

Jaromir Jedliński, "Stockholm memorial: a real gesture by Mirosław Balka", MareArticum, The Baltic Art Magazine, n°2-3, February 1998.

# Stockholm memorial

## a real gesture by Mirosław Balka

Jaromir Jedliński

*Everything is already there*

Rainer Maria Rilke

In April 1996, when I was talking to Mirosław Balka, he formulated a symptomatic statement related for his first project honouring the memory of 852 victims of the Estonia ferry catastrophe.

'I must stress that it is not only a space resolution, but above all, it is a sculpture aiming to commemorate a tragic event. The fact that it is a public commission is of less significance here. More important is that this sculpture is simply part of my normal work. Setting to work upon this project, I knew what it should look like. I knew that it couldn't be, dark, cold and closed.'(1)

Later, in September 1995, in an explanation of this project he added, 'I was sure that what I wanted to do would be, light, warm and open.'(2) A year after the planning and approval of this project (selected from proposals by five invited artists), suddenly Balka's proposal was asked for a new treatment. His comments, written in February 1996 and referring to the second and finally realised project, carry words characteristic of his attitude.

'When I got the invitation to create a new proposal for the memorial dedicated to the victims of the Estonia ferry disaster, I was not interested in making another artistic (better or worse) activity. In the end, what does it mean in the case of the tragedy itself, which took the lives of 852 people, whose future is in fact still unknown. I decided to make a real gesture. The realistic gesture of taking care of the victims.'(3)

One can see an analogy between the progress of this commemorative project and the way Mirosław Balka works in general. Regardless of how

complex the public commission is, 'the ultimate works have a certain finality' he writes, 'the effect of a laborious process of elimination.'(4)

The Estonia ferry catastrophe:

Cruise: from Tallinn to Stockholm.

Place: the Baltic Sea, 59°23' N; 21°41' E

Time: early morning, 28th of September 1994.

The Memorial:

Place: the outskirts of the old marine cemetery Galärkyrkögården on the Djurgården Island in Stockholm, near the borderline between the sea and the land.

Time of inauguration: September 1997, the third anniversary of the Estonia ferry disaster.

There are very few memorials that, like Mirosław Balka's Stockholm Monument, express both the common and the private, the public and the individual and which contain official as well as intimate values.

A convincing fusion of these diverse areas refers not only to the artist's gesture but also to the intentional reception of the embodiment of this gesture by others. Here we encounter a really exceptional move, that of taking care of those whose dead bodies are resting in the wreck at the bottom of the sea, by those who are alive. Sensitive to links between life, death and memory, Mirosław Balka created a place for both individual and collective repetitions of the caring gesture that he himself had performed. This gesture will be repeated for as long as memory, hope, personal grief and longing will last. Using another artist's words he created a place of 'meeting with separation.'

In our conversation the artist remarked that his sculptures 'create spaces for reflection.'(5) One such

place of reflection or meeting, the one created by the artist in Stockholm, is accompanied by the following inscription: 'In the early hours of September 28th 1994, the ferry M/S Estonia foundered and sank on a trip from Tallinn to Stockholm. 852 people died in this Baltic Sea catastrophe. They made their homes in Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Morocco, The Netherlands, France, Great Britain, Canada, Belarus, The Ukraine and Nigeria. We will never forget their names or their fate.'(6)

The social background of the Stockholm Memorial was complex and tense from the very beginning. This was a result not only of the emotions that surrounded the accident but also from moral, cultural, administrative and political matters. For Sweden, the Estonia ferry disaster had a historical dimension that must be read through its political neutrality and desire to protect its citizens from the traumatic experience of group loss. An experience well known to nations with a marked history of numerous wars. On the other hand one can not ignore the strong historical resonance of the tragedy for Estonia, the country from which the ferry set out on this dramatically curtailed voyage and the ship that bore its name.

Tensions also occurred between the Swedish government and the relatives of the victims. The reason for this lay in the obscure reading of the cause of the catastrophe and above all, in the issue concerning rescuing the bodies from the sunken ferry. Despite initial declarations, the government determined to leave the bodies with the ship at the bottom of the sea as a common grave. It was decided to cover the site with a

concrete sarcophagus to be guarded by the Swedish navy.

