

Simone Menegoi: Social Body. The Individual and the Collectivity in the Work of  
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Simone Menegoi

## Social Body

### The Individual and the Collectivity in the Work of Miroslaw Balka

Much has been written on the work of Miroslaw Balka ever since, more than thirty years ago, he first came under the spotlight of the international scene. And a great deal of what has been written focuses on certain key passages of his evolution: his artistic debut in the mid-1980s, marked by a stylized figuration of an existentialist nature; a few years later, his abandonment of the figure in favor of evoking the body *in absentia*, through materials such as soap, salt, ash, or simply through the measure of the body itself; his adoption of video at the start of the 2000s, as an autonomous medium or combined with sculpture; around the same time, the emergence of a theme which had been implicitly present for years in the artist's work: the extermination of the Jews of Europe by the Nazi regime. The following text does not set out to question this interpretation. Rather, it attempts to read it from a specific stance: that of the dialectics between the individual and the collectivity, which in Balka's work often references the other immediate and elementary dialectics between the individual body (of the artist, of the onlooker) and the collective body. This is a narrow yet transversal perspective, touching on all the key passages of Balka's artistic parable. And like always in these cases, the hope is to gain in depth of analysis what is lost in breadth.

1 / *Possible Worlds. Sculpture from Europe* (London: ICA and Serpentine Gallery, 1990), 17.

2 / Juan Vicente Aliaga, "Danse macabre. An interview with Miroslaw Balka," in *Miroslaw Balka. Revisión, 1986-1997*, (Valencia: IVAM Centre del Carme, 1997), 145.

#### I. Black sheep and scapegoats

Having grown up in 1970s Poland, a country contended between two mass organizations such as the Communist regime and the Catholic Church, at his debut as an artist, Balka chose to concentrate on the individual, starting from himself. "For years in Poland everything was collectivized, everything belonged to the nation. So I turned inwards to my own personal situation," he declared in 1990 to Iwona Blazwick.<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Church, natural ally (and often venue of activity) of non-official culture, filled the young artist with the same diffidence as the omnipresent framework of state culture: "As a child my experience was very negative. The Church was an instrument of punishment. [...] The Church is just a place, and the priest another element that does not necessarily have any relationship to Christian beliefs."<sup>2</sup>

The choice of focusing on the individual characterizes Balka's entire production of the 1980s, and translates into gnarled human and animal

figures, almost always bereft of individual features, at times maimed, isolated in space. Among these we find Cain – depicted as a black figure, standing before a small container representing the urn containing the ashes of his murdered brother – and St. Adalbert, a martyr particularly worshipped in Poland, evoked in the form of a decapitated body, without arms, feet and genitals, hanging horizontally from a wall. Balka would later say that his works in those years had to do with “Idols that were punished like St. Adalbert, put to death for his destruction of pagan temples. Punished by fate like Cain, who was provoked into killing Abel. I was interested in the individual’s conflicts with History and Society. Struggles that the individual loses.”<sup>3</sup> The individual is isolated, but not alone; behind him the image of Power stands out – another sculpture in those years portrays a black pope and a black sheep, *Black Pope, Black Sheep* (1987) – along with Sin and Punishment; around him a hostile crowd gathers. In certain circumstances, Balka gave that crowd a real body: that of the spectators called to his openings, the “active openings,” as the artist called them: inauguration performances that foresaw the participation of the audience. The most famous of these – staged as a graduation project at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, and entitled *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* (1985) – revolved around a bloodless likeness in plaster and cement of the artist as a child. The details of the performance/ceremony have been examined on many occasions, and there is no need to repeat them here.<sup>4</sup> We shall recall just one, particularly meaningful for us: at the entrance to the abandoned house in the country where the sculpture had been placed, the spectators were provided with pins. It was an unspoken yet clear invitation to stick them into the “heart” of the sculpture – a soft pad of red cloth that could be seen through an opening in the chest. A reference to the Catholic iconography of the Sacred Heart pierced by the lance, of course, and also an allegory of the birth of the adult individual through the death of the child, with the first communion evoked by the title serving as a rite of passage. But also – and it is here that we wished to arrive – the invitation to partake in a symbolic act of collective aggression against a chosen individual. What Balka was evoking, and which he proposed the spectators might become accomplices to, was also the scene of a community which gains its own cohesion through the attack on a sacrificial victim: a scene which, according to the anthropological theories of René Girard (expounded in books that have become classics, such as *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat*<sup>5</sup>), is the founding event of early human communities and their religious beliefs which has left its traces in countless myths, rites, institutions, and is constantly represented throughout human history in symbolic or literal manners.

