

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jakubowicz, Rafal, "Foot – operated boring machine", Piktogram, No. 7, 2007, pg. 90 – 105.

FOOT-OPERATED BORING MACHINE

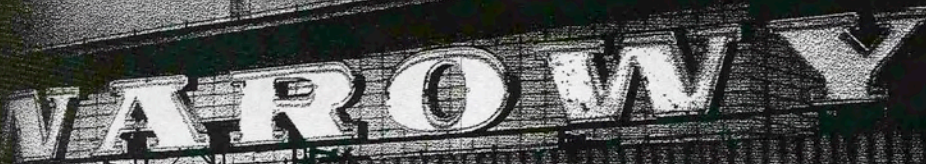
**Mirosław Bałka in conversation
with Rafał Jakubowicz**



GLADSTONE GALLERY

The context of Otwock, the town where he grew up, is very important for the reception of Mirosław Bałka's works. In the early 1990s his family home became his studio. In his art Bałka related to both the dimensions of this house and the particular materials found in it (wood, lino, ash, etc.). At present, the artist is moving to a new, more comfortable studio. What will happen to the house on Łukasińskiego street in Otwock?

Bałka usually uses the term 'sculpture' with reference to his works, distancing himself from the term 'installation'. Recently, however, he expresses himself more and more using the language of video. In his individual exhibition *Lichtzwang* in K21 Kunstsammlung Norderhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf he presented only video works, among others *BlueGasEyes* (2004) — the film showing a blue flame in the burner of a gas cooker. Many of his works are accompanied by a shadow of the Second World War; in one way or the other disturbing connotations arise...



TOWAROWY

Dom Towarowy w Otwocku/ Department store in Otwock.
Photo: Adam Johann, Andrzej Zborski, 1975

GLADSTONE GALLERY

The Otwock line

- Rafał Jakubowicz** You are a graduate of the Nucleonic Technical School in Otwock, the so called 'Nucleonic'. Why the choice?
- Miroslaw Bałka** I went to the 'Nucleonic' because it was the only technical school in Otwock. My parents believed a boy should go to a technical school rather than to a grammar school, even though I wasn't interested in technology. On the other hand, aged fifteen I didn't really know what I wanted to do. So, just like Jacek and Tadek, my friends from a few streets away, I went to the Nucleonic School, where at first I was a rather poor student. I got F grades in physics and chemistry [laughs], the fundamental subjects in that school. But later I pulled myself together. Besides I was a high-jumper. That interested me the most at the time.
- RJ** Later, when you worked at the Nuclear Research Institute, you reportedly made illustrations for a magazine called *Rezonans*.
- MB** The 'Nucleonic' educated technicians for the Nuclear Research Institute in nearby Świerk. I landed there a year after completing the school, after I failed my entry exams to the Academy of Physical Education. Thank God I didn't get in [laughs]. I worked in the drawing studio. I spent much of my time walking around the institute and attending the editorial meetings of the Institute's periodical, the *Rezonans*, with which I was invited to collaborate by Mr. Jerzy Zandberg, my high school teacher. The majority of the engineers who taught at the 'Nucleonic' also worked at the Institute. I would get a text and make pen-and-ink illustrations for it. They were the only images in the magazine. Beside them, very rarely poor-quality photographs were featured. One of my drawings was published in the satirical magazine *Szpilki*, I think it was 1979. I spent less than a year working there. Then I was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts.
- RJ** You said once that the reality seen from the windows of the Otwock-Warsaw commuter train was more intriguing and inspiring to you than, for instance, *arte povera*. Is that because it is 'authentic'? You also said that art history was less important for you than your personal experiences and the context of the places to which you were, and are, attached.
- MB** The reality seen from the train windows is very inspiring. I mean, it was. Poland has been changing. The experience of poverty, visual disability, always inspired me. It seemed close to me in a way. There are fewer and fewer such places. But they are still there. Recently I made a bike trip to the Decennial Stadium, the site of the so-called Europa Market. Have you ever been there?
- RJ** Sure, it's my favourite spot in Warsaw.
- MB** Things really start looking interesting there around 5 pm when they start folding the stalls, cleaning the place. The empty spaces, the waste, the crates, boxes, hangers, racks, tables. Fortunately, visually intriguing places are still there to be found. I've always thought them to be more authentic than a soot-blackened wall by Jannis Kounellis or even Mario Merz's igloo. They simply seemed authentic to me in their actual existence. Especially since no one moves them anywhere. They are born and die right where we encounter them. Art history didn't matter to me as a source of inspiration. Still, before I was admitted to the Academy of Fine Art, I studied it intensely. I read Alpatov twice [laughs]. I read almost all the books of the Nefretete series on historical styles in art. They were very interesting. I thought I knew art history quite well, from prehistoric times to Marcel Duchamp, futurism or dadaism, or even pop art and East Coast abstractionism. So I had some background. But the direct inspiration for me always came from the existing reality rather than from art history. I started making art not to dialogue with Marcel Duchamp but to dialogue with myself in the given situation. In the process, because of the tools used, that also became a dialogue with art history.
- RJ** In the catalogue of your 2001 Zachęta National Gallery exhibition you showed a number of photographs presenting the context of Otwock. Those pictures were a kind of visual self-commentary on the exhibition. They showed, among other things, the Primary School no. 4, the one that was also attended by Hanna Krall, something she mentions in the short story *Dom* (Home) from her collection *Tam już nie ma żadnej rzeki* (There, There Won't Be Another River, 2000).
- MB** Those photographs were featured in the catalogue only and they weren't of 'artistic' nature. I drove around Otwock trying to remember emotional situations from the past. I made them on some winter day during an hour or an hour and half. The primary school? My first experience — in fact, it was the first photo in the catalogue. It was built before the war, in 1935. It was designed by Waclaw Szpakowski, whose works are in the collection of, among other things, the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.
- RJ** Then there is a photo called *The Chapel*.
- MB** The chapel was an important element of my everyday life. That's where religion classes were held and — before the church was built — where the Sunday service

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Miroslaw Bałka „Świder” / Świder river, 2001



Miroslaw Bałka „Kino” / The Cinema, 2001

took place, from which I often bunked off. And because I was afraid to go back home early – I walked the nearby streets around the chapel, waiting for mass to come to an end. Then I joined the crowd leaving the chapel and I went back home [laughs].

