

Benezra, Neal "Miroslaw Bałka:  
A Privacy Which Can Be Called Public"  
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NEAL BENEZRA

**Miroslaw Bałka**

*A Privacy Which Can Be Public*

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—Miroslaw Bałka, 1990

In approaching Miroslaw Bałka's work for the first time from the West, one has a strong temptation to mythologize his life. His biography is compelling. Bałka grew up in Otwock, a small town near Warsaw, the grandson of a sculptor of funerary monuments who erected more than four hundred tombstones in the community cemetery. Bałka's father, an engineer, moonlighted by engraving the memorials that his own father had carved. Miroslaw, remembering well the summer vacations spent hauling tombstones in a horse-drawn wagon to the Otwock cemetery where he would paint the engraved letters and numerals, credits his grandfather for encouraging his interest in art.

Bałka attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1980 to 1985. His training there, where he concentrated on figurative sculpture, he has said, was "very academic, very realist. None of my teachers had any part in postwar or contemporary European art."<sup>2</sup> Bałka's graduation piece integrated self-portraiture and performance in a surprising way. Taking the rite-of-passage symbolism of graduation quite literally, Bałka invited the faculty and other guests to an abandoned farmhouse in the village of Zuków. Following a bus ride and a walk of several hundred yards down a country path, guests approached the house, where they were greeted by two young boys dressed for communion. The artist, a robust young man, six-feet three-inches in height, arrived on a small bicycle wearing gloves and white makeup. Inside the house was *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion*, 1985 (fig. 6). In the work, an adolescent male figure in painted burlap is mounted on a low platform with his hand resting on an adjoining table. Befitting his youth and the ceremonial act, he wears a jacket, shorts, and long white socks. Embedded in his chest is a red pincushion in the form of a heart, and mounted on the table

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Fig. 6. *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion*, 1985.

is a photograph of the artist himself at his first communion.

The graduation piece introduced a wide variety of themes and components of Bałka's early sculpture. First is the location of the exhibition itself. Given Bałka's description of his staid professors, one can well imagine their dismay at the young artist's presentation far from the halls of the academy. And yet at that time—June 1985—Poland was in the fifth year of martial law following the advent of Solidarity in the summer of 1980. During those years, artists throughout Poland self-consciously withdrew from formal exhibitions in traditional spaces and instead held unofficial showings in churches, homes, and other sites. Bałka's ingenuity in staging his graduate show at such a remote locale was entirely consonant with his own independent nature and the rebellious spirit then prevailing in Poland.

Related to his ingenious siting is Bałka's practice, established from the outset, of creating a particular environment for his art. Although sculptors have long attempted to dictate the perception of their work, Bałka is intensely focused on establishing a psychological mood. He has consistently used architectural and sculptural methods—

in this case a stagelike platform—to slow the pace at which we encounter his sculptures.

In conceiving *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* and effectively staging his own rite of passage, Bałka poetically conjoined communion and graduation. The conflation of sculpture, performance, and autobiography in this exceptionally personal work would distinguish all of Bałka's early efforts. His direction at that time seemed to allude to the influential German artist Joseph Beuys, who in 1981 had donated a large body of archival work to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Those pieces would subsequently be exhibited in 1986 at the progressive Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, where Bałka himself would exhibit beginning in 1991. When asked about Beuys in an interview published that year, Bałka noted:

*It is difficult to define any actual influence as I only recently had information about Beuys. But you could say my branch comes from the same tree. It's a tree which does not forget about its roots, which can be more important than the branches. Beuys showed how important autobiography is for the artist. I feel the same.<sup>3</sup>*

Bałka would continue to merge performance with sculpture through the late 1980s. These projects presented highly ritualized activities involving a variety of objects and sculpted animal forms. Yet, as his words suggest, Bałka is a profoundly private individual, and his quiet personality rather quickly recommended him away from the explicit personal involvement that performance requires and toward a sculpture of eloquent if silent allusion.

