

Anda Rottenberg

## Pursuing Meaning, Fleeing Meaning

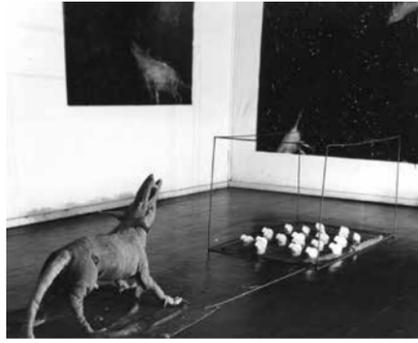
The fragment of Paul Celan's poem that serves as the title of this essay draws from the singular commentary Mirosław Balka provided regarding his 2013 work *TABU*.<sup>1</sup> In doing so he reiterated the importance of poetry to his work, which he has cultivated since the very beginning of his artistic path. That path runs through a not entirely defined, or definable, space that stretches between the appearance of his sculptures, their reciprocal relationships with the context of the exhibition space (its identity, character, proportions), and the titles he gives his works, which refer to both individual objects as well as exhibitions. Indeed, Balka's work is characterized by his obstinate delving for the meaning of each sculptural gesture coupled with a relentless, simultaneous derailing of that very meaning, preventing us from falling into the conceptual explicitness that we are so inclined to search for when confronted with a work of art.

The title of Balka's 1985 exhibition *Wolves-Nowolves* offered up a simple contradiction of wolf-not wolf, a logical dichotomy that suggested the question: If not a wolf, then what? There is no answer. We remain in an illogical reality in which the wolf and the not-wolf both are, or are neither one nor the other. Me-not me. Him-not him. Positive-negative. True-false. A dialectic played out on the level of language undermines the meaning of that which is seen. Are we sure they are wolves, or, maybe, perhaps not? We take them to be wolves because they were named as such, but we have received information that they are not in fact wolves. What are they? We do not know.

Only one figure of a wolf was exhibited, sewn together from old bags, along with four large drawings and around twenty plaster sheep "imprisoned" in a symbolic metal cage. Inconsistent in terms of both scale and the materials used, the figures played out their roles in this "performance," the later "acts" of which were punctuated by the howling of wolves and the bleating of sheep (the form of *Ooooh* against the formation *Baa Baa*, as the artist later commented).<sup>2</sup> The piece finally ended with the "liberation" of the sheep and the imprisonment of the wolf in the cage. On the stage of a gallery, on the stage of art, the objects Balka creates both are and at the same time are not the roles they play, as they possess their own independent identities, which are both recognizable in another order of things and subject to another axiology. In the art world one can move beyond the logic of binary values and undermine notions on which such concepts are based because, as a rule, these identities operate with visual, experiential things, and words and notions can complement them or give reason to question them.

1 / Paul Celan, *Glottal Stop. 101 Poems by Paul Celan* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 60. *TABU* was included in the exhibition *Uni/ja-Uni/on* at the *Otwarte Miasto / Open City* festival, Lublin, Poland, June–July 2013.

2 / From an unpublished interview with the author, 1993.



*Wolves-Nowolves*, 1985. TPSP, Warsaw / Varsavia

*No body*, 1992. Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna

3 / These took place respectively at Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna, 1992; Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2004; and White Cube, London, 2008.

This was the case with several of artist's later exhibitions, such as *No body*, *Neither*, and *Nothere*.<sup>3</sup> Nobody, so who? Some kind of existence expressed through the absence of a body and, therefore, the absence of a person. They are not there, yet they are. Although the figure disappeared, its abstracted memory clothed in the body of art remained, suggested by the placement of the objects in the space, the forms of which, in accordance with the title, one could not associate in any direct way with biological existence. Looking at them one felt an absence as well as the need for fulfillment. It is necessary, therefore, to activate both our emotions and our imagination, just as it was with the exhibition *Nothere*, which was shown sixteen years later.

*Nothere*, so where? Neither the title of the exhibition nor the titles of the individual pieces referred in any direct fashion to a single concrete point on a map. One of them, *Primitive* (2008), is a three-second looped clip from Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985). *Nothere* also included a minimalist skeletal form that referred to Treblinka's zoo pavilion, which was built on the camp's grounds by its commandant, Franz Stangl. Balka created a replica of the pavilion, proportionally reduced in scale to correspond with the anthropometry of his own body, and indeed to an area delineated by straight lines: "as far as I can reach" and thus personalized. A corridor running along three sides of the gallery's main space was built on-site in London and given a title that described only its dimensions – 190 x 90 x 4973 (2008) – that is, in numbers that are, in and of themselves, emotionally indifferent. It was ninety centimeters narrow and oppressively cramped, while its height corresponded with the artist's own. It readily calls to mind Himmelstrasse (translating as Road to Heaven), the main path to the gas chambers in Treblinka. In this way, as with both his earlier and later works, Balka made himself present in this piece, indicating what is to him the sole possible epistemology of suffering: subjecting oneself to personal sensations, experiencing the body, recorded for instance in the image "seen" by the camera's eye in Treblinka, whose name was shortened to its first letter and encoded into the title of the video *T.turn* (2004), as well as into the title of the replica pavilion (*ZOO/T*). The full name Treblinka is never mentioned specifically, because that would narrow the extensive field of considerations to be explored while the enigmatic title of the exhibition – *Nothere* – brought to the fore the indeterminateness of place: there and not there simultaneously. And so the title did not allude to the single concrete topography to which two of the four works in the exhibition referred; rather, it directed us to the geography of suffering located in our collective memory.



*Nothere*, 2008. White Cube, London / Londra

Similar connotations were contained in the title of Balka's 2004 exhibition *Neither*, which was comprised of a constellation of works that formed the composition *Winterreise* (2003) and directly referred to Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as several other pieces that did not at first appear to have any obvious link to the place, including *BlueGasEyes* (2004) and the nearly abstract sculpture *190 x 122 x 64* (2004). The titles of the individual works, as well as their visual content, distract the viewer from what we could call the essence of things. With its little roe deer in the snow and the title taken from the animated Disney film, one associates the artist's video *Bambi* (2003) with childhood innocence. *Pond* (2003) presents an image of a forest pond with a dusting of snow, reminding one of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings. The similarity of both landscapes suggests that they were seen during the same winter journey, which brings to mind Franz Schubert's song series of the same title, *Winterreise* (1827). But the barbed wire in the foreground generates anxiety, as does the slight tremor of the moving images, which was transmitted by artist's own hand as he filmed the scenes. A professional cameraman would consider these images inept, as was the case with one of the four photographs that stands as visual testimony of the crimes committed in the forest during World War II. Georges Didi-Huberman writes the following about the latter photograph:

[A] member of the *Sonderkommando* turned his lens as best he could in the direction of some trees, blindly. He obviously had no idea what kind of image he might capture. The only things we are able to recognize today in that photograph are the trees of the birch forest, just the trees with their branches raised up toward the sky, and the overexposed light of that August day in 1944.