RJ There is also a picture called *The Church*.

MB The church is architecturally problematic. The congregation chose a model that was exhibited in the chapel. There were two models and people were asked to decide. Or perhaps there was only one and it was the priest who made the decision? [laughs]. I no longer remember. In any case, the church is completely ‘exaggerated’. I attended several Sunday masses there as a boy. It was really cold inside. A very ‘cool’ interior.

RJ There is also a photograph called *The Dentist* – it’s probably the house of Osher Perechodnik, the father of Calel Perechodnik, a member of the Otwock ghetto police and author of the shocking book *Am I a Murderer?* It seems to be the same place, but I’m not sure.

MB Yes, it was the same house, on the corner of Kościelna street. When I was a boy, a dentist had her practice there. It was an era when lights often went out in Otwock. Power was cut off because the factories needed it [laughs]. The dentist had a foot-operated bore machine. A horror. The visits there were a traumatic childhood experience. There were no anaesthetics, everything was done ‘raw’, with the slowly revolving burr. I also remember a glass display case in the waiting room that fascinated me. It was a 50x50x30 cm box, and inside were highly realistic dolls of a patient in the chair and a dentist. I know she got it from children who made it for her

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mirosław Bałka „Iwona”, 2001



Mirosław Bałka „Stacja” / Railway station, 2001

- at school. It's interesting that there still is a dental practice in that house. Surely not the same lady, but the practice has survived.
- RJ** There is also a picture of the river Świder, taken from the bridge.
- MB** The river was the sole destination of summertime excursions. And also a place of maturation, where the various 'gangs' fought. Young males fighting for domination [laughs]. So it was a rather serious place. In the summer, it was almost like a backyard, because most of my friends spent the summer break in Otwock, so we all 'paddled' in the shallow waters of the Świder. Once, when I was twelve or thirteen, I almost drowned. It was winter. We were walking on ice and suddenly the ice gave way under me and I started drowning. All my friends ran away [laughs]. At that moment, I experienced a sense of existential loneliness. I went home completely soaked. There was panic that I'd get pneumonia. Those days, pneumonia was an almost deadly threat. Medicine wasn't where it is today. The nearest doctor was somewhere, who knows where... Drying myself, I read Ludwik Jerzy Kern's *Proszę słoniu* (Please, Mr. Elephant) [laughs]. The Świder was another traumatic experience. I wrote a text about it that was published in a HCAK brochure in The Hague in 1988.
- RJ** Then there is the *Department Store*, *The Pavilions*, and also two *Libraries*.
- MB** Well yes, the library was important. There were no books at home, except the *Pocket A-Z Encyclopaedia* and the *Tygrys* [Tiger] series books, which I didn't read. The *Tygrys* books were...
- RJ** Yes, I remember.
- MB** You do? Ever since I borrowed my first book from the library, the pre-war comic book

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Awantury i wybryki malej małpki Fiki Miki [Adventures and Frolics of the Little Monkey], I spent a lot of time in libraries. There are two libraries in Otwock. One beyond the railway tracks — at the far end of town. The other one was later moved to the very centre of Otwock, to a more modern neighbourhood. I spent a lot of time there, borrowing books. I often didn't read them at all but I simply liked to rummage through them, to look inside. All the books in the library had brown-paper wrappings and were signed with ink. Visually, they were all very similar. You had to take each book from the shelf, open it, browse through it. I also spent a lot of time in the reading room, where they had plenty of colour magazines on display. My parents lived on a tight budget. They bought me magazines like *Świat Młodych*, but for more ambitious periodicals, like *Panorama*, there was simply no money. In the reading room, they also had periodicals in annual bound volumes. All those colour magazines bound in dark brown-grey cardboard. The bookbinder's position was different then that it is today, wasn't it? [laughs] There was something magical in that. The library was a very positive experience for me. And the department stores. Modern architecture in the very centre of Otwock. I spent a lot of time in my childhood years watching shop windows or newsagent displays. I could stand there and analyse, devour those displays with my eyes. There was more empty space on the shelves those days, because there were less goods than today. Less newspapers and magazines but more small objects like perfume or ball pens. They were also exhibited in a different way. Today, the newsagent's booth is 'overloaded' with colour, and those days you had glass shelves on which those small objects were displayed. I didn't know at the time I'd become an artist. But today I think that my experience in terms of how things should be exhibited [laughs] was gained precisely by watching the window displays, chiefly of newsagents but also of department stores. Goods at the department stores were also displayed in a different manner than in today's shopping centres. Bottom line, there were less products. I remember a display of the portraits of the late Vietnamese leader Hồ Chí Minh. There was a portrait of his in virtually every shop window. I don't remember which year he died. I think it was the early 1970s, in any case before the peace agreement of 1976. Department stores were a place where you went to watch the window displays.