Initially, the figure predominated. Following *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion*, Bałka made *Fire Place*, 1986 (fig. 7, p. 24), a radically dismembered head and upper torso mounted above a simulated fireplace. The composition is situated on

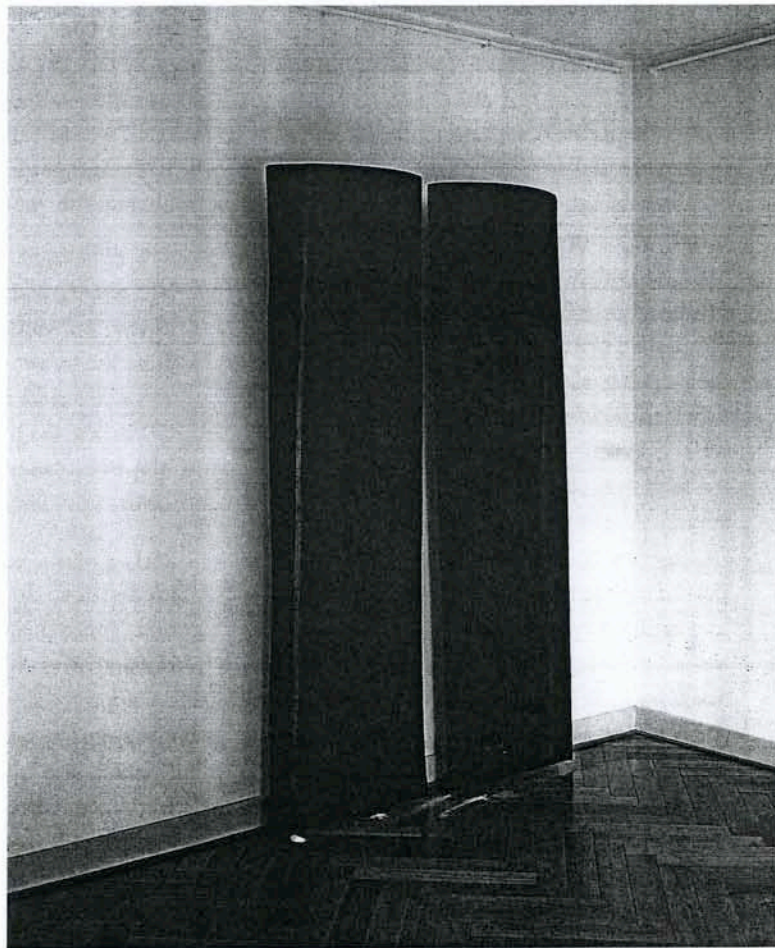
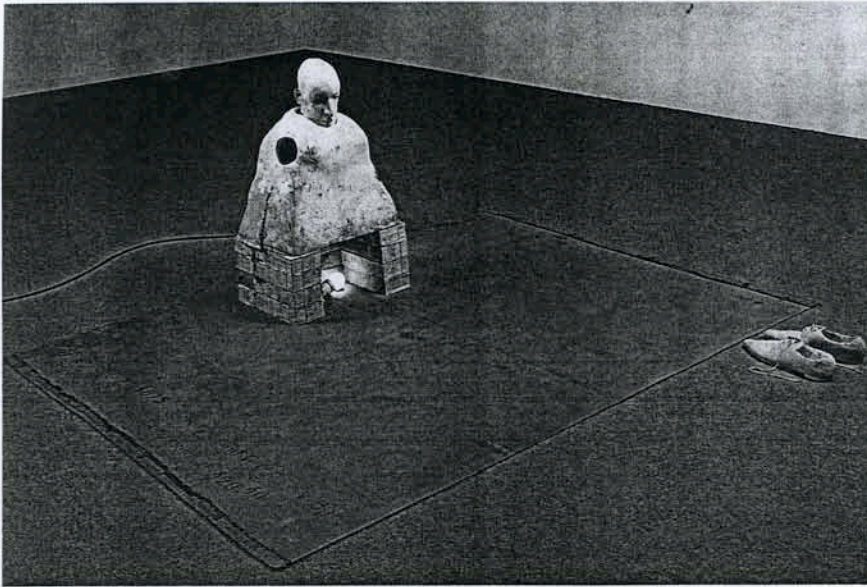


Fig. 7. *Fire Place*, 1986.

