

DIRK BELL
SOFT IS HARD (Work)

24 April – 16 June 2012
69 South Audley St London W1

Dirk Bell's second show at Sadie Coles HQ comprises an eclectic body of new work. Upstairs are three free-standing, moveable walls painted with linear designs similar to Constructivist paintings. The images are 'word grids' – graphic arrangements of letters which have been simplified to the point of abstraction.

The word grids find a parallel in the concrete poetry of the 1960s and 70s, presenting letters as sculptural objects while conveying the shifting connotations and meanings of a poem. Wherever the letter 'L' occurs, the grids are punctuated by Bell's "LOVE" symbol (an integration of the four letters, which has become a recurring emblem in the artist's work). These words are often cryptic and hybridised: they induce a moment of being 'stuck' or arrested, as the viewer attempts to decipher the writing.



moving wall 'workshop' (2012), placed near the window of the upper gallery, compresses the idea of an unbreakable cycle of working and shopping, while nostalgically evoking the idea of a workshop as a place of collaboration. The words "WOR / KOU / TOP / IAN" and "BUR / NOU / TOP / IAN" are blazoned on either side of a single wall, to suggest a cycle of utopian exercise and dispiriting exhaustion or 'burnout'. Downstairs, in *Untitled* (2012), a word grid spelling "BRU / TAL / ISM / ART" has been cut from a single sheet of steel using lasers, to resemble an architectural structure.

Arrayed throughout the downstairs gallery are various paintings, sculptures and found objects from Bell's studio in Berlin. The gallery has been divided by a net curtain threaded with a word grid design, reading "FAKE / REAL / FAKE / REAL / FAKE / REAL". Alongside it is an installation of objects which centres upon a mannequin and fragment of leather sofa. The mannequin's head and torso are adorned with a pattern derived from Nuba body art. Evoking Hans Bellmer's surreally-fragmented and reconfigured dolls, the sculpture comprises what Bell calls "a skeleton of unwanted things", seemingly on the point of falling apart, and undergoing a process of metamorphosis or *verwandlung*. Positioned nearby on a tiered lamp-stand are two red teapots, one a red plastic 'fake' and one a 'real' metal object. The installation expresses the notion of remembering – both in the sense of recollection (with all its gaps and distortions and amalgamations) and of trying to re-member or re-assemble the component parts of a thing. On the floor close to the mannequin are metal letters (similar to sections from an old letterpress) arrayed in a cross, within which it is possible to make out "RE / MIND / ER".

In a series of found and modified paintings, Bell has superimposed existing paintings bought from flea markets with images in white paint. Bell describes this process as introducing another dimension to the original paintings – clinching the existing imagery and interweaving elements to create new dramas. In one, a portrait of a robed woman has been overlaid by a spectral image of a Nuba mask (taken from Leni Riefenstahl's iconic photography of the tribes) which diverges from her eye.

The way in which viewers are required to believe (or to suspend disbelief) is dramatised in a fridge installed beneath a geometric arrangement of neon lights. The light inside has been modified so that it only turns on when the door is closed – an inversion of its usual function. The configuration of lights spells "N8" (standing for Nacht, "night", and 8, referring to the fact that one light turns off at eight in the morning, and one at eight at night). Throughout Dirk Bell's art voices a desire to repair – both in the sense of making good and of going back – through processes of retrieval and accumulation, and through verbal and sculptural amalgamation.

Dirk Bell (b. 1969) has exhibited internationally; solo shows include *Retour*, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany (2011); *Made in Germany*, travelling between The Modern Institute, Glasgow, Sadie Coles HQ, London, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2010); Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden (2009); and Kunsthalle Bremerhaven (2006). In 2012 he mounted a joint show with Frederic Detjens and Marcus Steinweg – *grid / er*, Melas Papadopoulos, Athens; he has also been featured in group exhibitions including *Gesamtkunstwerk: New Art from Germany*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2011-12); *Melanchotopia*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2010); and *Old Ideas*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Basel, Switzerland (2010). Bell lives and works in Berlin.

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