

Miroslaw Balka

How It Is

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That's How It Is

Julian
Heynen

Translated by
Fiona Elliott

Take it from here

He starts with a dead person.

By the time *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* was presented to visitors to a small, deserted house in the country in 1985, the particular ritual associated with this right of passage was already addressing an unrecoverable past. The boy in his best suit – dressed for the transition into adulthood and standing silently bolt upright, awkwardly, hesitantly touching the edge of the table – is a fragile construction. However patiently it has been put together, the body poised on an unlocatable piece of floating ground is distinctly makeshift. Made from concrete and clay, the figure would like to persuade us of its presence. Yet all it has to back it up are flickering memories and the schematic points of information that may be gleaned from the fake reality of the photograph on the table top. The artist was once that pale boy, or he could have been; but it doesn't matter one way or the other because the situation portrayed here is a collective ritual in the place where he comes from. The picture shows what has come down to us across the treacherous bridge of memory. All we see is a shell, although with a glowing, red (fabric) heart – like a fetish – into which the guests attending the ceremony have stuck needles. This invocation of death reinforces the impression made by the figure as a piece of sculpture.

It is not by chance that it recalls those graveside statuettes which – rather than appealing to any notions of idealism or abstraction – determinedly, yet despairingly, aspire to convey an enduring, faithful image of the real form of the deceased. However much the work and the circumstances of its first appearance are concerned with the existential moment of the transition from youth to adult, from carefree abandon to responsibility – marking the passage from student to 'free' artist in Balka's own life – it is also just as much, in a more general sense, about the unavoidable frailty of memory and even more about the fact that the world we encounter is fundamentally in the past tense. As he himself once said: 'Everything we touch is coming from the past, it's our access to death.'¹

This statement is closely tied to the place and time the artist inhabits. The main place is his own body, the main time is that in which the latter changes and ultimately disintegrates. To this day – as in his early performances from the mid-1980s and the figurative sculptures of the late 1980s which then gave way to more object-focused work – Balka's own body is always directly or indirectly present in his work, as a symbol for all bodies and as a persistent point of reference, be it in sight or not. It is not only implicit in the discreet arithmetic of his titles

that describe the measurements of individual components in his works but are also related to the actual dimensions of his own body. It is also inherent in objects such as bed-like structures, points of entry and exit (reminiscent of bodily orifices), substances such as salt, ashes, hairs or even soap, and the movements of the hand-held camera in video films – all of which point to the human body as the inescapable basis of all experience, as the unrelenting condition and limitation on all our perceptions and actions. Each person's corporeality determines their fundamental consciousness of time: it is not only that the changes in their body, from day to day and from year to year, mark out a particular sequence, the body also has inscribed into it a sense of the miracle of its own beginnings and the certainty of its own end. Inextricably entwined with the place and time of Balka's corporeal form is the place, Poland, and the time since the Second World War and the Holocaust, that lengthy, in some ways still ongoing 'postwar' period. For the sculptor, Balka, this place is neither an abstract entity nor – most definitely not – an ideological construct. It is a tangible, familiar piece of the world, that is to say, the former spa town of Otwock (near Warsaw) where he grew up, its streets, squares, buildings, his grandparents' house, which he later used as a studio. 'In the yard Miroslaw Balka picks up a piece of rusty metal. It's fallen off the roof ... "I can use that", he says with satisfaction, knocking the dirt off it and tossing it into his car.'² It is a piece of metal

from a house that a Jewish family had previously lived in. This place is the source of materials and items such as the remains of a post that was used in the fence around the Jewish ghetto,³ or the ancient linoleum from his grandparents' house. Otwock had already sharpened Balka's response to a particular part of the past, which was evident even before more or less explicit German words started to infiltrate his exhibition titles,⁴ and before he started (in about the mid-1990s) to approach places of death in his work – concentration and extermination camps.

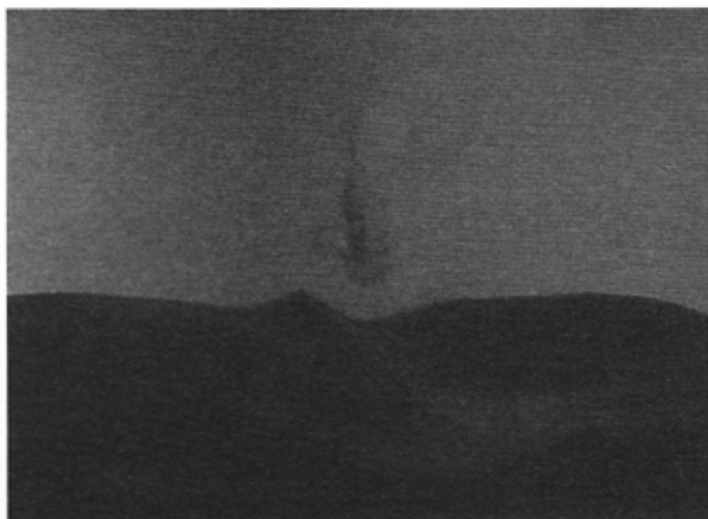
Kaleidoscope

From the outset – and even more so in the last ten years – Balka's publications and catalogues have included not just illustrations of his works but other pictures, too, predominantly photographs or video