- RJ** There is also a picture called *The Okaes*, or OKS, the Otwock Sports Club. As well as one called *The High Jump*, showing something like a small sports stadium.
- MB** I had a sports episode when I studied at the Nucleonic Technical School. Sport totally occupied my time. Five, maybe six training sessions a week. I was a high-jumper. Because of that I didn't drink, didn't smoke. Lived a healthy life. At first, my results weren't impressive — I started at 1.50 m. But then I jumped — I don't remember precisely, I give a different figure to everyone — but between 2.05 and 2.07 m. I have to check that. In any case, I ended up as the champion of Warsaw in the lower junior or junior category. Later, after I completed my education at the Nucleonic School, sport disappeared from my life, was wiped out, just like that. I no longer had the motivation. But it was quite an important experience. High jump is an extremely individualistic discipline. The moment of concentration, run-up, run, take-off, the moment the body goes over the bar. This resembles the situation when you 'walk around' some problem, trying to crack it, thinking. The moment of execution itself is but a fraction of the process. I think the high jump experience was a guiding element, an 'egoistic' one [laughs], not a teamwork one.
- RJ** Then the *WKU*, or the Army Conscription Office.
- MB** Yes. That was a horror. At the first 'pre-selection', when I was 17 or 18, I was so dumb as to admit I had a driver's licence and could swim. As a result, they assigned me to the military police, or the WSW, so they were bidding their time somewhere. The conscription was carried out in alphabetical order [laughs]. Every autumn and spring those 'announcements' were put up — their form hasn't changed to this day, they look as ominous today as they did then — I was trembling with fear. After I completed the Nucleonic School I was afraid — especially as I didn't get into the Academy of Physical Education — that I'd be drafted. That was a time of fear. The army seemed to me the last place I'd like to be. Besides, the context of the brutality and stupidity of the officers and of the whole conscription board. Utter absurdity...
- RJ** ...a sense of powerlessness in confrontation with the bureaucratic army machine...
- MB** At the same time, many of my peers wanted to join because the army would teach them some profession: a bulldozer operator or a truck driver. That appealed to them. For me, however, with my different sensitivity and a different understanding of the world, that was something I experienced as being directed against me. I was really scared like hell. Fortunately, I met a friendly doctor and I managed to somehow avoid being drafted until the moment I was admitted to the academy [laughs]. Funny thing, had I completed the academy a year later, I'd have been drafted, because they took everyone from the sculpture department, for a year. Our class avoided that — still, I have the rank of a 'private of the reserve' [laughs]. But

GLADSTONE GALLERY

when I think I could have landed there... I recently met a guy who complained to me that he couldn't make a career as an artist because right upon completing his studies he was drafted [laughs]. Basically, they didn't take the 'artistic professions' because they regarded them as deviated individuals who'd be useless in the army. Except musicians, who played in the military bands. The WKU office moved from place to place. There is only one picture in the catalogue but there were three different places. I chose the last one. When I was taking the picture, a soldier suddenly emerged from the building. As soon as he saw me photographing the 'strategic facility', he started running towards me. Really sprinted. I drove away, didn't wait...

- RJ There is also one called *The Cinema*.
- MB The Promyk cinema. A pre-war building. Unfortunately, after 1989 it was handed back to the heirs of its former owner. They opened a pawn shop there, some strange activities. Cinema was important. I went there almost every week. The repertoire was rather 'weekend-oriented'. The movie selection was quite interesting. I saw Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* there, for instance. Besides that, many westerns. Two I never got to see, they turned me back at the door. Those days they still cared about the age ratings [laughs]. Cinema was an element of weekend entertainment — going to the movies. There were two rooms. Today Otwock has a population close to 40,000 and there's no cinema. This, I think, is a serious mistake on the part of the city council. To go to the movies, you have to make the trip to Warsaw. Otwock is turning into just a bedroom.
- RJ There is a picture, one of the more puzzling ones, which shows an ordinary apartment block and is called *Iwona*. Why?
- MB *Iwona* was my first girlfriend. We went out for five years, from 1975 to 1980. The photo shows the house where she lived. It is a place I visited almost every day for five years.
- RJ The last picture seems symbolic — it is *The Station*, a railway station. You can leave Otwock, but you also go back there.
- MB Yes. A 'departure point'. When I studied, that's where I boarded the train to Warsaw. A place of everyday trips, departures and returns. A building from the mid-1930s. That is when the Warsaw-Otweek connection was launched. So 'direction Otweek' was the most civilised direction from Warsaw.
- RJ You often use the term 'Otweek line' as a kind of identification with the place.
- MB Identification with a 'line' [laughs]. It's not me who invented the term, it's become a set phrase. The 'Otweek line' is a series of towns, all of them former part-health resorts, part-spas, like Świder, Józefów, Michalin. Then it's already Warsaw suburbs: Warszawa Falenica, Warszawa Miedzeszyn, Warszawa Radość, which is where I live. Places with remnants of wooden architecture, like the dentist's house, in a style jocularly referred to as 'Świdermeier'. The concept of the 'Otweek line' is constituted by the intensity of these places. In a way, I live, I constantly move, on the 'Otweek line'.

Sculpture, home, studio

- RJ You've consistently used the term 'sculpture' with reference to your projects, thus situating your art within the sculpture tradition, though one could also, because the works' different elements are connected with the exhibition space, use the term 'installation'. It seems, however, that you don't like the term.
- MB Perhaps because in the 1980s and 1990s 'installation' was a trendy term. I've always thought that the difference between installation and sculpture is that sculpture is not something you throw away after the exhibition has closed. A sculpture has its life and its body. Even if it is just an electric cable — it is this specific electric cable and not any other. The majority of installation artists do not care for preserving their works. You can simply take the same materials and recreate the work, make it again. Then it's an installation. Sculpture, for me, is a greater challenge because of the presence of the body. Another body that we create. Which is why I believe those to be sculpture. Even this soap floor standing here, propped against the wall, was once a part of Harald Szeemann's exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery. I've kept it, so it's not an installation, is it? People think that if a sculpture has been installed in some space, then it's an installation. But the notion of a sculpture does not apply solely to an object standing on a column or a pedestal. What has always been important for me is that these are sculptures in space. Because the surrounding space, the approach, is important. The way the sculptures are arranged. Today problems result from it. Because in a situation when there are no precise instructions, and I often failed to provide such, it turns out even museums don't know how, ten or twenty years later, to arrange the sculptures in space. Tragic situations will ensue from this [laughs].
- RJ Usually the studio is a place where the artist simply tests his ideas and works

