

Bożena Czubak, "each boy fears differently", interview, "magazyn sztuki", n°19, March 1998.

each boy fears differently

Mirosław Bałka - interview by Bożena Czubak

Bożena Czubak: In your work entitled 'Pamiętka I Komunii Świętej' ('Souvenir of my First Holy Communion'), which shows a small boy posing for a souvenir photo, you made reference to a very personal experience: receiving your First Holy Communion, an experience perceived in its ritualised form, both as a religious ritual and as a social custom. You very clearly emphasised the aspect of violence in the subjection to the ritual of initiation, the involvement of a young person in Catholic religious ceremonial.

Mirosław Bałka: The concept of this sculpture arose in a more intuitive than thought-out way. There were no great thoughts on the subject of Catholicism behind this, although it was an attempt to formulate a certain level of dialogue between me and the Church, and also between me and my childhood, parents, punishment, reward and many other things. Above all I was thinking about taking a close look at the experience of a naive several-year-old boy finding himself in a very official situation, faced with a kind of oppressive officialness, imposed by the 'costume' and by the circumstances of having to pose for a photograph. This work is a realistic commentary on events from my life, very deeply felt experiences.

BC: Was the ritual of your First Communion such an important event in your life?

MB: Maybe even more powerful an experience than my wedding. At that time, looking at it from the perspective of 1985, it was one of the most important experiences of all, within the limits of course of just how powerful memories and the emotions based on them can be. These were experiences which I wanted to document, and which I could, because they affected only me. In any case, clear differences between two moments in my life were imposing themselves on me: my First Communion and my diploma paper at college. The effect is that the figure of the boy in the sculpture also has features of my self-portrait from 1985, since I have combined in this figure two kinds of experiences of loneliness in confrontation with situations imposed from the outside. The obtaining of my diploma was for me synonymous with the leaving of a safe haven, which the college was, it was the monument of stepping into reality, of having to define myself and what I wanted to do. Both in the case of the diploma and the Holy Communion I had to stand, or rather was forced, before some kind of commission. At college I stood before a commission which was to decide whether I was ready to follow the profession of artist. During the Communion they had to decide whether I should be given the right to have my own sins. Because earlier, before I made my first Confession, basically I had no sins. In both cases I had to undergo some kind of verification.

BC: In the interpretations of your art, your deeply Catholic upbringing is usually emphasised. In any case what struck me in one of your statements was what you said about the heroes of your childhood and early youth being the figures of Catholic saints, not pop music idols or the various heroes of popular culture which generally shape the immigration of children.

MB: In contrast to you I was brought up in a small town, with a different atmosphere, for example the hero of my childhood was St Stanisław Kostka. I always imagined the scene where he kneels in the mud at the feet of Mary the Mother of God, and throughout my entire childhood I wondered why I could never manage to do the same, to fling myself into the mud and fall at the figure of the Virgin Mary.

BC: In your case religious education seem to have exerted a very strong influence on your perception of reality. In the lives of the saints you found certain models which stirred the sensitivity of the child, and later on these stories gave you the wherewithal for thinking about your own situation in adult life. One could easily get the impression that in your art. In a certain way you are struggling with your own roots, with Catholicism, with the Christian tradition, about which you say it is a tradition of punishment, guilt, sacrifice. These threads appeared for example in your sculpture of 'St Wojciech' ('St Adalbert').

presentations

MB: In this work I was interested in something like an exchange of goods, the exchanging of suffering, pain for gold, because the body of St Wojciech was exchanged for gold of the same weight. In the figure of St Wojciech, a Czech chosen as the patron saint of Poland, I perceived the suffering of a masochist, and in my sculpture there is included an element of a game with suffering. Despite the fact that the body of the saint is mutilated, there are no hands, no head, no penis, no feet, there is a clear game being played with suffering, a game of taking away and giving back. Just like an aesthetic, visual game with the use of neon, which I was fascinated by at the time, but which I now look at quite critically; most recently I have shown this sculpture without the neon lights.

BC: Does that mean without the axe and the drops of blood?

MB: Without the axe, the drops have remained, like the oats, because they are important elements of this work, symbolising the connection between the body and the growing plant. Oats are a sacrificial plant in Christian iconography, at least in the Mazovian region. After the blessing of the lamb in the Easter basket, it is transferred to a vat in which oats are growing.

BC: These are customised rituals, deeply rooted in Christian religion but having various local forms...

MB: For me these are domestic rituals, deeply coded, like the ritual, remembered from childhood, of sowing oats in Easter period.

BC: In one of your later works there appears a reference to another ritual marking the door with chalk.