It is worth stressing that the casualties were made up of 17 nationalities, from various cultural and religious backgrounds. The tragedy consisted of 852 individual deaths, separations, mourning.

General issues as well as respect towards personal sentiment, found their reflection in the decision by the Swedish government to create a national memorial. It was not only to commemorate the tragedy of the



Miroslaw Balka, *Stockholm Memorial*, 1997

28th of September 1994 but also to become a symbol for the common grave. The aim of the memorial was to provide a symbolic meeting-place with the remains of the victims resting somewhere else, a place of remembrance and mourning, ceremonies and visits, of official homage and individual memory. As a gesture of the state, but with space for personal feelings, the task had to be given to an artist who could bring together all these matters in one spatial form - a meaningful symbol.

Within a month of the Estonia ferry disaster the Swedish government instructed the National Public Art Council to consider the possibility of building a national memorial that would commemorate the tragedy. The procedure started; councils, committees, administration boards took up the subject. The first question was that of location. The initial choice of the Skeppsholmen Island where many of Stockholm's museums

are situated was eventually rejected and the Djurgården Island became the site of the future memorial. The freeholder - The Royal Djurgården Administration was agreeable to the project. The next step was to select the artist. The National Public Art Council together with The Swedish Ministry of Culture decided to invite five artists, who would 'combine contemplative, intimate form with intensity and monumentality on a scale applicable to the existing park site.'<sup>(7)</sup> The artists requested to present proposals were: Miroslaw Balka, Bianca Maria Barmen, Antony Gormley, Sigurdur Gudmundsson and Gerhard Merz. In addition, with a view to the irregular configuration of the terrain, artists were expected to consult with landscape architects. Only Gerhard Merz declined this form of cooperation. The council decided also to respect other submitted proposals (almost a hundred) and to present them to the public alongside those made by the invited artists. The exhibition took place at the Royal College of Fine Arts just after the first anniversary of the catastrophe, in September 1995. All the procedural requirements connected with this enterprise of national importance, were conducted with care. The victims' relatives, other artists, architects, art historians and religious representatives were all consulted. The Royal Djurgården Administration joined the decision-taking process assuming as it turned out a significant and influential position.

On the 12th of October 1995 The National Public Art Council commissioned Miroslaw Balka to make the Memorial, though to be precise, two members of the jury voted for Sigurdur Gudmundsson. Their resolution was backed up with the following statement.

'The poetic strength of his proposal is exceptionally powerful. Miroslaw Balka claims the entire site, but uses little actual space for this purpose. Lightness, warmth and sincerity are characteristic of his path. This warm, long path joins the water with the land, the living with the dead. In scale and temperature, he alludes to the human body. The eye and mind find peace in the open landscape, the extension of the road expresses our loss. Balka creates not only a

space of sorrow, but simultaneously, a space of life.'<sup>(8)</sup>

Meanwhile the organisers of the project asked the families of the victims for permission to inscribe their names on the memorial whose form was still open. Only 37 from the 852 families disagreed. This fact emphasised that the true intention was to build a symbolic cemetery; to constitute a place of meeting between the living and those lost, and a particular reading of the role of the dead in the public sphere. In both the first and the later projects for the memorial Miroslaw Balka made the recollection of victims' names an element of intrinsic importance.

At the beginning of this text I quoted Balka's words, underlining, that for the artist, the first proposal dedicated to this special event was above all his next sculptural project. In our conversation he stated also. 'A sculpture functions in a concrete place. [...] Space without a sculpture can exist. A sculpture without space can not.'<sup>(9)</sup> Balka started to work on the project by getting to know the site. Its state as a public, multi-functional park, with a hill gently sloping down towards the shore of the island he disliked. 'By walking there I measured the place,' he stated. In the case of a sculpture in a closed area, in a gallery or museum, spatial relations are more defined. An artist searches then for the most economical location for his sculpture in some specific and to a certain degree inviolable place. In the situation I am describing however, the place itself had to be defined and joined to the process of bearing meaning and with the sculpture. In the interview given by Balka during his work on the project, the artist said, 'I created my own room with my work. I tried to find the right position for the piece in this room. You must think of what should be in the place and what shouldn't. But it's much easier to deal with a regular room or a museum.'<sup>(10)</sup>