Miroslaw Balka
*Remembrance of the
First Holy Communion*
1985
Steel, marble,
concrete, silicon,
textile, ceramics
and photograph

Miroslaw Balka
Stills from *The Fall*
2001
Video



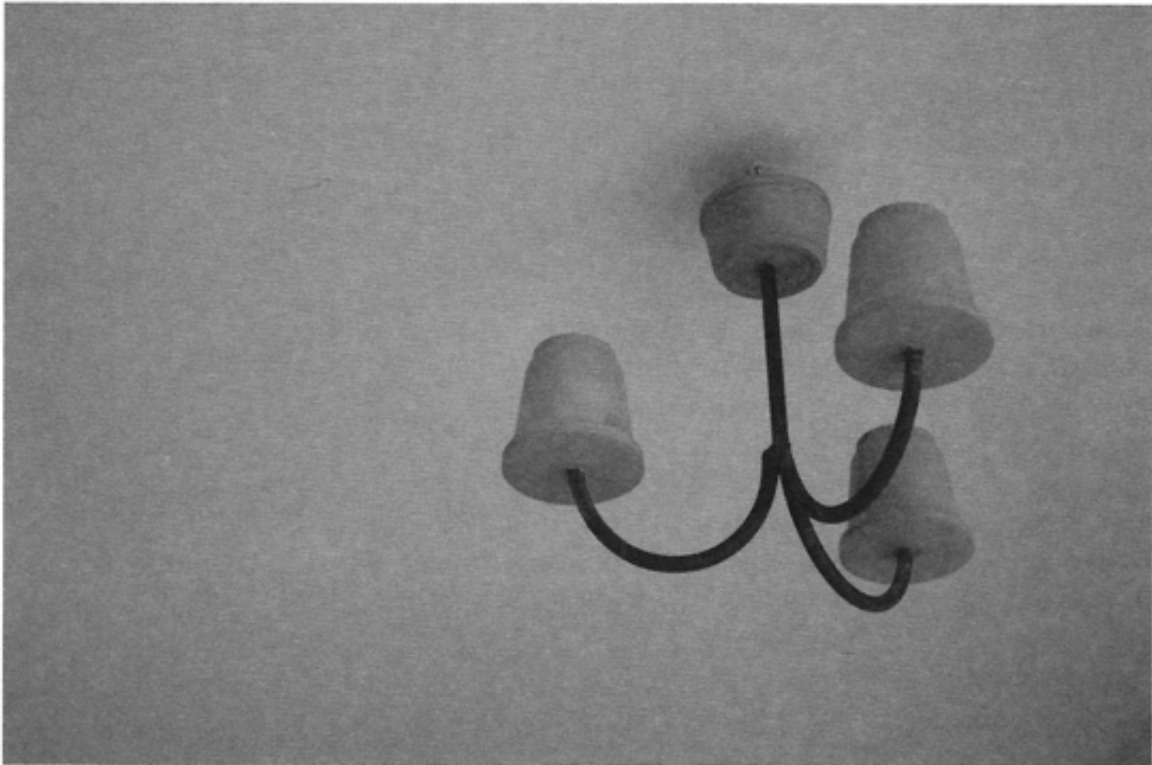
stills that he has shot himself. Sometimes they appear in conjunction with explanatory texts, sometimes they accompany works of art and texts in a fairly loose, associative manner. At times it seems as though their message is intentionally tucked away in tiny details obscured by the blurriness of the shot. They are obviously not primarily informative, but more about processes such as conjuring up a mood, ideas and memories or making a sudden – delayed – connection between two factors, for instance a particular work and a certain place in history. There are echoes here of the writing of W.G. Sebald who scatters similarly inconspicuous-conspicuous images into his novels and stories. However much one seeks to discover the nature of their interaction with the text, it is always impossible to fully identify it. If anything, the relationship of these images to the rest of the work could be said to provide an additional point of contact for the connection between the work and the reader, or viewer. It creates a certain amount of room for manoeuvre (only mildly directed by the artist) for the recipient's own exploration of the work and the questions it raises.

For this present book, Balka has gone a step further by including visual materials that are not of his own making, that is to say, pictures by other people, pictures of all kinds in a variety of media. The final selection of images relates to a list of words that occurred to the artist as he was working on the project for the Turbine Hall – although it is

impossible to say what these words actually represent: concepts or images. Let's call them notions that can materialise in one form or another. Sometimes there was a particular event or object for which a suitable picture had to be found, sometimes the picture was already in Balka's mind's eye, where it stood for the event or object. In some instances the pictures are highly visual, in others they look like attempts to give visible form to abstract notions. Aside from their actual purpose, in this book the selection of images could also be read as a small cross-section through the history of the ongoing struggle with regard to the relations between thoughts and images. On the whole, this selection could be described as a kaleidoscope – even if strangely obscured – a splitting and faceting of internal and external images that, rather than mapping out a straight, compulsory route to some destination, open up a wide-ranging field of possibilities. However, it would be an error to interpret the artist's procedure here as in any way arbitrary. It is more of a precautionary measure on his part in view of the size and fragility of his questions, his themes. Ever alert to the risk of constraining that very open field of image-word-image connections, the following seeks to capture individual prismatic reflections that flash into view from the contact between this kaleidoscope and older works by Balka and how they possibly relate to *How It Is*.

