

Julian Bell¹

Talking to You. On Self-portraits

An Interview by Annalisa Caputo

Abstract: Julian Bell, artist and writer, helps us reflect on some key issues regarding self-portrait, including the relationship with mirror, the myth of Narcissus, the question of identity, the historical and existential dimension of the artist. Finally, he presents his last self-portrait.

Julian Bell, artista e scrittore, in questa intervista ci aiuta a riflettere su alcune questioni-chiave che ruotano intorno al tema dell'autoritratto, tra cui la relazione con lo specchio, il mito di Narciso, la questione dell'identità, la dimensione storica ed esistenziale dell'artista. Infine Bell ci presenta e descrive il suo ultimo autoritratto.

Keywords: *Self-portrait, Philosophy, Art History, Mirror, Narcissus*

Parole chiave: *Autoritratto, filosofia, storia dell'arte, specchio, Narciso*

A. Caputo: *Allow me to begin by asking you to make a sort of 'written' self-portrait. You are painter, writer, thinker: in which of these attributes do you recognize better yourself in? In your life and in your work, what is the relationship between painting, writing and thinking?*

J. Bell: I paint, I write about art, I teach art. I am now 64 and I have worked this way for the larger part of my life. My family formation licensed such a career, since my parents and grandparents were involved both in the visual arts and in writing.

The result is that I live in a normal state of tension - usually mild, occasionally acute - between the differing modes of mental operation involved in visualizing and in verbalizing. Whatever I am doing, a voice at the back of my mind tells me that I should be doing something else. Certainly, painting is for me at once the most challenging and the most spiritually rewarding form of activity. Yet I do need sometimes also to write and talk about art. Largely for practical reasons - I get paid more quickly for these second-order activities! - but also because I have greater facility at them and they are in a sense more relaxing.

A. Caputo: *In your writings we often find the 'image' of the mirror. I think not only the title of your work *Mirror of the Word: a New History of Art* (2007), but in general the metaphor of the mirror («The mirror, above all - the mirror is our teacher», wrote Leonardo da Vinci). I would like to ask you to relate the text of 2007 and that of 2000: *500 Self-Portraits*. Is the self-portrait a mirror of the self, a mirror of the world, or a mirror of both? What is the relationship between self-portrait and mirror, in art?*

You wrote: «I have a face, but a face is not what I am. Behind it lies a mind, which you do not see but which looks out to you. This face, which you see, but I do not, is a medium I own to express something of what I am» (500 Self-Portraits). What is – according to you – the relationship between vision and expression, face and expression?

¹ Julian Bell is a painter living in Lewes, Sussex. Besides painting, he writes about art for various magazines and has also written several books, including *What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art* (1999), *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art* (2007), *500 Self-portraits* (Phaidon, 2000: introduction)

J. Bell: I have to answer you at some distance from these texts that you kindly mention. In the years since I wrote them my thoughts may have changed.

Mirrors (or, for that matter, still waters - those into which Narcissus peered) stand in one sense for the possibility of adequate knowledge. Reflecting all things faithfully, they propose that everything could be re-presented *just as it is*. In another sense, they are vessels of strangeness. Everything in the silvered glass is *cooled* as well as inverted. Everything becomes other. (So that Narcissus falls in love: so that Leonardo learns how to improve his own painting by seeing it as through another's eyes.)

Now, our eyes are *in* our faces, so that we do not see our own faces, unless we have recourse to some reflective surface. So we might hope for self-knowledge there: but it might be chimerical. Narcissus might never be satisfied.

What is the most certain element of the situation? The yearning to turn attention in that direction - the yearning to seek for 'self'. I put the word in quotes, because there is no fixed and substantive quantity to which I am referring.

A. Caputo: *What is your favourite self-portrait (in the history of art) and why?*

J. Bell: I end my short introduction to *500 Self Portraits* by turning to the circular canvas painted in 1646 by Johannes Gump, now in the Uffizi. It is oddly satisfying that this single item is nearly the only evidence we have of this artist's activity. Gump invented a conceit about the nature of self-portraiture, a metaphor for the genre. He depicts three half-length figures with a single identity: the artist with his brush and maul-stick and with his face averted: what he sees when he looks at his reflection, and what he is setting on a rectangular canvas, placed on an easel. As I wrote in the book, Gump «paints mirror, canvas, painter locked in an enclosed circle, the hope of delivering a complete self-representation shifting forever from one to the other. The painter keeps his back turned: what I am you cannot see.»