Fig. 8. 217 x 87 x 39,  
191 x 57 x 37, 191 x 57  
x 37, 1992.

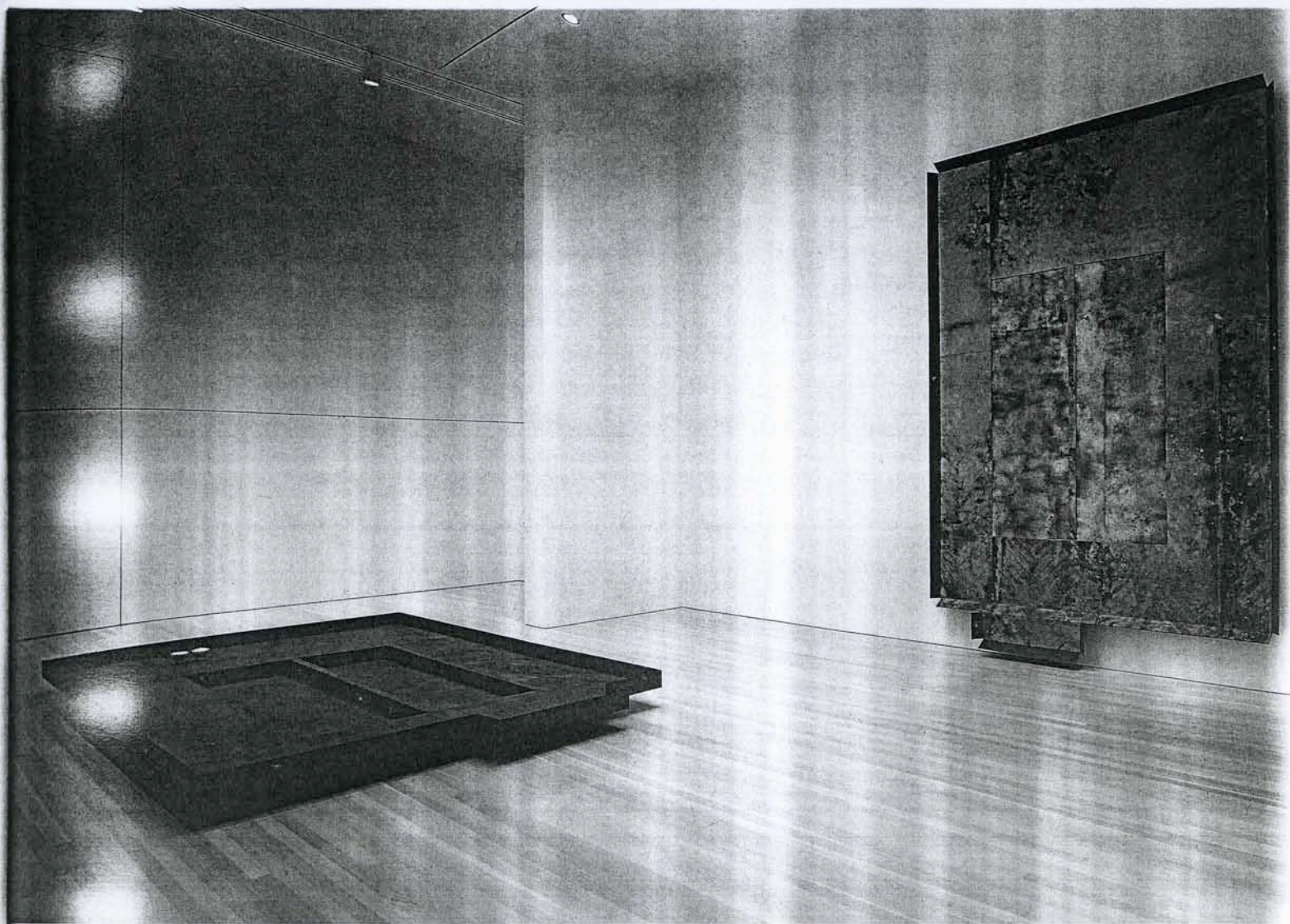


Fig. 9. 376 x 241 x 25  
(on wall), and 350 x 230  
x 23, 80.4 x 810, 1993.

a carpeted space just outside of which he placed two cement shoes. In addition to these freestanding sculptural environments, he completed a relief, *St. Adalbert*, 1987 (fig. 10), the title of which refers to a tenth-century Bohemian bishop who became embroiled in the politics of the moment but ultimately served as a missionary and lived as an ascetic monk. In Bałka's sculpture the white, headless figure is mounted horizontally on a black wall. A hatchet—the weapon of his martyrdom—is depicted in neon and mounted above the figure. Four neon loops suggest drops of fallen blood, which nourish a narrow trough of oats below.