For those of us who agree to look at this picture, this "failed," "abstract," or "confused" photograph testifies to something that remains essential: it bears witness to danger itself, a fundamental *danger of looking* at what

was happening in Birkenau. It testifies to the urgency of the situation, of the quasi-impossibility of bearing witness to that moment in history. For those managing this “place of memory,” such a photograph is useless because it is deprived of the referent at which it is directed: we do not see anyone in this picture. Is, however, a clearly visible – or readable – reality necessary in order for it to be considered testimony?<sup>4</sup>



*Neither*, 2004. Gladstone Gallery, New York

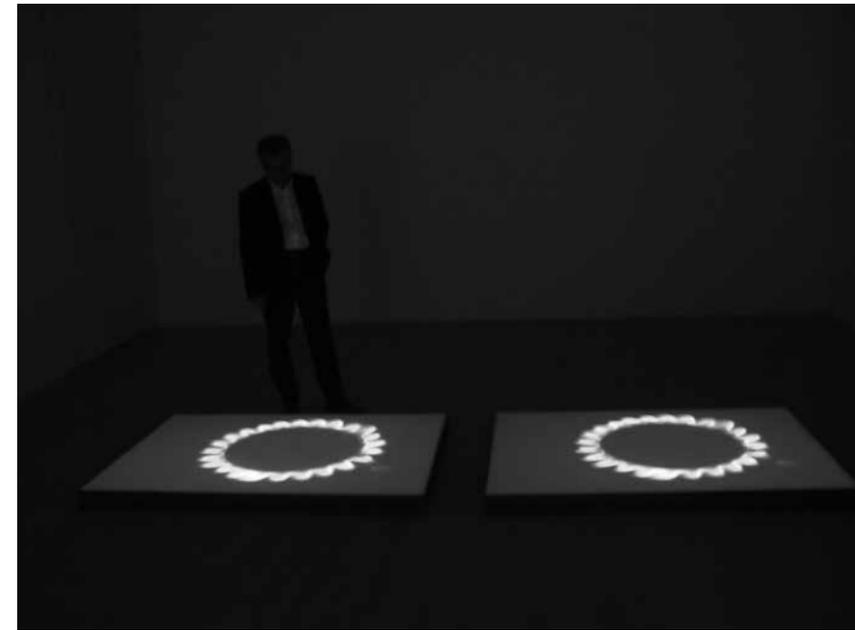
*a, e, i, o, u*, 1997. Galeria Foksal, Warsaw / Varsavia

4 / Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011), 48-49, translated here by Jason A. Goldsmith.

5 / It was exhibited at Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, and Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany, in 1997, and at the Bienal de São Paulo in 1998.

In this respect the little-known 1997 exhibition *a,e,i,o,u* is interesting, although it touches on slightly different issues.<sup>5</sup> The fragment of the alphabet referred to in the title indicates the most basic forms of language articulation and simultaneously points to a lack of consonants – therefore, to something that is missing. The form of the exhibition also underscored the notion of absence: there was no possibility of entering the interior of the closed structure, or even looking into it, despite it having openings in its walls, since the interior was dark – that is, it lacked light. Only sound was available: an endless loop of barking dogs. The essence of this message did not reach the viewer because the dogs spoke a language that does not exist, but yet it does.

And so the invisible is sometimes more important and stronger than the visible. This occurs, for example, when we apply a set of notions to an image that differs from those that we receive from elements perceived with the naked eye. This is what Didi-Huberman’s book deals with. And this is what Balka’s work speaks to. Some of the titles of his works suggest clues that reveal hidden meanings. If, for example, we know that the Disney movie was released in 1942, the year the Germans began to implement the “final solution” to the “Jewish question,” and that one of the areas in which the “solution” was carried out included the very grove in which the deer in the video runs, and that the frozen pond filmed during

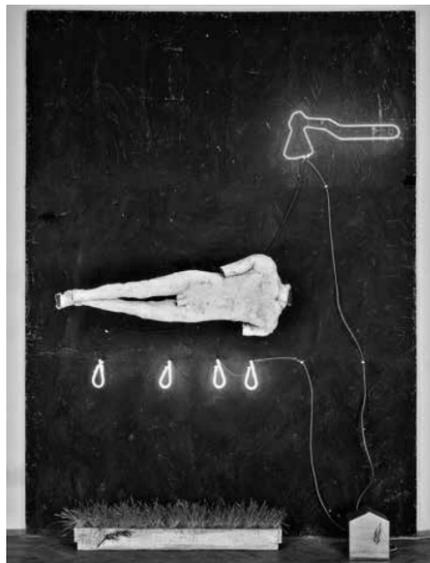


*BlueGasEyes*, 2004. Installation view / Veduta dell’installazione, *Lichtzwang*, K21, Düsseldorf, 2006

the “romantic” winter journey served as a dumping ground for human ashes during the implementation of said “solution,” then this knowledge leads us to look differently at the work, and in so doing we see the invisible. Only then does the image of the two stovetop burners’ gas flames in *BlueGasEyes* become poignant. The title removes the obvious identity of a simple home appliance from the field of vision. We cease to see burners and in their stead see burning gas eyes, although we *know* that something like this does not exist.

The well of possible references opens up only when we begin to pair the individual words of the title with that which is contained in the image. And in so doing, the illogical and emotionally charged, and therefore intentional, perception of one work creates the context for understanding the next one. For example, we can begin to read the abstract form hanging over our heads, *190 x 122 x 64*, as a roof or tent, both of which are usually regarded as a form of protection for the body and therefore life. A decade earlier, the artist had placed such forms on the floor in order to indicate the absence of those whom they were supposed to protect. Now he has elevated them with the help of feeble cords and has placed protective insulating foam on their outside faces, seemingly inverting the intended order. They are no longer what they were meant to be: they do not offer protection, but rather pose a potential threat. Indeed, none of the objects in that exhibition were what they are normally intended to be. But they also failed to be something else. *Neither* means both not this and not that.