In Balka’s version, the “founding lynching” was connoted by the symbols of Christianity. On first reading, it appears to be an autobiographical reference, which would appear to call for no further comment. However, in Girard’s perspective, the choice is extremely significant. Christianity, according to the French anthropologist, is the only religion that as a founding myth chooses that of an *innocent* victim, thus unveiling the secret “hid-

3 / Adam Szymczyk, Mirosław Balka, “A conversation,” in *Terskel / Threshold*, n. 18 (Oslo: Museet for Samtidskunst, January 1997): 89.

4 / For an account of the performance, and of the “active openings” in general, see for example Anda Rottenberg, “Mirosław Balka – Arranged Events (A First Draft),” in *Die Rampe* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum and Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 14–22.

5 / *La violence et le sacré*, 1972 [English edition, *Violence and the Sacred* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1977)]; *Le bouc émissaire*, 1982 [English edition, *The Scapegoat* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1989)].

den since the origins of the world” of the sacrifice: that of it being a brutal abuse, in which the individual is immolated in the name of the group.<sup>6</sup> By making its sacrificial rite a *Christian* rite, Balka doubled the provocative charge of his gesture, and implicitly cast the suspicion over the religious institution that the original sacrifice of Christ was not enough to purge it of the temptation to give in to the fatal calling of seeking out scapegoats.

The scapegoat, as Girard notes, often bears the characteristics of the “different,” of he who is not immediately absorbable within the group; but those characteristics may be emphasized, distorted, or even invented. It is not the victim who inspires the aggression, but the need for aggression that calls for a victim, and that yearns for it to be designated in one way or another. The essentially mimetic nature of desire is cyclically transformed from cohesive social force into an element of division; emulation becomes rivalry and generates violence, and the latter requires an outlet that only the sacrifice of an individual, or of a group of individuals, seems to be able to ensure. Another of Balka’s performances-with-sculptures from that period appears – a necessary term, given the substantial ambiguity of the action – to aim to stage similar changes of side, the transformation of the friend into enemy, the arbitrary designation of the victims. Staged in the gallery annexed to a university church<sup>7</sup>, it was characterized by a great cloth rabbit. The choice of the rabbit was not a random one: put on display the first day after the Easter holidays (giving the title, *Post-Holiday Show*), the performance started out with an animal linked to the popular iconography of Easter, without the explicit, solemn religious connotation attributed to the lamb, but associated at any rate with childhood and with sentiments of tenderness and innocence. The performance began in a light-hearted, almost goliardic climate: a number of spectators, extracted at random, joined the artist as helpers; all of them, including Balka, donned white caps with big, cartoonish rabbit ears. The comedy took a slightly unsettling turn when the rabbit-men, imitating Balka, laid down steel traps prepared by the artist all around the other spectators; and became no less than sinister when Balka, after taking the great rabbit in his arms, forced its mouth open, revealing a set of sharp steel teeth, similar to the traps laid around the floor. The rabbit, likened to the Easter lamb in its innocuousness, thus turned out to be a predator; those who bore the signs of this tendency circled and threatened those who were without – the roles given to each side dictated entirely by chance.

## II. Anthropometries

*Everything is number. Number is everything.*  
The number is in the individual. Intoxication is a number.  
Charles Baudelaire<sup>8</sup>

One of the most widely studied passages of Balka’s work is that from his figuration of the 1980s to his form of austere, geometric sculpture that evokes the body by metonymy, through forms, measures and materials

6 / *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, 1978 [Research undertaken with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. English edition, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford University Press: Palo Alto, 1987)].

