
Cursory remarks on Bo Christian Larsson

WOLFGANG FETZ

“We cover the universe with drawings we have lived,” writes French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: “These drawings need not be exact. They need only be in accord with the tonality of our inner space.”¹ If I were to characterise BCL’s art in the briefest, most general of terms, then I might speak of an oscillation, a flickering, a precarious ambivalence, between this “tonality of our inner space” and what cultural historians term “the abyss”.

The abyss is the maelstrom that Edgar Allan Poe describes: the constant threat of being dragged down into a world of irrationality, a form of wild energy. The “tonality of our inner space”, on the other hand, implies something akin to “familiarity” and “trust”. Bachelard speaks of topophilia, of examining “images of *felicitous space*”.²

More specifically, an excellent example of this opposition is provided by the central wall-mounted work in the exhibition at Magazin4, *The Redeemer’s Wall* (p. 57). It consists of a text, or, to be more

precise, a single sentence, whose apparently eccentric structure is based on a typeface designed by the artist. The letters are made of interlinked bars forming a rune-like weave of words that can only be deciphered with considerable effort. (The theme of encoding and deciphering plays an important part in BCL’s work, due not least to the artist’s referencing of certain subcultures and their practices.) The bars are mounted on a black ground and covered with a thick layer of dripped white candle wax.

The phrase, borrowed by BCL from a New York rapper, reads: “You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it”. Admittedly, the unambiguously moral charge of this call to enjoy the world in all its wonderfulness rather than producing badness is counteracted in this work in the same breath – a perfect example of antiphrasis. Just as we might view the wall installation as the altarpiece for a celebration of the Mysteries or as a pietistic call to action (something suggesting a certain optimism, in any case), it points to the opposite. Nothing is easier than to “upend” the typographical field, so to speak, and to adopt a more topological point of view. Then one is confronted with (a “picture” of) a bizarre icy landscape, constructed in a void, in pure blackness. A Siberian scenario with no way out; a system of walkways over a nameless abyss.

The emphatic, associative quality of my interpretation may meet with suspicion. But that does

not alter my conviction that it describes an integral aspect of BCL’s aesthetic.

Another work in the exhibition, *Violence Is Golden* (p. 47), is a wooden house (seemingly) sunken into the ground or buried in snow almost up to the eaves, perforated by a large number of different-sized crosses. (BCL told me that the piece develops a memory from his childhood and youth, the Nordic landscape with its snowbound houses.) The cross and the house stand (actually and/or figuratively) for shelter – roughly speaking for well-being and goodness. The cross is prominently displayed above the door or gable as a form of apotropaic device, a medium born out of pagan beliefs that is meant to ward off potential evil or bad luck. In *Violence Is Golden*, the viewer finds the positive, “sheltering” connotations cancelled out in a double sense. Although they are clearly “legible”, they are also suspended, pushed into their opposite. The massiveness and violence with which the sword-like crosses penetrate the house (here, too, the nightmarish quality of Poe’s work is a strong presence) evoke images of ritual sacrifice. As in *The Redeemer’s Wall*, although under different conditions, the scenario developed in *Violence Is Golden* is permeated to the core by the charisma of a paradox or ambivalence as insistent as it is productive.

I would like to pursue these remarks in different terms, i.e. those of the “uncanny”. (I am aware

that this concept has become almost fashionable in recent art debate, especially in the wake of Stanley Cavell’s work,³ and I will therefore not be dwelling on it overly.) In his essay “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” Cavell refers among others to Thoreau and Heidegger, and to their common theme of “house building”, of “making oneself at home”. The Germanic word ‘heim’ means ‘house, residence, home’, thus also implying ‘familiarity’. ‘Heimlich’, the German for secret, suggests a retreat, the act of hiding in a house. ‘Unheimlich’, the German for uncanny, is the opposite, implying a lack of familiarity, a lack of a ‘house’, a shifting, ungraspable quality.

This distinction, which is not dissimilar to that made above between the abyss and the “tonality of inner space”, can be mapped onto BCL’s pictorial and architectural worlds. This creates a further brand of ambivalence, i.e. that between “house” as a place of shelter and the state of “houselessness” as an essential deficit. It is these intransigent but inseparably interwoven poles which mark out the magnetic field of BCL’s works. In his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”,⁴ Heidegger puts the matter concisely: “At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary, it is extra-ordinary, uncanny.” With his “houses” and “rooms”, be they environments, objects or performances, BCL consistently traces the inner ramifications of this ambivalence, this impure elective affinity.