The contradictory concepts that quite regularly appear in the titles of Balka’s exhibitions serve to underscore the notional and logical ambivalence of the meanings they carry. This conscious decision moves the category of “in-betweenness” to the fore. This is a more appropriate space in which to locate art



St. Adalbert, 1987

After-Easter Show, 1986.  
Galeria Wieża, Warsaw /  
Varsavia

6 / The name of the group is formed by the coupling of the German word *Neue* [new] and the Russian *Bieriemiennost* [pregnancy].

since it includes not only the relations between the visible and the invisible, the named and the perceived, but also between artists and their work as well as the work and the viewer. If we look back at Balka's earlier art from the point of view of the ambivalent meanings suggested by the titles, we can see many pieces in a new light. *Abel* is not always a victim, and *Cain* is not necessarily only a murderer. *Saint Adalbert* does not have to be holy. The *Black Pope* might not be the pope, just as wolves are not wolves. These figures, aside from the fact that they are sculptures, can play the roles of this or that character while at the same time not being them, especially because a great many of these figures are self-portraits of the artist embodied in various roles, playing someone other than himself. This interest in the theatrical aspect of art is equally clear in his earlier activities, such as those carried out under the auspices of the Consciousness *Neue Bieriemiennost*<sup>6</sup> group of artists, with whom he "embodied" emblematic working-class characters of that era, for example posing in a miner's hat. There were also more developed actions, as in the 1986 *Post-Holiday Show* at Galeria Wieża, Warsaw, when he played games with the cultural function of the Easter Bunny: he became him, putting on a hat with ears, that is, he made believe that he embodied that role, but only partially, because at the same time he was both the narrator and the writer-director of a production that involved props.

This kind of theatricality and the convention of "embodiment" has a long tradition in Polish art. It is not just a matter of the custom of composing monumental, historical, frontal battle scenes in a theatrical manner. Nor is it a question of staging such events in the quiet of one's studio in order to transfer them onto the two-dimensional plane of a canvas. Nor is it even about having the public play them out in the third dimension, creating a "living painting." It is rather a question of the current represented by Witold Wojtkiewicz, who at the turn of the twentieth century painted scenes from adult life being performed by children, thus imbuing the problems afflicting humanity with a symbolic fiction in order to bring



Photo documentation of  
*Remembrance of the First Holy  
Communion*, 1985, Żuków

7 / A category introduced by Witold Gombrowicz's "Filidor dzieckiem podszyty" [the child runs deep in Filidor], a character in his 1937 novel *Ferdydurke*.

8 / *Cricot 2* was Tadeusz Kantor's theater in Cracow.

9 / *Pracownia Dziekanka*, Warsaw, 08/03/1986.

them to the level of child's play. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's (known as Witkacy) solo performances in front of his camera in the 1930s also contained playful connotations. This versatile artist toyed with images of famous people, mocking them and thus making them appear grotesque. He also recorded images of his own bizarre poses, grimaces, and faces, mocking himself by "infantilizing" his own behavior and therefore freeing himself from responsibility. These activities were predecessors for the face-making duels, ridiculing, and bringing out the "child within" or otherwise the category of "the child runs deep"<sup>7</sup> in Tadeusz Kantor's performances, most famously his play *The Dead Class* (1975).

A dialogue with one's child within, or coming to terms with one's childhood, was one of the most important themes of Balka's early work, beginning with his multipart thesis project in 1985, *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion*, which he turned into a complete production. A meadow "stage" that included the audience became a vague space for the action. The gathered professors and random viewers were confronted with local children acting under the artist's direction; the natural, rural setting was somewhat disrupted by "holy pictures" attached to the trees. The scene also employed a house as a found object, in which Balka "posed" a sculptural self-portrait from his childhood, which seemed to be based on photographs staged in the tradition of the frozen post-communion-ritual pose commonly taken in provincial photography studios. (Characters who populated the stage of the *Cricot 2* theater in the mid- to late 1970s appeared to have been taken from the same pictures.)<sup>8</sup>

Balka did not follow Kantor's idea of "playing marionette." He did, however, use and further develop the concept of the "poor object" and the "object-actor." The former includes objects and materials that have been denuded of their initially intended uses, including old sacks, worn-out boards, beat-up linoleum flooring, doormats and rugs, bits of soap, trash cans, and old fencing and fence posts. All of these either become elements for Balka's sculptures or he simply elevates them to the rank of sculpture. The latter – whether "found" or created by the artist – also "plays" roles in his actions, such as in the *Post-Holiday Show* or *Wolves-Nowolves* exhibitions. This was also the case with *NB for Women* (March 8, 1986), for which Balka used, among other things, cast figurines of Saint Nicholas and pyramids made of snow.<sup>9</sup> Only

with *Boomerangs of Peace* did he move away from “directing” objects.<sup>10</sup> In this case he used cast-plaster boomerangs almost as they were intended – that is, he threw them at a target. The target was an illusory vacation landscape. The boomerangs did not, therefore, go far, but simply shattered on the wall that served as a screen. The rhythmic repetition of the successive throws and impacts created such a tension that one observer fell into a fit and threw all of the unused boomerangs onto the floor, thus crossing the unwritten, unspoken threshold separating audience from stage. By moving into the action, she became a part of the art space and therefore the work itself.



10 / Pracownia Dziekanka, Warsaw, 09/05/1986.

*Boomerangs of Peace*, 09/05/1986. Pracownia Dziekanka, Warsaw / Varsavia

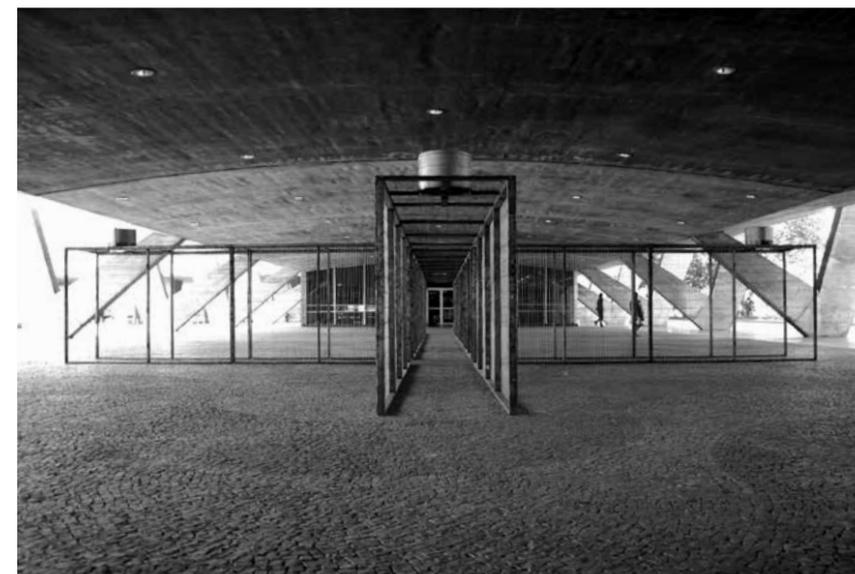
*AUSCHWITZWIELICZKA*, 2009. Rynek Podgórski, Cracow / Cracovia

This event appears to have been an important turning point in the artist’s work, as years later he began actively planning the complete presence of the viewer in his projects. It was just such a role he had in mind for the viewers of the passages he has built in both public spaces and indoors. The semantic context of the place also always plays an important role. For example, the poured cement sculptural passage *AUSCHWITZWIELICZKA* (2009) invited viewers inside via the title, which had been cut out of the flat roof of the massive sculpture in such a way as to allow sunrays to cast the words onto one of the walls. On cloudy days one could only read the title by looking up at the slices of sky written into the cement ceiling. The blending of the two geographical names, Auschwitz and Wieliczka, is a popular advertising slogan used to offer tourists a one-day package trip to see both places. One is known for its gas chambers, the other for its salt chambers; one is a symbol of the Holocaust, the other has healing powers.

