed and obliterated in almost one and the same act. It adopts the form of a mural painting, yet it is made on paper. It’s as monumental as it is transportable, made to be both eternal and erasable.

At the upper part of the work’s tree-like configuration, we see a tranquil profile of a young man, his eyes closed, presumably dead, drawn with sensual lines. A white swan whose neck and body envelope the man’s shoulders, inclined lifelessly, embraces the head. This morbid pair, recalling the legend of Prince Siegfried—famously recounted in Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, where Siegfried chooses to stay with his swan-maiden lover Odette, who is cursed to drown, rather than marry her false duplicate—is illuminated and surrounded with darkened feathers, tree leaves and esoteric symbols such as a radiating eye and spirals, all framed by a circle. At the work’s lower part, one can detect a dark phoenix marking the root of the work. It is arising from its burnt cinnamon nest, obtaining new life from its predecessor’s ashes after he had set himself on fire.

*The Sky Will Sink* operates as a cycle of morbid metamorphosis, metempsychosis and resurrection. Eight concentric circles are entwined and

form an ornamental, elongated structure that echoes the Christian cross and the tree of life, or the Kabbalistic "Sephiroth." Fin-de-siècle symbolism, fairy-tale illustrations and occult man-animal figures are drawn meticulously and overlap each other. The drawing carries the patina of an antique wall, but also recalls vinyl records: a modern antique, an analog media of mechanical reproduction. (Such low-tech means appear in Bell's work often, sometimes as pieces of junk that are recycled by him, serving as a memory of modernity, a remnant and a ruin). Each circle conveys a sub-cycle closed in upon itself like a placenta: swan wings and peacock feathers, embryos and eggs, eyes that reoccur as separated organs—feet, bottoms and arms; roots and leaves and mythological nude figures in precariously balanced poses. The figures seem to be mystically enchanted, alternately exposed and concealed according to the viewer's position and pace.

White graphic marking lines serve as epidermises that separate the circles and prevent their contents from lingering and merging, while the drawn androgynous bodies of men and women dissolving into the animal convey a yearning for the melting of boundaries, for fusion of the genders and inter-human unification.

The drawing work gains intensity also by resembling a cathedral ceiling, a setting designed to evoke religious awe (what Rudolf Otto defined as "means of expression of the numinous"). It displays Bell's tendency to activate such religious sentiments by utilizing an eclectic collection of images from myths and fairy tales that he appropriates and animates with faith.

*The Sky Will Sink* aims to simulate an idiosyncratic version of a mythological cosmology in which love affairs, life and death, growth and decay, summer and winter morph into each other repeatedly in a cosmic movement towards the idea of unification of the earthly with the metaphysical (divine).

### 3) Mirror

The installation of *The Sky Will Sink* in the exhibition space involves another kind of syntax that puts the drawing in an optical-psychological setup. A cable with a bare burning lamp descends towards the floor from the center of the drawing, where a large spread of wings is depicted (a closer look reveals an underlying pair of sleeping swans). A mirror is laid on the floor underneath the drawing, reflecting it.<sup>2</sup>

Elucidating the viewer's participation, the mirror obstructs a direct view of Bell's mystical scheme. By approaching the work, the viewer is left with his/her own image and a reflected image of the drawing as backdrop. The viewer, whose perspective is diverted, is trapped in an optical threshold between upper and lower image/world that is infinitely out of reach.

In this theatrical orchestration, the ceiling's reflection (like water that mirrors the sky) situates the viewer inside a narcissistic circuit, while he/she embodies it and is being absorbed by it at the same time.<sup>3</sup> The



drawing itself is overfilled with figures that are androgynous and futile. Two nude figures, supporting the main circle, whose gazes are directed into the “off-screen” (neither at each other nor at something else) possibly relate to the myth of Narcissus and Echo; the mythological Phoenix, which according to belief is always a male and never reproduces, shares auto-fertility and futility with the figure of Narcissus.

The installation transforms the drawing into a reflection, an optical event. Here, finally, one cannot withstand what Jennifer Higgin might have called the “exhausted provenance” of Bell’s images<sup>4</sup>: Bell’s drawings, inhabited throughout by nude, frail girls, by shores, horses and lilies, fairy tale woods and sailing ships, are permeated with late Romantic influences of symbolist artists such as Odilon Redon, Jean Delville, and even William Blake’s spiritually dancing theurgic figures. While Bell’s images’ “usage” is exposed—and we cannot deny the worn out, lost meanings of their origins—they are still destined to give emotions a form.

The clash between desire and the void, inherent in all images of this world (in so far as they are an outcome of a gaze) is calibrated in the delicate drawing(s) as a terminal encounter with the self. This terminal encounter, however, still bears traces of real sensuality.

#### 4) Ruin

*Revelation Big Sun* (2009) can be seen as a complementary opposite to *The Sky Will Sink*, each being a distinctive culmination of its kind in Bell’s oeuvre. Similarly, it was made for a ceiling, in the large octagonal exhibition space of the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin with its marble floors and high windows.

