

ALLEGRA PESENTI

ALL THAT REMAINS:
THE DRAWINGS OF
MIROSŁAW BAŁKA

It will come back, it can't have disappeared forever, that's impossible, it's been here for so long ... it was that frail ... slightly stooping ... evanescent ... silhouette that brought it for the first time, they came here together and it remained more deeply implanted here than its bearer.

— Nathalie Sarraute¹

Drawing has long accompanied the sculptural practice of Mirosław Bałka. He has not always acknowledged the significance of draughtsmanship vis-à-vis the rest of his œuvre, but the time is ripe for a first comprehensive presentation of the ongoing dialogue between his expressions on paper and his more widely known dimensional work. The sculptures of Bałka have reached international acclaim with exposures in institutions and biennials throughout the world, but the drawings have so far been more guarded and for the most part concealed within the confines of the studio. Many have now come out of their boxes to converse from within their newfound frames amidst a more public setting. From their loose status as unhinged sheets the drawings take on the presence of objects behind glass: “This is a new discipline for me;” admits Bałka, “it’s exciting to see them become safe.”² The theme of survival resonates in all of the artist’s work, but the rendering of “what remains” is especially poignant and symbolic with regards to his drawings. A fire in his studio in 1993 left him with hundreds of charred sheets and the first cognitive appreciation of a body of work he had previously regarded (or disregarded) as mere collateral materials. The salvaged drawings, with burnt edges and hardly distinguishable subjects, and their subsequent display in vitrines at the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles in 1994, marked a turning point in his artistic practice. They are now fragments of his graphic memory, not unlike the verbal attempts to recover a forgotten word in the opening paragraph of Nathalie Sarraute’s novel *Here*: words and images come together to form a disjointed puzzle of the past.

*...leftovers from the material world or settlement structures
shelter or swept away
bonfire
burning the remains...*

— Mirosław Bałka, in *RMMBRNC*, 2015³

Bałka began to navigate the space of the page from the age of ten, when he drew in the blank margins of newspaper sheets. These sketches occupied the most immediately available surface to him at the time, but they also anticipated some of the underlying characteristics of his art. His precociously inquisitive and visually astute forays into the socio-historical sphere developed into what Georges Didi-Huberman has described as “the anthropologist’s vocabulary,” and research work that “involves a kind of archaeology.”⁴ More formally, the doodles announce a relationship with space and place that continues to be profoundly important for Bałka. He developed a dimensional and personal understanding of space that spans from these delineations on snippets of paper to the orchestration of vast and intimidating areas like Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall.⁵ It is fitting that this exhibition, with the particularly intimate nature of Bałka’s presentation, should take place in Poland, his home and country of birth. For the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, an institution of historical importance that has endorsed the avant-garde since its foundation around 1930, Bałka has chosen works that most attest to his persona. The absence of labels allows a seamless flow from work to work so that his drawings become an integral part of what could be considered a single, singular sculpture.

Bałka inherited a conception of creation that has been connected to the object in the round in his family for at least two generations. Both his father and grandfather were stonemasons and tombstone carvers for whom the act of making involved hard materials and chiseling tools. For him, drawing too became one of the tools that accompany the thinking process and production of the sculptor. It enabled him throughout his academic studies, beginning at the Nucleonic Technical School in his hometown of Otwock with a period portrayed in a handwritten timetable dated 1977. The sheet is loaded with remarks and sketches that took the student beyond the subject matter taught. Thereafter, at the Nuclear Research Institute in nearby Świerk, he worked in the drawing studio and made illustrations for the institute’s periodical *Rezonans*. “I would get a text and make pen-and-ink illustrations for it,” he recalls, “they were the only images in the magazine.”⁶ His relationship to space thus began within the architecture of the book and the pages within.

Balka's sense of placement and composition is what struck the printmaker Jacob Samuel when he first encountered his work at the Burnett Miller gallery in Los Angeles in 1991: "I liked the way he used the floor."⁷ Over ten years later, he invited Balka to manoeuvre through the plane of an etching plate and on paper in a collaborative effort that bore a portfolio of fourteen prints, which are at once conceptual, sculptural, and two-dimensional. Rather than focussing on his own gestural draughtsmanship, Balka chose to imprint the feet of twelve homeless men he found on the beach near his hotel in Santa Monica. Their toes and limbs are positioned on the lower half of the sheets so that they appear to leap from the paper into the void ahead. Some are still and well defined, while others, likely under the influence of alcohol, are more shady and tremulous (the five dollars exchanged for their participation was immediately spent at the liquor store nearby). The biblical allusion to the washing of the feet of the disciples prompted one of the men to ask Balka: "Are you Jesus?" The final plate of a twirling orange peel is more elusive although its circular form is suggestive of a route to the beyond: could it be the way to Paradise that these inebriated men might perceive in the surrounding palm trees and sandy pier? The backlit tunnel in Hieronymous Bosch's *Ascent into Heaven* comes to mind. Or does its resemblance to an intestine attached to an anus allude to a more sordid exit? Whichever the case, the peel is what is left of a former life.