GLADSTONE GALLERY

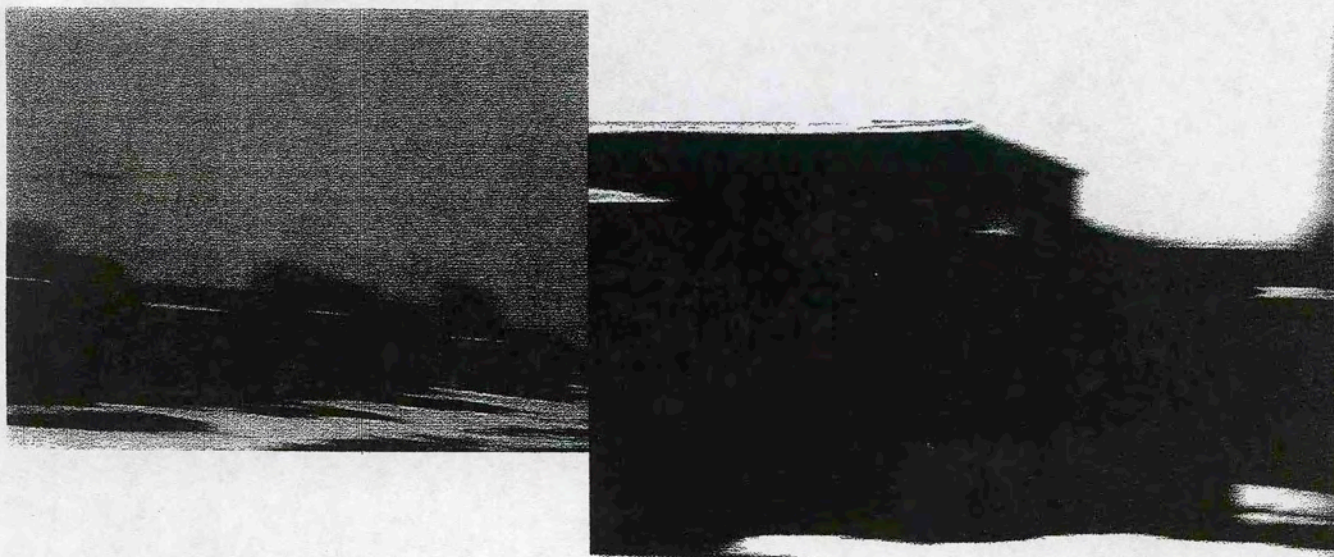
on his projects. But your Otwock studio is probably more than that for you, the house being part of your family history and your childhood. And today also of your art, the history of your art. At what point did you decide to work with that context? When was it that you related for the first time to the materials and dimensions here? Recently you've had a new studio. What will happen to this one?

- MB** I didn't choose this studio. It happened to me at some point, I think it was 1991 or 1992, following the death of my grandmother, who lived here with my sister. Before that, I worked in a shed at the back of the house. It was the *Good God* period, 1990. When I started working here, I had no plan whatsoever. It is only because of being here that I started making works referring to the dimensions of the place. The floors. The linoleum. The fire I had here in 1993 was quite an important experience that made me aware of fragility. With time, I became something of a custodian of the place. The early 1990s were a very emotional period. Memory being restored. There were more marks. Today the place has been marked by me, my work, my presence. It's been transformed. A piece of the original wall is missing. The walls are blackened after the fire, and in fact after two fires. The second fire, which, fortunately, was put out, happened in 2000. This place has a tradition of fires. As a child I almost set the house on fire, using candles to illuminate toy cars [laughs]. Now I'm building a new studio. It's almost finished. Waiting for me, empty. In fact, I could already be working there. I'm wondering what to do with this house. Because if I move everything there, I'll clutter up the new studio. So I guess I'll have two studios. This one will serve as a kind of archive.
- RJ** You say you feel a bit like a custodian. You said once you might set up a small museum, with one room for exhibitions of young artists.
- MB** That would be nice. Only I don't know if any of the young artists and spectators would bother to come to Otwock. If you open a gallery these days, it's usually in the centre of Warsaw [laughs]. Then there's a chance the Warsaw viewer will come to you. I once thought of something like an artist-in-residence programme, but it seems to me that'd be too oppressive for a young person. A young man needs something completely else than living in Otwock [laughs], in the house where Miroslaw Bałka grew up. But a 'memorial room' for sure. I think I'll install two or three works here. You know, you have to have a place for receiving the curators [laughs]. An empty room wouldn't make sense, would it? And I want to keep the new studio completely clean.
- RJ** Do you really feel this place has already communicated to you everything it was to communicate? You said you had to detach yourself from all these details and memories, that you felt the need to work in a more anonymous space.
- MB** Yes. I'm gearing up for that. I'm a little anxious. I'll probably have to make different sculptures. A larger space — larger sculptures. In Otwock, each time you had to think about how the sculpture I was doing would be taken out of the studio. Through the door or through the window. The place's spatial relationships influenced the size of the works. People are often unable to take a coffin with a deceased person from their apartment. They are forced to drag it out in almost a vertical position. This can be referred to the 'body' of a sculpture. This is where I escort them from. Several sculptures, the larger ones, I had to make outside. Eventually, rust appeared. I noticed that the working of the atmospheric conditions created a kind of natural patina. I accepted rust in my works as a sort of 'weather report'. Later, it became something of a mannerism for me, which, I hope, has already passed. There are still some rust-covered works, already sold, in the courtyard.

The Works

- RJ** In 2005, at Marek Wasilewski's group exhibition *The Horizon of Events* at the Stara Rzeźnia in Poznań, you showed a work called *AU*: potted flowers, white begonias, arranged in the shape of the letters AU. It was a very meaningful gesture in the context of the place: the former municipal slaughterhouse. AU is the symbol of gold, and, at the same time, it is a onomatopoeic word that denotes pain. It was also a symbolic purification of the place. Today the work is exhibited in private space, in one of Poznań's courtyards. I've heard you donated it to friends.
- MB** Yes, Stefan Ficner replanted the begonias to the courtyard of the house where he lives. He did so in a very caring manner. Ficner also owns my 1986 sculpture called *The Little White Dog*. It's one of the best maintained sculptures of mine that I've seen. So it is with pleasure that I presented him with *AU*. But begonias are annual plants, so the work doesn't exist anymore. I didn't actually think about the symbol of gold. For me, AU is primarily an onomatopoeia of pain. The dentist [laughs]. The notion of pain referred to the slaughterhouse building, the history of the place that the work was supposed to undo. There were still plans at the time that the Academy

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Miroslaw Bałka „Bon Voyage”, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Strasbourg, 2005.
Kadry z filmu/ film frames. Courtesy of the Artist, White Cube Gallery, London.

of Fine Arts could be moved there. So it was supposed to be an almost magical gesture. I heard that Jarosław Kozłowski criticised the idea of organising an exhibition in an abattoir, that you shouldn't exhibit in such places. But I thought the spell cast on the place could be broken. And hence the work. It was a little too easily made. Too little effort was put into it. Today, I'd make standing letters. I'd make a metal construction and place more pots. The work was made within a rather short time.

