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KASIA REDZISZ

NERVE:
TOUCHING THE
INFRATHIN SKIN
OF MIROSŁAW BAŁKA'S
SCULPTURES

*For it would seem — her case proved it — that we write,
not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The
nerve, which controls the pen, winds itself about every
fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver.*

— Virginia Woolf¹

The Road (2014), a schematic drawing by Mirosław Bałka occupying twenty-eight pages of standard A4 paper, is a simple, yet precise, illustration of the path of his artistic career. Spindly, fragile lines drawn with a blue ballpoint pen reveal a swift working process. For all its apparent spontaneity, the sketch belies a deeper diligence. The lines compose a list of all the exhibitions and events featuring the artist's works between the years 1984 and 2013. The titles and dates of shows appear in chronological order, and, accompanying this inventory, are small sketchy images of works that have appeared in the exhibitions listed. Disarming in its dry, analytical character, the diagram constitutes a condensed, meticulous professional autobiography. It charts experiments, breakthroughs, and ideas developed in search of an artistic *modus operandi*, which, with time, came to be marked by a stark economy of means, a focus on personal experience, and a preoccupation with history. Perhaps most of all, in its rigidly defined, highly linear narrative, *The Road* speaks of Bałka's discipline and clarity of thought.

Bałka's extraordinary oeuvre includes numerous figurative and abstract sculptures, a range of site-specific commissions, a number of short videos, and countless works on paper — primarily drawings. This heterodox practice is united by a minimalist formal syntax combined with a vast lexicon of metaphoric materials.² Ever since Bałka entered the mainstream of the international art circuit in the early 1990s, his works have not only been prominently featured in prestigious exhibitions and collections, but they have been the subjects of critiques, polemics, arguments, and dialogues generated by a range of critics, curators, art historians, and philosophers. In the constellation of references associated with his work, giants of European literary Modernism like Beckett, Joyce, and Celan appear frequently; such parallels are drawn with an intense solemnity that positions Bałka as a messenger-angel of the utmost gravitas, weeping at the borders of a ravaged continent desperately trying to wring coherence from the anguish and absurdity of the universe. Such interpretations, while touching on important themes in Bałka's work, perhaps miss the subtlety and tenderness that some of his more quietly sophisticated pieces embody.

For example, what do such voices make of a work like *Smile* (2005), a sculpture composed of a plastic bottle-cap, a needle, and a wafer?

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

— Marcel Duchamp¹⁵

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

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

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

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

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

All these things have a background that is not visible.

— Marcel Duchamp²⁵

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| 1 Nathalie Sarraute, <i>Here</i> (New York, George Braziller Inc., 1997, originally published as <i>Ici</i> , Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1995), p. 17. | 6 Quoted in a conversation with Rafał Jakubowicz in "Foot-operated Boring Machine," <i>Piktogram</i> , no. 7, 2007 [pp. 90–105], p. 92. |
| 2 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015. | 7 Conversation with Jacob Samuel, 16 December 2016. |
| 3 Mirosław Bałka, <i>RMMBRNC</i> (Tel Aviv, Dvir Gallery, 2015), frontispiece. | 8 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015. |
| 4 Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Place in Spite of Oneself, in Spite of Itself (Fragments)," in <i>Mirosław Bałka. Ctrl.</i> ; exhib. cat. by Lynne Cooke, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Zbigniew Herbert (Madrid, Museo Reina Sofia, 2010–2011), pp. 63–64. | 9 <i>Mirosław Bałka: Die Rampe</i> , exhib. cat. Van Abbemuseum, by Jan Debbaut, Selma Klein Essink, Jaromir Jedliński, Maria Morzuch, and Anda Rotenberg (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, and Łódź, Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), p. 64. |
| 5 <i>The Unilever Series: Mirosław Bałka: How It Is</i> , Tate Modern, Turbine Hall, London (13 October 2009–6 April 2010). | 10 Conversation with the artist, 15 November 2015. |
| | 11 <i>The Unilever Series: Mirosław Bałka: How It Is</i> , ed. Helen Sainsbury, with contributions by Zygmunt |