Balka's approach to draughtsmanship evolved when he moved on from his technical education to a degree in fine arts in Warsaw. Studies of female nudes from this period of academic training are at the root of an art that has continued to place the body at the core of its character, whether represented figuratively or metaphorically. Two principal types of drawings by Balka can be distinguished among his works on paper. There are spontaneously executed images that might pertain to a particular project, like the now partially burnt examples he made while working on the exhibition *Good God* for Galeria Dziekanka in Warsaw — a breakthrough show for him that was later presented at the 1990 Aperto at the 44th Venice Biennial. He produced a stream of such drawings when confronted with the proposal to occupy the Turbine Hall in the years prior to 2009. "Drawing was a way of projecting my ideas for this huge hall," he recalls, "and a way to scale the project down to something I could handle and process easily."⁸ They are made on sheets of A5 paper (210×148 mm.), which are slightly smaller and more manageable than the classic A4 sheet, and liken his practice to the writing of a book or to a diary-like form of daily documentation. In fact, to call these preparatory drawings would be incorrect as they relate more to his thought process than to the specifics of the sculpture.

The dark container-like structure that delved visitors into a disturbing sensory experience in *How It Is* does not appear in these studies, but the places he visited prior to its making and the images the piece conjured in his mind do.

Irregulartrapezoid of 2008 delineates the outer perimeter of Treblinka extermination camp, north-east of Warsaw, which was torn down by the Nazis in 1943 and is known today primarily through the recollection of survivors and aerial photographs. The irregularity of the form reflects a line shaped by differing memories rather than concrete evidence. Its interior is shaded in grey and brown, like the haze, which is all that remains of a site that saw some of the most horrific crimes of the twentieth century. Bałka seldom moves beyond these muted monochromatic tones in his drawings. Many are rendered in a rusty-coloured ink, not unlike the Braunkreuz paint that Joseph Beuys repeatedly used on paper. Indeed Bałka's draughtsmanship can be compared to Beuys's prolific production of drawings, in terms of his choice of organic materials and skin-like tones but also with regards to his use of paper as a platform on which the figurative and the conceptual spontaneously meet.

Bałka's drawings can be reductive, but his basic forms are charged with message. A seated figure with a downturned head is defined with single strokes of brush and brown ink for the body and two small dabs of pink wash for the eyes in his interpretation of a Pietà. Arms from an unknown entity recede from the top edge of the paper. The Christian iconography Bałka grew up with assimilates discretely into his visual language, here in particular in relation to a scene of mourning that all human beings can relate to. However, this stick figure belongs to the now as a graphic and universal description of man.

In my earlier works I employed the body in the very literal way ... After some time I satisfied my hunger for the form of the human body. I took interest in the forms that accompany the body and in the traces the body leaves: a bed, a coffin, a funeral urn.

— Mirosław Bałka⁹

A notable characteristic of Bałka's drawings is the fact that the artist continued to draw the figure even after he completely removed representations of the human body in his three-dimensional work in 1989. From then on, the figure is alluded to only in abstract form in his sculptures, but it continues to appear in his works on paper. As he admits, "the drawings represent what I am thinking, not what I am doing."¹⁰ Text and typography are also integral to Bałka's works on paper. His verbal list of references for *How It Is*, jotted across a blank sheet, can be considered in the same realm as his drawn images.¹¹ Like them, it streams through subjects and reads like a poetic lexicon of sources: Totems, Plato's caves, Holes, Whale, Hell Visions, Hades, Courbet's *Origine du monde*, Memling, Blake, Shells, Noah's Ark, My cellar entrance, Malevich, Jonah, Mecca...

He refers to his installations as "sentences"; and over the years a recurring vocabulary of materials has appeared within his distinct formal syntax.