Simultaneous with pursuing the somewhat diagrammatic, illustrational quality of *St. Adalbert*, Bałka was trying to achieve greater allusiveness in his work.

*In my earlier works I employed the body in the very literal way.... After some time I satisfied my hunger for the form of the human body. I took interest in the forms that accompany the body and in the traces the body leaves: a bed, a coffin, a funeral urn.*<sup>4</sup>

A change began to occur in 1987, when Bałka made his first nonfigurative sculpture, *When you wet the bed* (illus. p. ii). The spatial environment in which he often placed his figures is here a raised platform on which stand three rough-hewn wooden objects: in the front is a simple framework resembling a prayer stall; to the side, an elevated bed with a plaster mattress and pillow; and at the rear, a tall, T-shaped object suggesting a crucifix. The latter two elements function as fountains, sending thin streams of fluid into a square depression in the platform. Religious allusions are omnipresent—prayer, baptism, crucifixion, and entombment among them. Ultimately, Bałka's spirituality is firmly grounded, not just in the religion of his upbringing but also in the mundane, daily processes of the body

in which he finds the traces of life.

Since the late 1950s, beginning with the work of Robert Rauschenberg and continuing much more recently with the sculptures of Mona Hatoum and Rachel Whiteread, beds have been among the most richly metaphorical forms in contemporary art. As Bałka has noted:

*The bed is where we spend at least a third of our lives, it's where we dream, where we make love, it's deeply private. But at the same time as soon as it's on public display it can remind one of a hospital or prison bed, a surgery table, something from an external situation. So there is a duality between public and private.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while Bałka continued to make figurative sculptures during the late 1980s, he was simultaneously exploring ways in which to make less literal, more allusive references to human experience. If certain materials referred poetically to himself and his environment, their symbolism encompassed the simple, ultimately greater, dramas of human life. As his words indicate, the symbolic nature of his work was not at the expense of its public implications, which subtly grew as his dependence on the figure lessened.

The nonfigurative aspect of Bałka's work, which he kept out of public sight until 1990, has deeply personal roots. In 1985, the year he left the academy, Bałka moved into a studio near his parents' home that became available following the death of a neighbor whom he had known. He would later note:

*This is not an indifferent interior.... The room has given me a good deal. First of all, I have been able to concentrate on things that are quite invisible in what people call "objective interiors." I have found traces in this particular place. I have made works from old planks that I approached with all the respect that their private history deserved.*<sup>6</sup>