7 / Wieża Galeria, Warsaw. See Anda Rottenberg “Mirosław Balka...” in *Die Rampe*, op. cit., 18.

8 / Charles Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu*, 1887 [English edition, *My Heart Laid Bare* (Haskell House Publishers: New York, 1950)].

bound to it. Starting from the beginning of the 1990s, the artist's works suggest objects destined to house the body (beds, coffins) or to support it (chairs, tables), or architectural elements that frame it or hem it in (doors, windows, walls, roofs, corridors and floors). The materials hark back to the furnishings and architecture (wood and iron, carpet and linoleum) or directly to the body, to personal hygiene (soap) and even its very material constitution (salt, a residue of sweat and tears; ashes, the residue of cremation). Lastly, the titles are substituted by long and detailed lists that correspond to the measurements of the works, commonly bearing the figures 190 (the height of the artist in centimeters) and 250 (the height he can reach with his arms stretched out above his head), taken by Balka as standards for his own works. In an interview in 1994, the artist explained this passage as follows: "In my earlier works I employed the body in the very literal way. Very sensual. Human body, body of a dog. I think that it resulted from hunger, or rather primeval hunger for a body. 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. Those earlier figures, in a way, died. There appeared the problem of dimensions which begin to be very important in the moment of death when the coffin has to be built or the urn to be of a certain capacity to contain the ashes."<sup>9</sup>

Critics have dwelled at length on Balka's choice of using the measurements of the body as measurements of the works as titles. In those painstaking lists of numbers – 200 x 60 x 170 (1990), 250 x 30 x 16 (1990), 50 x 40 x 1, 190 x 50 x 40, 190 x 50 x 40 (1992), etc. – some have read an echo of medical and statistical anthropometries, i.e. a cold and quantitative consideration of the body and the human experience.<sup>10</sup> Others, on the other hand, have seen a potential humanist intent, the desire to slip into the rigor of minimalist sculpture a subtle psychological and narrative content; an operation akin to that carried out over that same period, albeit with different means, by artists like Absalon and Rachel Whiteread.<sup>11</sup> Also from the point of view that interests us, the measurement has a two-sided value. When the works take on the form of cots, chairs, metal boxes endowed with minimal openings, the fact that they are shaped around a single body, which they fit around exactly, gives them a melancholically solipsistic if not indeed claustrophobic air, explicitly evoking ideas of contention, imprisonment and even torture (an idea anything but far from Balka's mind when he produced works of this kind). We might even draw a parallel with a lesser known text by Samuel Beckett, *All Strange Away*, an obsessive brooding in which he exploits the image of a male body that huddles up and stretches out so as to adapt to a restricted space, alternately pitch black and dazzling white, the measurements of which change constantly (giving rise to the need to note them down scrupulously, just like the postures of the body that the space withholds).<sup>12</sup>

Other works instead broaden out to an architectural dimension. Here, the use of the size of the artist's body as a benchmark thus becomes an intermediate term between the outside and the inside, between him and the others. It's a sort of Modulor declined in the singular: while in the grid of

9 / Jaromir Jedliński, Mirosław Balka, "Conversation," in *Die Rampe*, op. cit., 64.

10 / This is one of the aspects underlined by Michael Archer in "Heaven," in *17 x 23.5 x 22* (London: White Cube, 2009), 7-16.

11 / Selma Klein Essink, "Mankind the Measure of All Things," in *Die Rampe*, op. cit., 40-48.

12 / Samuel Beckett, *All strange away*, 1976.

measurements of Le Corbusier it was the universal (or what the architect believed to be so) that dictated the form of the experience of the single, in Balka's works, it's the measurements of the single, with his specific physical characteristics – his above-average height, for example – that serve as the criterion of everyone's experience.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, many of the works of this period refer to the places of Balka's childhood and adolescence (his grandparents' house in particular, which went on to become his studio), of which they offer a stylized reproduction of the environment and of which they physically incorporate the materials (the linoleum of the flooring, for example); the neutrality of the number, of the figures used in lieu of the title is also a way to put his own autobiography at arm's length, opening up spaces of identification for his viewers. The upshot is places and spaces that are at the same time private and public, intimate and shared, personal and anonymous.

