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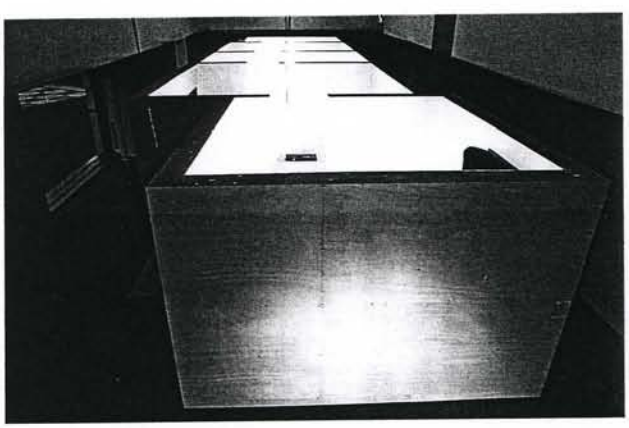
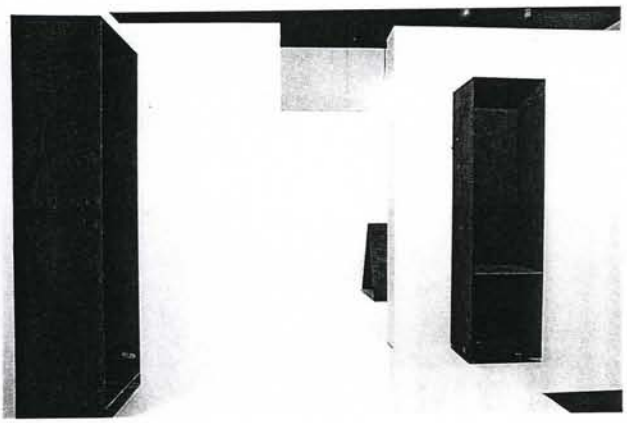
Stuart Morgan, "Last Rites", FRIEZE, n°14, January/February 1994.

In recent years, Minimalism has become the *lingua franca* of contemporary sculpture. Yet since the Richard Serra *Tilted Arc* hearings in 1985, a tendency to associate the style with cold, masculine intransigence has been inevitable.[1] That very year saw the first major work by an artist whose Minimalist variations would be devoid of coercive overtones. The sculpture of the young Polish artist Miroslaw Balka evokes a sense of dignity and strength, but does so simply and modestly. Jerzy Grotowski coined the term 'poor theatre' to describe his vision of a new drama. And the adjective 'poor' in the sense both of humility and of paring down, also summarises Balka's art.

Stuart Morgan on Miroslaw Balka

last rites





36,6 1993
Installation views, List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

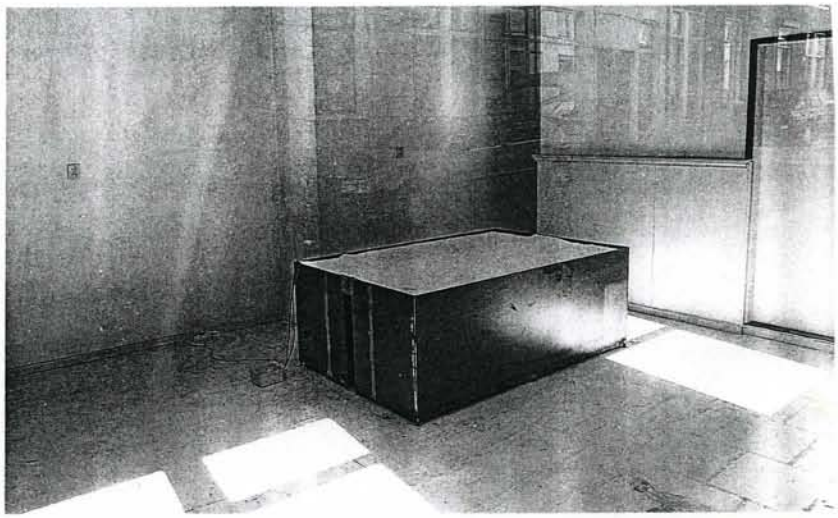
His materials are all too familiar; for example, visitors to his latest installation *Die Rampe* (1993) in Zurich are confronted first by an entire room containing only two small, roughly semicircular pieces of used, patterned linoleum. And materials are often old and worn. Visible on the floor of the adjacent, larger space is a rectangle of grey powder: fine ash from the hearth, arranged with infinite care, since for Balka, it seems, vulnerability is a fact of life. And, as art and daily life coalesce, Balka's use of space reconciles apparent contradictions; overtones of museum and home are felt simultaneously. While this is happening, a third influence prevails. As wretchedness and grandeur are brought together, a sense of the sacred is felt. Perhaps it is Balka's humble means that succeed in evoking reverence in the viewer, a state where life and death are separated by an existence which is precious, however wretched. The more that is excluded, it seems, the more powerful the feeling that floods in. With Balka it has always been like this.