— Andreas Huyssen¹²

The second type of drawing that is distinguished within Bałka's œuvre is less explorative and more finite and mechanical in character. These works are generally on a much larger scale, often made in proportion to the artist's own body (as opposed to the palm of his hand), and could be better described as two-dimensional sculptures. Bałka has referred to himself as a "conscious sculptor and unconscious draughtsman," but the works on paper in question should perhaps be categorized as conscious drawings.¹³ *Modulor/AF/1994*, 2015 is among his most recent examples of this type of work. Its first iteration, exhibited at Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv, is composed of six sheets of grey cardboard that are pinned directly and inconspicuously to the wall. From afar, it might seem simply like the shadow of a vertical wall, but at closer examination a fine grid of ruled lines in graphite pencil appears across its surface.

Measurements are inscribed throughout. One set of lines relates to the anthropometric scale of proportions devised by the architect Le Corbusier as the Modulor.¹⁴ Based on the height of a man with his arm raised, the Modulor was conceived as a universal measuring scale for modernist design and architecture. Le Corbusier began to develop it in 1943 during a period that saw the spread of modernism across Europe and America, and, as Bałka reminds us, at a time that concurrently witnessed the atrocities of World War II. This unorthodox confluence of events is represented in *Modulor/AF/1994* by the intersection of the architect's scale with measurements based on the markings of Anne Frank's height, made by her father on the wall of the house where they hid from the Nazis between 1942 and 1944. The dimensions of a teenage girl whose growth was halted by death at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945 are juxtaposed with those of a six-foot-tall male figure whose flexed arm is eerily reminiscent of the Nazi salute.

In this factual and “anti-gestural” piece, the artist's hand is masked by the use of the ruler. It can be described as a drawing because of the materials he used to make it, notwithstanding its anonymous line. There is an ephemeral quality to drawing in as much as graphite can be rubbed out, and card can be torn or disfigured with water, or burnt. But, like skin, paper is also extremely resilient; it ages and scars, but it can resist the tests of time. Paper, in fact, has borne the weight of history. So much of our past has reached us on paper, and however hard perpetrators have tried to eradicate the memory of certain periods or people, there is often a witnessing record that falls through the cracks — like the markings on wallpaper that are now preserved behind plexi-glas at the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam.

The mechanical drawing for me was the best form for that dry conception of art.

— Marcel Duchamp¹⁵

This type of drawing by Balka can be aligned to a tradition of modernism that spans from the mechanical configurations of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia to the work of American artists bound to the grid from the 1960s such as Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. Balka's work, however, is a form of loaded minimalism in which each line is tied to a person, a place, or a moment in time. Their significance creeps up quietly and discretely if the viewer even notices them. In its second iteration in Łódź, *Modulor/AF/1994* was drawn directly onto the wall of the gallery and its web of intersecting lines could easily be missed. The question of survival arises again here: we can only surmise about what will remain of the work when the exhibition is dismantled.

The corporeal character of Balka's drawings is due to the intrinsic quality of the mediums and the indexical traits of his compositions. Charcoal resembles residual matter like ash and dust, and like them it is soft and iridescent and can be lifted off the surface beneath it with a blow. When it is layered densely on paper it can be as deep as soot, as in Balka's threatening portrayal of a Soviet tank engine in *T34 D*, 2013. Burnt holes appear in the place of nipples in a drawing of female busts that Balka claims to have made with a magnifying glass.¹⁶ And flesh is alluded to in the greasy, amber-coloured band that runs across the width of *13cm AF*, 2015, a work for which Balka chose myrrh oil and frankincense to mark Anne Frank's 13 cm. of growth between 1942 and 1944.¹⁷ Here, the medium swells beyond the outlines of the band.

The notions of trace and erasure are also evoked by Balka's choice of materials for his large-scale drawings. The precarious graphite pencil outlines of three extermination camps in his monumental triptych *Mapping T; Mapping B; Mapping S* of 2008 are emphasized with charcoal, a thicker and more powdery medium than graphite, then stabilized with fixative in what the artist has described as a "tower of protection."¹⁸ Balka has jokingly surmised that if Willem de Kooning had framed his drawing, Robert Rauschenberg would not have been able to erase it to create what is now famously known as his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (*Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953).¹⁹ As Rauschenberg recalls, "it was a drawing done partly with a hard line, and also with grease pencil, and ink, and heavy crayon. It took me a month, and about forty erasers, to do it. But in the end it really worked. I liked the result. I felt it was a legitimate work of art, created by the technique of erasing."²⁰ Rauschenberg's own framing of the piece, which includes its label made

by Jasper Johns, was his way of claiming ownership and “fixing” it. His note of warning on the back reads “DO NOT REMOVE DRAWING FROM FRAME / FRAME IS PART OF DRAWING.”²¹

