Interview

Art to atone for our sins

Polish artist Miroslaw Balka explains the possibilities and problems of being known as a "Holocaust" artist

By Louisa Buck

Miroslaw Balka at Tate Modern and, right, his installation for the Turbine Hall which he says may scare you at first but not for long

Miroslaw Balka is the tenth artist to be commissioned to make work for Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall and his giant steel container, entitled *How It Is*, after the bleakly purgatorial Samuel Beckett novel, has been widely acclaimed as one of the most successful projects to occupy this most challenging of spaces. Balka, who was born in Warsaw in 1958, is renowned for work which, while often minimal in appearance, is always highly personal in origin and makes evocative and sometimes unsettling use of materials ranging from concrete and steel to ash, salt, wine and human hair. When he represented Poland in the 1993 Venice Biennale, his contribution included a corridor made of soap and paving slabs heated to body temperature. This month, Modern Art Oxford is mounting an exhibition of Balka's less well known video works, some of which were shot at the sites of the death camps close to where he grew up and which add another dimension to his explorations of history and memory, both personal and collective.

***The Art Newspaper*: When you first saw *How It Is* completed and in situ in the Turbine Hall, did it surprise you in any way?**

Miroslaw Balka: Not really, but it could have turned out very badly if the result hadn't been like I expected. This was why it was such a stressful experience—because there is no maquette or visualisation that could tell you anything about this piece; it is very much about experience and first it had to be my experience. First you have this visual adventure but then you have a body adventure and a mind adventure: this is what a good work of art should be. I think the important point is that you shouldn't be afraid. There is a moment when [you're inside] and it looks very dark and very black, then you begin to see again…And this is how life is: you meet a stranger who first you don't know and after some time this person can be your best friend. The relationship with a work of art in some ways is like a relationship with another human being.

TAN: I like the story that an early prototype for *How It Is* was a small steel box which had lain in the courtyard of your studio for many years. You later discovered it was a steriliser for surgical instruments.

MB: It was the first model, in a way. When I went to my old studio, I noticed this thrown-away object and I brought it to my new studio and placed it in the middle of the table and I brought it back to life. However, it was not the first departure point: first I came to the concept of the black box and then I found this other box. It was not like I took the box and I thought: "Wow! Maybe this would be a good project for the Tate." The process was a little bit different. I made a lot of different sketches and proposals which I sent to Vicente [Todoli, director, Tate Modern]—and he motivated me more and more. I also analysed the [Turbine Hall projects] that had come before mine because I thought I would be wasting energy to do something that was similar to the projects that had already been done…so I knew that I couldn't make anything with sound, or with light. I spent a few months thinking: "What can I do?" It was so stressful—I had a lot of completely different ideas. Then finally after a year-and-a-half, after discussion, discussion, discussion, it came to the point of: "Lets do it!" But the box was an important element, because when I found it again I knew that it was a good sign for the project, and I believe in things like this, that life gives you signs.

TAN: It seems very important that your work is rooted in your own physical reality, in objects that have a personal resonance for you. I understand that in your studio you have a bath full of clay scavenged from your old art school, bags full of pine needles from old Christmas trees. This personal specificity seems crucial to you.

MB: I believe that you cannot split art from life and life from art. I have always been afraid of changing my artistic activity to the factory, of producing goods branded with the sign of "Miroslaw Balka", because I don't want to lose this private side of the process. I don't have assistants, I always communicate directly with curators. I think that we have one life and we have to take responsibility for this life.

TAN: One of your studios is the family house where you grew up.

MB: Yes, but this just came about in a natural way because my grandmother died and the house was given to me and to my sister. I had some money at that time so I paid my sister and said, OK, I will take it as a studio. So it wasn't any kind of strategy.

TAN: But it obviously suits you, because you continue to work there.