Beside a table stands a small boy in short trousers, wearing long socks which are about to fall down. He is trying to muster courage for the ordeal to come. And he is right to be apprehensive: his first communion is not simply a matter of religion, it is also an initiation into manhood, into society. As sculpture, the work seems awkward and old-fashioned, not because of the material (tinted cement mixed with artificial stone and crushed marble), nor the tableauesque aspect of the display, but because of its obvious sincerity. It is even more sincere than it seems, however, for its first showing coincided with a rite of passage for the artist himself, and one in which he seized every opportunity to heighten the element of risk. Indeed, he stopped at nothing to dramatise his own predicament. Required to travel to a special space outside the official Academy building (an abandoned house in Zukov), the examiners were invited to look at the statue while listening to a tape of a religious procession, quiet at first, swelling as the procession approached, then fading into silence as it moved away. As they did so, each, one at a time, had to take a needle and plunge it into the heart of the cement boy or, at least, instead of a heart, a pincushion exposed in his chest. Theatrical, kitsch even, the graduation sculpture and its installation seemed devoid of irony and proud of it, as if a first person account were being given of that miniature crucifixion the budding artist was undergoing. As Balka's career progressed, abstraction replaced figuration,

theatricality became more muted and the means became sparer. But two elements remained: ensemble installation and a sense of poignant emotion. Or perhaps three; for Balka has continued to pursue his career as an exercise in self definition as a Pole, as a member of his family and as an artist.

Balka's sense of space is now so personal that he takes his measurements from the dimensions of his own body. (He was delighted to discover that his own foot measures exactly a foot.) So the spaces he creates are primarily housing for his own frame, and the humblest kind of housing at that. In the space he was allotted in the Aperto section of the 1990 Venice Biennale, he placed a low bed form, and added dirt from the floor in Venice mixed with pine needles, which he then brushed away tidily behind a low shelf. Not for the first time in his work, the bed resembled a grave; here dying and living spaces coincided. Nor for the first time did the bed, the hearth and other features of the house in which he was brought up cast long shadows. And as always, there were references to daily routine, a state that Eliot called 'living and partly living'. In the Venice Biennale of 1993, where the Polish pavilion was devoted entirely to Balka's sculpture, he based his installation on the small house be inherited from his grandmother, the place where he now works. Since Balka tends to turn viewing spaces into comparable areas, a feeling of physical and emotional proximity characterises his sculpture. And choreographed step by step, visitors encounter not single items but environments. Even the shape of the gallery must sometimes be adjusted or altered. (In Boston earlier this year, he had a scale model of his studio constructed, and visitors put on slippers before entering.) For frequently, Balka's work is fragile and transient; responsive to temperature, touch, even a light breeze, it not only recalls, but may even consist of the remains of daily activities to which scant respect is attached. It is these to which Balka is determined to draw his viewers' attention. The ash from his hearth; terrazzo (or 'poor man's marble') from which humble graves are made; cheap soap of the kind found in public washrooms; even old linoleum from the floor. All these find their way into Balka's work and are made to seem dignified, timeless, infinitely precious.