*Cruzamento* (2007), a restrictive metal wire fence constructed in the form of a Latin cross, functioned completely differently and had an altogether different message, which was written into the proportions of the covered passageway leading to the modernist building that houses the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. This work was conceived as an echo, or perhaps a shadow, of the massive statue of Christ that towers over the city. Balka’s oppressive construction reminded one of a pen for wild animals and evoked, though not through personal experience, scenes from the Roman arena that are rooted in the iconography of European art. The entrance to the interior of this “crucifixion” was at the same time the entrance to an imagined arena as well as into the depths of the cross. This meant one had to literally, tangibly face what had after two thousand years simply become an external symbol of the culture upon which European civilization, and consequently Brazilian modernism, was founded. It also forced a coming to terms with what that

civilization had done to the native inhabitants of the South American continent, a symbol of which stands atop Corcovado mountain with outstretched arms.

While the passageway-sculpture *Wir Sehen Dich* (2010) was externally similar to *Cruzamento*, it possessed a completely different meaning and mode of functioning. The limiting metal fence construction extended through a series of connected rooms in the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, full of late-Gothic German paintings. The internal space of the structure served as a separate area in which Balka directed the presence of the visitors, and thus forced them to ask questions about the relationship between the work and the audience. The situation they found themselves in begged the question of who was the viewer and who was being viewed. Is it certain that the subjects were those visiting the museum, or perhaps was it the figures in the paintings by the Old Masters, such as Matthias Grünewald or Hans Baldung, displayed outside of the fencing and looking at living people enclosed in a cage?



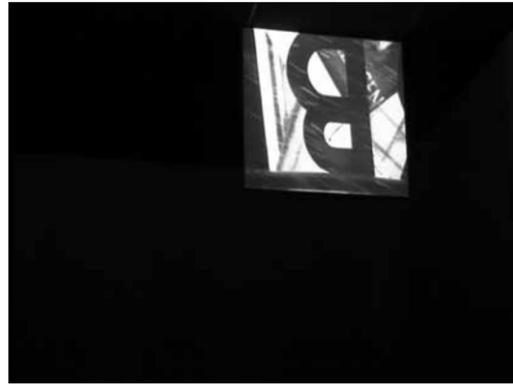
11 / The piece later appeared in the group exhibition *Where Is Abel Thy Brother*, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 1995.

*Cruzamento*, 2007. Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro

The simple act of tightening a space, limiting someone’s freedom of movement, in such passages can evoke feelings of enslavement and even panic, but this does not exhaust Balka’s strategies of pushing the passive viewer out of their comfort zone. He often activates other stimuli that act on the senses and enhance the intensity of an experience, which in turn can open new layers of the imagination, soaring off into distant areas of the visual or experiential here and now. For example, walking through the “soap corridor”<sup>11</sup> at the Polish Pavilion of the 45<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia (1993) engaged the sense of smell, activating a whole range of associations revolving around tasks such as washing or cleaning and, by extension, the dirt that might equally touch one’s body or personal possessions (clothing, sheets, towels) or one’s soul. The corridor might be associated with a path leading to the area of an imagined laundry or bath, or

serve as a transfiguration of purgatory, the path between heaven and hell. One could, in certain instances, overlap this second interpretation with the first, since as with places isolated from the rest of daily life, such as a leper colony or a death camp, the bath can also play the symbolic role of purgatory, though those paths never lead to heaven. Here once again we think of the infamous Himmelstrasse.

12 / B (2007).



37,1 (cont.), 1993. Polish Pavilion, 45<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition / Padiglione della Polonia, 45. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, Venice / Venezia

B, 2007. Installation view / Veduta dell'installazione, *Fragment*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw / Varsavia, 2011

The theme of being “sentenced to hell” appeared once again in 2005 in a sculpture constructed in a form of a simple seesaw, a wooden walkway placed across a fulcrum. The center of balance of such a device is so difficult to find that one arm is always raised while the other one drops down. It is, however, simple enough to overload the raised portion so that one end falls to the ground with a crack. Up, down, heaven, hell, like on a heaven-hell swing. Two people are needed for such a game. Individuals step onto the lowered end of the walkway and walk uphill only to fall back down once they have stepped a bit too far. Purgatory, or the center of gravity, is therefore found at a halfway point between heaven and hell. The sculpture’s title, *400 x 250 x 30*, suggests nothing more than dimensions. But knowing the creative contexts of the artist’s work, one could recall the inscription that appeared on the gates of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.” This sentence would have been equally appropriate for the gate at Auschwitz. If the phrase had appeared there, however, Balka would not have found any reason to point his camera in its direction, and not only because of its appropriateness to the place, or because of the lack of the letter B, one of the few letters one can flip upside down. This letter, looking like written upside down, finds itself in the word *Arbeit*, which was included in the well-known sentence adorning the entrance to the camp and declared the liberating function of work. This is why the artist devoted one of his works to it.<sup>12</sup>

Naturally none, or almost none, of the above fictionalizations is objective because none are explicitly contained in the work. The direction of one’s thoughts and the nature of one’s associations while communing with art is dependent on the viewer’s knowledge, sensitivity, and experiences. Through his work Balka gives “only” the initial impulse, activating the first experiences by introducing unexpected dramatic effects intended to affect the senses, such as sound, temperature changes, the sucking or blowing of air, blinding light or deep darkness, uncomfortably cramped

