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Installation view of *FIGURE/S: drawing after Bellmer* at Drawing Room, London, 2021. (Courtesy Drawing Room, London).

Body as language, language as body

by Kathryn Lloyd

[Reviews](#) / [Exhibition](#) • 14.10.2021

Story of the Eye (1928) by Georges Bataille (1897–1962) is, as the title indicates, the tale of an object. Although the eye in question does not make an appearance until the penultimate page of the novella, when it is cut from the head of a Spanish priest, that inevitable moment hangs over the preceding sixty-four pages. In his postscript – obscurely titled ‘Coincidences’, for what coincidence can occur in the deliberate act of writing? – Bataille states that the story was woven in his mind ‘out of two ancient and closely associated obsessions, eyes and eggs’.¹ The substance of this weaving is the increasingly frenzied sexual perversions that occur between four figures: an unnamed, male adolescent narrator; his primary sexual partner, Simone; a sixteen-year-old girl called Marcelle, who is violently subsumed into their transgressive acts; and Sir Edmund, an English aristocrat, whose role is one of facilitation and observation. The fate of the eye, which Simone inserts into her vagina after its removal, is foreshadowed

by an obsession with white, rounded forms: eggs, but also saucers of milk and the raw, severed testicles of a bull.

In 1944 a second edition of the book was published, which included a series of illustrations by the German artist Hans Bellmer (1902–75).² In each of Bellmer's drawings, orifices are the focal point, opened up as though offering their contents directly to the viewer. Flesh gives way to skeletons, animal parts and the flesh of others; fingers delicately grasp eggs and are indelicately buried in anuses. Repetitive folds of material are rendered in faint lines, hanging around and over the body, almost indistinguishable from hair or bone. And there is the eye, peering down from the folds of its new home, showering urine on the subject below. Each figure is highly sexualised but equally anonymous, its separate components held together solely by the desires of a male artist. Bataille's narrative finds its counterpart in Bellmer's drawings; here are two male creators equally drawn to bulbous forms, orifices and penetration, and the liberation of articulating 'troubling pleasures'.

Michael Newman began researching the work of Bellmer over six years ago, an endeavour that has now been distilled into two complementary projects: the exhibition *FIGURE/S: drawing after Bellmer* at Drawing Room, London **FIG. 1**, curated with the gallery's Co-director Kate Macfarlane, and the accompanying publication, *ON FIGURE/S*.³ Including seven of Bellmer's drawings, the exhibition positions his work in dialogue with that of nineteen modern and contemporary artists. The works are grouped into four sections, the titles of which indicate the implausibility of categorising Bellmer and his influence into concise distinctions: 'Anagram, writing and the cut', 'Technical and forensic drawing, time and the change of state', 'Other than human, becoming object, doll, plant, animal' and 'Inside/outside the body, and jouissance'. Bellmer's drawings are interspersed throughout the exhibition, hung alongside works made some fifty years after his death, such as the coloured-pencil drawings of Neil Gall (b.1967) **FIG. 2** and a series of watercolours by Marianna Simnett (b.1986) from 2021. There are no labels on the gallery walls; instead, artists and groupings are referenced in a text-heavy exhibition handout. There is also a plethora of additional reading material: *ON FIGURE/S* comprises twenty-nine contributions from historians, writers and exhibiting artists. As is typical of Drawing Room exhibitions, there is also a bibliography and an artist's reading list, both notably extensive. The concentrated nature of this approach is both a reflection of the participants' scholarly engagement with Bellmer and the complexities of his work and its themes.

The first section **FIG. 3** takes Bellmer's interest in reconfiguring, disfiguring and transfiguring the body as its starting point. In the early 1930s Bellmer constructed two dolls, *Die Puppe* (1933) and *La Poupée* (1935), which exist somewhere between girlhood and womanhood. Bellmer photographed the dolls over and over again in various debased and unsettling positions. Moreover, in his drawings the human (female) body is treated as if it was relieved of its physical limitations. Bellmer likened the body to a sentence, inviting us to 'dismantle it into its component letters, so that its true meanings may be revealed anew through an endless stream of anagrams'.⁴ In aligning the body with the structure of language, Bellmer rationalised the cutting, reshaping and reassembling of the body to adopt any form. This was an interest he shared with the artist and writer Unica Zürn (1916–70), with whom he had a relationship from 1953 until her suicide in 1970, and whose drawings also feature in the exhibition **FIG. 4**. Zürn's interest in anagrams was more typically confined to the realm of language; she created a number of anagram poems, which explored the arbitrariness and contingency of letters, words and sentences.