Under the ground

There was a time when Balka always took visitors to his home in Otwock



Mirosław Balka
34 x 34 x 27
2007
Steel, plaster



Mirosław Balka
Still from *Narayama*
2002
Video

Babi Yar, Ukraine,
October 1941



to see the former Jewish cemetery. Between the few surviving grave-stones, it was not uncommon to find human bones showing up on the surface of the sandy ground. In one area of the fairly hilly site, the sand had been partially removed, in all likelihood as a building material for some new houses directly behind the cemetery. Things that ought to have been sealed underground forever, in eternal darkness, far away from night and day, had been forcibly exposed to the light again – through carelessness, ignorance or sheer indifference. Forgotten. Like a distant echo of this situation, one of Balka's later works contains a sequence of stills, shown on a monitor, that appear to follow a load of sand on the back of a moving lorry (p.30). The title *Narayama* refers to a Japanese story, also told in two movies, about the enforced yet voluntary, almost ritual death of an old woman. Regardless of the story, the sand on the back of the lorry is 'used' nature, it serves particular purposes: a raw material that binds, fills, covers, buries. Elsewhere, in a short video film, the same material crops up again, this time as an apparently gigantic image. (In actual fact it is merely a close-up of a small souvenir, a toy.) Landscapes and worlds form and dissolve again, a dark, endless drama of becoming and decaying ruled by instances of falling, flowing, spilling. And then more sand, or soil, now in connection with the associative pictures that Balka has selected for *How It Is*. We see it in a photograph of Babi Yar (p.31), the gorge on the outskirts of Kiev where German troops shot over 30,000

Jews in September 1941, and where the wall of the gorge was subsequently blasted, burying the victims under tons of earth. There are even more dramatic, horrific records of the aftermath of the event than this one. However, this photograph brings out all too clearly the gulf between victims and perpetrators, between the dead and the living. Dominating the picture is the unstable wall of the gorge, at its base, rather indistinct, traces of those who have been murdered, their clothes; clearly silhouetted on the skyline, in full command of the situation, are the players in the murder. Between the two are the tons of material that were to plunge the proof of this deed, the corpses, into darkness. But that was not to last; the Soviet army later shifted the earth again, uncovering the bodies and the crime. Since then, time has reshaped the terrain yet again. Now all that remains of the gorge are some hollows in a park, although it is still the same earth. A memorial marks the place seeking to cast some light into the ever-recurrent threat of obfuscation that we call the past and oblivion. What happened here is literally and metaphorically concealed underground. Emotions, documents and knowledge penetrate this lightless place, but can never entirely illuminate it. Although the earth has yielded up a certain amount, it is still hiding so much. Balka deploys this loose, almost fluid substance in his work specifically because of its dual nature. In that sense it is also like memory: it is inconsistent, deceptive, vital to sustain life, somewhere between firm foundations and quicksand.

Housings

A soldier stands in a wide field, tired but upright; directly next to him is the entrance to his dugout, his shelter, his quarters in a hostile land. It's almost as though he were standing outside the door of his house, after work – 'this is where I live'. The inconspicuous black hole leads down into the ground, into what must be a dark, damp, confined space. It is not only that life down there is reduced to the bare minimum with regard to space, air and light, the mound of earth also isolates its occupants from the rest of the world. It has to be like that in order to provide shelter, but at the same time it means that the occupants have no control over what is happening above ground. They have to hang on down below, waiting, whatever happens outside. Life in a bunker: sheltered yet unprotected. People have also gone under ground to live, in less traumatic circumstances than warfare – digging

tunnels or using and extending natural caves. There are entire settlements of this kind and important sacred institutions that for whatever reason prefer to withdraw into the 'underworld' rather than risk exposure above ground. This retreat from the light, which scarcely filters into such dwellings, the tendency to shut out the times of day and the seasons, the act of shutting one's own person into that unimaginably vast and different mass that we call Earth, allegedly ensue when life is being lived at a less developed level, when the individuals in question lack the imagination, courage or skill to fit in with and hold their own in the outside world. Thus existing under ground can be seen as the opposite of living in the world, a primitive state or a regressive act that pre-empts what normally only comes after life, the grave, whose final darkness most people want to postpone.



Image Left
A German soldier
next to his foxhole
during the Second
World War

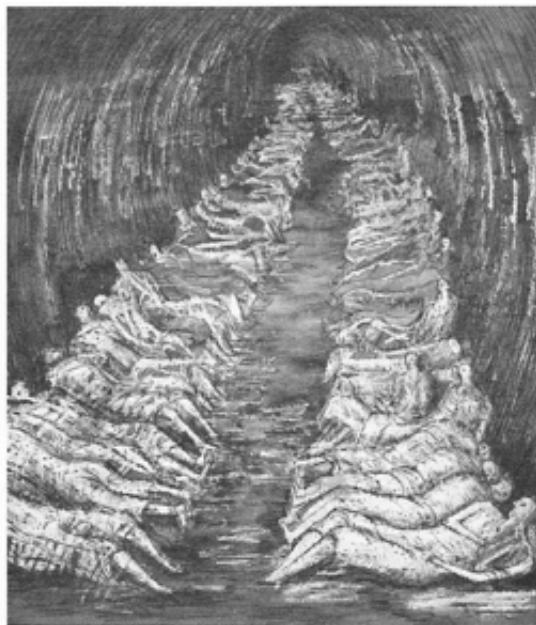


Image Right
Henry Moore
Tube Shelter
Perspective
1941
Pencil, ink, wax and
watercolour on paper