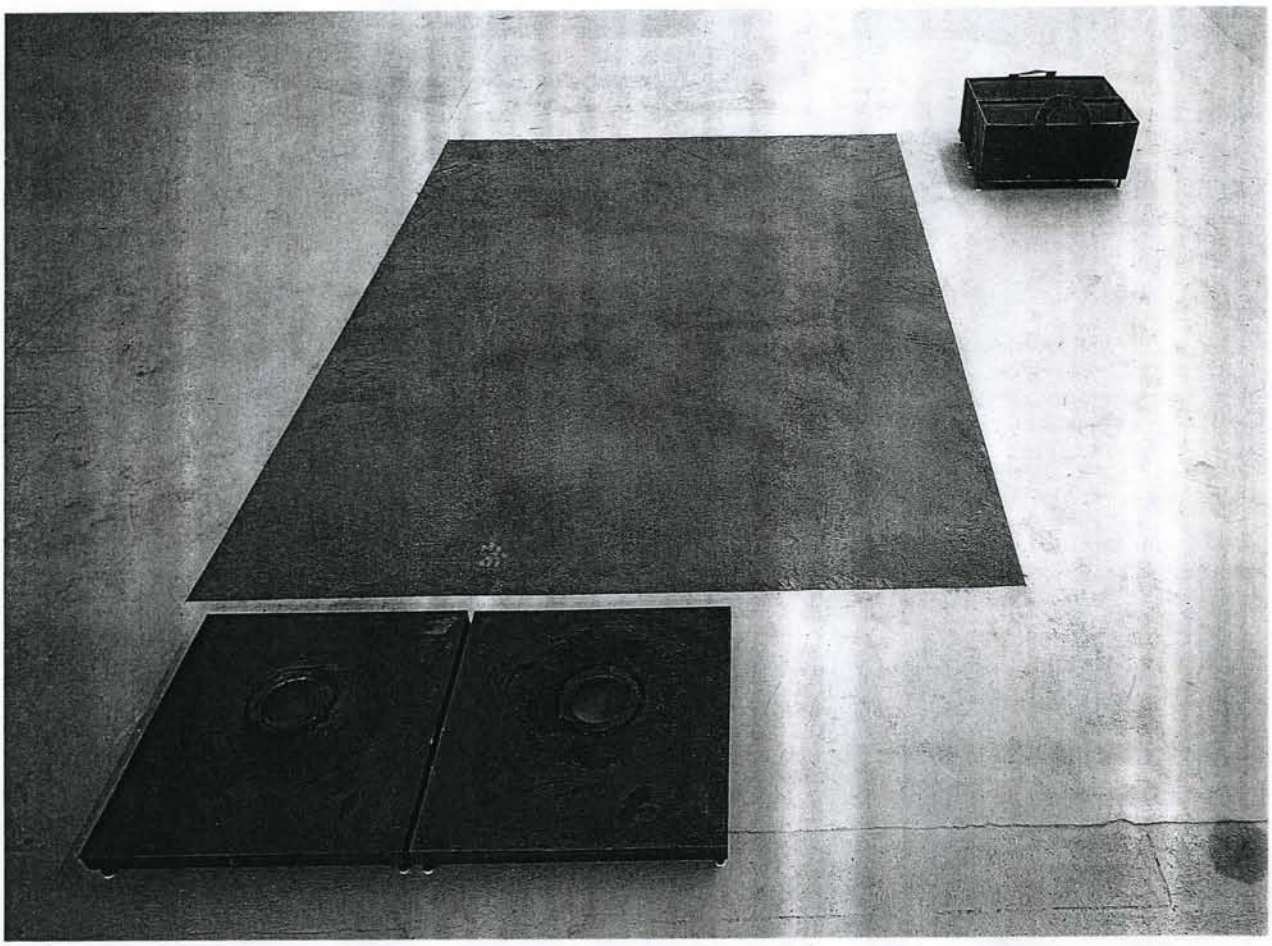
For Balka is essentially a monumental artist. At Sonsbeek this year he made three sculptures – two outdoors, one inside. On the ground floor of a house at the end of a street, high above a main railway line in the middle of the city of Arnhem, a door opened to reveal a room empty except for a double bed with high metal sides, on which rested two primitive electric blankets at body temperature. On a patch of grass at the side of a tree-lined street adjoining the local cemetery, a similarly shaped, two-chambered concrete trough had been sunk, and in the middle of one of the longer sides a pair of angular seats, also made of concrete, had been fixed side by side like thrones. Finally, at ground level on the bank of the river, next to the bridge which the British army tried so valiantly and