- RJ** But it had an aura of naturalness and unpretentiousness. That's how you place flower pots, after all.
- MB** A bit like the flower crosses of the Solidarity era. Well, yes. It had that gesture. Though I later encountered a work by an artist who sculpts only in flowers. So the niche is already taken and it doesn't make sense to continue the flower theme [laughs]. She's tested inscriptions, everything, on a large scale. I don't remember whether she's Italian or Turkish. "Au" — it didn't occur to me it's the chemical symbol of gold. The association was with animal suffering, whining. Especially that I visited that place back in 1986, I think, with Piotr Kurka and precisely Stefan Ficner. Piotr froze a heart of ice there.
- RJ** In fact, on the occasion of the *Stara Rzeźnia* exhibition, Kurka showed a work alluding to that experience. It was a heart of ice and a video.
- MB** It was interesting. We visited the slaughterhouse in 1986 when it was still in operation. Fortunately, it was towards the end of the day. The verge of a massacre. A horrible smell. Choking stench. The sight of several animals with broken legs. A lost cow. Stefan became a vegetarian then. That's why the flowers went to him. Now he's 'converted' again and eats meat. But following that visit, he kept his vow for 19 years. The begonias closed the circle.
- RJ** At the group exhibition *Art Negotiators* at the *Łaźnia* in Gdańsk (2000) and at your one-man exhibition *Between Meals* at the Osaka National Museum of Art (2000), you showed a plank floor (inspired by the floor of the bathhouse at the Majdanek concentration camp), with salt in the slits between the planks. You showed another version of that work at the group exhibition *Continental Breakfast*, curated by Anda Rottenberg, at the Belgrade Public Bathhouse (2004).
- MB** In Belgrade, in the old Turkish bath, there was a huge empty swimming pool. I poured salt on its bottom. Above, I placed a projector that was showing a video I made several years ago at the Majdanek camp. I filmed the showers walking under the pipes with the camera facing upwards. An important element of that video was

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mirosław Bałka „Bambi”, część wystawy „Winterreise”, 2003.
Kadry z filmu/ *Bambi*, a part of *Winterreise* exhibition, 2003.
Film frames. Courtesy of the Artist and Barbara Gladstone
Gallery, New York.

the sound of footsteps on the wooden floor. The video was projected on the bottom of the pool. I recently showed it — it's called *The Bottom* — at the Santa Fe Biennale Site.

- RJ** In 2005, you had an individual exhibition, called *Bon Voyage*, at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Strasbourg. You showed there, among other things, a video made in winter time at the Majdanek camp. Whence the title? Could you tell us a bit about that exhibition?
- MB** It wasn't a large exhibition. In the middle of the room a metal construction resembling a bus shelter, and four large projections on the walls. The projections were of a video I made by spinning very intensely around my own axis in the middle of the roll-call area of the Majdanek camp. The image moved from screen to screen. Each projection featured time shifts. You had the impression of the walls spinning around you. Above each screen there was a small metal roof, covered with white foam, like with snow, sheltering the video images. The sound came from a speaker mounted in the construction in the centre. So the sound was detached from the images. The swoosh of me spinning around. The crowing of a crow flying by. The French title 'Bon voyage' means 'fare well'. Wishing someone a good trip. Caring for that person. In the days of yore, travelling was a dangerous and time-consuming affair. The camps were places to which people travelled from all over the world. The shadow of WWII. People greeted each other, wishing each other a good trip. But they were ending up in a bad place. Their stories had tragic finales. An important element of the exhibition was the logo of the Al Jazeera channel. A broadcaster of whose existence we learned when the hostages were executed in Iraq. The Al Jazeera logo appeared in my consciousness in a brutal manner. Like a herald of bad news. The Al Jazeera name was mentioned in our media only if someone got killed, if someone's head was cut off. On one of the screens, showing an image of the Majdanek barracks, in the right lower corner, like on the TV screen, letters, and MDF template painted white, were stuck, the Al Jazeera logo. I was wondering which channel — if they had existed at the time — would have been showing reports from the concentration camps. Probably both Al Jazeera and CNN, and also TVP.
- RJ** In *Categories*, an exhibition you showed at Galeria ON in Poznań in 2006, you referred to the symbolism of the colours used to mark various categories of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps. Red for political prisoners, green for criminals, black for the asocial ones, violet for Jehovah's Witnesses, pink for homosexuals.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