In the early 1990s, after Balka made the transition from figurative sculpture to a reduced form of representationalism, he made a number of works that can be read as minimal or rudimentary housings.⁵ They are just large enough to hold him, to hold a human being. Hanging upright on a wall, just above floor level, they are reminiscent of closets or chambers, albeit with the front wall missing, as though it had been removed for demonstration purposes. A small number of partitions, double floors or small holes indicate that they are intended for specific types of use. These chambers organise the occupant's stay and existence in extremely confined circumstances. The aim is self-sufficiency, as necessity dictates, although it is not achievable. Two tent-like hide-outs, also made from raw steel, flip the minimal housing into the horizontal, thereby creating a dark, protected zone for a recumbent, crouching, or creeping figure.⁶ Salt and/or ashes,

simple yet highly evocative substances, indicators of the not-present body, are used to roughly seal off the walls at ground level, as though the occupant were making him or herself at home in a precarious situation, battening down the hatches against a hostile outside world. Lastly there is a long trunk on the floor, once again just large enough to more or less accommodate a human being.⁷ It is closed on all sides, but in two places small brass pipes, cut at an angle, protrude from this otherwise hermetically sealed box. Two of these, close to each other, are in the lid, at the point where one might imagine the head of anyone inside the trunk: breathing holes corresponding to the occupant's nostrils. Another small pipe, just above floor level, looks like an outlet or outflow for something no longer needed inside the space, not wanted there. With minimal, technically straightforward means, a system is suggested that implies the presence of a living organism that this

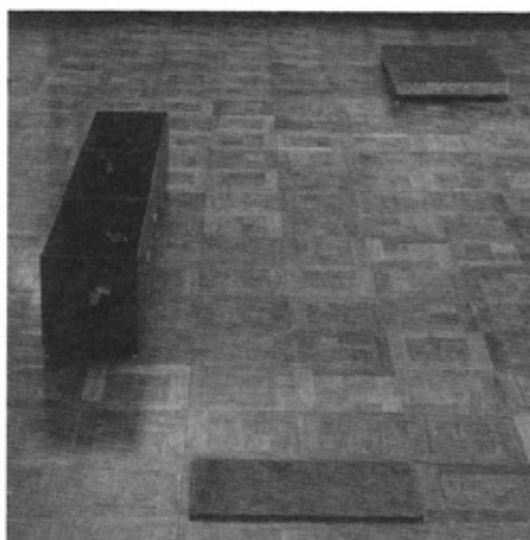


Image Left
Mirosław Balka
Detail from 200 x 90
x 87, 3 x (Ø 26 x 39)
1992
Steel, salt and plaster

Image Right
Mirosław Balka
Detail from 30 x 60 x
1, 3 x (60 x 30 x 34),
3 x (60 x 30 x 11)
1992
Steel, terrazzo, felt

trunk could have been made for. Unsettled – with their speculations on what is inside it suddenly being taken in a very particular direction – the viewer now comes upon another detail. Directly below the side outlet there is a small lid lying on the floor, containing ashes. These remains of organic life seem to be proof of what might be described as a final metabolic process; this *Dumb Box* turns out to be a coffin.⁸ But is it that obvious? Is it not rather the case that in this work and the other 'makeshift dwellings' there is a strange tension, not to say dialectic, between endings and continuance, between the darkness of a non-life and the last glimmerings of a highly concentrated life? And might it not be possible to draw a fine line from the photograph of the soldier beside his dugout/home/grave to the image of Noah's ark that also appears in Balka's kaleidoscope? The 'ark' provides shelter – in pitch-black darkness, in a tiny space – for just the necessary pairs of all types of animals and the family of the man chosen to implement the survival plan, until the window and roof can be opened again after the catastrophe and the rescue vessel has fulfilled its task.⁹ We learn nothing of life in this capsule during the flood, but it must have somehow been adequate.

Entering the Black Square

It did not take long before people were drawing parallels between Balka's work and the minimal art of the 1960s. The reduced, geometric forms of his sculptures that first appeared around 1990, the boxes,

panels and cylinders and the evident lessening of direct expressivity seemed to some to be in line with Minimalism. And it also seemed there could be a connection between his use of rough, old materials and Arte Povera. His apparent references to these canonic trends in Western art and the deviations from the norm that he introduced were ostensibly in keeping with the notion of postmodern art that was taking hold in the 1980s with its hybridisation of avant-gardes, which it then extended and enriched with other repressed elements. However, apart from the fact that these readings of his work either overestimated or misjudged the level of contact a young, Eastern European artist would have had with Western art before 1989, it throws a far too small-meshed, art-historical net over Balka's work. It is not by chance that he chose to include a work by Kasimir Malevich in his kaleidoscope of pictures instead. Malevich's *Black Square* 1913–15 (p.36) not only opens up a wider historical context, it also significantly taps into a view of content that is far removed from formalist comparisons and notions of linear development. This is not the place to retrace the complex reception of this early endpoint in the history of so-called abstract art. However, if research conducted in recent decades is to be believed, it would be hard to overstate either the metaphysical intention that gave rise to this painting or its debt to the tradition of holy icons. It seems likely that Balka presents Malevich's painting as a point of reference not so much for its abstraction – whatever