A key example of this attitude is *190 x 400 x 70; 190 x 260 x 70; 190 x 400 x 70* (1997), a sequence of three rectangular rusty iron frames fixed side by side to the wall, all together more than ten meters long, the measurements and the internal partitions of which faithfully reproduce those of the walls of the kitchen in his grandparents' house. The only exception is the height, which corresponds to that of the artist. Very few figurative elements (an iron stool, a glowing lightbulb) suffice to complete the evocation of an interior. The work literally proposes a gesture of opening: the closed environment of the artist's childhood is opened up and developed on a single level, like the sides of a cardboard box that have been cut up, spread out and fixed to the wall. Furthermore, the relationships between the fulls and voids of the original architecture are inverted. The frames that correspond to the doorways and the windows are sealed off with terracing slabs (another autobiographical reference: the artist's grandfather was a mason specializing in tombstones, and frequently worked on this kind of artificial stone); conversely, the frames that correspond to the walls are empty. A house with transparent walls, or rather, without walls at all, that anyone can walk into, both physically and symbolically, associating his own experience and memories to this minimal architecture, bereft of any explicit narrative content (starting from the drily factual title). The artist's height is not the bolt that closes the work to the outside, but the key that opens it up.

While the work of 1997 is a sort of manifesto of an attitude that we have defined as one of opening – towards the anonymous community of on-lookers – this was not however its earliest manifestation. In 1993 Balka had taken part in the 45<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, representing Poland. His solo show in the Polish pavilion was a finely studied presentation of works in terms of spatial relationships, introduced by an element which was to become characteristic of the artist's work: a corridor. A plywood corridor in that case, the walls of which were covered with soap up to a height of 190 centimeters. Entering the pavilion, immersed in the pungently clean smell of the soap, thus took on the contours of a little purification ritual. The artist's body, also in this case abstracted as a linear measurement, played the role of interme-

13 / That turning Le Corbusier's perspective around may take on a political value and meaning is made clear in one of Balka's recent works, the mural drawing *Modular / AF / 1944*, 2016. See note 15.

diate term between the inside and outside, between the open space of the garden and the closed dimension of the pavilion, in which the artist had positioned a selection of works, in turn, each modeled around the measurements of his body and his family home.<sup>14</sup> The corridor in Venice in 1993 was to provide the prototype of many of Balka's works to come, from the cement passageway, punctuated by ventilators encased in the ceiling, on show at the 51<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia of 2005 (750 x 340 x 255 / *some in some out*), to the gigantic black box created for the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern (*How It Is*, 2009); works which are now freed from any specific reference to the body of the artist, yet the measurements of which, used once again as the title, are clearly aimed at the viewers of the work as a group and not as single figures, as a collective body and not individuals.

### III. Chains of the past, signals of the future

In the early 2000s, the video medium made its way into Balka's work, and soon became a regular presence in the artist's shows, either alone or in a combination with sculptural elements. And the use of video brought to light a theme which Balka, from then on, has always been associated within the public perception: the extermination of the Jews by the Nazi regime. It was not, in fact, an absolute novelty. Ever since the 1990s, Balka propensity to dig into the past and his somber meditation on mortality had led critics to associate the use of ashes with the cremation of bodies, and to read therein a reference to the Holocaust. However, the reference becomes entirely explicit only after 2000, and in particular in the videos and video-installations, in works such as *Bottom* (2003, based on footage shot in the ex-lager of Majdanek), *T.turn* (2004, in which the 'T' in the title stands for Treblinka), *B* (2007, a close-up framing of the letter in the famous wording 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' at the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp).