MB: A whole surface of this work is covered, or rather drawn on, with holy chalk but it is as if nothing results from this, because this is the reverse surface, the unseen side. I wanted to show two sides and at the same time their reverse, for example the two sides of a dirty towel, such as the Turin Shroud, where we adore a certain kind of dirt, some residues, bloodstains. In my work this bottom layer, usually unseen, where the dirt gathers, just like the dirt in the proverb which is swept under the carpet, hidden, this unwanted layer is on the top, at the front. But the external side which was intended for show, is here anointed with holy chalk, is hidden. We look at the skin first of all from the inside, from the bottom, first the dirty interior, then the washed exterior, first the soul then the body in other words, the fact of washing the hands does not mean the washing of the soul.

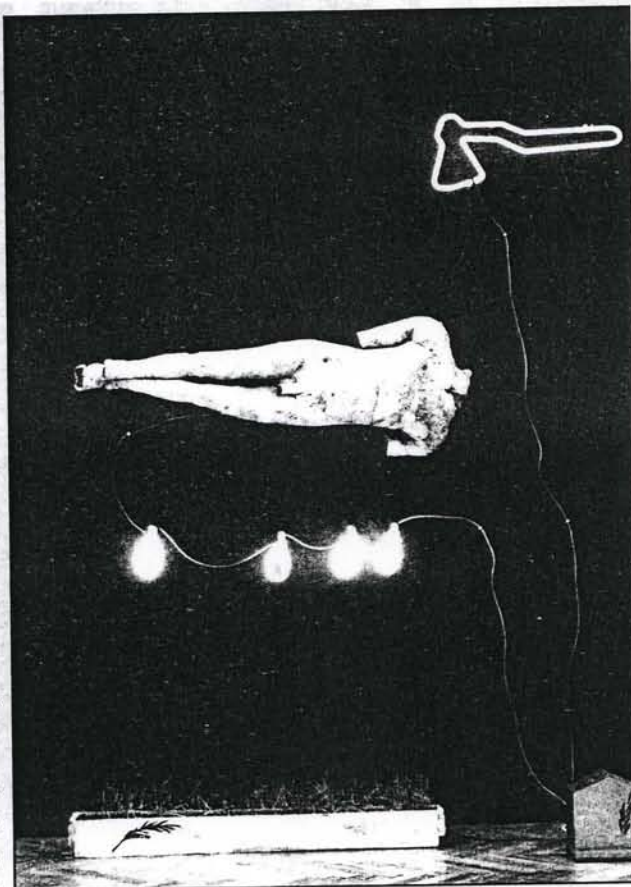
BC: In your work in the 1980s there can be seen a thread of moving away from Catholicism.

MB: It was not a moving away, because I had moved away from Catholicism before 1985, or even earlier, and my relation to the Church was already firm at that time and what I was doing then in no way changed it.

BC: But you still quite persistently returned to religious themes, the figures of various saints.

MB: As a practising Catholic religious themes were always dear to me and I always tried to do things which were dear to me, well known, which I had experienced or which I had at least come

Św. Wojciech [St. Adalbert], 1987, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi; foto: Muzeum Sztuki



across. Reaching for the mythology of the saints was the consequence of my own experiences.

BC: In your worrying away at these themes did not there appear a certain ambiguity: on the one hand, the celebration of Christian symbolism, and on the other hand, the resistance of a young man to the pressure of the teachings of the Church, to the authoritarian nature of this institution? You mentioned in one of your interviews that you perceived the Church as an institution of punishment.

MB: Perhaps I did look at it that way at the time. In each of these saints in some way I saw something of myself - in St Wojciech it was I who was being punished, perhaps for the divorce, perhaps for something else. In the sculpture of St John I referred to the Biblical prophesy about the burning bush, in which the angry Christ burns the bush which yields no fruit. In the crying figure of John there is a shadow of my own person. My suffering is hidden somewhere in these figures of the saints or those punished by the Church.

BC: Christian elements are for you an area of identification of clearly negative experiences, which you localise in the context of punishment suffering... a feeling of guilt.

MB: Perhaps my life for a long time was made up of negative experiences and such a circle of identification resulted from my experiences. Particularly when you bear in mind that as a twenty-something-year-old I really felt my pessimism deeply.

BC: Were not these cruel parables about the saints allusions, which additionally suffused your experiences with some aura of sadness?

MB: Undoubtedly, just like when you read a sad book - when I read Kafka as a young man, I also became filled with sadness, in some sense I identified with his heroes, obviously not directly. When choosing my heroes I always used some kind of camouflage. I was interested in the figures of martyrs, with whose help I could express my own fears. St Wojciech, because he had his limbs cut off, was for me a figure full of fears, including fears about sexual life. I was not interested in the holy martyr of Poland, in St Wojciech there hidden many and varied disquietes. I realised several figures, in which I told about my own disquiet connected with the body, with the feeling of one's own corporeality, with the sexuality of the body. I was not interested in an analysis of the history of the martyrs.