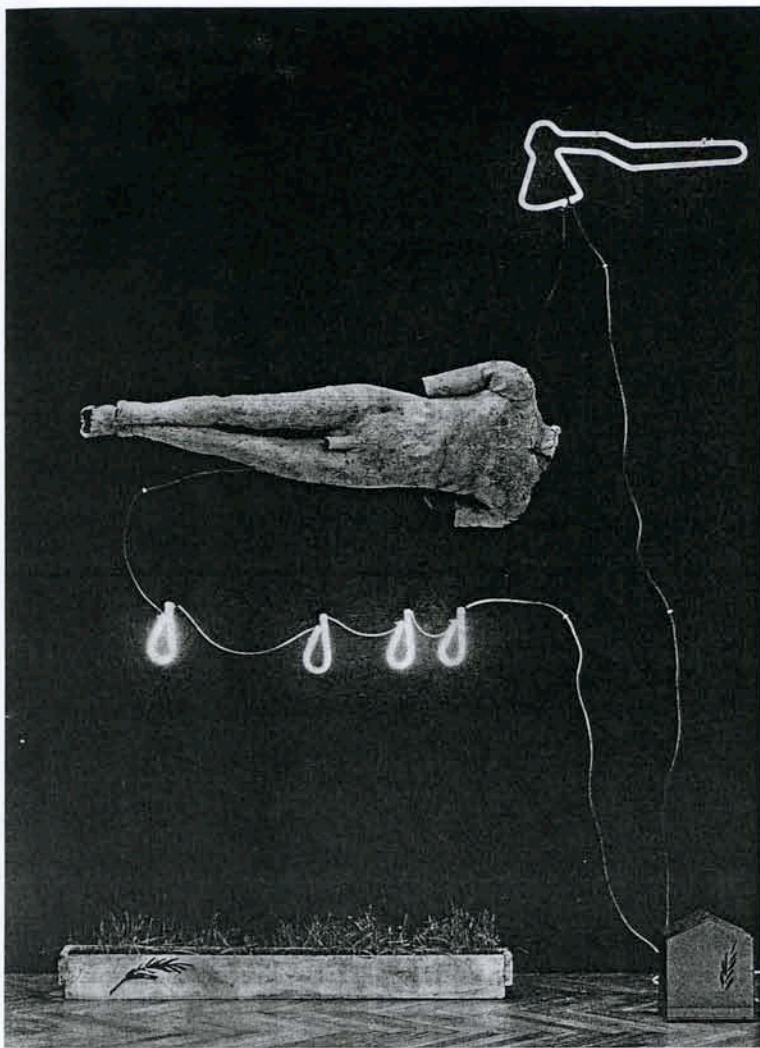


Fig. 10. *St. Adalbert*, 1987.

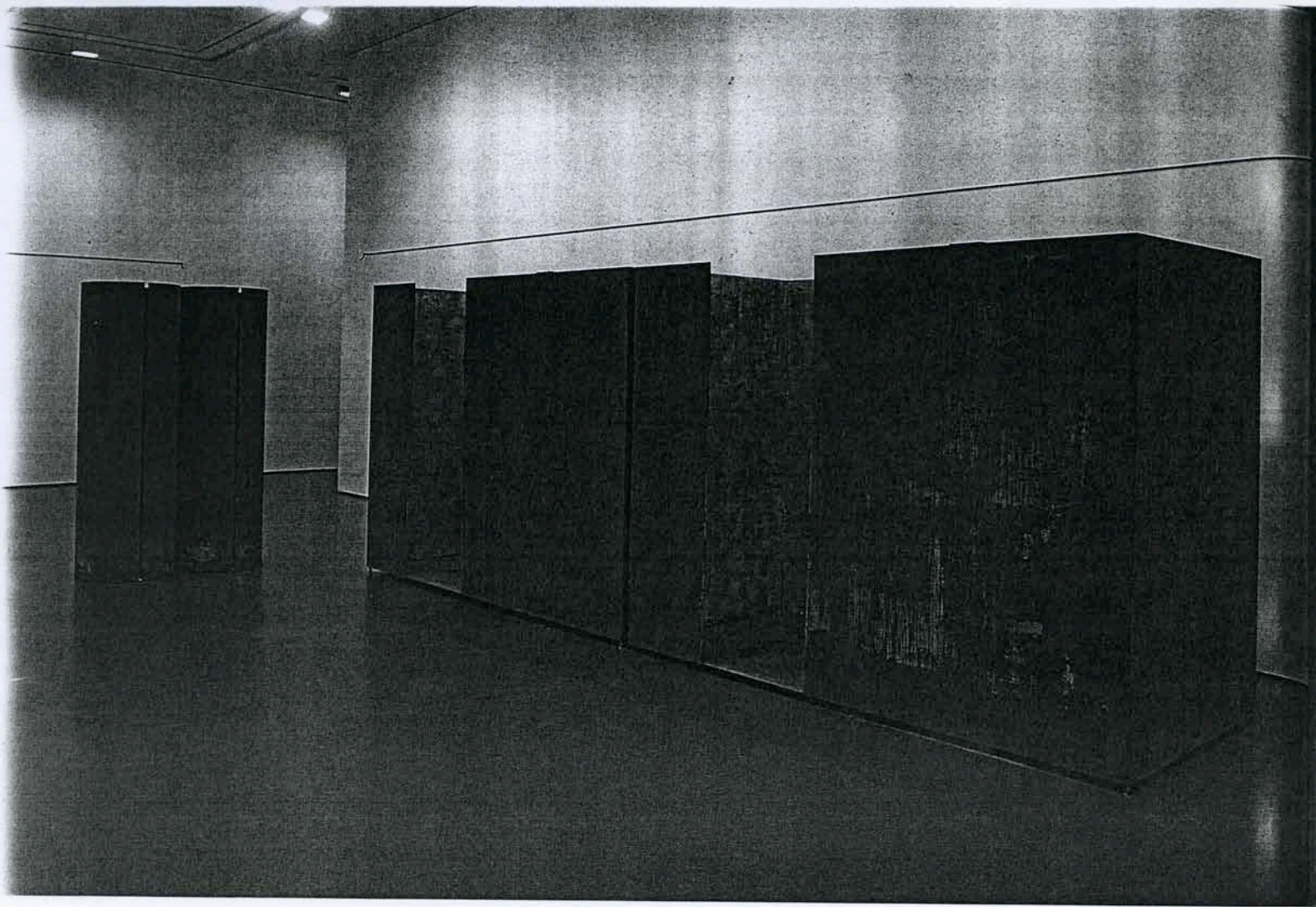
The place in which Bałka works is of utmost importance to him. In interviews he has acknowledged his interest in the art of the German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, and one can liken Bałka's feeling for his surroundings to those of Schwitters for his *Merzbau*, the domestic studio in Hanover that in the late 1920s became the site of an ongoing environmental sculpture.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while Schwitters literally built into his studio, creating a sculptural grotto, Bałka is more of an archaeologist, extracting meaning from the layers of lives lived in a given interior. Bałka worked in that studio from 1985 to 1992, gradually transposing the objects, materials, and spirit of the modest, memory-laden interior into his art. While he continued to exhibit figurative pieces, he simultaneously was developing sculptures from old planks, bits of wallpaper and linoleum, as well as a variety of objects left