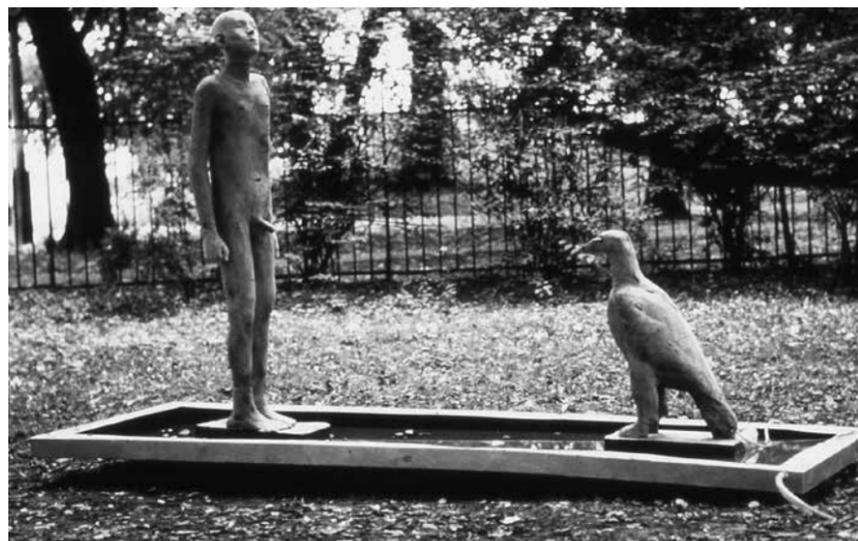
conditions, or a change in the ground underfoot, which can be components of a work materially or otherwise. The most important complement to his work is the viewer’s vast range of feelings, for it is only when they are experienced that the pieces become complete.

This particular strategy was epitomized in the Turbine Hall at London’s Tate Modern with *How It Is* (2009), which has been widely written about and analyzed. From the entrance to the hall it looked like an enormous shipping container resting on steel supports, which referenced, both with its structure and the materials from which it was made, the very architecture of the museum. One immediately thought of twentieth-century heavy industry, with all its connotations. One had to walk along the entire structure to reach the point where the edge of the container touched the floor in order to see that it was open: the lowered “flap” of a wall created a ramp that led slightly upward toward the light-absorbing, and in a way blackness-filled, interior. Sucked into the depths of that pitch-blackness, viewers explored the space as though they were blind. Carefully groping forward with hands outstretched, they immersed themselves in the shapeless darkness, where they faced their own terrifying sensations. This sculpture could serve as a starting point for wide-ranging discussions about Balka’s work, as it deals with themes taken up in earlier stages of his creative path. Some touch on material and immaterial substances used as building blocks. Others, such as literary references, began with youthful nods to James Joyce, and lately recall Samuel Beckett’s parable of the fruitless struggle with the inertia of matter that is contained in the very title *How It Is*. In English. That is the language used to name other works,



*How It Is*, 2009. Tate Modern, London / Londra

for example the hissing *BlueGasEyes* or the quiet *Dawn and Still*. The language of the title does not necessarily correspond with the place of presentation, but rather arises from the need to give meaning or, perhaps more importantly, evoke a mood. Hence the seemingly calm *Ruhe* and *Nachtruhe*, the mysterious *Tristes Tropiques* or *Landschaftsabfalle*, the calming *Good God* and *Schmerzstillend*, the cheerful *Buenas Noches*, the promising *Entering Paradise*, the categorical, mostly German *Die Rampe*, *Lichtzwang*, *Ordnung*, *Hygiene*, *Pause*, *Selection*, *Lebensraum*, and *Kein Warum*. These and the many others form a notional-lexical layer of Balka's work and demand deep analysis. Avoiding his mother tongue when giving his works titles is not accidental, nor is it born of a desire to make them easier for foreigners to understand. He deliberately introduces the category of otherness against that which is entirely his and deeply personal. By distancing himself from his works he allows them to exist in the external world, in another cultural space and in a different logic, and in so doing expands the field of their possible interpretations. Affixed with strange-sounding words, the works end up in a space that is marked with the previously mentioned designation "pursing meaning, fleeing meaning," a space in which there is a place for the viewer's and the artist's fear, doubt, irony, empathy, and anger.



*A Boy and an Eagle*, 1988.  
SARP, Warsaw / Varsavia

Language and the meaning of words play an important role in Balka's projects and exhibitions. Such lexical connotations are equally important in the artist's theater of resurrected childhood memories, but do not directly refer to Kantor's theatrical works that maintained Witkacy's tradition of the grotesque, nor to the expressions of the body cultivated by Jerzy Grotowski. Having been raised in a different time, in another reality, Balka first understood his childhood from the perspective of its impoverishment and provincial Catholicism. Only later did he begin to reference the work of James Joyce, who experienced a similar provincial Catholic tradition in Ireland. Balka's 1987 work *When you wet the bed* (the title is taken from the beginning of a sentence in a Joyce novel) is composed of three



*IV. / IX. My body cannot do everything I ask for*, 1991.  
Galerie Isabella Kacprzak,  
Cologne / Colonia

*371 (cont.)*, 1993. Polish Pavilion, 45<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition / Padiglione della Polonia, 45. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, Venice / Venezia

*13 / James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

fundamental forms: a cross, a prie-dieu, and a bed. Water spurts from the center of the bed as well as from the finial of the cross, the former symbolizing urine and the latter tears. The streams intertwine, falling into the same place.<sup>13</sup>

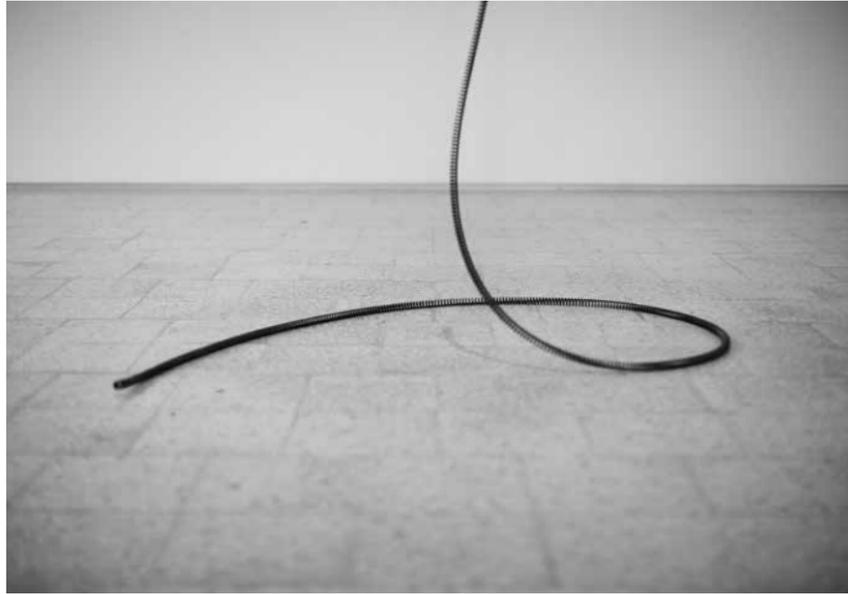
*14 / Władysław Bełza, "Polish Child's Confession of Faith" (1900), also known as "Catechism of the Polish Child."*