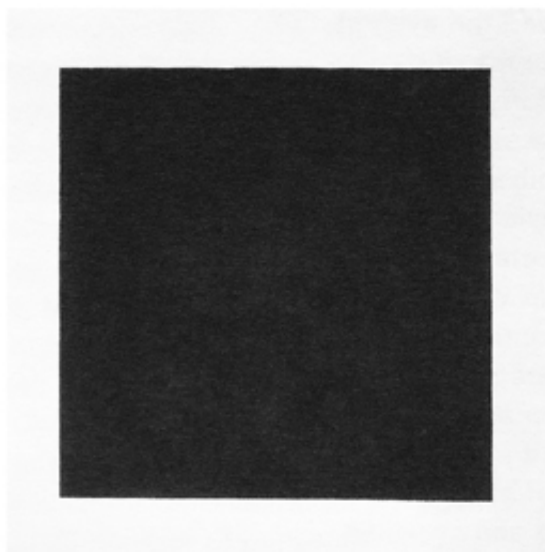


Image Left
Kasimir Malevich
Black Square
1923
Oil on canvas

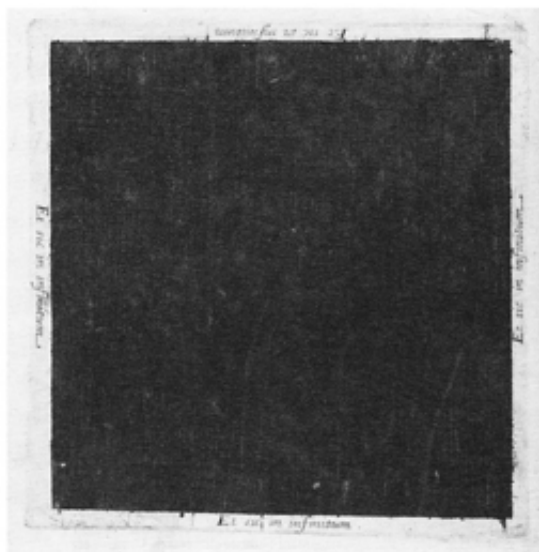


Image Right
'Et sic in infinitum'
from Robert Fludd,
Utriusque Cosmi,
Oppenheim 1617

that may mean – as for the real, almost palpable nature of the quiescent, compact black of this representation of non-light, of a highly active darkness. Moreover, as a sculptor his main interest would not be in the notion of an almost square plane, a virtual space, but rather in the materiality that is realised in the actual paint and texture of the picture.

On the occasions in Balka's work that there are echoes of the *Black Square*, it is always in a mediated form, never as a quotation, more of a distant reflection. Nevertheless, simple, more or less isolated geometric forms – particularly rectangles – achieve a forceful, physical presence, not least when they make the step from the vertical of a picture on a wall to the horizontal of an object on the floor. It is as though Balka had secularised the form by putting it on the same level as the most obvious and ordinary thing – the ground that we stand on and move around on. These

sculptures can take the form of markings on the floor, like a threshold, or they may appear in combination with other items (p.34). They act like stop signs, momentarily halting the advance towards something else. In a recent sculpture this moment of stepping into or across is dramatically heightened with the aid of a large, rectangular plate.¹⁰ A concealed pipe turns the platform into a kind of see-saw that you have to walk across. As you pass the centre point the other half slaps back down on the floor with a loud, alarming bang. Besides this kind of sculptural focus on the rectangle as a form, more recently Balka has also turned his attention to the customary rectangular picture in the form of video projections. Malevich's formulation is perhaps most closely echoed in the film that shows almost nothing, just an almost white wall, with the image exactly the same size as the free-standing wall it is projected onto in the exhibition space.¹¹ Staring at this gently but

somewhat aimlessly moving image one is drawn into a meditative state, into a vegetative mode of contemplation, only for one's thoughts to repeatedly come to a grinding halt at the sheer banality of this perfectly normal wall. It prevents one's mind from travelling out into worlds beyond the image represented. The film focuses on a peripheral zone of perception and stimulates scrutiny on the margins of the physical, without ever offering one a way out. The rectangle of the image, which is seen here *vis-à-vis*, can also be laid flat as a sculpture. Some of Balka's video films are projected downwards onto a surface made of salt in a metal frame on the floor.¹²

Thus the image is virtually turned upside down, in a metaphorical sense. It is taken from the realms of distance and perspective – kindling the imagination, speculation, even illusions – and relocated in (relegated to) ordinary reality. Even if the image does not lose its illusory character, this is nevertheless an attempt to ground it, to place it on the same level as the viewer's own bodily presence.