in the house. Neither the smallest element nor the most unpromising material escaped Bałka's touch. He has stated:

*For me the history of materials is more important than the history of art. I don't make any connection with Arte Povera, but rather base my decisions on my own private experience. These are the materials I encounter in my studio, they constitute my personal landscape.... I can spend hours deciding on which way I should cut a plank. For me it is a very important decision. I am looking for this kind of energy hidden in simple decisions.*<sup>8</sup>

Although Bałka began to make "abstract" sculptures as early as 1987, they did not become prominent in his public exhibitions until 1990. In three separate exhibitions in that year—"Good God" held at the Galerie Dziekanka in Warsaw in the spring; *Aperto '90* at the XLIV Venice Biennale in the summer; and "Possible Worlds: Sculpture from Europe" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Serpentine Gallery, London, in the fall—the figure was suddenly and startlingly absent. The sculptures Bałka now showed were seemingly simple, and in their modesty they made reference to functional objects, such as beds, benches, shelves, bookcases, and other household forms. If the absence of the figure implied a growing formalism—an impression furthered by the artist's titles, which consisted of the consecutive listing of the dimensions of each object composing a work—closer observation revealed that Bałka had now located remarkable ways in which to enrich the references in each piece.

Since the early 1990s, Bałka has exhibited widely, participating in major international group shows such as "Metropolis" in Berlin, 1991; *Documenta IX* in Kassel, 1992; and the Carnegie International 1995 in Pittsburgh. Given the subtlety of his work, however,



Bařka's sculpture has been seen to best advantage in solo shows, particularly in intimate architectural settings.