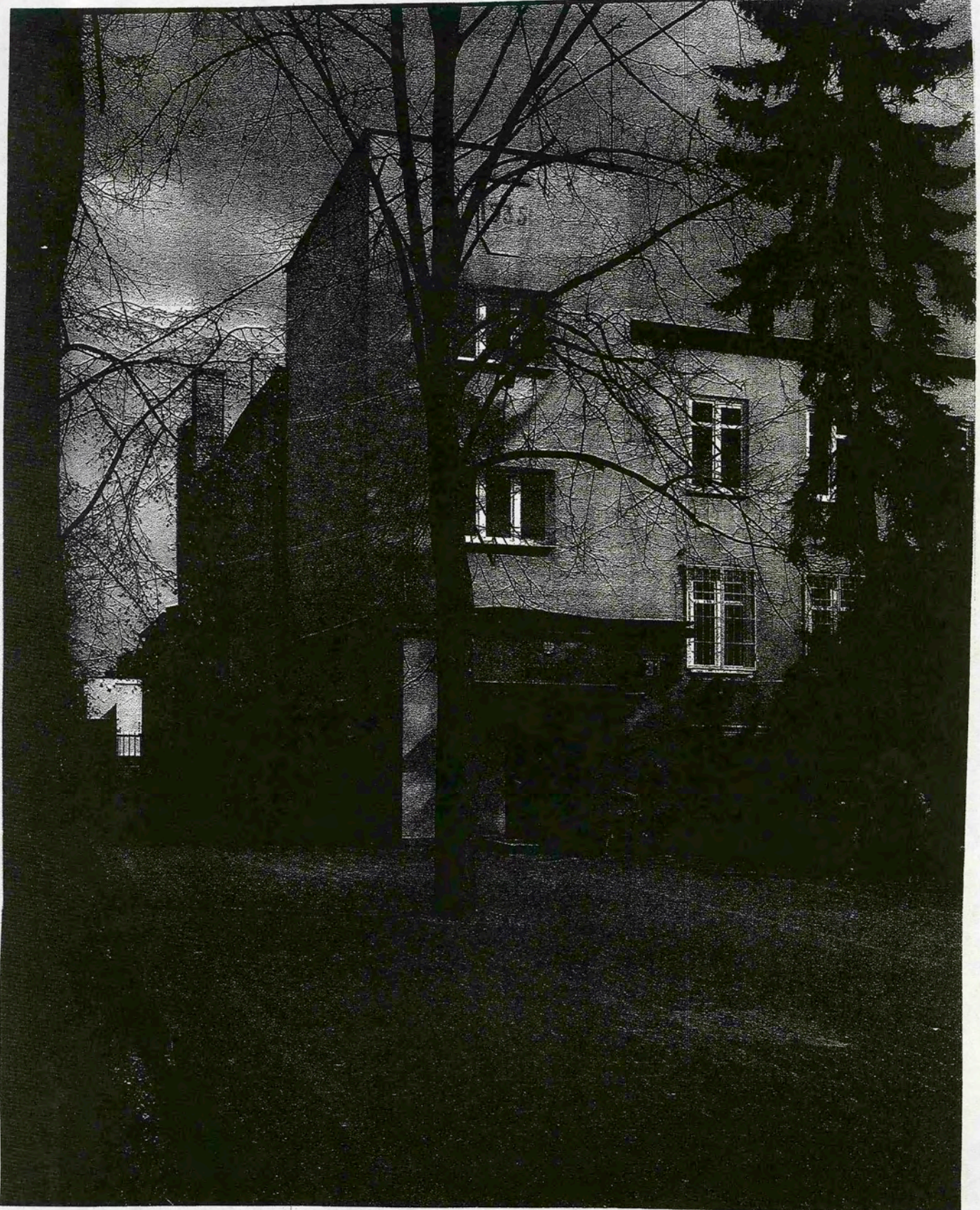
In the exhibition space, threads corresponding with those categories were displayed. Also installed in the gallery was a steel pipe, bringing to mind both the night club and a whipping post or a stake. This ambiguity was important. An object of lecherous entertainment and at the same time an instrument of repression. Your statement could be perceived as an artist's worried voice about the various manifestations of discrimination and stigmatisation of all 'strangers' and 'others'. A voice against intolerance, nationalism and xenophobia which, it seems, have been on the rise in Poland. The project also alluded, though not directly, to political tensions. The exhibition can bring to mind the various hurdles and repressions encountered by the organisers and participants of the Equality Parades. It needs to be remembered that the Equality March in Poznań in November 2005 was dispersed by the police.

- MB** I earlier sewed large fleece triangles, in the same colours, which were to rotate in the exhibition space. But I ended up showing the threads. So these are the threads that were used to sew the triangles. Unpicked threads. Elimination. The triangles had to be made, though, so that I could arrive at the threads. Fleece. A warm fabric. Maybe I'll use the triangles at some winter demonstration. Not in an exhibition, though. Too colourful.
- RJ** 'Categorisation' works both ways. We are all subject to categorisation, and at the same time we all categorise, constantly sticking labels on others. One of the elements of the exhibition was a draw. Threads of various colours were put into a black sack. The person who drew the yellow thread won the prize. It was an envelope signed 'PRIZE. A device for aiding the perception of the colour world'. Inside was a pair of gold-coloured glasses, a toy. A kind of counterpoint, but also something that enlivened the opening.
- MB** Yellow — the colour meaning 'Jew'. I returned to the situation of the 'active openings' of the 1980s. Those days the opening was always some kind of an event. The 'body' of the *Categories* exhibition was very delicate — threads spinning in the air. I think that touching them was an interesting experience for the viewer. Touching threads that are a sculpture. Possessing them. The draw situation. Understanding more closely what colours mean. What mattered was the physical experience. Sticking your hand into the sack, making the step towards actual physical contact, crossing the border of an object that you are usually not allowed to touch. That was important. The glasses had distorting lenses. I've already forgotten about that draw. Thank you for reminding me [laughs].
- RJ** It helped the viewer go more 'deeply' into the exhibition.
- MB** I think so. You draw, and you know you've drawn the colour black — an 'asocial element'. For instance, a 'Gypsy'. An educating identification experience. When I was thinking about the concept of that exhibition, Wittgenstein's remarks on colour came up. It was an important exhibition for me, even though its 'body' was very ephemeral. It turned out later that the two girls who run the Muzeum Bistro, Ewa Bone and Ewa Kozubal, placed there the two threads they had drawn. Next to a piece of Abakanowicz's cast iron they secured at the foundry where Abakanowicz made her famous Poznań figurines. So my threads became 'museum pieces'. [laughs]
- RJ** In the recent period you have often used video as a medium. At *Lichtzwang* at K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf (2006), you showed, among other things, the work *BlueGasEyes* (2004). The title is an allusion to Bertram Verhaag's documentary, called *Blue Eyed*, about Jane Elliott, the American teacher who in the late 1960s, in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, conducted the controversial experiment on racism and prejudice, dividing her students into the 'blueyed' and 'brown-eyed'. Many years later, she repeated the 'exercise', as she insists on calling it, with a group of adults during one of her workshops. You showed a number of video works at *Lichtzwang*. Whence the title *BlueGasEyes*? Whence the title *Lichtzwang*, which can be translated as something like 'the compulsion of light'?
- MB** I haven't yet had the time to see *Blue Eyed*. The work *BlueGasEyes* I showed for the first time at the exhibition *Neither*, at Barbara Gladstone's in New York in 2004. *Neither* is a title that refers to the title of Samuel Beckett's work. Interestingly, at the same time Doris Salcedo opened at London's White Cube an exhibition also called *Neither*. Beckett *per tutti*. As far as the title *BlueGasEyes* is concerned, the title came first. The three words, 'blue-gas-eyes', put together in a poetic manner. I've always been fascinated by the name of the female volleyball team Nafta Gaz Pila* [laughs]. In any case, the title, the word, came first. Then I filmed the burning