The *Black Square* also momentarily makes itself felt in other areas of Balka's work. For instance, walking into a solidly-built passage, thoughts come to mind of the relationship of the white border with the black square



Mirosław Balka
750 x 340 x
255 / some in
some out
2005
Steel, bricks, mortar,
Zeihl-Abegg
ventilators, plaster

in Malevich's painting, although here one finds a black that is not so deep, for there is an exit a few steps away, and a number of fans in the ceiling emitting powerful air currents (p.37). Elsewhere a small threshold sculpture highlights the razor-sharp division between black and white in a way that sets one thinking about darkness.¹³ Or should mention be made of the series of flagstones leaning up against the wall, all but one with the title and date of a different solo exhibition of Balka's work between 1985 and 2001 carved into it (p.43), a graveyard of the artist's past activities? Or the square field of ashes (p.42), just 'the thickness of touch',¹⁴ that turns the solid monument of the *Black Square* into an ephemeral grey on the verge of disintegration? Lest there be any misunderstanding: when Balka makes use of squares and rectangles, when he more or less isolates them, his interest is not in any artistic genealogy, nor in quoting Malevich either in agreement or seeking to distance himself from him. Moreover, it makes no difference where precisely the *Black Square* crops up, whether as a point of reference for a particular work of his own, or more generally in his thoughts revolving around specific topics. However, once it has been invoked, it serves as a foil that sharpens his way of approaching these 'ultimate pictures'. His operations in an advanced realm where materials and images enter the territory of abstraction, of pure drawing or of thinking, consistently hold on to a remnant of the 'real world'. Here, too, tangibility is his main criterion.

Darkness with lights

The ninth plague, described in Exodus, was the penultimate punishment, in an escalating series, to befall the Egyptians for refusing to allow the Israelites to leave the country (p.91). The description of the darkness that shrouds the land is minimal. As the King James Bible tells us, this unprecedented event took the form of 'a thicke darknesse ... which may be felt'.¹⁵ Its impact, again described with a minimum of words, was temporarily to destroy the normal interaction between people and to condemn individuals to inaction.¹⁴ For all the vivid detail in the accounts of some of the other plagues described in the Bible, it seems that language has met its own limits in this case. When the sense of sight is rendered useless, the sense of touch takes over; everything comes down to bodily existence. However, the dialectic of the biblical story does allow light into the homes of the Israelites.



Mirosław Balka
196 x 230 x 141
2007
Steel, wood, electrical
light-bulb and motion
sensor

Early on in Balka's work there is such a light, albeit in a rather surprising form. In amongst the rigid, self-sufficient elements of his first object-like sculptures there is an almost chatty found object: an old metal rubbish bin in the shape of a penguin with its beak open.¹⁶ However, this appealingly absurd relic of equipment in a public space only appears so eloquent because of the bulb lighting up its interior. A trapped light shines out of the part that one generally would not want to look into, shedding a little light on its surroundings, like a voice. This modest, humorous instance of a dialectic of darkness and light later takes on another dimension and deep meaning. In 2007 Balka made a short corridor, one end of which is invitingly open, while the other is firmly closed off. The rhetoric of the material used in this piece – a steel frame clad with used-looking wooden boards – is something of an exception in his work as a whole. One might easily imagine this to be a found object with a very specific history. In the middle of the corridor is a naked, illuminated bulb, suspended from a cross-spar. The walls open out invitingly at one end, but it is this small but warm light that draws you into the corridor. However, just before you step into it, the light goes out; the corridor becomes a dead place. Nothing will make the light come on again as long as you remain inside the corridor. It is only when you turn on your heels and walk away that it switches back on. This piece sets up a moment of frustration. From a distance the light makes a connection with you, its life calls out to your own.

However, as soon as you pursue it, it retreats, as though the presence of one precluded that of the other. A place that puts up resistance to you, an experience that can never be had in full. Balka has not only laid a trap here, one that thwarts our urge to follow a light in darkness, he has also constructed a 'metaphysical machine' by the simplest of means.¹⁷ In conversation he has also talked of it in connection with the notion of a near-death experience.¹⁸ However, the corridor is far from an illustration of this particular human experience that comes to some who are momentarily clinically dead. Rather it breaks down this unseen thing – for which there are no words – into something unquestionably present. The at times nebulous accounts of these moments are specifically not translated into the ambiguity of a two-dimensional picture, into painting for instance, or into a mythologically coloured symbolic language. Instead we find a construction that is wholly open to scrutiny, a soberingly ordinary-looking construction, with a banal bulb for a light at the end of the tunnel. However utterly unsuitable this simple contraption seems to be in this context, it is only credible in this form, as a crude, poetic apparatus. It is only by making clear the endless distance between the medium and the extreme questions that he is addressing, that Balka has any hope of not entirely missing the mark. As so often, it is the details that pin down the paradox – in this case the naked electric light that always goes out when you need it most. '... but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.'²⁰ When

darkness befell the Egyptians, interrupting life's usual patterns, there was still light in the homes of the Israelites. More or less concurrently with the corridor, Balka also made a small sculpture that sums up the paradoxical function of light sources in his work. It takes the form of a ceiling light, a petit-bourgeois version of a chandelier, although in this case the 'lamps' are made of plaster (p.30). There is no escaping an association with domestic comfort, a light that creates a feeling of togetherness. Yet the plaster lamps are in effect petrified, dead 'light' that only conveys a vague sense of its potential power. This ceiling light is a strange mixture of darkness and illumination, of warmth and cold. Its almost too familiar form is not only a sign of closeness, but also of vulnerability. This domestic item and the petrified light preserved within it is but a weak counterpart to the 'dark side of things' that Balka touches on in his work, a mere flicker compared to the works that delve deep into darkness itself. And yet, there is a 'possibility of light'.²¹

