



Mirosław Balka, *Black Pope and Black Sheep*, 1987. Wood, carpet, textile, steel, paint

Balka came to maturity at a time when certain factions in his native Poland, notably elements in the Catholic Church and in Solidarity, the independant trade union, were beginning to confront the repressive Soviet regime that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War. In the mid-1980s he graduated from the conservative Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw with a body of work that obliquely referenced this turbulent socio-political context. A number of related figurative sculptures, that included *Black Pope and Black Sheep*, 1987, soon followed. By the beginning of the Nineties, as a more liberal, democratic climate evolved in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Balka’s work underwent a marked change. An abstract iconography, that related to the body through forms of measurement and proportion, replaced the representational imagery he had formerly favoured. Although space as much as the objects that occupy it now became a primary preoccupation, his abiding concerns have nonetheless remained constant: above all, an acuity to the ways that history shapes and governs the present. Since he

feels the weight of history as an inevitability, his work is imbued with its shifting valencies. “Everyday I walk in the paths of the past”, he said in a recent interview: “Contemporary time does not exist”.<sup>2</sup>

Balka’s bipartite installation was conceived after visits to both the monastery and the museum. In the Edificio Sabatini he has conceived a totally new installation comprised of several components. At Silos he has re-contextualised a formative early work which still remains in his possession some twenty-five years after it was first shown. Visitors access the gallery at the Abbey by descending a small flight of stairs into an antechamber where they see a handle, hanging from the ceiling, but attached to the doorway that leads into the exhibition space proper. That entrance is completely blocked by a dark structure, the backside of what turns out to be a wardrobe. Symbolically if not functionally, the handle becomes a device to access the exhibit beyond. Visitors who push open one of the closet’s two identical doors find themselves on the threshold of a barrel-vaulted room, near the end of which a startling vision appears. A single object, bathed in light, occupies the sombre and otherwise empty chamber: a sculpture of a life-size, seated, black pope accompanied by a black sheep. On closer inspection, the potentate is seen

to be weeping, his tears flowing so copiously as to form a solid stream. Each of these two motifs has a richly layered history. Commonplace in many cultures, the concept of the black sheep fulfils a clearly defined role however various its individual manifestations. Above all, it functions as a scapegoat, the locus through which a tightly-knit community expresses fears and anxieties that otherwise could cause internal dissension. By contrast, the notion of the black pope carries multiple references that derive in part from the context in which it appears. For Balka, this hieratic image is linked to certain prophecies made by the Renaissance seer, Nostradamus, which were widely embraced in Poland in the Eighties as social and political upheaval spread throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> In his singular conception, the potentate who, it is predicted, will appear at the Apocalypse has been transformed from a vengeful to a sorrowing revenant. The juxtaposition of this melancholy icon with the sprightly animal is deeply affecting if, ultimately, enigmatic: mysterious and full of pathos Balka’s variant on these legendary concepts proves less baleful than deeply unsettling.

Key to viewers’ responses to the uncanny duo is their participation in a rite of passage. In order to return to the mundane world outside the monastery, they must re-negotiate the threshold marked by the wardrobe. As they near it, they find themselves confronting their own selves. Reflected in the mirror that separates the closet’s twin doors, their disembodied figures cohabit the spectral realm with Balka’s eerie protagonists: they are an integral component of this dramatic mise-en-scène. Transit back through the wardrobe brings participants once more into contact with the handle hanging just over head- height in the antechamber. From this second vantage point it reads quite differently, for now it seems to offer a means of assistance (though from what remains far from clear): something to grasp at when all else seems in flux. Like the other elements in this charged installation the wardrobe, too, signifies variously. For the artist, it brings to mind the closet used by Anne Frank’s family to conceal the secret place in which they hid from Nazi sympathizers in occupied Amsterdam in the early 1940s. For others, it may conjure references to Alice’s haunting adventures after she passed through the looking glass and found herself in the confounding realm of Wonderland. Its cavernous gloomy interiors may galvanise even earlier childhood memories: nocturnal fears that threaten the fearful child before it succumbs to the welcome oblivion of sleep.