* which means 'Petroleum-Gas-Pila', where 'Pila' is the name of the city, but also can be read as 'Petroleum drank Gas', because 'pila' also is past tense form of the verb 'to drink', or 'Petroleum-Gas-Saw' as the other meaning of 'pila' is 'a saw'.

Z prawej/ right:
Szkoła nr 4 w Otwocku/ School No.4 in Otwock. Photo: Wideoprojekt, 2007

GLADSTONE GALLERY

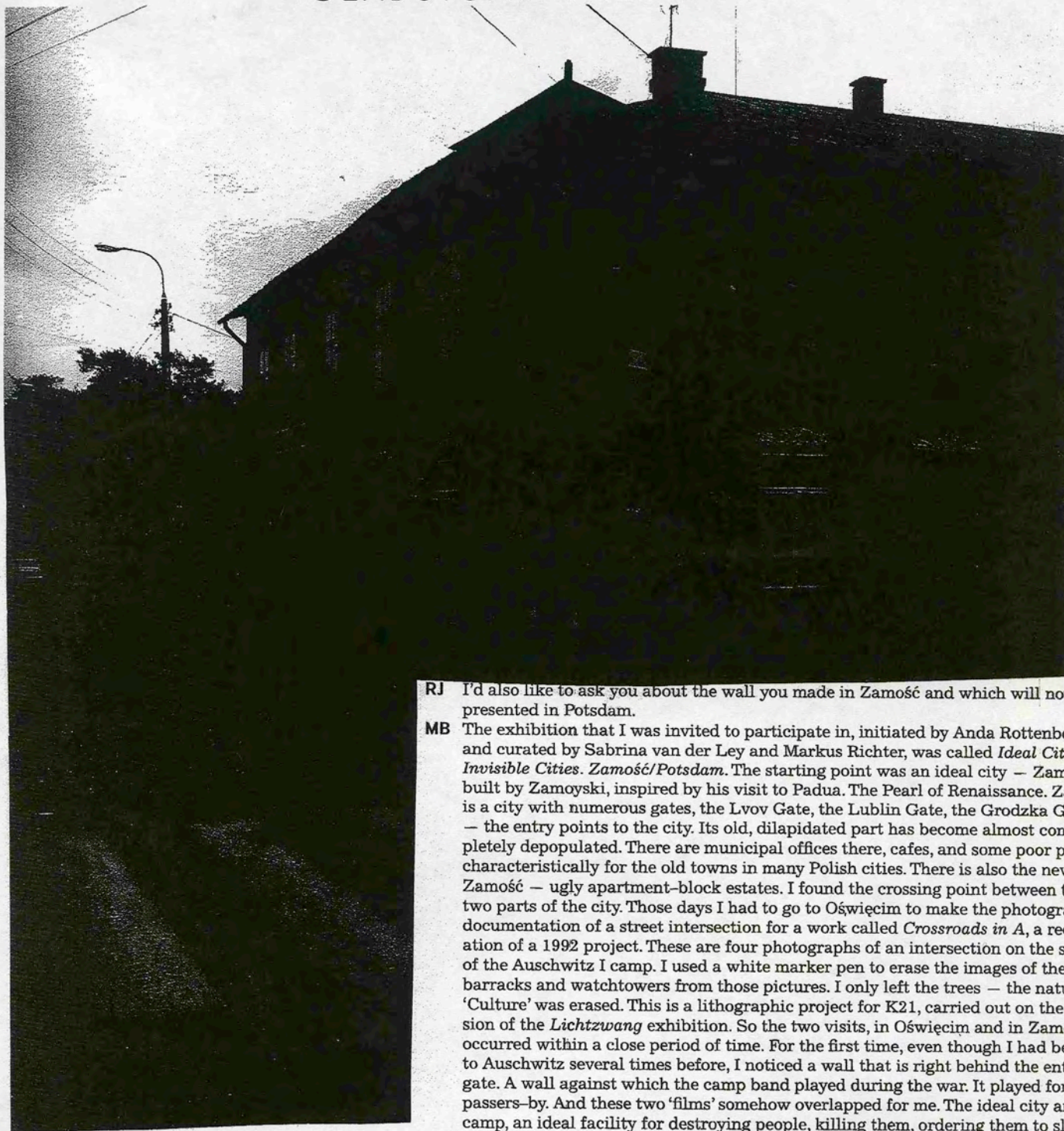


GLADSTONE GALLERY

flame of a gas cooker. So at the beginning there was the name, then came the 'body'. Two parallel projections of slightly moving flames that created the illusion of eyes shifting their gaze.