MB: Yes, and in some ways I have become the prisoner of this house. If I hadn't got this house my art would probably have gone a different way, maybe better, maybe worse—who knows? It is

like a throat which describes the dimensions of the work: I can't swallow bigger things, there are the limits of the doors, the entrance, the limits of history. Actually I like limits very much, I think limits are very important—they are much more creative in a way. Artists can create more interesting situations with limits rather than with possibilities. Possibilities always bring problems. For example, the possibilities of the Turbine Hall—there are so many possibilities and then you have to find the narrow throat through which you are able to metabolise.

TAN: More recently the other places which have featured in your work are the death camps Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek. Before World War II, 75% of the population of your home town Otwock near Warsaw was Jewish and virtually all perished in Treblinka. When you discovered this, did it become something that you couldn't ignore?

MB: Of course I knew about these places, but I didn't connect them with the history of the place where I grew up. Since 1989, step by step, the closed, hidden pages of the history of Poland have been opened and I discovered about [Otwock] at the beginning of the 1990s. It was a process which took time, and which is still taking place. I bought my first video camera in 1998 and this was a good moment for me to make this pilgrimage. For me filming is a process where I feel a bit shy, taking a camera into these places. Before 1998 video cameras were too big, and this was the first time you could hide one in your pocket, so for me it was a very important moment. I have a feeling that some of these places will disappear quite soon—and with my sculpture, I collect things. I believe that I can take care of the memory of these places in a work of art. As an artist I feel I can perhaps say something in a better way than even a very well-educated historian, because then [the history] just lies on the archive shelves in books which nobody reads. I have a feeling that now I have very good knowledge in this matter so I think that I should use this knowledge. For me it is a kind of a personal penance, in some way I feel guilty.

TAN: But these events took place before you were born.

MB: The fact that nobody in my family spoke of these things–I think it is a shame for them, not for me, but maybe I have to do something to clean this. Maybe I am responsible in some way for the sins of the family, the silence of the family? Perhaps that's why I am beating the floor in [the series of films called] "Flagellare".

TAN: How important is it that we know the source of these short films? Do we need to know that the deer in *Bambi* are foraging for food on the site of Auschwitz?

MB: For me the process, the pilgrimage of going to these places was much more important than the images which I took there. It's always a problem to find the right balance and probably at the beginning I said too much [about this]. I should have kept this more secret. My work is always about layers, so yes, it can be [Auschwitz], but in the 10th or the 11th layer. But because of the tragic nature of this subject it always comes out on the top. So it is quite hard for me now because I seem to have turned out to be this Holocaust artist which was not my intention. I think I am an artist working in the field of memory, but because of the power of these elements I cannot stay clean. But I have a feeling that I have almost completed a mission, I'm very close to a point when I can walk away, I'm close to the last station.

TAN: Did you conceive the exhibition of your film works in Oxford to complement the Turbine Hall?

MB: First I got the Turbine Hall—you are invited two years in advance—and Oxford came a year later. But when I was invited by Oxford I still didn't know what I was going to do for the Turbine Hall. Then, when I knew what I was going to do for Tate, I said that I would do the film and video projections in Oxford. I thought it would also be quite interesting for people to see the work at Tate and then go to Oxford where they can come out of the darkness of the black box into these rooms which have more light and moving images. This is also my personal territory because it has been a long process getting out of this project which took so much energy and stress, so I, too, am coming out into the light. ■

Mirosław Bałka's commission "How It Is" for the Unilever Series in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern runs until 5 April and the artist's solo exhibition at Modern Art Oxford is on show from 12 December-7 March 2010

Biography

Born: 1958, Warsaw, Poland **Education:** Academy of Fine Arts Warsaw **Lives and works:** Warsaw **Selected solo shows:** **2008** National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh **2007** Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin **2006** K21, Düsseldorf **2004** Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg, France **2001** SMAK, Ghent **2000** The National Museum of Art, Osaka

Deer forage for food at Auschwitz in a still from Bałka's film *Bambi*