

## BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Noerni Smolik, "Miroslaw Balka", *ArtForum*, January 1992.

### MIROSLAW BALKA

ISABELLA KACPRZAK

What strikes one immediately upon entering the gallery with Miroslaw Balka's works is the emptiness. In the gallery itself there seems to be nothing. The few objects displayed along the walls include: a wooden frame that could be a bed but is filled with salt; a nearly two-meter-long steel tube attached to the wall, its interior likewise filled with salt; other steel tubes of various lengths, filled with salt, salt water, or ashes. These objects produce an impression of absence marked by ascetic purity and rigor, an almost physical absence. Yet what or who is missing here remains a question for the viewer.

Balka, originally from Poland, plays on the question of the absence or presence of god; it is an existential question for him. One of his first works bears the title *Pamiątka Pierwszej Komunii świętej* (The remembrance of the first holy communion, 1985). In this sculpture, he represents himself as a youth, with his hand lying on a table. There is something at once sacral and threatening about this self-portrait as he looks like a fallen angel. His former faith in God, attested to by first communion, transforms itself here into a memory, frayed at the edges.

From this point on, Balka's work centers on the emptiness left behind by the absent god. Any other presence in the work that follows is removed from human form; remaining in these works are only uncertain, worldly traces and the certainty of the void. Water turned to salt and ashes are such worldly traces, traces in which, however, reverberations of the departure still echo. They are preserved in formally rigorous, simple containers.

The absence of an omnipotent god has defined many terms of life in Europe in the 20th century. Left behind was a wounded, rootless, thrashing creature

who found his most radical expression in the Nazi death camps. Thus the wooden bedsteads and steel tubes remind us, in their austerity, severity, and poverty, of the death cells, whether of fascist or communist dictatorships, for both have marked the life of the artist's homeland.

In the earlier part of this century Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Paul Celan had already exposed the intimate connection between this rootless void and the hunger for death. Yet the visual art of this century has only seldom dared tread into such a real void. While Balka's works here thus represent an exception, they join the ranks of these literary masters, and they do not miss their mark.

—Noemi Smolik

*Translated from the German by Leslie Strickland.*