- RJ** The association with the pupil and the iris is obvious. On the other hand, in such a big close up, this is quite an abstract film. The title causes us to see blue eyes.
- MB** Yes. You see a burning gas flame. The hissing sound was also important: 'tsss'. I think the work, though very simple, has many layers. From the safe, domestic one, to a very dangerous one. Gas cookers have often been used as a suicide device. You seal the windows, put on the cooker, turn the knob without igniting the gas. Sylvia Plath. If the gas burns, it means it's okay, it's calm, it's safe. And the blue eyes we mentioned. The element of categorisation, of label-sticking. *BlueGasEyes* was later shown at *Lichtzwang*. The title comes from a poetry volume by Paul Celan. I was beguiled by it: 'the compulsion of light'. Julian Heynen, the director of K21, saw several of my video shows and he wanted to focus on a selection of videos presented in space. I was thinking about the title. I was browsing through Paul Celan's poems and it occurred to me that the 'compulsion of light' has something to do with a video projection. If there was no light, there'd be no projection. I decided it was a good way of describing those projections in space. Those were different projections: on to a wall, onto screens made with salt poured on the floor, on the corner of the room. Julian presented with me with a volume of Celan's poetry, in German, titled *Lichtzwang*, with a personal dedication. A couple of days ago an exhibition called *Territories* opened in Lublin. I decided to present an audio work there. Without knowing German, I read out the whole volume of Celan's poems. I recorded this recitation on an audio tape — 60 minutes of material. This is a work about obscuration, that is, about defining a territory of falseness that may seem a territory of truth. A black old-type audio speaker, in a wooden casing, chain-bound. Suspended. It hangs from the ceiling close to the floor. Through it my recitation of *Lichtzwang* is played back. Paul Celan uses some heavy word clusters. My first reading was, I'd say, very 'broken German'. When I got more familiar with the material, things got better. I think if I read the book ten times, I could go to Germany and recite it fluently, from memory, at the academies. That is, light was emerging. The exhibition is a pretext for transforming yourself, for exploring your own potential, your various 'territories'. I experienced something like that. It was something else than making an object that I'd exhibit. I experienced something important sitting here, at this table, and reading Celan's *Lichtzwang*. This is an interesting appendix to the K21 exhibition.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



RJ I'd also like to ask you about the wall you made in Zamość and which will now be presented in Potsdam.

MB The exhibition that I was invited to participate in, initiated by Anda Rottenberg and curated by Sabrina van der Ley and Markus Richter, was called *Ideal City – Invisible Cities. Zamość/Potsdam*. The starting point was an ideal city – Zamość, built by Zamoyski, inspired by his visit to Padua. The Pearl of Renaissance. Zamość is a city with numerous gates, the Lvov Gate, the Lublin Gate, the Grodzka Gate – the entry points to the city. Its old, dilapidated part has become almost completely depopulated. There are municipal offices there, cafes, and some poor people, characteristically for the old towns in many Polish cities. There is also the new Zamość – ugly apartment-block estates. I found the crossing point between these two parts of the city. Those days I had to go to Oświęcim to make the photographic documentation of a street intersection for a work called *Crossroads in A*, a recreation of a 1992 project. These are four photographs of an intersection on the site of the Auschwitz I camp. I used a white marker pen to erase the images of the barracks and watchtowers from those pictures. I only left the trees – the nature. 'Culture' was erased. This is a lithographic project for K21, carried out on the occasion of the *Lichtzwang* exhibition. So the two visits, in Oświęcim and in Zamość, occurred within a close period of time. For the first time, even though I had been to Auschwitz several times before, I noticed a wall that is right behind the entry gate. A wall against which the camp band played during the war. It played for the passers-by. And these two 'films' somehow overlapped for me. The ideal city and the camp, an ideal facility for destroying people, killing them, ordering them to slave labour. I needed the dimensions of the wall, which was the back wall of the camp kitchen. The Zamość wall is an almost exact copy of the situation in Auschwitz. A free-standing wall, one metre in width. The title: 'Welcome/Wilkommen'. Movement detectors were mounted on top of it. When someone passed, music played, the Radetzky March. It played very loudly for 15 seconds and then stopped abruptly. An accompaniment for the passers-by. I think the work had a very powerful effect there. It had an interesting life and towards the end of the exhibition it stopped playing altogether. It turned out wild bees had built a nest there. Radetzky obviously attracted them... They covered the speakers tightly. Before that, someone

Z prawej/ right:

Dom, w którym mieszkał Czeł Perechodnik, a w którym obecnie mieści się gabinet dentystyczny/ The house formerly occupied by Czeł Perechodnik. Currently a dentist's office is located there. Photo: Wideoprojekt, 2007

GLADSTONE GALLERY

had suggested birds might nest there, so we mounted anti-bird nettings, but no one thought of bees [laughs]. The work stopped playing. It started producing honey instead [laughs]. On the last day of the exhibition the Zamość area experienced a whirlwind. It uprooted trees, and it also blew the wall down. Fortunately, no one was passing there at the time. The same work will now be recreated in Potsdam. But it's just the same old stuff. I know a situation as emotional as the one that occurred in Zamość simply won't happen again.

- RJ** I saw your work with the hanging frame at the exhibition *Hot/Cold – Summer Loving* at Zachęta Gallery. Part of that work was sound and a piece of paper with something like calligraphy exercises. It looked like school drawings (I remember we made similar calligraphies during the arts-and-crafts classes).
- MB** Yes. My oldest drawings. Exercises. Made with a stick dipped in ink. Learning to write properly. The work was shown for the first time in the exhibition *dig dug dug* at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin in 2003. I think it had a more interesting context there. I mean, it was accompanied by my other works, because it was my one-man exhibition. Speakers are mounted in the hanging frame, playing the sounds, rather scratchy, of a couple, love-making. The Zachęta exhibition put the work into just a single interpretative track – 'loving'. And yet a hanging frame is also an instrument of oppression. This is where you beat the carpets. So it's a place where you can discharge your bad energy.
- RJ** On the other hand, it's also an important place from childhood. The place where we met other kids, struck up acquaintances.
- MB** The courtyard hanging frame. Where did you meet other kids? By the hanging frame. I keep saying this over and over: 'multidimensionality'. But that happens... For me, these works are not one-dimensional. The juxtaposition of the hanging frame, an oppressive instrument, but also a meeting place, a place of communication, of the first friendships – with a didactic drawing, a calligraphy exercise. The sound of the couple making love is indistinct. There are no words. There are groans, vowels. And all that combines into a piece that has many layers. A sandwich.

Otwork, the artist's studio, 6th September 2006.