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Mirosław Bałka

Polish Haiku

White ducks in the yard of a derelict factory.

A workman with a hammer dislodges heaps of rust from an old lamppost. He seems curious to discover if, when the rust is removed, there will remain a lamppost.

Coal smoke in a powder blue sky.

"FUCK OFF" and "PUNK NOT DEAD" are prevalent graffiti. A young boy in a group of young boys, who surround him in postures of admiration, gives a passing train the finger.

Sunflowers!

Poland for an American making the first sojourn of his life to *Mittleuropa* is a harsh place full of enchanting or disconcerting livelinesses. Understanding nothing, he collects impressions that he feels to be significant without knowing why.

Then he is in the presence of a Polish artist.

Mirosław Bałka is a big, strapping, open-faced guy thirty-four years old with a crew cut and pale blue eyes. He stands in a cramped, decrepit three-room house that seems too small for him, as if it were a playhouse or he were a giant. It is the house in which he was raised. It became his studio recently when his parents moved to a larger, nicer house next door. "Now I can't imagine how we lived here," he says. He points to the corner that contained his boyhood bed.

Bałka seeks an ashtray for his visitor, a smoker. Then he remembers that his ashtray is in Krefeld, Germany, as part of a sculpture. (A substitute is found.)

I first saw Bałka's work, having heard nothing of him, in the "Aperto" of the 1991 Venice Biennale, and I was struck by the beauty of objects exuding a sense of poverty so pronounced that it made any *arte povera* I could think of seem a deluxe commodity by comparison. What was that quality? Now having been in Poland, I begin to know: the characteristic of found material where junk is a rare category because nothing may be so wrecked or forlorn as ever to fall from the grace of possible human use. When a thing breaks irreparably in such an environment, it is freed for employment as something else. Bałka does not redeem his materials from desuetude so much as detain them from the course of twilight-dim careers in an economy of makeshift. In exhibition, his rusted metal and wizened wood seem shocked by their elegant employment, as abashed by ambient white walls and track lighting as an odd-job laborer thrust into a corporate boardroom.

Bałka leads the way to his former studio, one tiny room of a two-room shed behind the house. The other room is full of tombstones, which his father engraves when not working as an engineer in a factory. Bałka's grandfather, who died twelve years ago, was a mason who made tombstones—the local cemetery is full of his handiwork—and taught Bałka's father to engrave. Sometimes Bałka would be working, and the *chink chink chink* in the next room of his father's hammer and chisel would become maddening. He would have to flee. He credits his grandfather with making him an artist. He remembers with happiness accompanying the old man by horse-drawn wagon, taking tombstones to the graveyard. He recalls a grime-smudged album of photographs of his grandfather's tombstones, kept as a sort of catalogue for customers. The book was thrown away, and to hear Bałka describe it is to feel the painful loss of some small, soiled Library of Alexandria.

In much of Poland as in any place that has been poor for a very long time, practically no location or object is quite clean or exactly dirty—soiled seems the overall word for a physical state as various in its types of soilage as the variousness of the words for snow conditions in Eskimo languages. One might learn fine distinctions there between soil incurred from without, as “dirt,” and soil generated from within, as a byproduct of decay, with terms for degrees of each and combinations of both. One might study paradox. Is dirt “dirty”? Isn’t it, rather, clean: cleanly itself, clean dirt? It can be immaculate when a artist finds an artistic use for it, as when Bałka sets out a tray of ashes from the small, ancient wood stove that (very badly, he says) heated his former studio: soft gray ashes, of a subtle near iridescence, fragile as gossamer. Resting in the ashes are lumpy balls of plaster that recall for Bałka, he says, lumps of soap made by his father from salvaged slivers of nearly extinct soap bars.

Bałka’s materials teeter between the forms of their past and possible uses and the entropy of their decay, their molecular disintegration. I think again of a functioning lamppost that is either rusted or made of rust. The workman’s hammer that will discover the truth about the lamppost may be a symbol of a new Poland. So, too, may be the work of Bałka, an artist internationally resonant who says he is happy to keep working in the old Warsaw suburb where he grew up (while living in another, nearby area). The suburb, Otwock, figures in the early writing of Isaac Bashevis Singer. It was the last stop on a famous tram line from Warsaw and site of fashionable tuberculosis sanitariums. It is haunted by Poland’s demolished bourgeois and Jewish pasts. In the much-vandalized Jewish cemetery of Otwock the sandy soil, long scavenged of sand for making cement, fails to cover protruding human bones. Bałka’s studio feels close to the center of a world anxiously contemplating questions of the persistence and possible transformation—destruction or redemption—of the human. It is something a visitor thinks about in Poland.

In last summer’s Documenta IX Bałka showed a work incorporating stones from the grave that his grandfather planned for himself. The stones are terrazzo (pebbled cement ground to flat surfaces), poor people’s marble. The family, having become relatively prosperous, deemed the material too humble. Bałka’s grandfather lies beneath granite. The grandson keeps faith with the grandfather, who in spirit follows his rejected sepulcher around the world.