Alongside Bellmer's *Untitled (Pelvis-Eyes-Ears)* **FIG. 5**, this section includes the ink drawing *Good Evening Bad Luck, How Are You? I Control In You The Constant Bending* (c.1958) by Zürn. Although the artist kept her drawings and poems separate, this title indicates a crossover with her use of anagrams. In the 1960s, after her first hospitalisation, Zürn destroyed a large number of her works; this one was torn up and later reassembled by Bellmer. Also displayed in this section are a series of text drawings by Jade Monsterrat (b.1981) **FIG. 6**, which similarly treat language as fragmentary but also explore its potential damage. These 'agitated palimpsests', which detail the artist's experiences of racism, are presented next to an audio

recording of her 2017 performance *No Need for Clothing*. In the original performance, Monsterrat, speaking to her audience while naked, ejects each word as though it is unconnected to the last, in a manner similar to the clipped tones of GPS and AI technologies. She often returns to the word 'body', each time delivering it with the same deliberate tonal inflection:

Her
body
marked
out
is
bitter
to
the
bite
[. . .]
The
body
is
punished
for
the
mind's
wrongdoing.

Monsterrat's staccato delivery manifests as an expulsion, and exorcism, of historical and present traumas. Her texts speak of colonial and racist narratives, but also of the politics of care and autonomy, of reclaiming ownership over her body and sexuality.⁵ In an ostensibly similar vein, Bellmer's drawings are often cited as a violent attack on Nazism and its antagonism towards 'degenerate' bodies – his reorganisation of the physical form is interpreted as political activism. However, the bodies Bellmer creates and manipulates exist purely in relation to his own desire, and their immovability (of being a doll or being a drawing) refuses them the option of consent.⁶ Monsterrat's methodology of dissecting language and drawing out its absurdity is designed to undermine its power for abuse. Her controlled, embodied writing – the result of direct, traumatic experience – reveals the entitlement inherent in Bellmer's phantasy **FIG. 7**.

In juxtaposing Bellmer's work with that of other artists, the exhibition does not set out to analyse its origins or impetus. Historically, most writings on Bellmer have attempted to 'rescue' him from the classification of pornography or mere perversion.⁷ His affiliation with the Surrealism movement has allowed for a legitimisation of his oft-violent representation of female bodies, and as Sue Taylor states in her book *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (2000), many have been too quick to believe the artist's claim of therapeutic intentions – 'to help people lose their complexes, to come to terms with their instincts'.⁸ Instead, this exhibition mines the paradoxical nature of his work and all its possible eventualities, using it as a starting point for contemporary debate. Despite the time separating the works on view, there are shared themes throughout: acts of transgression, the dissolution of bodily boundaries, the abject, extremes of pleasure and pain, and human–animal relationships. In this context, Bellmer's drawings almost act as a control mechanism, a point from which to begin, rather than to end.

The section 'Other than human, becoming object, doll, plant, animal' brings together works by Chloe Piene (b.1972), Simnett, Rebecca Jagoe (b.1988), Sharon Kivland (b.1955), Kumi Machida (b.1970), Zürn and Gall. This grouping extends Bellmer's anagrammatic approach of recomposing the body to explore

connections between the human and the non-human. Jagoe's work *Letters to Arm* FIG. 8 hangs from the ceiling of the gallery, its long, vulviform, red silk spilling down from an upstretched latex hand. The folds of the fabric resemble the inner workings of muscle and arteries. A long strip of paper is nestled inside, a gigantic scroll of intricate text and watercolour drawings with visible revisions and mistakes. The work is part of Jagoe's *Significant Others* (2015–ongoing), a series of romances to non-human protagonists – previous iterations include declarations of love to cream cheese and a mirror. In *Letters to Arm*, the sentiments of the love letters are directed towards a blue plastic mannequin arm. Jagoe's subject is partly inspired by the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's confession that he stole a shop dummy before his crimes escalated to rape and murder. In their letters, the lover of the arm recounts their daily activities – trips to the beach, what they had for dinner – to the resolutely static, and silent, recipient, refusing to waver in the face of its objecthood: 'the strawberries I left on your palm have started to attract flies'; 'you do not give in so easily. You are hard, hard and plastic, and cold [. . .] You do not yield, you tease, you delicious tease. Playing hard to get, I know this game you beautiful, blue demon'.⁹

In Bellmer's *Untitled (Reversible drawing)* FIG. 9, displayed on the wall opposite Jagoe's cascading letters, the form of the egg – or the eye – seems to resurface. Although the subject-matter is not immediately recognisable as a human body, certain figurative elements emerge from the roving lines: ear lobe, knee joint, pelvis, penis. Here, the body appears to be melting – a total dissolution of the self rather than an altering of the bodily landscape. Throughout this exhibition the orifice and its counterpart – the eye, egg or ball – operate as meeting points between works. In *Lens* by Kumi Machida FIG. 10 a figure – (n)either human or non-human – pulls apart the skin at the back of their head to reveal a black circular void. Whereas Bellmer's act of opening is ostensibly one of sexual offering, Machida's is perhaps one of communication. The figure holds open a portal, waiting, like a character in *The Matrix*, to be plugged in to reality or to escape from it.