Balka applied the effect of spurting water in other works, too – for instance *Preaecepta patris mei servivi semper* (1986) and *A Boy and an Eagle* (1988) – and in both of these cases water is a transfiguration of tears. The first title refers to the identity of Saint Nicholas. The idea behind the second title is a reference to the trauma of adolescence and was the result of a confrontation of the prose of William S. Burroughs with a patriotic Polish poem from 1900,<sup>14</sup> even though visually the piece references the myth of Zeus and Ganymede. Behind this multiplicity of references, which indicate the artist's wide-ranging interests, hides the already-mentioned need to give his works ambivalent meanings. In this light, the fact that the titular boy is a self-portrait of the artist in his youth becomes a little more important, as it is a slightly less realistic nude version of the model from his *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* (1985). In this context Balka's own experiences appear to have played a greater role in the composition of *When You Wet the Bed* than Joyce's prose. The introduction of concrete titles was (and is) necessary in order for his works to gain a universal quality, which points to an awareness of sharing one's experience with others. We the viewers receive the idea of an artist "in the world" and not just "vis-à-vis the world." It contains an attitude toward participation, or perhaps an awareness of it and the role of co-presence, of being inside matters that are seemingly distant in time and space. This is true even when Balka subversively reveals the limits of his own body, as he did in a series of three exhibitions in 1991: *April. My body cannot do everything I ask for*; *IX. My body cannot do everything I ask for*; and *XI. My body cannot do everything I ask for*.<sup>15</sup> It is curious that shortly afterward he composed *No Body*.

*15 / These took place at Galeria Foksal, Warsaw; Galerie Kacprzak, Cologne; and Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles, respectively.*

*16 / Centre d'Art Contemporain Le Creux de l'enfer, Thiers.*

Focusing on one's own body with the intention of making a statement about the world is a seeming paradox: On what can you base your knowledge of sensations if you yourself have not experienced them or if you cannot even imagine them vis-à-vis your own biological, personal existence? These are the kinds of questions one must pose in order to understand the title of Balka's 1995 exhibition in Thiers, which took the form of a quote about a vaccination certificate taken from an old French phrasebook published during the Algerian war: *J'ai en ma possession un certificat de vaccination contre le choléra, la fièvre jaune, le typhus, la variole*.<sup>16</sup>



*To be*, 2014. Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw / Varsavia

17 / 36.6 took place at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 1992, and List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, 1993. 37.1 took place at Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 1993. 37.1 (cont.) took place at the Polish Pavilion, 45<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 1993, and was repeated at the Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles, 1994.

18 / Currently accepted norms dictate 36.8 degrees.

The artist, of course, was not threatened by cholera, yellow fever, typhus, or measles, nor in need of protection from them. This exhibition capped off a three-year process of reflection upon the phenomenon of the precarious, liminal state between health and illness. It was expressed by minor changes in a thermometer reading, but it had wide-ranging implications with respect to one's lifestyle and the position of one's body.

The titles of these earlier shows were intended to focus the viewer's attention on a few lines on the thermometer: 36.6; 37.1; and 37.1 (cont.).<sup>17</sup> For each of these exhibitions, slabs measuring 190 x 60 x 10 cm were used, which again corresponded directly to Balka's own anthropometry, but because they were made of a material used in cemeteries (terrazzo) and were in the form of elongated cuboids, one rather associated them with tombstones. Balka had used both slabs and terrazzo in many previous compositions, but in this case, despite the associations evoked by their shape, the temperature at which the sculptures were kept played an important role. In Europe, 37.1 degrees Celsius was until recently accepted as the normal body temperature of a healthy adult, while in Poland 36.6 degrees was the norm.<sup>18</sup> So what was considered in Western Europe a weakened state for the body was in the East considered a normal state, and a temperature increase to 37.1 degrees a low fever, which could indicate illness. Five marks on a mercury thermometer – that is the difference between the values contained in the titles 36.6 and 37.1, both of which refer to an accepted norm, depending on the standards of a given country, thus pointing to the ambiguity of such notions as health and illness.

The subtleties associated with body temperature had, for Balka, implications tied to the geometry of existence, that is, with the understanding of the positions of vertical (health) and horizontal (illness), but also with the intimacy related to the ways in which one's temperature is measured. Placing a thermometer in the mouth or anus violates a person's bodily integrity, induces a sense of helplessness

or shame, and activates the Freudian sphere of libido. If we add that the same five lines mark the differences between childhood and adulthood, and for women the five stages of the menstrual cycle, all of this together guides one's thoughts in the direction of sexuality, even if it is not directly referenced in any of these works. Sexuality remains hidden, like "dark" thoughts activated by seeing some tools in isolation from their original functions. Such vague anxiety, discomfort laced with unpleasant associations flowing from the darkest recesses of the mind, reminds one of the sculpture *To Be* (2014) from Balka's later period, which was inspired by Martin Heidegger's existential loneliness.<sup>19</sup> It is essentially a readymade object, namely a plumber's snake for unblocking pipes. Placing it in an exhibition space underscores its penetrative function and suggests some sort of elaborate torture.

The simple gesture of heating an artificial headstone therefore opened the work to a wide range of interpretations, associated with both the physiology and the metaphysics of being. And again, as with his earlier and later works, the most important element is that which finds itself in between those values, as well as that which is revealed by both the individual in the general and the universal in the individual – in direct connection with the circumstances of human existence. This was a period during which Balka became interested in the properties of the body as a "living vessel of existence" whose shape, dimensions, temperature, and life functions all had purpose: metabolism, peripheral nervous system, excretory processes, secretions, sensations of pain. He also researched the body's actions and passive capabilities: What can I do to another and what could they do to me? What can I do with my body and what would someone perhaps do to it? A hypersensitivity to the chosen field of observation turned his attention to the smallest of details and the most drastic of possibilities. For example, the simple exchange of an active function for a passive one can have far-reaching consequences. In an active function we look after the hygiene of our bodies, while as a result of a passive one we can turn into ash. The cause can become the result: being into nothingness. Hidden relationships between distant categories can then be revealed: between position and substance, shape and temperature, appearance and meaning, the grammar of life and the geometry of art.