“Something happens for you in your childhood, so strong for you that it never changes,” Bałka says. The minimalistic vocabulary and syntax of forms he has adopted—lingua franca of the world of international sculptural exhibition in which he is a rising star—is “just the visual aspect,” he explains. An obviously Joseph Beuys-influenced lexicon of metaphoric materials (fleshy foam rubber, for instance, and salt for the primal human body) might similarly be termed just the semi-otic aspect of Bałka’s art. (Another of Bałka’s Western affinities is to early Bruce Nauman, whom he recalls in taking a severe, ad hoc approach to what might be termed the problem of bootstrapping art: You are an artist in your studio, alone in space and adrift in time. Now what? Look around. What’s there? What can be done with it?) Bałka is not yet an innovator in sculptural aesthetics or poetics. He is prepossessing for his ability to make a learned language tell his story. The virtue of the language for him seems its capacity to sublimate—to render subliminal—charges of feeling otherwise uncontrollably powerful and contradictory.

Bałka told me that in 1986, while still in school, he traded a bottle of vodka to a man with a broken nose for a small, crude figurine of Santa Claus that had a broken nose. For one of his first shows after graduating from the academy, he arrayed many plaster casts of this pathetic object facing a pyramid of snow into which a rope descended. When the snow melted, the original Santa was revealed hanging by its neck. A lynching? “Yes, that is the word,” Bałka said. For another performance-like piece, he displayed a big rabbit made of used fabric surrounded, and apparently threatened, by many sharp-toothed steel jaws, painted white. On consideration, Bałka cut out for the rabbit a sharp-toothed mouth of its own for self-defense. The two installations seem self-explanatory as parables of the artist in an onerous world. I asked him how those startling works were received. “Fine,” he said. “Nobody treated them as art.”

Bałka credits as a formative experience his reading, in English, of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The book encouraged him to embrace his simplest and often most abject early experiences as themes for art. He was transfixed by Joyce's account of the sensation of bedwetting: first warm, then cold. He made a sculpture about it. Two rusted pipes close together and upright against a wall stop at eye level. They are filled, Bałka fancies, with tears. Short sections of pipe set in the floor are for him positive forms of the negative spaces made by the act, mysteriously satisfying to a boy, of pissing in snow.

In Warsaw I saw a sculpture by Bałka in a Polish virtual shrine of contemporary art, the Galeria Foksal in the complex of an old villa used by the Polish Association of Architects. The Foksal consists of an office and a very small exhibition space with lovely oblong proportions, as if it were the scale model for a substantial gallery—and as if it were a pocket-sized working miniaturization of the panoply of a free international art world that until recently could gain no more purchase in Poland than this cherishable toehold. Memorable exhibitions have been held there of local and Western art (Giovanni Anselmo, Lawrence Weiner, Arnulf Rainer, Joseph Beuys, Tony Cragg, Anselm Kiefer) in the gallery's difficult history since 1966. Its director for all that time, Wiesław Borowski, is a tough sort of aesthete-saint who couches his passion in watchful, shrewd deference. Censors used to preview all of Borowski's shows. Polish censorship wasn't so bad, he told me with a shrug: if the censors couldn't understand the art, they figured it was no threat and let it go. (The opposite policy pertained in Czechoslovakia, he said.) In the gallery when I visited was a Bałka that incorporated a low-lying, narrow, rusted-steel trough, triangular in cross section, holding a rivulet of dried salt. The trough was body-length, which make it a large object in the little space. But if one imagined it as a body lying down, then its situation seemed capacious, as if it were saying, "See, there's lots of room for me here." All of Bałka's work, one way or another, may say something similar, intent on finding the minimum requirement of space and time in which to be.

Bałka's world is wide now. So is Poland's, though in a country that needs practically everything in the way of infrastructure and whose currency features a million zlotys note (worth eighty-some dollars last summer) the extent of the freedom rather dwarfs immediate prospects for making effective use of it. With Bałka and his fiancée (now wife), artist Zuzanna Janin, I ate carp at a cozy restaurant in the Old Town section of Warsaw, the Renaissance district which, destroyed like most of the central city in World War II, has been painstakingly rebuilt to its original appearance. The effect of the restoration is a bit Disneyfandish, but promising in its energy. After dinner we sat at a cafe table in the night in the main square, and I liked being there with Mirosław and Zuzanna, watching them watch the passing scene. Their scene.

We in the American art world have waited for something from the former Soviet empire, something new. Our eagerness for creativity from that quarter seems partly an expression of healthy curiosity and goodwill, partly a confession that our own artistic resources feel exhausted and in need of exotic transfusion. The pickings so far have been slim, and the best of them—as by Ilya Kabakov, as by Bałka—tell us why. They also teach us how to square our expectations with what we are likely to receive. An "Eastern" artist must first master an artistic idiom of the West, because none of any sophistication, with a local accent, survived the long darkness. Then the artist must speak in that alien idiom of painful things, telling as with a stammering tongue, unused to speaking, of so many truths so long unspoken that they have sedimented like a river bottom. Only when all the layers of silence are dredged may we encounter the "new" in our frenetic Western sense.

Bałka showed me an incredibly dilapidated old public trash container he discovered in Germany, an image of which he used as a poster for the exhibition in Krefeld. He had been very nervous about the show, he said. "But when I found this, I knew it would be all right." In Germanic lettering beneath the container's gaping mouth is the hungry, peremptory plea,

"Bitte"

Peter Schjeldahl