Balka’s work has often sought the trace of what has been hidden, or a resurgence of the erased, and it responds to an urge to recover the remains of what once was: absence can be fuller than presence. He questions for instance the mark that his grandmother left where she prayed on the linoleum floor of the family home, now the artist’s studio: “when I will die who will know whose trace this is?”²² Balka has felt the same impulse to identify the scars of history that have marked the streets just beyond the walls of his family home. For a long time, he did not know that on the 19th of August 1942, seven thousand Jews were rounded up at the train station of Otwock and deported to Treblinka, where they died in a single day. Now, the battered terrain and fallen tombstones of the town’s former Jewish cemetery leave a hammered impression of what once was a thriving community.²³ In the case of de Kooning’s drawing, the original image can be vaguely deciphered within the patina and the shadows of the rubbed sheet. By erasing the drawing, Rauschenberg emphasized what was once there.²⁴ Balka too tries to recover time in his drawings by making the invisible visible.

All these things have a background that is not visible.

— Marcel Duchamp²⁵

1 Nathalie Sarraute, *Here* (New York, George Braziller Inc., 1997, originally published as *Ici*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1995), p. 17.

2 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.

3 Mirosław Balka, *RMMBRNC* (Tel Aviv, Dvir Gallery, 2015), frontispiece.

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Place in Spite of Oneself, in Spite of Itself (Fragments),” in *Mirosław Balka. Ctrl.*; exhib. cat. by Lynne Cooke, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Zbigniew Herbert (Madrid, Museo Reina Sofia, 2010–2011), pp. 63–64.

5 *The Unilever Series: Mirosław Balka: How It Is*, Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, London (13 October 2009–6 April 2010).

6 Quoted in a conversation with Rafał Jakubowicz in “Foot-operated Boring Machine,” *Piktogram*, no. 7, 2007 [pp. 90–105], p. 92.

7 Conversation with Jacob Samuel, 16 December 2016.

8 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.

9 *Mirosław Balka: Die Rampe*, exhib. cat. Van Abbemuseum, by Jan Debbaut, Selma Klein Essink, Jaromir Jedliński, Maria Morzuch, and Anda Rotenberg (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, and Łódź, Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), p. 64.

10 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.

11 *The Unilever Series: Mirosław Balka: How It Is*, ed. Helen Sainsbury, with contributions by Zygmunt

- Bauman, et al. (London, Tate Modern, 2009–2010), p. 47 (ill.).
- 12 Jessica Bradley, "Introduction" in *displacements* [exhib. cat. by Jessica Bradley and Andreas Huyssen] (pp. 19–28) (Toronto, The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998), p. 26.
 - 13 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.
 - 14 See Le Corbusier, *The Modulor: A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale, Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics* (London, Faber and Faber, 1954; French ed. 1951).
 - 15 *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London, Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 71.
 - 16 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.
 - 17 Mirosław Bałka, *RMMBRNC* (Tel Aviv, Dvir Gallery, 2015), ill.
 - 18 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015.
 - 19 See Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall, A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York, Picador, 2005; first publ. 1980), pp. 87–88; and Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg, The Early 1950's* (Houston, Menil Foundation and Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), p. 160.
 - 20 Calvin Tomkins, 2005, op. cit.
 - 21 Sarah Roberts, "Erased de Kooning Drawing." *Rauschenberg Research Project*, July 2013, San Francisco Museum of Art [online], <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25846> [access: 6 November 2015].
 - 22 Interview with the artist online, third part of a series by James Price for Tate Media and Channel 4's *3 Minute Wonder* strand, "Mirosław Bałka," 2010 [online], <https://vimeo.com/12611414> [access: 10 February 2016].
 - 23 By 1939 Otwock's population numbered more than 19,000 citizens of which approximately 14,000 were Jews.
 - 24 A recent technical analysis and infrared photography have disclosed a vague reconstruction of the image and another sketch by de Kooning on the verso. See Sarah Roberts, 2013, op. cit.
 - 25 Marcel Duchamp, "Some Late Thoughts of Marcel Duchamp," in Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60's and 70's* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 18.