The star-like structure of neon tubes comprised a grid of over thirty triangles. It was hung a few centimeters below the ceiling as a floating entity covering the octagonal room while being reflected endlessly in the glass of the high windows—onto the panorama viewed through the windows of Berlin’s new-old government center. The neon grid spelled the word “Sonne” (sun) in the type developed by Bell that simplifies letters into horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines. Such geometrical grids have been used by Bell since 2007 in diverse variations to form sculptural objects or paintings that carry textual messages.

A computer turned the lights, connected to a sound amplifier, on and off irregularly. An ongoing hiss was heard as the electrical interference was transformed into audio frequencies (produced by the fluorescent lights themselves)—an instrument that increases the volume of stillness, rendering a kind of “sound of silence.”

The soundwaves that were attributed to the moon and the sun blended in the space.

Bell’s “Sun” is an ambitious bulky symbol of a blinding entity at which no gaze can be directed. In one performance, the space was darkened

and the external eight tubes were dimmed, flickering constantly between being on and off while forming a stage for an eruptive dance. At other times the space was fogged by smoke, while the flashing of the neon light imitated a storm spectacle, surrounding the sun. The low-tech construction of neon lights and analog recordings amplifies the kind of friction that "high" technology wishes to demolish. In the hands of Dirk Bell it seems to articulate a desire for slowing down, de-hastening, decreasing manmade technology.

The floating neon entity created a low-tech setting that simulated cosmic powers such as the moon or a solar eclipse, blinding light or endless darkness, an infinite, potent *mise en scène*, laconically repeating and competing with celestial orders.

Hovering over the empty space, it seemed unclear whether the heavy neon-web was to crash onto the ground or rise up into the skies—through the large windows, one could detect outside in the garden a realistic bronze sculpture featuring a man holding a woman who stretches her arms towards the sky in a gesture that recalls Ikarus and Daedalus in their attempt to free themselves by flying. It is titled *Der Traum vom Fliegen* (the dream of flying), made by GDR artist Senta Baldamus (1920–2001).

*Revelation Big Sun* was also to illuminate potential, symbolic social activity with a utopian resonance. Indeed, Bell's works often entail an affinity to the "Lebensreform" movements, which were developed and experienced as a reaction to modernization (industrialization, urbanization) from the end of the nineteenth century in Europe. Navigating between social engagement for a classless society (anarchism, collectivism, sexual and feminist revolutions...) and modalities of self-improvement ("Lebensreform": vegetarianism, naturopathy, theosophy...), Bell trifles with the duality of those movements and attitudes. His social claim draws its energy also from those aspects of modernity that have turned against it, those tendencies which embodied regression as well as emancipation, and that have made way for contradicting movements such as Dada and National Socialism (total war and life reform). This art lends the artist the poetic role of a priest or a prophet that, following Beuys, asks to link social utopias to "Soziale Plastik" with a speck of new-age wisdom and the groove of discotheque lights and a nightclub floor.<sup>5</sup>

While *The Sky Will Sink* transcends its system of references to make a subjectivity visible through endurance and contemplation, the mechanism of *Revelation Big Sun* directly affects the bodies of people. It operates as a medium for people to connect to each other, while tapping the powers of noise, light and rhythm.

##### 5) Revelation: Two versions of infinity

*The Sky Will Sink* and *Revelation Big Sun* configure the two different modes in Dirk Bell's work, those of interrupting meaning and disrupting comprehension.

While the ceiling drawing and its reflection present a figurative, narrative, vertical scheme that is cyclical and relates to organic morphing, the big lamp is a horizontal electrical mechanism, abstract or textual, that embodies the movement of endless eclipse.

- 1 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. J.W. Harvey, (London: Oxford University Press, 1923)
- 2 The drawing was made over a long period of time and slightly hidden from sight, on the ceiling of a large apartment in Berlin Mitte. The installation of *The Sky Will Sink* evolved over the course of years. The choreography of the viewer/work situation underwent dramatization and crystallization. When it was first exhibited in 2004 at Art Basel's Statements in the BQ booth, underneath the ceiling drawing stood a table and chairs. A mirror was installed on the table. In 2006, when it was installed in Kunstverein Bremerhaven, there was no mirror at all. Finally, since 2012 it has been exhibited as part of the Boros Collection in Berlin, placed in a darkened space. The description in the text above refers to the installation at the Boros Collection.
- 3 In her seminal text "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," Rosalind Krauss defines the difference between reflection and reflexivity. Reflexivity, she says, is the fracture into two categorically different entities (for example Jasper Johns' *American Flag* points reflexively to the flag as both the object of the picture and as the subject of a more general object "painting"). Mirror reflection, however, implies the vanquishing of separateness. Its movement is towards fusion. Erasing the difference between the subject and the object, the self and its reflected image.  
Rosalind Krauss: "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", in *October*, spring 1976.
- 4 Jennifer Higgie, "Night for Day," *frieze*, Issue 80, January–February 2004.
- 5 The work served as a setting for music and dance performances in the exhibition space. During the opening, the Norwegian noise band MoHa! performed. One month later, during a performance of the band Tree People, the lights were extinguished. Over the following ten days, the afterglow of the partially illuminated grid diminished.