This installation ultimately precludes both narrative parsing and explicit exegesis: the situation viewers encounter at Silos remains as

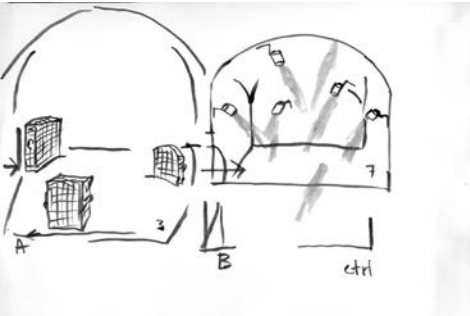
dark figuratively as it is in actuality. As elsewhere in Balka’s practice, his principal tool for the construction of meaning is direct physical engagement overlaid with metaphor and memory. In order to exit, visitors must pass from the gallery into the medieval cloister with its sculptural reliefs depicting such hallowed subjects as the Annunciation and Coronation of the Virgin, Pentecost, the Tree of Jesse, and the Doubting of Saint Thomas. The transition from Balka’s subterranean realm to this luminous courtyard adorned with canonical religious scenes is provocative, not least because it reminds us that the inspirational images we construct as manifestations of our beliefs, desires and aspirations are accompanied by repressed alternates; mordant figurations of fears and terrors that must be engaged if the good and beneficent are to prevail.

At the Museo Reina Sofia, the galleries in the Edificio Sabatini assigned to Balka for the second part of his project resonate with echoes of their former life. Designed in the later eighteenth century as a hospital, this massive stone building was only recently converted into an art museum. During the renovation few changes were made to the architecture of the brick-lined dungeon-like spaces in which psychotic patients had formerly been kept. They consequently resemble the harrowing places in which the insane were incarcerated, en masse, that Goya depicted in several small paintings made shortly after Sabatini’s vaults were first put to use. Memory of their dismal former function springs irresistibly to mind as visitors descend a winding staircase in search of Balka’s project. The first of the pair of galleries occupied by the installation is a large sombre space, empty except for three cage-like structures stuffed with foam which guard the trio of exits. From the doorway opposite the threshold a howling sound emerges. Those who venture into the almost pitch-black space beyond find themselves in a gyre of churning air-currents, and so subject to visceral as well as aural assault. (Tellingly, on one of his sketches limning this space Balka wrote the word ‘Purgatory’.) Formally akin to the repertoire of basic geometric

volumes the artist has employed in much of his work over the past twenty years, these lugubrious structures could effectively seal off Balka’s installation in what is already a quite isolated part of the museum. Confined here most people would quickly succumb to despair, perhaps even madness.

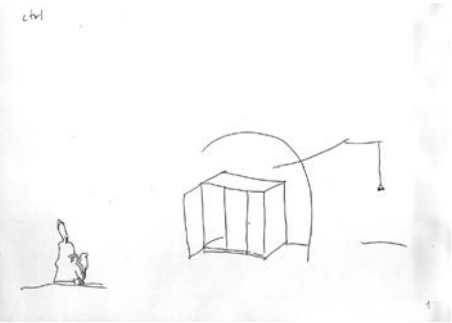
As at Silos, a charged concordance between work and setting establishes the installation’s affective tone, galvanizing an anxious search for meaning. The

Mirosław Balka, *ctrl RS*, 2010. drawing / pencil, paper



<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gregory Salzman, *Mirosław Balka: Gravity*, University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> According to the artist, “Many Poles believed in Nostradamus. Not me, but I felt his breath on my back”, email to author, Lynne Cooke, 2 November 2010.