Eventually the first version of the Memorial, consisted of a few simple elements referring, generally speaking, to processes of communication. A kind of concrete path (79,20 m in length and 92 cm in height) was emerging from the shore and was leading to the summit of the hill. It ended with two basic

BERGSMARK ANDRESSON HAVASTE  
RINA CLAESSON GUNBORG LINNEA BERLIN  
ANNY ERIKSSON SUSANNE ELISABET CLAESSON  
VIKA KRISTINE GRUNDSTROM STINA ERIKSSON  
ANSES MARTA GUNBORG HAGMAN GUNILLA MARIA ERIKSSON BRACK  
V-OLOW HOLMOVIST GUNNAR HOLMSTRÖM LARS ERIK HENRIK HAGMAN  
MARA JERMAKOVA GÖTE JIBREUS ANN-BRITT JOHANSEN  
INA KALJUSTE KAIDO KALLASMAA BARBRO KALLIONIEMI  
JUL KIRMANN SAHIDJA KIVILA MALLE KIVIPOLD MIKAEL KLASSON  
KURR EVA KUUSE ANDE KUUSK KATRIN KUUSK  
LEVARTOVSKI DAGNY LIDNER PRIIT LIGI  
LOSKAS ANNIKA LANGSTROM URMAS LAANE  
BITTA MELLSTROM KARL ARNE NILSSON LENNART NILSSON  
THE NILSSON RAMOND ORMUS ANGRES PILL ANITA POUER  
JANE PIHUS ANNE REIMANN RENEE RENORP  
JURI AAVIK ALLA ANNUS BRITTA ANDERSTRÖM  
LEMBIT ANNUS EVI ANTON  
JÄNIS BERHÄNS VYONNE BERGSTRÖM  
AGNETA ORIEN KÄTHE-MARIE GRANSTRÖM  
ARNE VIKTOR ERONHAGE HELENA ERST-HEIKKÄS  
MARIA MAGSTEDT  
ASE HOLMSTRÖM SYEN HOLSTRÖM  
GUSTAF JOHANSEN  
KULLI KALVIET  
THOMAS JAN DE KIECK  
ANDRES KUUSTE  
JUHANI LIIVA  
ARNE LÖFLING  
MAARIKA METSÄLIIK  
MARIJE NILSSON  
VILLO OSSIP  
ANITA POUER  
RENEE RENORP  
MARC SARD  
BRITTA STEENHART  
ALDO METSÄLIIK  
HEIDI LUTJA  
JUTA LÖFSTEDT  
MONA NILSSON  
HELEVI OTT  
ANNE OTT  
ESKRI PIUS  
EVA SÄBLER  
LISA SÄBLER  
BRITTA STEENHART  
ANNE SUNDIN  
ANNE SUNDIN

chair forms, also made in white concrete. This would allow two people to sit side by side with their gaze directed, along the path, to the sea. Their silhouettes would make the outline of an ideal contemplative position, as recommended by Za-Zen practice (at that time Bałka was in Japan preparing his exhibition at Watari-Um in Tokyo). The path contained the 852 names of the casualties engraved in alphabetic order, one under another, and would be heated to 37°C, the temperature

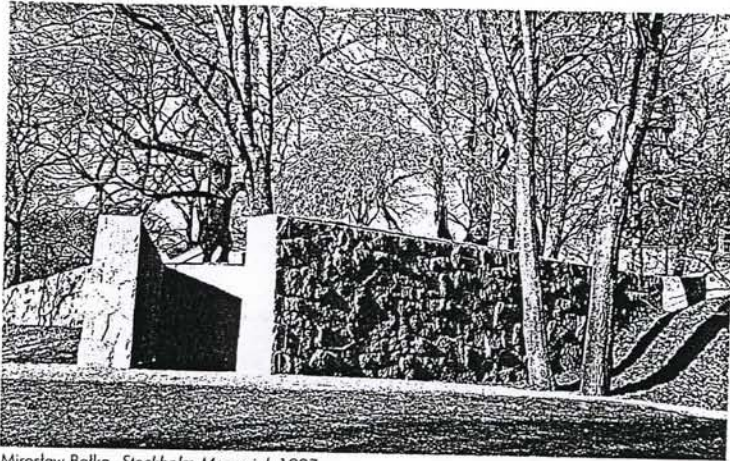
participate in the process of waiting for (the empty chairs), looking for (the empty path) and listening for (the empty column). The dimensions of these elements and their temperature refer directly to the human body and, in that way, suggest the real presence of the absent victims. Looking for, listening for, waiting for.'(11)