A. Caputo: *I was very impressed by the relationship you create between your writings and your readers. I think 500 Self-Portraits, that is almost a 'book jacket' where the face of each reader is like the 501st self-portrait. But I think at the end of Mirror of the Word: a New History of Art, too; when you say: «What is beautiful in a work of art, what changes the life of the viewer, lies far beyond the range of such a description. Go in closer, to finer-grained art histories. Better, get close to the work itself. Best, make things. What happens next in art is up to you». This reminded me of what some contemporary thinkers – as Gadamer and Ricoeur – say about Hermeneutics: i. e. it is the reader who 'completes' a book by reading and interpreting it; and it is the 'lover' who makes a work a 'real' work of art, through his vision and his listening to it. What happens when the work is a self-portrait? In this case, is the hermeneutical circle a very special kind of circle?*

J. Bell: The self-portraits I was reviewing in that book were almost all by professional artists. As such they were inevitably exercises with a social dimension. Self-portraiture has flourished in relation to the rise of market economies, broadly speaking, and in those contexts the circle of reception is never likely to be closed. I think Gary Schwartz, the Rembrandt expert, gives us a valuable reading of the most famous and most productive self-portraitist of all when he says that Rembrandt wanted, like St Paul, to become 'all things to all men'. So one has to allow for this: whatever 'great' self-portraits - self-portraits by major artists - may convey of internal meditation, they are also outward-turned performances, seeking to catch the eye of some viewer who will have a sensibility attuned to their emotional pitch.

A. Caputo: *If it's true that works of art «come together as facets of a single great verb, an ever-varying wave of the human imagination», if it is true that «art is such a verb, then this is not its grammar - merely a glance at a few general ways in which social circumstances have shaped its usage» (as you write at the end of Mirror of the Word), then are self-portraits like a single great verb, wave, too? And what is the 'single' face, the single 'wave' that emerges from the history of self-portraits?*

J. Bell: Above, I'm suggesting that the historical rise of self-portraiture from 1400 onwards is tied up with the rise of mercantilism and all that follows. I suppose you could think of self-portraiture as froth on the crest of that great wave in human history!

That would be a Marxian, materialist way of addressing your question. However the all too grandiloquent image that you quote, taken the closing lines of my art history book, is quasi-Hegelian and idealist in aspiration. My own sympathies fall more or less that way. I would subsume most categories, including economics, within the category of Imagination, if it were for me to make assertions of a philosophic nature.

But it's not my business to be an historical philosopher: as a writer, I simply want to communicate information and open up questions in a lively way. I suspect in fact that with the way you end up formulating your question in the final sentence, you take self-portraiture a little too seriously. I doubt we should seriously hypostatize the concept. Just as I doubt we should lay too much emphasis on the construct of 'self'.

A. Caputo: *Is there a particular reason why you decide to do (again) a self-portrait? When and why it happens?*

J. Bell: I have many friends who are figurative painters, and among them there are some for whom self-portraiture is a regular or even constant component of their practice, while there are others for whom it has no role at all. In my case, for most of the time I keep away from it. Occasionally however - once every six or seven years - it strikes me that it might be a kind of duty - like doing one's spiritual accounts, as it were.

A. Caputo: *When I wrote you the first time by email, you told me you were doing a self-portrait. Have you finished it? Can you describe it to me or even show me a picture?*

J. Bell: What matters to me, Annalisa, is not so much what kind of a witness a painting bears to my inward spiritual or emotional truth, as whether it is a well made painting, one on which I can satisfactorily rest my eyes because every mark in it is vitally interdependent. What matters is the mirror's charming strangeness, not its representational adequacy.

As such, I painted my own favourite self-portrait in 2007. I painted it in half an hour. I had just finished a year's non-stop work at my writing desk (drafting *Mirror of the World*) and returned to my studio in a state of physical exasperation, after so long an absence - picked up a paintbrush, looked in the mirror and expressed all my frustration with quick joyous urgency. It was a good little painting, but I guess too ugly to sell.

This painting along with all my other unsold work from four decades disappeared when my studio burnt down three years ago.² After that big loss I sketched an idea for a melodramatic self-portrait, representing my situation.

I didn't take the idea any further until I was invited to take part in a London exhibition that is just about to open. The exhibition is called 'The Ruth Borchard Prize 2017', Ruth Borchard being a collector who, like the Medici once did, specialized in artists' self-portraits and who left an endowment so that there could be an annual competition for the best example of this genre. The premise is strange to the point of being paradoxical: we are

² The image can be found on my website in the section labelled 'Ex-paintings': [Julian Bell](#)

being invited to ask, Who is best at being themselves? Nonetheless I was happy to take up the challenge.

And so my *Self Portrait, Empty-Handed*, just completed, walks a peculiar melodramatic line between talking to you, the viewer (or the exhibition organizer), and talking prayerfully, to God after my loss, and I'm aware that as it does so it falls submissively into the great shadow cast by Rembrandt. Whether you accept it as 'the truth about me' doesn't concern me: what matters to me is whether you feel that the marks hang together well. But maybe ultimately, there cannot be the one without the other.