Miroslaw Balka, *ctrl Silos*, 2010. drawing / pencil, paper

spelling of “ctrl”, Balka’s title for this project, is adopted from computer key boards designed for use in multiple languages: a semiotic shorthand with international currency. Among the many definitions of this impacted concept are the following: the power to influence or direct people’s behaviour or the course of events; the restriction of an activity, tendency or phenomenon; the base from which a system or activity is directed; a member of an intelligence organization who personally directs the activity of a spy; a group or individual used as a standard of comparison for checking the results of a survey or experiment. The purveyor or, alternatively, the recipient of agency or force, “control” connotes both active and passive states, authored and received conditions as subtle shifts in power shade its variously interlinked meanings. In Balka’s theatrical project spectators find themselves at once agent and audience - at one moment exercising, at another becoming subject to - the effects of an unstable and constantly morphing balance of forces that resist definition. Manifest in one instance as spectral visual forms, and in the other as invisible physical vectors, his visionary mise-en-scènes are perhaps best described as fictive constructions, projections that enable us to grapple with phantasms generated by the fraught motions of our susceptible minds. In his essay on an earlier body of Balka’s work, video projections that contain footage shot in the concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, American historian James Young dubbed the artist, whom he sees as “scarred inwardly with the memory of events he never knew”, a “counter-memorialist”.<sup>4</sup> Imbued as they are with very different historic references and traditions, the loaded spaces in Silos and Madrid are fundamentally unlike the death-ridden Polish camps; yet Young’s term has a certain applicability to Balka’s Spanish project. In these venerable contexts he has made evident the fact that since history can neither be avoided, nor securely grasped, it is best addressed obliquely. Through their refusal not only to fix, but even to name, those forces which lurk darkly on the edge of our awareness as we engage these charged sites, his ambiguous strategies prove potent. Wresting control from the spectres that threaten our rational minds, we mentally press RESET.

<sup>4</sup> “Every fixed memorial and museum carries within it the authoritarian logic it would have us commemorate, mandating how to think about the past how to remember it”, writes James E. Young. (“Miroslaw Balka’s Graves in the Sky”, *Miroslaw Balka: Topography*, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford, 2009, p. 182).

Miroslaw Balka  
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**Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos**  
26 November 2010 to 25 April 2011

**Sala de Bóvedas Sabatini building**  
26 November 2010 to 20 February 2011

**Text by Lynne Cooke**

**Images**  
Courtesy of Miroslaw Balka

**www.museoreinasofia.es**  
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Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Santa Isabel, 52  
**Nouvel building**  
Plaza del Emperador  
Carlos V, s/n  
28012 Madrid

Tel. 91 774 10 00  
Fax 91 774 10 56

**Museum hours**  
Monday to Saturday  
from 10.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m.  
Sundays  
from 10.00 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.  
Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes  
prior to Museum closing

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**Abbey hours**  
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and from 4.30 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.  
Sundays and holydays  
2.30 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.  
Closed Mondays

Please check websites for  
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Sometimes in the form of solace, sometimes as a burden, history imprints itself indelibly on all who visit the Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos. A seat of the Benedictine Order since the tenth century, this medieval monastery offers religious services to the public daily, beginning with Matins at 6 a.m., and ending with Compline at 9.40 p.m. In addition, a small museum housing the institution’s treasures, a traditional pharmacy, and the celebrated Romanesque cloister are also open to viewers. In such a venerable ecclesiastical setting, a gallery dedicated to the display of contemporary art might strike an anomalous note. Yet artists commissioned by the Museo Reina Sofia to make site-related projects here have proven acutely sensitive to its religious and cultural context.<sup>1</sup> Miroslaw Balka’s contribution to this series of shows is no exception. What distinguishes his invitation to take part in the Reina Sofia’s contemporary art program at the Abbey from previous commissions is that it is two-pronged. His project has been designed to straddle dual sites: the modest gallery in Silos, and a little known exhibition space, called Sala de Bóvedas, within the museum’s principal venue, the Edificio Sabatini in Madrid.

<sup>1</sup> Beginning with Susan Philipsz in 2008, this series of commissions has resulted in shows by Pedro G. Romero, Tacita Dean and Ibon Aranberri.