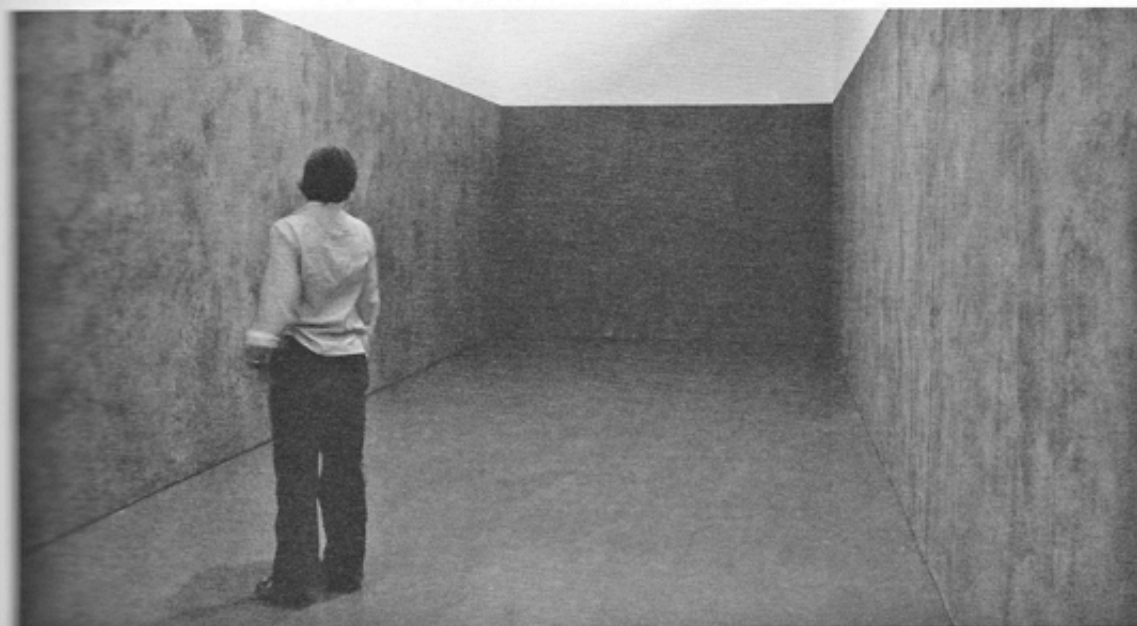
Paths into darkness

Ancient myths and the pictures of the modern era that are based on these present the domain of Hades – the shadowy realm of the dead or literally darkness, that which we cannot perceive – as a place filled with a multitude of terrors. However, it is not portrayed as just another place, as the negative of this world. Particular importance also attaches to the path to Hades, the path into the underworld marked out by the traveller's arrival at the river Styx, separating our world

from the next, the crossing of the Styx in Charon's barque, and the moment of appearing before the god Hades. The theological, philosophical and psychological meanings of this and other descriptions of the path into death are self-evident. Of necessity they resort to recognisable metaphors to explain something that has never been seen and cannot be understood. Real burial grounds, for instance those of the Ancient Egyptians or Neolithic man in Britain, also pay particular attention to the passage from this world to the next, where effort is required to make the journey from light into complete darkness. It is only relatively recently that Balka first contemplated this zone in his work, although there are earlier shades of it here and there that dissipate into the muted twilight that pervades most of his videos. More often darkness is indirectly evoked by somewhat weak lights.²² Later on, when he coats the walls of the exhibition space with a two-and-a-half-metre high, continuous layer of ash (right), or makes a long, narrow walkway with twists and turns from simple timber,²³ although he may literally and metaphorically be working his way towards darkness, these pieces are presented in the full light of the exhibition space. Not so in the case of *How It Is*. As the viewer approaches, it looks like a huge container, a mighty sculpture with a powerful presence. However, walking round it brings one to something else entirely, and to a sudden halt. A fragment of memory: turning the pages of the philosopher Robert Fludd's magnum opus of 1617 the

readers may find, to their surprise, a large black square taking up much of page twenty-six (p.36).²⁴ 'Et sic in infinitum' is inscribed into all four margins of the dark square: 'And thus into infinity', a something that one cannot imagine. The non-picture comes at the beginning of a chapter about shadows and *privatio*, a word that translates as both 'privation' and 'liberation'. Cut. The back wall of the colossal container has been lowered, forming a ramp into the darkness. What wonders or beasts await us inside? Will we have the curiosity and calm determination of János in Béla Tarr's movie *Werckmeister Harmonies* to pursue the unknown, in astonishment, or will we gaze at it from outside, uninvolved and suspicious? The steel room is large enough for its depths to be shrouded in mystery as we enter, but it is also wide enough to move about freely inside it – alone or with others. It is

not pitch black inside, just increasingly dark; turning around we can still see outside. This mise-en-scène of the unknown is overwhelming, but not because the Turbine Hall where it is placed would dwarf any smaller structure. The fact is that the mighty, raised up steel body – as tall as a house – corresponds in size to our inner sense of the unknown, of the limits of life. The effort and huge amount of material that went into making it were necessary to convey the notion, the fear, the black block that weighs us down on the last path. The sculpture had to become almost absurdly large in order to give a true sense of the threat that looms at us in the shape of the last wall in the realms of our imagination. However, when one in fact enters the black box, there is no climax to this sense of the overwhelmingly uncanny, instead there is a kind of gradual dis-illusion as one becomes accustomed to the darkness,