Framing the show as its starting and finishing

point, *The Intruder* (p. 33) is an elegant, fragile steel object. It recalls a giant spider, lit by theatre lights as it climbs in through a window of a wooden room and onto a stage-like podium. This creates the impression of a certain threat (but gives no cause for panic: nervousness is not a category that would interest BCL). At the same time, the structure possesses a surprising beauty and formal rigour; this reduced form is an especially good illustration of BCL’s gift for concentration, revealing his formidable awareness of form. On the other side of the wall with the window (outside the room, in a different space) there is nothing to suggest a spider. Where the viewer would have expected to find it continuing with the actual body, s/he finds a bundle of square tubes with sharp points, which bear an undeniable resemblance to outside slate pencils. This area, too, is theatrically lit.

Incidentally: in *The Earthly Whisper* (p. 63), a steel object with the structure of a pentagram, a ritual knife hangs on a string above a suspended steel plate with a covering of quartz sand. With every movement of the flexible elements, the knife scratches “graphic” patterns into the sand. The scriptural aspect, then, runs through the whole exhibition. Does this ultimately prompt me to identify the main part of the “spider”, too, as a strange kind of writing implement, a typewriting automaton? It would not be out of place in a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

As we see here, the complex relationship between

the familiar and the uncanny is kept in deliberate suspension, with aberrations planned in. It is as if a kind of doppelgänger were always present, but one who can never really be pinned down. One aspect of this paradox is described by Cavell when he speaks of houses that cannot be lived in because one cannot leave them.

Perusing my bookshelves, I recently happened upon Ernesto Grassi’s *Die Macht der Phantasie* (The Power of Imagination).⁵ The central axis of this treatise published over thirty years ago is an examination of the “terror of the dismantling of myths” as a consequence of the widespread enthronement of rational, formal thought. “If we accept that, on account of the dismantling of the myths surrounding it, revelatory language no longer has a sacred aspect and can thus no longer offer guidance, [...] then all primal signs, instructions, announcements are empty. All that is left, as rational language is then without any real basis, are free-floating images, errant and meaningless metaphors which take on a ghostly quality.” Among other things, Grassi relates this phenomenon of “lost guiding signs” to landscape, speaking of “devalued landscape”.

I mention Grassi because the conceptual framework outlined above is of interest with regard to the work of BCL. If my understanding is correct, then the artist’s environments and works on paper alike, as carefully planned dramatizations of “landscapes”

(or fragmentary landscapes, of spaces and places), aim to give “signs” back their mythic quality. Against the ghostly force of the juggernaut named “profanity” he deploys the “charged” image, the myth, the perversely sacred. Such a claim transgresses the accepted bounds of rhetorical simplification. The crudeness of my claim, which is as true as it is false, obscures the fine oscillations that give BCL’s art its unmistakable style: he is a master of precise connotation and of veiling in equal measure. He creates “places” that resist the logic of “devaluation” (ultimately an economic logic that has become strangely crucial to our everyday life).

In his book *Non-Places*,⁶ French anthropologist and ethnologist Marc Augé notes the following: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” For Augé, such non-places include transit spaces like airports, railway stations, temporary residences, holiday villages, refugee camps and slums. Put differently: “The traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of *non-place*.”⁷ One might add: the refugee’s space, the migrant’s space, the space of globalisation.

To quote Heidegger again: “Accordingly, spaces receive their essential being from locations, and not from ‘space’.”⁸ BCL creates such locations, zones of concentration – centres of crystallisation which

nonetheless retain a certain fluidity. BCL’s places (by which I also mean his objects) possess an energy that makes me think, speculatively, of the theme of Aby Warburg’s pathos formulas (expressive gestures). Pathos formulas are symbols (or symbolic states) which represent “mental energies in conserved form”. This is what I am interested in here. For me, BCL’s places/locations are something akin to “mental energies in conserved form”.

My remark above concerning precise connotations and veiling is illustrated not least by the drawings. In them, one sees how diverse narrative strands and symbolic units are juxtaposed and layered. Sometimes there is an almost baroque lavishness about them; one senses a delight in telling stories, a pulsating proliferation that also gives some of BCL’s performances their distinct atmosphere. Sigmund Freud once developed an archaeological model of the unconscious as a series of strata. This, approximately, is how I read BCL’s drawings, which form exquisitely proliferating landscapes. My personal way into BCL’s multiverse, if I may call it that, was through his drawings, whose technical brilliance alone is striking.