BC: These disquietes can probably most clearly be seen in your work 'When you wet the bed'.

MB: That work was an illustration to an event described in James Joyce's book 'The Portrait of the Artist as a Young man'.

BC: A book which as you yourself said made you realise the possibility of talking about the shameful sides of life. In this work, in the arrangement of a prie-dieu, a cross with the eye of providence and a wet bed there is a sharp tension, or indeed a conflict between the common religious customs and the shameful side of life. I would say that this work shows that the norms of these customs together with their suppression make certain aspects of life shameful and that it is these very norms which are the source of tension. I would read it also in the context of reality, the social discussion about the introduction into schools of religious education on the one hand and sexual education on the other.

MB: Many of my works arose a little in the dark, it was a sort of attempt to put together a few questions, and the answers came later. I found the questions interesting, not the formulation of answers, but the seeking of a shape, a form for the experience, its specificity. We can say that certain experiences in youth are common to all, but they are never exactly the same. We generalise when we talk about the fears of young boys, but each boy fears differently. Boys have different fears than girls. My own experience as expressed in this sculpture allows others to discover their own experience. With the help of art, through the mediation of the work, there can take place a certain dialogue, without talking directly with each other. It would be substantially more difficult to talk with a stranger about bed-wetting, and other very intimate experiences.

BC: From the beginning your sculptures have oscillated around the body, earlier they were figures, after 1989 seemingly abstract sculptures in which the body, absent in matter, shape and form, is signalled through various aspects of its presence traces left behind by it, the temperature appropriate for the human body, and finally the dimensions of the sculpture based on the dimensions of the



Dom artysty w Otwocku [Balka's home in Otwock]; foto: M. Balka

body, in particular your body. All the time you are circling around the body but in its incorporeality you are almost obsessively returning to the subject of the body without crossing the boundary of its visibility. Your attitude to the body is rather ambiguous, on the one hand it is for from metaphorisation, from the modernist essentialisation of the body, because you talk about in its physical aspects, on the other hand you are also for from such currently popular exploitations of corporeality.

MB: The starting-point for the signalling of the dimensions of the body in an abstract way was an experience connected with a coffin. Please note that the coffin is a very abstract box and at the same time a very precisely defined one, because its dimensions fit a particular body. Referring to this ambiguity of the coffin I started doing sculptures, in which the body is represented by its dimensions and in which there appears the aspect of waiting for the body, as in the case coffin - an empty box, which waits to be filled by a body. Then I started also to give the dimensions as the titles of the sculptures, which is connected with a certain anonymity of these works, but on the other hand, if we draw out these dimensions, they will signal defined shapes.

BC: Your words about the fact that it is easier to talk about the body without presenting it have stuck in my memory. I get the impression that here we are talking about avoiding the trap of representation, the rhetoric of presentation, in which the body is always mediated by cultural symbolisations.

MB: I think that the temptation of exhibitionism, probably present in every one of us, is very weak in me. I do not feel the need to display my own body, I talk about it through various traces, characteristics, I use forms referring to the position of the body, I mark its outlines. I protect myself with the appearances of abstraction, which also arises for personal reasons, I would not be able to use my own body, so it is easier for me to talk about the body without showing it. The need for distance grows with age, when I was 30 I was more interested in the body in its direct presence. Now I am rather looking for expression in a certain kind of game with the body.

BC: Sometimes they are quite cruel games, subjecting the body to physical suffering, there appears the element of violence, giving pain, mortification. I am thinking here about the seats or beds with protruding sharp spikes.

MB: Part of these works refers to the body in positions of mortification: kneeling, lying prostrate, bodies crammed into confined spaces making movement impossible, cramping the freedom of movement. This is how it was in a project realised in Gotland and

later shown in Helsinki. Two not very big cement columns about my height, warmed up to the temperature of the human body. In order to get inside them you had to go in sideways, at an angle of 90 degrees, squeezed in almost. Probably now, when I am of bigger build, I would not be able to do it. In any case it was not possible to fall over or change position inside the sculpture, it sort of kept the body in a vertical position, in the position of life. The physical contact with the sculpture was the important thing, the moment of sliding the body inside the concrete chamber.