Mirosław Balka
0.5 x 2085 x 250
(The Dead End)
2002



Mirosław Balka
Detail from *2 x (55 x 23 x 27), 190 x 190 x 0.3*
1995
Steel, linoleum, PVC, ash, felt

Mirosław Balka
Detail from
+GO-GO
(1985-2001)
2001
Terrazzo, paint



an in-sight into 'how it is'. *Privatio*: deprived of the certainty of life yet also liberated from fear? The black container is a paradox. It has the dimensions of fear and is large enough to accommodate a social event, but it also has the intimacy of an individual thought and the normality of a single life. We step into a real model, a device that creates a zone just this side of metaphysics – even as I write, three months before it is finished.

In the cellar

In Balka's grandparents' house, as in many others, there is a trapdoor in the floor, indicating that there is a cellar below. It stands open, the camera shows the dimly lit start of the steps leading downwards. Quickly and in a strong voice, albeit without any particular emphasis, almost like an announcement, Balka – off-camera – enunciates the same sentence time and again into the dark opening: *Dlaczego w tej piwnicy nie ukrywaliście Żydów?* Like a bland litany. Every second time, endlessly, he switches on an extra light, although it does not cast any additional light on the situation. The question goes unanswered, not by the relatives who once lived here, nor from the depth of the cellar, nor by the one who is asking: 'Why didn't you hide any Jews in this cellar?' So it has to go on being repeated. That's how it is.

Endnotes:

¹ Iwona Blazwick, 'Interview', in *Possible Worlds*, exh. cat., ICA and Serpentine Gallery, London 1990, p.18.

² Hanna Krall, 'Das Haus', *Da ist kein Fluß mehr*, translated from Polish by Roswitha Matwin-Buschmann, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p.143.

³ *97 x 38 x 45, 1942–2006*, in *Reflejos condicionados*, exh. cat., Fundación Botín, Santander 2007, p.19.

⁴ Such as *Rampe* (1993), *Winterhilfsverein* (1994), *Selection* (1997), *Lebensraum* (2003).

⁵ Such as *50 x 40 x 1, 190 x 50 x 40, 190 x 50 x 40, 190 x 50 x 40*, 1992, in Julian Heynen (ed.), *Bitte*, exh. cat., Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld 1992, fig.2.

⁶ Also, see *203 x 79 x 93, 191 x 65 x 7, 190 x 6.5 x 11* 1992, in *Privacy: Luc Tuymans/Miroslaw Balka: 1958–1998*, exh. cat., Fundação de Serralves, Porto 1998, p.69.

⁷ *190 x 60 x 54, Ø 9 x 1* 1992, in exh. cat., Krefeld 1992, fig.7.

⁸ *Dumbox* is the title of a work made by Joseph Beuys in 1982.

⁹ Genesis 6:14.

¹⁰ *250 x 215 x 25, 30 x 7 x 25* 2006, in *Nothere*, exh. cat., White Cube, London 2008, pp.60–4.

¹¹ *The Wall*, exh. cat., London 2008, pp.76, 96–7.

¹² Such as *T.Turn* 2004 (exh. cat., London 2008, p.88), *The 3rd Eye* 2006 (*Lichtzwang*, exh. cat., K21, Düsseldorf 2006, p.29).

¹³ *60 x 30 x 4, 60 x 10 x 4* 1994, in *Winterhilfsverein*, exh. cat., Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana 1994, fig.1.

¹⁴ (the thickness of touch) As cited in Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leigh, 'The Light Gleams an Instant', in *Miroslaw Balka, Tristes Tropiques*, exh. cat., Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin 2007, p.42.

¹⁵ Exodus 10:22, 21.

¹⁶ 'They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days', Exodus 10:23.

¹⁷ *Penguin Lamp* 1990, exh. cat., Dublin 2007, pp.65, 67.

¹⁸ 'The possibility of light. A conversation piece', Miroslaw Balka, Julian Heynen, Juan Vicente Aliaga, Santander, 26 July, 2007, 12am, in exh. cat., Santander 2007, p.122.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Exodus 10:23.

²¹ For this and the next quotation, see note 18.

²² As in, for instance, *Shepherdess* 1989 (*Die Rampe*, exh. cat., Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Museum Sztuki, Łódź 1994, p.30), *250 x 196 x 164, 190 x 89 x 51, Ø 10 x 15* 1994 (exh. cat., Eindhoven / Łódź, fig.2) or *Eclipse* in the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo 2001.

²³ *190 x 90 x 4973* 2008, exh. cat., London 2008, p.75.

²⁴ Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque technica Historia*, Oppenheim 1617–1719.



Mirosław Balka
Still from *Dlaczego
w tej piwnicy*
2007
Video