For a Polish artist, dealing with the theme of the massacre of the Jews inevitably means investigating the past and the responsibilities of the community itself to which he belongs, given that it largely took place on Polish soil. And yet, Balka's works that deal explicitly with the theme of the Holocaust obstinately focus on the individual, on his biographical and even physical singularity, and on his individual responsibilities. All the videos cited are from footage shot by Balka himself with a handheld camera, without editing, from a specific vantage point which in turn references a specific posture or movement (respectively, walking; standing still; lying on the ground, rotating his arm around him). Although he does not appear in the imagery, the artist is inscribed in it with his own movements, his gestures, the limits of what he can see and shoot personally. The work 250 x 700 x 455, ø 41 x 41 / *Zoo/T*, (2007/2008) transposes a similar logic into the field of sculpture, and latches back onto the anthropometries of the 1990s. This is the schematic reconstruction of a large cage which had been installed in the field of Treblinka to keep wild animals (mainly foxes) captured in the surrounding woods; a sort of zoo, created for the amusement of the camp

14 / For a detailed description of the pavilion, see again Selma Klein Essink, "Mankind is..." in *Die Rampe*, op. cit., 40-44.

guards. The proportions of the cage are faithful to the original, but the overall structure is downsized so that its highest point is 250 centimeters, the artist's height with his arms reaching up above his head. Also in this case, Balka is embodied in the work. He seems to want first-hand experience, both physically and psychologically, of the sensation of being inside the little zoo of Treblinka, of being the caged animal, yet kept alive, in a place of human beings imprisoned in order to be put to death *en masse*.

In the face of the statistics of the tragedy, the toll of the victims, the historical analysis of collective responsibilities, as an artist Balka feels the need to bring everything to an individual scale; to single places, faces and voices. Like those of Franz Suchomel, an ex-guard at Treblinka, filmed (without him knowing) by Claude Lanzmann in the documentary *Shoah*, who – speaking of the mechanism of elimination of prisoners – defines it as "a primitive but effective assembly line of death;" and in the face of Lanzmann's amazement at the use of that unexpected adjective, 'primitive', he replies, "yes, primitive." In turn, Balka filmed the passage from the documentary from a television screen, extracting a fragment of just three seconds which repeats as a loop, in which Suchomel's face, grainy and ghostly, repeats just those two words *ad infinitum*: "Primitiv, zwar," a sinister mantra which binds him forever to his complicity with evil.<sup>15</sup>

The attention to the individual that characterizes the works that explicitly address the Holocaust is balanced in Balka's work from the 2000s onwards by an unprecedented opening to the collective dimension. Alongside the great practicable installations (some of which produced for public spaces), works made their appearance for the first time in his exhibitions involving and staging the community of residents of the city hosting the display. Implemented for the first time in Warsaw in 1999, on the occasion of a show at the Foksal gallery, and then presented again in other nations,<sup>16</sup> *sza* – the Polish word for "shhh" – consists of a workshop carried out by the artist with local inhabitants and an installation, the former being aimed at the implementation of the latter. Balka called on volunteers to join him in cutting out obituaries from local papers and then, with the use of flour paste, forming rings with them, one joined to the next, to create a series of paper chains. Lastly the chains were displayed in the gallery or museum space as if they were decorations from a popular celebration. Deliberately simple, both in the creation and in the shape, the work is steeped in meaning. The chains of obituaries are a visual manifestation of the chains of relationships – both sentimental and professional, of relatives and lovers – that hold a community together; a manifestation in a minor key though, in which each link in the paper chain corresponds to a missing link in the chain of the living. Calling on people from the town to carry out the work means inviting them to become aware just as much of those voids (both for the workshop participants and for local exhibition visitors, it is not uncommon for them to have known some of the deceased) as of the fulls, the interweaving of relationships in which they are taking part. And the way in which the paper chains are laid out in the space evokes the collective dimension *par excellence*, that of the party: albeit a party in which life is inseparable from death.