Even if the exhibition at Magazin4 does not make this obvious, drawing stands at the centre of BCL’s oeuvre. Not quantitatively, not in the sense of a prioritization, but simply because drawing constitutes

the imaginative reservoir and origin for the pictures which he goes on to realise in various media including performance, installation, objects. And if BCL considers drawing in and of itself as a performative act, then this tells us something about the broad spectrum of his output: it makes little sense to distinguish starkly between the individual levels or genres in which he works. For several reasons, it helps to consider his artistic activity as a whole in terms of theatre.

From this point of view, BCL is more of a dramaturg, director and performer. He creates his own stage, be it the world inside his head or the more prosaic world of three-dimensionality. This diversity has nothing to do with an aesthetic of overwhelming. It is not about a pose or about (contrived) drama. The qualities that tend to make an artist like Beuys appear so laboured – the high earnest and lack of humour in many of his works – are not at all characteristic of BCL. He looks into the abyss without foregoing a certain playfulness, a lightness of touch – reduced gravity.

In an interview, the artist said: “I think it [the wig] is the only costume you can wear that does as little and as much as possible with your body as the same time. No great effort. You put on a wig and you’re a different person. I’ve always been fascinated by that. I have the wig in front of my eyes. I turn it round so I can’t see anything. This is an important

point in my performances, that I make myself blind and that I have to look inwards. I become a different person and I disappear into the part.” In BCL’s work, the theatrical, the stage-like, is not concealed or airbrushed out. Rather than claiming to mirror reality, he emphasizes the theatrical aspect of his spaces, underlines it, without making it into the main argument. For the viewer, it remains clear that s/he is moving in an artificial realm, a staged space.

Although BCL’s multiverse cannot be reduced to any single specific ideology, his interest unmistakably focuses on subcultural phenomena like death metal and black metal – musical genres and lifestyles that have become widespread not least in the Scandinavian underground (where some of them also originated). For all his affinities, however, BCL is of course no full-blooded exponent of this very specific subculture. His sensitivity reacts to a wide range of traditions and contexts. He refers explicitly and with precise gestures to romantic motifs, and in connection with black and death metal background his repertoire of background sounds even includes Aleister Crowley. BCL explicitly places himself in the echo chamber of romanticism – and this, as our historical experience tells us, is clearly not achievable without the presence of myth. (Consequently, the fact that BCL was awarded Hamburg’s Philipp Otto Runge Grant, as the igniting spark for this new institution, so to speak, is of more than marginal significance.)

This brings me, via a roundabout path, to a point that can be described using the classic concept of “Noir” – classic inasmuch as the term covers the spectrum from film noir to the gothic subculture that emerged from the punk movement of the late 1970s, as well as harking back to the darker side of Romanticism. These are phenomena that alternate between stark hopelessness and fantasies of salvation, between the abyss and an escapism driven by private mythologies. A reflex that, I would say, either directly or indirectly mirrors our current reality. Within these coordinates, BCL unfolds a complex play of resonances, developing a “peripheral” artistic economy that is less affirmative than revealing. The bottomless abyss (or at least the sense of the ground moving beneath one’s feet) and all the contradictories – these are immanent to his practice, without ever becoming in any way illustrative or the primary the focus of attention.

Or put another way: “Perhaps the absence of myth is the ground that seems so stable beneath my feet, yet gives way without warning,” writes Georges Bataille in a text from 1947. To which he adds, by way of conclusion: “‘Night is also a sun’ and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only true myth.”⁹



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⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace* (Paris: P.U.F., 1957): “Nous couvrons ainsi l’univers de nos dessins vécus. Ces dessins n’ont pas à être exacts. Il faut seulement qu’ils soient tonalisés sur le mode de notre espace intérieur.”

⁷ “... les images de l’espace heureux.”

⁸ Stanley Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary”, in: *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 153-180.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 15-86.

¹⁰ Ernesto Grassi, *Die Macht der Phantasie* (Königstein/Ts: Athenäum, 1979).

¹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London/New York: Verso, 1993), 77-78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (London: Routledge, 1978), 332.

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, “The Absence of Myth”, in: *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (London/New York: Verso, 1994), 48.