

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Fisun Güner, "Miroslaw Balka, Tate Modern & Modern Art Oxford," *The Arts Desk*, 16 Dec 2009.

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Miroslaw Balka: 'Pond', video still (2003)

Miroslaw Balka

Walk into the gaping mouth of the metal container featured in Miroslaw Balka's installation at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and you are plunged into a disorientating darkness. Unnerved, you shuffle forward, passing and perhaps finding comfort in the ghostly presence of other limbs, other bodies which are also shuffling uncertainly, all awareness of spatial relationships denied in the enveloping blackness.

Balka, a Polish artist born 13 years after the end of the Second World War, has become known as a Holocaust artist. He mines personal memories of growing up in post-war Warsaw, and mixes these with pieces quietly, allusively suggestive of the horrors of the death camps on Polish soil. Bearing this in mind, all sorts of hellish, existential associations can bubble up while we shuffle nervously, unseeing and disembodied, inside the Turbine's metal container.

But one can also feel the nervous thrill of the scary fairground "tunnel of death", because, depending on who you're sharing the container with, you encounter the experience in solemn, reverential silence, or amid excited whispers and the glint of waving mobile phones. It's a risky business showing in a popular art venue where crowds and school groups gather. And as with much contemporary art, this work's effectiveness is more a case of what you, and others around you, bring to it, rather than what it immediately brings to you.

And yet *Here It Is* remains the least perplexing and obtuse of all of Balka's previous works. One certainly feels perplexed by his latest major installation, *Topography*, at Modern Art Oxford. There are many disparate elements, all of which, added together, create a sense of chaos and confusion.

Pictured below: *Carrousel*, video still (2004), courtesy of the artist

In the first gallery four huge video screens occupy each of the four walls. The same scene, of snow, and low huts, and branches of trees, spin before you. Each of the screens play the same looped footage, though not simultaneously. Though there is no explanatory text on the walls to guide the casual visitor, the footage shows the bleak winter landscape



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of Majdanek camp, one of the first camps to be liberated. Balka took the footage while literally spinning round with a handheld camera. Standing in the middle of the room one quickly feels dizziness, and then a rising sense of nausea. Perhaps Balka's suggestion is that we can never entirely capture and grasp the horrors of what happened beyond the barbed wire fence. Or perhaps that nausea is the only appropriate response.



In another part of the gallery, three screens placed flat on the floor show a mottled concrete floor being violently whipped. All one can see and hear is the whoosh and smack of the whip as it strikes, and indeed the floor looks like mottled flesh. It's possible that Balka wants to address suffering, cruelty and violence in general terms, and not just that meted out in a specific time and place. Who knows? The final room, in which we are confronted by a cacophony of sounds and images that seem to add up to very little at all, blurs your focus even further.

Below: *Bambi (Winterreise)*, (2003), courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York



Two large-scale projections, one of deer looking for food in a snow-laden landscape and one of a frozen pond, were both shot in Auschwitz. The idea presumably is that the fact of shooting there lends weight and meaning to whatever the artist seeks to say. In the same room, grainy footage of a small, wind-up toy frenziedly whirring about and bumping into a wall, is almost impossible to make out. There are further

projections: an image of a wooden pallet is flash lit every few seconds; dense, grey fog is projected onto another, overhead, screen; elsewhere the number 4 comes in and out of focus.

You only find out by reading the catalogue that this last image relates to Claude Lanzmann's Holocaust documentary, *Shoah*, and to the number of camp inmates that may or may not have died. The figure one former guard recalls begins with four. But without that reference you're left clueless. Meanwhile, that constant soundtrack of voices and loud mechanical whirs and clicks deepen the impression that this is an installation grasping at a meaning whose associations and connections remain elusive.

*Topography continues at Modern Art Oxford until 5 April. Admission is free.*