15 / In relation to this obstinate desire to scale down the general to the detail, we might also cite another recent work, *Modulor / AF / 1944*, presented on the occasion of the exhibition *Emplacement* at the British School at Rome (2016). It's a pencil wall drawing that connects the figures of Le Corbusier and Anne Frank in a drawing chart. Le Corbusier devised a scale of proportions, the Modulor, based upon the height of an average man (male, white, European) with his arms raised to roughly 2.20m. The sympathy of Le Corbusier's for the fascist Vichy regime has been recently documented by some historians [see Xavier de Jarcy, *Le Corbusier. Un fascisme français* (Albin Michel: Paris-Montreal 2015); Marc Perelman, *Le Corbusier. Une vision froide du monde* (Michalon: Paris, 2015)]. The Modulor was formulated in 1944 (the peak time of the Final Solution). At the same time the last measurement was taken of Anne Frank's height on the doorpost of her hideout attic before being arrested by the Nazis. Balka counters the individual story of Anne Frank – and the mirrored one of Le Corbusier, opposite in its character – to the presumed universality of the Modulor.

16 / New versions of the work were created and presented in the context of the following exhibitions and locations: *Between Meals*, Osaka, 2000; *Wanas 2000*, Wanas, 2000; *Lugares de la Memoria*, EACC, Castellon, 2001; SITE Santa Fe International Biennial, 2006; *Reflejos condicionados*, Fundación Botín, Santander, 2007.

Even more explicit, in terms of putting a community on stage, is *Signals*, the work carried out by Balka on the invitation of the IHME Festival of Helsinki in 2013: not a sculpture or a video, but like in the “active openings” on the 1980s, a performance. Balka had asked various groups of volunteers, each from a different area of the city of Helsinki, to learn the signaling system known as ‘semaphore’, used by European navies from the end of the nineteenth century up until the 1960s, in which the letters of the alphabet correspond to the positions of the two little flags held by the signaler. On the designated day, the volunteers formed chains of signalers endowed with flags who converged onto four “communication points” established by the artist; each group transmitted a message from signaler to signaler – a declaration, a question, an appeal etc. – elaborated by citizens’ associations in various neighborhoods of the city. (“How to get people take the initiative?”; “Protect me, protect me;” “We do it ourselves”). In Helsinki, the chains of obituaries were transformed into living chains, a sort of human nervous system which, through a silent and composed choreography, transmitted messages that groups of people wished to communicate to other groups. The work was entirely immersed in the collective dimension: Balka had limited his role to that of activator of a communication process within the community.

A very recent work – a sculpture once more – confirms his opening to the community dimension that characterizes Balka’s work post-2000 compared to that of previous decades. *Common Ground*, put on display at Pirelli HangarBicocca for the third time (the first was in Cracow, at the International Centre for Culture in 2013, the second in Madrid, at Galería Juana de Aizpuru in 2016), consists of a great number of doormats, laid one next to the other to form a huge carpet. The used doormats came from individuals and families of Cracow who had agreed to give them to the artist in exchange for new ones. Just like in previous cases, the work offers the collectivity a way to manifest and identify itself; the thresholds of private spaces, represented by the doormats, are symbolically brought together to form ‘common ground’, a public and shared space that belongs to everybody and nobody in particular.

It is tempting to think of it as a turning point in Balka’s work; an embrace of the community dimension in which, starting from 2000, the existential solitude of the works of the 1980s and the autobiographicism of those of the 1990s melt away. This is only partly true and not only because, as we have seen also in the decades prior to 2000, an understanding of the collective dimension was already present in his work, albeit of a different kind (decidedly pessimistic in the 1980s, and one of partial opening in the 1990s), or because over the last 15 years the thread of works addressed to the social body goes hand in hand with that explicitly dedicated to the Holocaust, which instead insists on the individual. To these reasons, at least one more should be added: in the works in which the artist addresses the collective dimension, hope – hope in cohabitation and communication between individuals – is always countered by an element moving in the opposite direction, be it a reference to the precariousness of the

