MIROSŁAW BALKA

control

“Black Pope and Black Sheep” (1987)

PLACE AND DATES: Abadía de Sto. Domingo de Silos (26 November 2010-25 April 2011)
Edificio Sabatini, Bóvedas (26 November 2010-20 February 2011)

CURATED BY: Lynne Cooke

ORGANIZED BY: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía with the collaboration of Instituto Polaco de Cultura, la Cámara de Comercio e Industria de Burgos and la Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos

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Sometimes in the form of solace, sometimes as a burden, history imprints itself on all those 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 daily to the public at TK and Vespers. In addition, a small museum housing the institution’s treasures, a traditional pharmacy, and the institution’s 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. However, artists commissioned by the Museo Reina Sofia to make site-related projects for this freighted venue have proven acutely sensitive to its religious and cultural context. Miroslaw Balka’s contribution to this series of shows is no exception. What distinguished his invitation to take part in the Reina Sofia’s contemporary art program at the Abbey is that it is two-pronged. A companion piece, conceived in tandem with the project in Silos, was requested for presentation at the Museum’s principal venue, the Edificio Sabatini in Madrid.

Balka came to maturity at a time when certain factions in his native Poland, notably elements in the Catholic Church and in Solidarity, the principal 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, including 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 thereafter became a primary preoccupation, his abiding concerns nonetheless remained constant: above all, his acuity to the ways that history shapes and governs the present. Since he feels the weight of history as an inevitability, his work is consequently 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”.

Balka’s bipartite installation, “ctrl", was conceived after visits to both the monastery and the museum. At Silos he has recontextualised a formative early work which still remains in his possession some twenty five years after it was first shown. On descending the stairs in the antechamber to the gallery visitors see a handle hanging from the ceiling but attached to the doorway that leads into the exhibition space proper. A dark structure, the backside of what turns out to be a wardrobe, completely blocks the entrance; symbolically if not functionally, the handle becomes a device to access to the exhibit beyond. Visitors who push open one of the closet’s two identical doors find themselves on the threshold of a dark barrel-vaulted room, near the end of which a startling vision appears. A single object, bathed in light, occupies the otherwise empty room: a life size sculpture, it depicts a 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 motif has a richly layered history. Prevalent in many cultures, the concept of the black sheep fulfills 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. However, in his singular conception the potentate who appears at Armaggedon is transformed from a vengeful to a sorrowing revenant. The juxtaposition of this melancholy icon with the sprightly animal proves deeply affecting if, ultimately, enigmatic: mysterious and full of pathos Balka’s variant on a legendary concept proves less baleful than deeply unsettling. Key to viewers’ responses to this uncanny sight 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, where they now find themselves confronted by their own images - their reflections caught in the mirror that separates the closet’s two doors. Disembodied figures, they cohabit this spectral realm with Balka’s uncanny protagonists, they are an integral part of its 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. 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, may be read in diverse ways. 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 further childhood memories: nocturnal fears that threaten the fearful child before it succumbs to the welcome oblivion of sleep.

Balka’s installation precludes both narrative parsing and explicit exegesis. As elsewhere in his practice, his principal tool for the construction of meaning is direct physical engagement overlaid with metaphor and memory: the situation viewers enter at Silos is as dark figuratively as it is in actuality. After leaving the gallery visitors must pass through the medieval cloister with its sculptural reliefs depicting such hallowed subjects as the Ascension of the Virgin, Pentecost, the Tree of Jesse, and the Doubting of Saint Thomas, on their way to the exit. The transition from Balka’s subterranean realm to this luminous courtyard decorated with canonical religious scenes is provocative: it reminds us that the inspirational images we construct as manifestations of our beliefs, desires and aspirations have 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 a series of small studies 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 installation. The first room they enter is a large sombre space, empty except for three cage-like structures stuffed with foam. Each lugubrious object has been precisely scaled to the dimensions of the exit it guards. From the largely obscured 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 a 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 three massive structures could be used to seal the room. Confinement here could quickly induce despair, even madness. As at Silos, a charged concordance between work and setting establishes the installation’s affective tone, galvanizing an anxious search for meaning.

“Ctrl” is the title Balka chose for this project. Semiotic shorthand with international currency, its spelling reflects the format displayed on computer key boards designed for use in multiple languages. Among the many definitions of the 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, ctrl connotes both the active and passive, directed and received: subtle shifts in power shade the variously interlinked meanings of this richly inflected term. 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 ultimately remains indefinable. Manifest in one instance as spectral visual forms, and in the other as invisible physical vectors, his visionary installations 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 contained 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”. 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, nonetheless Young’s term has a certain applicability to Balka’s project here too. In these venerable Spanish contexts he has made evident the fact that since history can neither be avoided, nor securely grasped, it is perhaps best addressed obliquely. Through their refusal to fix, or even name, those forces which lurk darkly on the edge of our awareness as we enter these charged sites, his ambiguous strategies prove potent. Wresting control from the spectres that threaten our rational minds, we press RESET.

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