In this project, and in much of his work, Bałka uses his own body as a point of reference. The body is a measure of the space, a place in it, a source of experience and sculptural

Such upheavals often happen to projects that are collective or involve national history and memory. It is enough to mention the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe (Denkmal für die Emordeten Juden Europas) planned to be erected in Berlin. Here the Chancellor of the Federal Republic had the final word. What these two memorials have in common is not only that they are dedicated to the dead, but that they were also subjected to similar 'handle with great care' procedures, for a public commission.

Not every artist wants to work and can work under such conditions. Maintaining his attitude and the integrity of his creative idea, Mirosław Bałka decided to present another project, utterly different from the first one, which became the basis for the Stockholm Memorial on the Djurgården Island inaugurated in September 1997. One can assume that the artist found his vision in the very place assigned for the siting of the Memorial, just at the moment when he parted with his previous idea, expressing its form and sense, vision.

In his second, eventually finished work, Mirosław Bałka responded to the old marine cemetery on the Galärkyrkogården Island. The cemetery was founded in the middle of the 18th century and since then it has served as the last resting-place for members of the Swedish navy and their relatives. The artist's intention was to break the wall of the cemetery and to create a passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead. By opening the south side of the wall he made a symbolic gesture of opening, a gesture of invitation and care directed towards the casualties of the Estonia ferry catastrophe. The previously uninterrupted granite wall (3 meters high and 80 cm wide) is set ajar in the shape of a half-opened gate resembling opening hands or arms. The gap, the entrance to the Memorial, is 2 meters wide so are the stairs that provided with a metal railing, lead to the old graves situated above the ground-level created by Bałka. The two arms of the opened wall extend the original wall of the cemetery and with the wall by the stairs, form a triangle - the central point of the Memorial. These



Mirosław Bałka, *Stockholm Memorial*, 1997

of the human body. Underneath the path the artist placed a concrete pipe with one end submerged in the sea and the other one emerging from the earth near the chairs. The latter assumed the form of column (cylinder) 190 cm in height (the height of the artist) and 60 cm in diameter. The column had a slit 8 cm wide, running from its base to its upper rim, the idea being that this should make it possible to hear the sound - silence of the deep sea carried by the pipe from the depths of the water to the above-ground cylinder. The column had the geographical position of the Estonia ferry catastrophe: 59°23'N ; 21°41' E, engraved at the top and was also heated to 37°C. Mirosław Bałka opened his description of the project with a kind of motto.

'A warm path, following the sound, deep from cold water,' and concluded with the words, 'the elements which are situated on the hill and start in the water, let us

expression. The rest is filled with individual thoughts, feelings, sensations. A sculpture says nothing about them but is their embodiment. 'A body is not created only to be a body, just as a form is not the only element of a piece of art,' remarked the artist in 1996.(12)

Since the selection of the project by the National Public Art Council in September 1995, matters had lingered on and ultimately, in the summer 1996, the Royal Djurgården Administration realised that Mirosław Bałka's project - extending between the shore of the island and the hill, would go beyond the area assigned for the execution of the memorial. This was the reason the King of Sweden, Carl-Gust, refused its construction. Worrying about Mirosław Bałka's reaction, the Council asked the artist to propose a new treatment. Time was passing and the second anniversary was getting closer and closer.

three walls are faced with slabs of Finnish granite and have the names of the victims inscribed on them. In the case of those families didn't agree to the inscription, empty spaces are left. The letters are written in Universe and are 5 cm high. The ground is covered with white gravel that like the stairs leading to the higher level of the old cemetery are both heated in winter. In the middle of this open, triangular space, the artist planted an elm tree. According to his suggestion it should make people when they are in this vestibule or passage, feel less lonely. At its base the trunk was clasped with a steel hoop engraved with the longitude and latitude of the Estonia ferry's position at the moment the ship and her passengers sank. 'In this way, the place of the tragedy will be connected to the tree through its water and roots, although not visibly so,'(13) stated Balka in his explanation of the project.