Sonsbeek 1993

for so long to defend against the Germans in the Battle of Arnhem, Balka built a concrete pit with a powerful searchlight inside it, set in the middle of a base shaped like a concave parachute. It was tempting to regard the three as a trilogy, one set in some distant past, another in the present, the third in a period pivotal to both. The way the bridge monument inflected the other two works in Arnhem, bringing together marriage bed and grave, people of high and low rank, safety and vulnerability – for a searchlight catching the inside of a parachute signals instant death – suggested that the thematic pivot of Balka's work might indeed be the last War. Sleep and wakefulness, burial and birth, a sense that the most extreme events of life in peacetime have taken precedence over routine, happiness and order and that between cradle and grave only a situation of constant emergency can be expected, most of all perhaps the idea of being singled out from the crowd, from loved ones, for special treatment... The sinister act of recognition that the parachute monument seems to commemorate has already been identified in Balka's sculpture. It appeared once more in *Die Rampe*.

As usual, it began sparely, controlling the path of the visitor, encouraging an accumulation of meaning from one item to the next, and ending with the most dramatic touch of all, so subtle an alteration of the ground floor gallery itself that it might be passed by. Indeed, it scarcely qualified as a separate artwork. The ramp of the title led up to a high door, one of the final elements to be encountered in a walk that, as usual, had turned back on itself, gaining significance and, indeed, becoming more dense as it continued. The door was ajar, and behind it a powerful light had been placed, implying that the further the door opened, the more light



55x55x8, 55x55x8, 260x190x0.2, 55x23x27, 55x23x27 1993
Steel, linoleum, PVC, ashes, felt

would flood in, and the more access intruders would gain. The ramp itself, a permanent feature of the building, a former warehouse, carried the powerful suggestion of robbery or desecration, danger of some sinister kind. By this time the entire scope of the exhibition had become clear. Indeed, the visitor was about to turn and walk back through works already encountered: two matching boxes made of old linoleum from the family home, placed side by side, both revealing the spaces from which the introductory pair of arc-shaped offcuts had been removed; a rectangle of ash; a pair of low, terrazzo 'beds', just above the ground, heated gently; a pair of angled metal plates on the wall, covered with and smelling strongly of soap, like the panels on both sides of the Polish pavilion in Venice, through which viewers walked before gaining access to smaller, horizontal works... The high value placed on continuity – literal continuity in the installations and temporal continuity in historical terms – may offer some insight into the thematic basis of Balka's work. Isn't the 'art' on display in a Balka installation in the nature of a collection of relics, remnants of what purport to be remnants of everyday life? And, as was the case even as early as the statue of the lad preparing for his first communion, aren't transience and ordeal high on Balka's list of thematic priorities?

The first and last things done with the body are its washing and ceremonial presentation. Minimalist slabs in Balka's work are often pierced with holes: for nipples, navel, anus and penis. For the body is always evoked but never represented. It is non-specific, male or female, often half of a pair. It breathes and washes, it performs daily rituals and may gain strength from these. Above all, it persists. One reading of Balka's work would stress this sheer persistence, the national characteristic of a traumatised country with an unrivalled history of Nazi cruelty. In the face of this, conventional means of self-identification have collapsed. (Since death-camps like Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka were to have begun by killing Jews and proceeding to kill Poles, it has been argued, the mass murder of Jews and Poles has coalesced into a single event in the collective memory.)[2] At this point representation breaks down, and bins of prisoners' shoes at Majdanek or suitcases at Auschwitz, inscribed with their names and numbers by the owners themselves, assume a significance beyond any that art can achieve in a time of mourning. Balka's half-life, one of ablutions and wakeful sleep, in which disturbance is expected at any moment and identification means death, has its heroes: boys prepared to shoulder responsibility and confront adulthood; a hooded shepherdess in another early work, using a torch to seek her lost lamb; the single airman prepared to risk his life to prevent the enemy from invading... Private acts of care which have an added social dimension provide the basis for a return to peace and continuity. The threat of invasion in *Die Rampe*, as the partly open door reveals a spotlight which nothing and no one can escape, has the same twist as the military memorial. For a second, it will be impossible to know whether the invader is friend or foe, Saviour or Antichrist. Then everything we know and have will be taken away.

1. Anna C. Chave: 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power' in *Arts* vol.64, no. 5, January 1990, pp. 44 – 63, reprinted in edited form in F. Frascina and J. Harris ed. 'Art in Modern Culture' London 1992, pp. 264 – 281
2. James E. Young: 'Holocaust Memorials and Meaning' Yale 1993, pp.113 – 152