It was exactly during this period that Balka began to title his works using numbers, indicating their "objective measurability," with the help of accepted systems and patterns. Degrees Celsius direct one's attention to temperature, linear centimeters to the length of an edge. In the case of metal "sarcophagi" and terrazzo sculptures that have the same dimensions (190 x 60 cm), we are dealing with the canon that refers to the proportions of the human body, and indeed with the Christian concept of man created "in God's image and likeness." According to church doctrine, God resides in each of us, but we do not, of course, all look the same – we have individual facial features and our bodies come in various shapes and sizes. God is an idea, and man is a model for himself, but we create religious, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic systems in order to bring our human imperfection closer to the divine ideal. According to Polykleitos of Argos (fifth century BCE), the ideal man was rather stocky and awkward looking. His *Doryphoros* is 156 cm in height, with childlike hands and size 41 shoes. One hundred years later, Lysippos introduced more slender proportions that were only written down by Vitruvius after an additional three hundred years, at the beginning of the Common Era. These were in turn

19 / The reference is to Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).

drawn by Leonardo da Vinci around 1490. The figure of a man inside a circle and a rectangle, universally known as *Vitruvian Man* or *Homo Quadratus*, defined the canon of male beauty until almost the mid-twentieth century. Le Corbusier broke with it when, using statistics and mathematical calculations, he defined the new "ideal" proportions of the male body as having a height of 175 cm and, on the basis of this, developed his Modulor, which he then used in the design of functional modernist homes and apartments, those "machines for living" with ceilings at 240 cm, which the ideal man couldn't reach with his hand extended upward. Aesthetic canons, just as with dogmas of faith, do not bring us closer to God, but they can serve as reference points in a process of self-discovery. Entering the modernist residential "conveyor belt," Balka instinctively lowers his head. He is 190 cm tall and his upward reach extends to 250 cm, so in a "functional" apartment he is not able fully extend his hand over his head. It is for this reason he applies in his sculptures an anthropometry based on the dimensions of his own body. Before he made that decision, he had already, in the course of his studies, been exposed to all the canons, but he openly refers in his work only to Le Corbusier. In 2015 the artist blew up the original 1943 Modulor drawing to life-size dimensions. He added one line at the height of 162.5 cm, Anne Frank's height just before she was deported to Auschwitz. In contrast to the Modulor and its creator, the Jewish girl did not survive the Second World War. Le Corbusier modified his ideal in 1946. This "improved" version of man reached a height of 183 cm, though he still could not reach the low ceiling. The modern architect did not develop a model for the ideal female body, so even if Anne Frank had survived and grown up, she would not have measured up to an ideal.

20 / Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2014.



233906250 cc, 2014. Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw / Varsavia

Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N +GO-GO (1985-2001), 2001. Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw / Varsavia

21 / Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2001.

value expressed in cubic centimeters can be described as a volume, a capacity. The device most commonly described by its capacity is the combustion engine, which produces a combination of gases. This is a poisonous combination, which is why they were used in the Nazis' T4 program to kill people on a massive scale. This solution was used in both stationary and mobile gas chambers, the latter of which were mounted to automobiles. Both were covered with cheap plywood and looked rather makeshift. Balka's sculpture was built from plywood that smelled like cheap, mass-produced IKEA products and was shaped like an elongated cuboid, open on one end, inviting people to enter its depths.

Geographic coordinates are also expressed in numbers, allowing one to define the position of something on a map, as was the case with Balka's first retrospective, titled *Around 21°15'00"E 52°06'17"N + GO-GO (1985-2001)*.<sup>21</sup> These coordinates indicate the location of his home-cum-studio in Otwock, a prewar spa town located just outside Warsaw that has served as the subject of many of his studies, the incubator of his artistic ideas, and the place where he has completed the bulk of his work. It also serves as a functional and symbolic reference point for the work, just as Wielopole did for Tadeusz Kantor. Both names, Wielopole and Otwock, serve as *pars pro toto* for a place mythologized by childhood memories. Degrees, minutes, and seconds described the place in the title of the exhibition, allowing one to pinpoint it on a map, but not allowing for anything more – a point on a map is completely abstract and looks the same as any other point defining another place, but only as long as we do not dig deeper into the real picture Balka is presenting.

In Balka's work from this period, we find references to the reality of Otwock, beginning with the concrete dimensions of his grandfathers' home. The grandfathers were the stonemason Wiktor Balka and the carpenter Józef Mucha, from whom he inherited his talent for working with his hands as well as his "understanding" of materials, which has, for example, allowed him to recognize the semantic-bearing capacity of terrazzo. The same applies to this house. Parts of it, as well as in its entirety, have been used as a model for many of his sculptures. The standard of living in Otwock was reflected in the dilapidated burlap sacks he used as material for his first works, as well as in countless "material quotes" in the form of used boards, dried-up bits of soap, old doormats, and fragments of wall-to-wall carpeting.



Mirosław Balka and / e Arthur Nauzycki in the making of / durante la realizzazione di *Modulor/AF*, 05/12/2015. Passage de Retz, Paris / Parigi

In recent times Balka has introduced yet another numerical value, one that draws upon a system of measuring airborne substances, consciously referring to Marcel Duchamp's *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919), a gulp of air enclosed in a glass ampule – a life-giving combination of gases. The large container that Balka designed for the 2014 exhibition *Progress and Hygiene* carried the title *233906250 cc*.<sup>20</sup> A number



7 x 7 x 1010, 2000. Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw / Varsavia

BETH HA KNESETH, 2014. Trialog, Krynki

Balka has also addressed the town's history, and the fate of its Jewish inhabitants in particular, in a variety of pieces over the years. Despite all of these references "pinning down" Balka's work to details rooted in the place where he grew up, the language of the forms in which he has chosen to articulate his sculptural narrative has turned the space of Otwock into a significantly less important place on the map, while at the same time elevating community experience in many towns and cities. A point on the map might mean Otwock, or anywhere – exactly anywhere where growing up is accompanied by fears, where the shape of a house signifies not only financial limitations but the limits of a resident's dreams, where anonymous graves exist next to well-kept cemeteries, where loose fragments of old fences remind one of how various communities were separated from one another. Wherever the soil is saturated with evidence of someone's suffering, with the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears, or with ashes – that which remains after a conflagration.

Balka can point to all this, reaching for readymade fragments of reality, or for pure substances, such as salt or ash, whose use universalizes the symbolism associated with them, while at the same time allows one to place that painful knowledge in a work of art and "export" it far beyond the borders of a town or home country. Lately, however, Balka has also initiated activities aimed in the opposite direction – that is, at Otwock, which he has begun treating less and less as simply the place where he grew up. It has become increasingly important to know the objective, individual identity of the town and, in that sense, such actions are of a demythologizing character. Those whom Balka invites to visit, artists from Poland and around Europe, discover the uniqueness of this former spa town, while at the same time they reveal it to its current residents by marking with their art specific places whose former function and meaning have faded over time. Balka behaves similarly during his own trips to distant and unknown destinations.