Bellmer wrote that his only 'returning instinct' was to 'escape from the outline of the self'.¹⁰ In 'Inside/outside the body, and jouissance' drawing is used to probe definitions of what constitutes a 'body'. In the series *Sade for Sade's Sake* (2007–09) by Paul Chan, the artist drew from the notorious photographs that emerged in 2004 of detainees being tortured by United States military soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison. The title is a reference to the Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), the illustrations of which, to Chan, were comparable to the scenes in Abu Ghraib. In these drawings, four of which are exhibited, the figures of prisoners and perpetrators are reduced to identical, overlapping, thick black lines. While they formally explore the boundaries of the body, they are also made in response to an unequivocal transgression of human rights. Chan's figures resemble schematic puppet diagrams that seem to clearly reference Bellmer's dolls. The mass of repeated oval forms in *Barely Legal 4* FIG. 11 could equally represent head, anus or knee joint. Similarly, the structure of Bellmer's dolls, and their capacity for manipulation, is dependent upon the use of ball and socket joints: the circular form on which Bellmer's practice seems to hinge.

Bellmer is an artist who simultaneously repulses and appeals, whose intentions seem to constantly oscillate between domination and liberation. As evidenced in this exhibition, the continued influence of his characteristic quality of line and his forensic attention to prurient detail are undeniable. Newman and Macfarlane's curation does not evade the complex, paradoxical and at times violent nature of his drawings. They have aptly identified his legacy as being a starting point rather than a culmination. In this narrative, Bellmer is the object in the tale – the egg, the eye – who has been rehoused and reclaimed. Here, his ideas are furthered and expounded in the hands of other artists.

Exhibition details

FIGURE/S: drawing after Bellmer

Drawing Room, London

10th September–31st October 2021

About the author

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Footnotes

- 1 G. Bataille: *Story of the Eye*, London 2001, p.71.
- 2 Bataille originally published *Story of the Eye* under the pseudonym Lord Auch, with illustrations by André Masson. The edition with Bellmer's illustrations, which were uncredited, was also published under the name Lord Auch; 199 were printed. The first version to be issued under the author's real name was published in the late 1960s, after Bataille's death, by Jean-Jacques Pauvert, who is notable for also printing the works of the Marquis de Sade.
- 3 *ON FIGURE/S: Drawing After Bellmer*. Edited by Kate Macfarlane, Michael Newman, Sharon Kivland and Louis Mason. 243 pp. incl. numerous b. & w. ill. (MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, London, 2021).
- 4 H. Bellmer, transl. M. Green: *The Doll*, London 2005, p.133.
- 5 See C. Ruiz: 'Meet Jade Montserrat, the Black artist who took on the British art establishment', *The Art Newspaper* (27th May 2021), available at www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/27/meet-jade-montserrat-the-black-artist-who-took-on-the-british-art-establishment, accessed 13th October 2021.
- 6 In 1958 Bellmer produced a series of photographs of Zürn, in which she was bound with ropes. With her head obscured and the rope creating deep furrows in her skin, Zürn's body is presented as meat-like. Referred to as a partnership between the two artists, one in which she became his willingly submissive participant, these images represent Bellmer's method of altering the landscape of the body on a real, human form.
- 7 See, for example J.H. Matthews: *The Imagery of Surrealism*, Syracuse NY, 1977, in which the author wrote that Bellmer's 'disarticulation and even dismemberment of the body is anything but a sign of brutal indifference to feminine beauty' and instead 'pays sincere tribute to the attractiveness of the

whole', p.210. See also P. Webb and R. Short: *Hans Bellmer*, New York 1985, in which the authors set out to extricate Bellmer from the 'obscurity' his sexually explicit work has historically afforded him. The authors align him instead with Thomas Rowlandson, Henry Fuseli and Aubrey Beardsley.

8 Hans Bellmer, quoted in S. Taylor: *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, Massachusetts 2000, p.3.

9 Text reproduced in Macfarlane *et al.*, eds, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.90–101.

10 Hans Bellmer, quoted in H. Foster: *Prosthetic Gods*, Massachusetts 2004, p.233.