One of Bařka's most compelling exhibitions was "Bitte," installed at the Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, in 1992. The show offered Bařka the opportunity to conceive an installation for the Haus Lange, one of two adjoining brick houses designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in Krefeld in 1930 and today used for public exhibitions. A beautifully scaled structure with a garden to the rear, the site encouraged Bařka to translate the domestic intimacy of his sculpture into a public exhibition space. One can scarcely imagine a better conjunction of sculpture and architecture. The modest interior, with its large windows, parquet wood floor, and domestic scale, served as an ideal location for Bařka and his work. Similarly, Bařka's sculptures were defined by their internal relationships, a series of dialogs that he

carefully orchestrated among individual objects in an ensemble. His principal material, formerly wood, was now steel, sometimes in the form of plates, in other cases open or closed boxes, some wall-mounted and others set on the floor. Throughout, Bařka scaled the sculptures to his own height, 190 centimeters. The strength of the warm reddish brown steel and the human scale balanced the subtly placed interventions that Bařka made in these minimal forms. Floor sculptures were slightly elevated by legs, which in turn rested on small pools of salt. In many, Bařka made reference to a human presence, not just by virtue of the scale but also by the inclusion of small drains or slightly protruding pipes, discreetly placed to suggest body fluids. The references to death were unmistakable throughout, as Bařka also wall-mounted large fabric sacks—sometimes individually, sometimes in pairs—and filled them with ashes. The exhibition was

Fig. 11. 260 x 120 x 194,  
250 x 120 x 194, 1995.



dominated by the strong shapes and materials of the sculptures, but the more lasting impact derived from details implying human presence and absence: the manner in which the ash sifted through the sacks and onto the floor, the passage of air or body fluids through the small drains and pipes puncturing the steel boxes, and the inclusion of salt, which suggested bitterness but also the preservation of life.

In the year of the "Bitte" exhibition, 1992, Bałka's parents moved from the artist's childhood home in Otwock, a cramped, three-room house in which his grandparents had lived before them. The old house, where he had been reared with his sister, became Bałka's studio. The next year, 1993, his grandfather, Viktor, whose work as a stonemason had first introduced young Mirosław to art, died. The confluence of events called forth in Bałka memories of his youth and his extended family, and he turned to that powerful foundation in creating a new body of work.

In two exhibitions—the Polish pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale for which Bałka was the sole representative, and "Laadplatform + 7 Werken 1985–89" at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, The Netherlands, in 1994—Bałka again explored the idea of passage, this time in sculptures based on the dimensions of the Otwock home that was now his studio. The predominant sculptural motifs were large steel panels, sometimes wall-mounted, sometimes resting on the floor. Many were infused with soap or lined with carpet, and some were scaled to bear the imprint of Bałka's height. In each case, Bałka included a small protruding steel panel, a precise reference to the threshold over which one enters the family-home-turned-studio, and yet another suggestion of passage.

The imprint of the home/studio was the sculptural form that predominated in those

installations, but the pungent smell of soap also permeated the exhibitions. On entering the pavilion in Venice, one traversed a long corridor with its walls lined with a layer of soap scaled, once again, to Bałka's height. In the Eindhoven installation, Bałka's most comprehensive exhibition to date, the Otwock studio sculptures were preceded by seven figurative installations made between 1985 and 1989. The viewer proceeded from the old works to the new only by passing through another soap-lined corridor. As Jan Debbaut, director of the Van Abbemuseum noted, "You do not have to have been brought up in Poland for it to evoke childhood memories; everyone of our generation has had to wash with this sort of soap when young."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if Bałka had begun with a participatory rite of passage in 1985, he had now engaged us again in a highly personal, eloquent, and yet ultimately silent dialog about the passage of time and the traces each of us leaves in the world.

#### Notes

1. Quoted in Iwona Blazwick, "Mirosław Bałka," *Possible Worlds: Sculpture from Europe* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Serpentine Gallery, 1990), 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 18.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.
4. Quoted in interview by Jaromir Jedlinski, "Conversation between Mirosław Bałka and Jaromir Jedlinski," *Mirosław Bałka* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1994), 64.
5. Quoted in Blazwick, *Possible Worlds*, 16.
6. Quoted in *Von angesicht zu angesicht—Face to Face: Ars Baltica Prolog 1991* (Kiel, Germany: Kunsthalle zu Kiel, 1991), 61.
7. See Bałka's comments on Schwitters in Blazwick, *Possible Worlds*, 18.
8. Quoted in *ibid.*, 16.
9. Quoted in Jedlinski, *Mirosław Bałka*, 13.