cohabitation itself or the threats gathering on the broader geopolitical or environmental horizon. The reference to mortality in *sza* is evident – the celebration of the community coincides with the commemoration of its deceased – and has no need to be underlined. Instead it is worth remembering that in the second presentation of *Common Ground*, Balka added to the carpet of doormats a surveillance mirror placed on the ceiling of the Galería Juana de Aizpuru, which made it possible to embrace the work in a single gaze – and which alone altered the connotation of the work. A surveillance mirror means reciprocal diffidence, reciprocal monitoring and reciprocal control. Uniting private spaces to create a public one is a gesture rather easier to carry out in the symbolic than in the real dimension, Balka warned; collectivity is not necessarily a synonym of community. What’s more, the work had been installed in such a way as to fill the space from wall to wall, obliging anyone who wished to access the further half of the room to tread on the doormats: a gesture that some spectators were willing to carry out while others were not. Depending on the choice of the individuals, the work became a passage – the title of the exhibition in Madrid was *TRANSIT* – or an impassable (and monitored) frontier. Would we be forcing our hand were we to suggest reading these changes in the way of presenting the work in relation to dramatically contemporary issues of borders and migratory flows, humanitarian crises and (reluctant or denied) reception? The anonymous press release of the exhibition provided no explicit keys of interpretation, but underlined that “*TRANSIT* is meant to give us a look at history, at the stories that are being experienced in Poland and all over Europe, scenarios in which he [Balka] firmly places himself as an artist and a human being.”

As for *Signals*, the performance in Helsinki, it should be remembered that it was commissioned by a festival – IHME – of which the 2013 edition had opened with a debate around the limits of environmental resources and the dangers of climate change. In that context, Balka’s choice of carrying out a communication process based on hand signals was not just a way of giving a sense of solemnity through the slow and laborious process of visual spelling to the messages of the various city communities. It was also the evocation of a dystopic future in which the scarcity (or the total lack) of electricity might make it necessary to return to manual methods of communication at a distance. The community that Balka evokes is placed before a real or perceived threat, be they an energy crisis, a migratory wave, or simply the horizon of mortality; indeed it is this very threat that compacts it, that ensures that individuals hold onto one another. Just like the spectators held onto one another (and for once, finding comfort in the company of strangers) when plunged into the dark depths of *How It Is*.

#### IV – CROSSOVER/S

The exhibition at the Pirelli HangarBicocca is exemplary of the way in which the individual and the collective dimension exist side by side in Balka’s work. While on one hand we find practicable sculptures like *400 x 250 x 30* (2005), *196 x 230 x 141* (2007) or *200 x 760 x 500 / The Right Path*

(2008/2015), conceived in such a way that only one person can access them at a time, and of which the essential point is the very experience of solitude (and the solitude of experience). On the other hand, we come across a work like *Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen* (2011), a public fountain of black water, symbolically warning spectators about their relationship with the collective past and their environmental future. On one hand we have *Common Ground*, with its evocation of a collectivity/ community; on the other, *105 x 25 x 25* (2008), in which a single brick hoisted up on a steel stele – the Biblical ‘cornerstone’, ‘discarded by constructors’ – ideally challenges the spectator to carry out a violent individual action: to grasp the brick and throw it.

On the edge between these two dimensions we have *Cruzamento* (2007), the largest work in the show. A practicable structure of metallic grills some 22 meters long and 13.2 meters wide, in the shape of a cross, in which the spectators may enter as a group, but in rows of two people at a time, in which those who are inside are visible to those who are outside (and vice versa). Whoever enters cannot foresee together with whom, in the anonymous crowd of visitors, s/he will cross the physical and symbolic thresholds of the jets of cold air from five powerful fans placed along the arms of the cross (corresponding to the five wounds of Christ in the crucifixion), nor can s/he choose who s/he will meet at the center of the work, where the two elements cross over. One is in a group yet alone; one is alone, yet within a symbolic structure mirroring religious authority (the layout modelled on the cross of Christ, like that of a church) and political (the grids referencing contention). The symbolic heart of the exhibition – right from the choice to take up the title in English – *Cruzamento* is also a crossover point between the two sides of Balka’s work: the individual’s and the collective’s.