Krynki, a village in the far northeastern part of Poland, is just such a place. There, in the summer of 2014, Balka and a group of volunteers led a complex action titled *BETH HA KNESETH* [The Great Synagogue Resuscitation], referring to a devastated temple whose foundation was overgrown with vegetation, just like the remains of

the abandoned buildings of Otwock's former sanatorium. In order to reveal the foundation, it was first necessary to remove the vegetation from the area. The notions of cleansing and removing are the same euphemistic language used by the Third Reich to obfuscate actions undertaken against Jewish populations in the countries it conquered. The steps the artist intended to take against the plants operated on a symbolic level, and also to a certain degree linguistically, though in this case Balka was acting in order to save from oblivion material evidence of the culture of a community murdered by the Germans. The vegetation growing on the walls of the synagogue was cut so as to reveal both the remnants of the foundation as well as the outline of the building's basement. All of the species of plants found there were catalogued by botanists and taken to a local herbarium. In the Jewish tradition there is a belief that plants are composed of the substances they draw from the ground. The gesture of keeping pieces of the plants that drew life from the elements contained in the temple's walls was, therefore, a life-saving procedure that took place at the molecular level. It was nearly metaphysical and as such harmonized with the final action in which Balka, recalling the history of the city, once again employed water in his work.

The name Krynki comes from the Slavic word *krynice*, or spring, which shaped the town's identity. Balka, however, summoned other connotations as well: water is a source of life, and it also serves to clean dirt from both people and places. As a metaphorical carrier of information about the city's past, water was also needed to "wash" the site of the former synagogue and reanimate it, in both a literal and a symbolic sense. Here the artist shared a creative act, which included both the condensed social energy and the physical participation of the volunteers in the ritual cleaning and restoration of a space that was once filled with the prayers of thousands of people. Volunteers held fire hoses and water spurted up from where the bimah, the raised platform from which the Torah is read, had previously stood and in that moment became transfigured into the cantors' songs that had once come forth from the depths of the temple.

There are no longer any Jews in Krynki, and the synagogue as a house of prayer no longer has any reason to exist. Its remaining presence is as a kind of phantom, a figure from the past that paves the way to a collective memory. The exposed ruins are proof of its material existence. The stream of water spurting up toward the sky consolidated the local community around a substitute ceremony, carried out in lieu of the one that should have been taking place. An artist took the rabbi's role and praying Jews were replaced by people of other faiths, which for a moment were united by a mystical experience, by their participation in a ceremony that joined the past with the present. A rainbow appeared in the evening sky. *BETH HA KNESETH* did not exist as a material work of art. What took place in Krynki should be called a moment of art, just as in physics we have what is called a moment of force.

Water, therefore, just like many other substances, fulfills a variety of symbolic functions in Balka's work. In his earlier compositions it was transfigured into tears and urine. In Krynki it was a catalyst in resuscitating a specific structure and community. In others it functions as a liquid that absorbs the world's filth, poisons (and sins). It was used in the latter fashion in Wrocław's Four Dome Pavilion in 2011.<sup>22</sup> In that instance black water fell from a great height into an enormous

22 / The exhibition was titled *Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen*, 2011.



*Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen*, 2011. Trickster project, The European Culture Congress, Four Domes Pavilion, Wrocław / Breslavia

23 / [http://www.culturecongress.eu/videoblog/video/videoblog\\_ekk\\_balka](http://www.culturecongress.eu/videoblog/video/videoblog_ekk_balka).

24 / [http://www.culturecongress.eu/event/trickster\\_balka\\_miroslaw](http://www.culturecongress.eu/event/trickster_balka_miroslaw).

metal tank. Of course the title of the monumental work, *Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen* (2011), directed the viewer's attention to another of its aspects. About this project Balka said: "This is a work about a certain situational discomfort. It's about treating pain. And treatment must begin from identifying that pain, recognizing that it exists."<sup>23</sup> The curator of the exhibition added that the work "plays with the official rituals of memory and territorial identity that are subjected to instrumentalization and sentimentalization, denying what is shameful [and] unpleasant, with celebrations that attempt to veil crippled memories full of impurities, waste, and stains."<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult not to agree with this. It seems, however, that additional meanings of this moving work emerge from the context of the place, as is often the case with this artist. Designed by the famous German architect Hans Poelzig, the Four Domes Pavilion was built in 1913 in what was then Breslau. Sometime after the war and the incorporation of the city into Poland, the pavilion was given to the state-run Feature Films Studio, but after 1989 it experienced a progressive decline. By 2011 the area, housing old chemicals used in developing film, was emitting toxic fumes into the air and one could only enter wearing a protective mask. Some areas bore signs of neglect and devastation, even though the outside of the building still looked imposing. The confrontation of the beautiful facade with the ailing interior brought to mind the proverbial portrait of Dorian Gray, as well as other allegories such as the "poisoned well" or the Freudian processes of repression that prevent the awareness of everything that we hide, deny, so as not to destroy the self-image. This multiplicity of interpretations should not, however, push either the history of the building or the history of Wrocław from one's field of vision. Nor should one lose sight of Balka's interests and the very personal nature of his

creative impetus. The strength of the sensations called forth by both communing with the enormous container placed in the run-down interior, and by the image of the constant stream of dirty water flowing from the pavilion's soaring dome window, acted viscerally upon the viewer.

The habit of reading between the lines of Balka's works makes it difficult to consider their literal aspect, the direct tautological correlation between the work's appearance and its meaning. As has already been mentioned, titles and artist commentary can pull one away from visually perceived reality, and raise doubts about what one has seen. Viewers might have fallen into such a trap with another

25 / Paul Celan, *Glottal Stop*, 60.



*Wege zur Behandlung von Schmerzen*, 2011. Trickster project, The European Culture Congress, Four Domes Pavilion, Wrocław / Breslavia

*TABU*, 2013. *Uni - Me / Uni - Him, Otwarte Miasto / Open City Festival*, Lublin / Lublino

of Balka's works, like the *TABU* mentioned at the outset of this essay, which also involved black water. This stream of water flowed from a window that had been cut out of a windowless gable wall in a former bathhouse in Lublin, Poland. In a seemingly easy, logical way one could have associated it with bathing activities, with clean water becoming dirty. Balka attached, however, a short poem by Paul Celan to this project; indeed, it was an integral element of the composition:

Wet from the world  
the scrapped taboos –  
and all the bordercrossings between them,  
pursuing  
meaning, fleeing  
meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Mirosław Balka's works, actions, and artistic gestures have much in common with Celan's condensed poetry. One can "read" them many times over and ponder their constituent parts – the shape and dimensions of their forms, the multitude of ways of constructing extremely cautious narratives, as well as the visible and invisible stimuli and substances and their reciprocal relations – in the exact same

way as when we read individual words that connect with ambiguous meanings contained in laconic verses written in German by a Romanian Jew living in Paris who hailed from an area around historic Bessarabia. We can, therefore, consider the poem quoted above essential to understanding the nature of the art of this Polish sculptor from Otwock, who uses a language that is clear to inhabitants of the entire world, if they only open themselves to their own sensitivity.