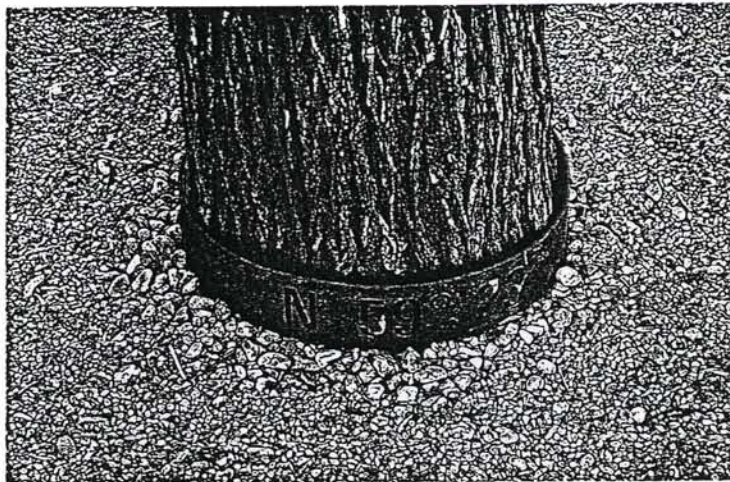
Anders Jonsson and Thomas Andersson, the landscape architects who worked together with Miroslaw Balka on the planning of the site, opened an undisturbed view from inside the Memorial to the sea. A path with benches was made along the wall and some birch-trees were planted. Such a siting of the Memorial constituted, according to its author, 'a step into quietness and contemplation.'(14)

In summer 1995 Miroslaw Balka took part in the exhibition *Rites of Passage. Art for the end of century*, at the Tate Gallery in London. The title referred to the study written by Arnold van Gennep, a French ethnologist of Dutch origin, at the beginning of the century. The words, 'rites of passage', accurately describe Miroslaw Balka's spiritual world and hence the content of his work. This is powerfully tied up with a conception of life up to its limit, and concentrates on crossing the thresholds of life and death, again and again. Maybe this essential feature of the artist's output materialised itself most forcefully but in a most laconic way, in his projects for the Stockholm Memorial. The memorial is the place of crossing the threshold, the result of the artist's brave decision to reject fear. A lack of fear must accompany any rite of passage, that according to Walter Benjamin is similar to awakening

from a terrifying dream. The rite of passage brings appeasement in the face of that what is real and inevitable.

1) Conversations on art (IV), Miroslaw Balka in conversation with Jaromir Jedliński, *Odra* No. 3, 1997, p 62

2) Miroslaw Balka, Explanation of the project from September 1995 quoted in, Miroslaw Balka, *En Minnesvård. A Memorial*, Statens Konstråd, Stockholm 1998 (published in



Miroslaw Balka, *Stockholm Memorial*, 1997

Swedish and English), p 77

3) Miroslaw Balka, Explanation of the project from the 27th of February 1997, *ibid.*, p 79

4) Conversation between Miroslaw Balka and Jaromir Jedliński, in Miroslaw Balka, *Die Rampe*, catalogue accompanying exhibitions in Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and Museum of Art in Łódź, 1994 (published separately in Polish, English and Dutch versions), p 66

5) Conversation on art (IV), Miroslaw Balka in conversation with Jaromir Jedliński, p 63

6) Miroslaw Balka, Explanation of the project from the 27th of February 1997, *En Minnesvård. A Memorial*, p 52

7) Ann-Sofi Noring, 'Background', quoted in Miroslaw Balka, *En Minnesvård. A Memorial*, p 54

8) *ibid.* p 55

9) Conversations on art (IV), Miroslaw Balka in conversation with Jaromir Jedliński, *Odra* No. 3, 1997, p 61

10) Miroslaw Balka, *En Minnesvård. A Memorial*, p 72

11) Miroslaw Balka, Explanation of the project from September 1995, *ibid.*, pp 72-77

12) Conversations on art (IV), Miroslaw Balka in conversation with Jaromir Jedliński, *Odra* No. 3, 1997, p 63

13) Miroslaw Balka, Explanation of the project from the 27th of February 1997, *En Minnesvård. A Memorial*, p 80

14) *ibid.* p 80

Translated from the Polish by Joanna Hoffmann

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