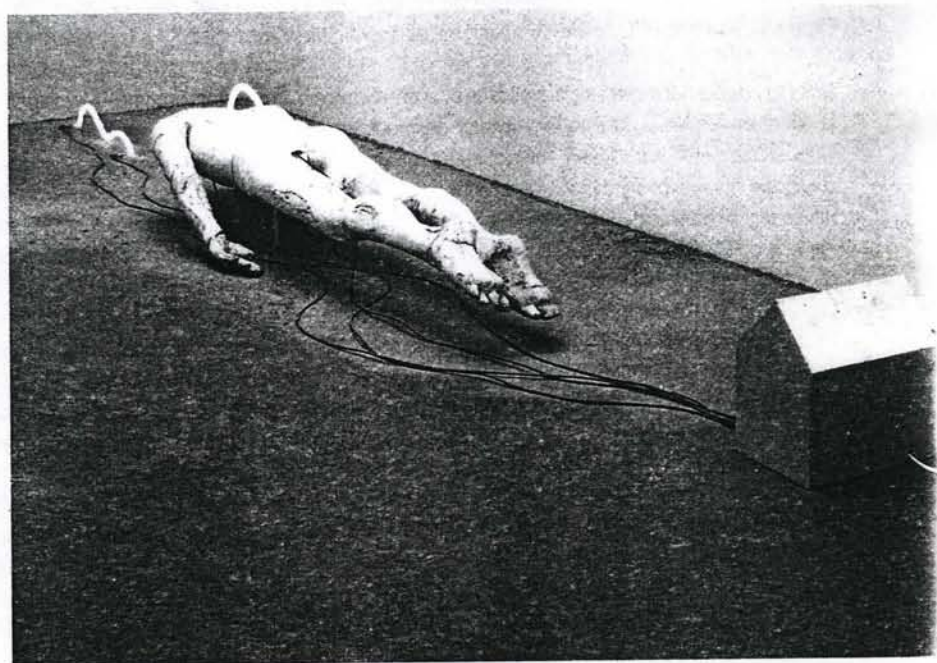
BC: From a certain time you began to call your sculptures after dimensions, always referring to the dimension of your own body. Talking about the body in its physical dimensions, despite its absence, you are even more strongly exhibiting the thread of thinking with the body, thinking with your own body.

MB: This also is an operation making it easier for me to move around in what I am doing. As sculptures kept coming, giving them names was bringing with it a certain chaos. Whereas dimensions, which can sound anonymous, very precisely define for me the shapes, allow for speedy reconstruction and do not remind me of their appearance. On the other hand, numbering introduced a certain insufficiency of using language. From this comes the giving each of my one-man shows a title. e.g. 'Ordnung', 'Selection', 'Dawn', 'My Body Cannot Do Everything I Ask For'. Let us imagine that the already-named exhibition there would appear further titles suggesting some interpretative routes - there would be total confusion.

BC: Does this renunciation of other titles, always suggesting a way of reading or interpreting the work, not constitute an attempt to avoid an excess of easy or even mechanical associations? I am reminded of the formula you used at the end of your poem about the cemetery: „i ani slowa o Erosie i Thanatosie“ („and not a word about Eros or Thanatos“).

MB: In this poem, entitled 'Sand-pit', I described my childhood experiences connected with my grandfather, who was a grave-stone-maker. The cemetery was in effect the sand-pit of my childhood, the place of very natural experiences, to which I referred later, hence my distance to literary metaphors. The formula which you mentioned, maybe modest in appearance, has great significance for me. In my works there constantly appears the motif of death and erotic love, but they are never called in that straight out, they are rather signalled in some peripheral aspects. Talking about the penis, I talk about a hole in a steel plate at the level of the penis. An element which recalls is for example the fact of skin flaking. I always found it easier to use everyday details, to concentrate on apparently unimportant traces, on trivial or even shameful details. Above all I avoid great words. Miron Bialoszewski wrote a great deal on the subject of death, without necessarily using the word itself - death. I think that it is like that in my works, I am always coming back to the subject of death, or rather to the feeling of the inevitability of death. I have a deep consciousness of mortality, of the passing of life and the approach of death. But I do not

Rzeka [River], 1988/1989, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland; foto: Peter Cox



talk about this directly, I use to reexample form which are as if waiting to be filled up with a body, the body after death.

BC: In one of your earlier, still figurative, sculptures called *Rzeka* ('River'), the subject of death was brought up in a much more conventional way, by a visual metaphor, the image of a floating man.

MB: That was my most realistic sculpture, one of the few figures with a head, its only wounds were cuts on the wrists. Initially even I was not aware how powerfully this image was rooted in iconographic traditions. I discovered this later, in Italy, when I came across numerous images in post-Renaissance sculpture of rivers in the form of a prostrate man. With the proviso that my work is devoid of the characteristic affirmation, this is a river of refugees, a river of those escaping from life. But this dialogue with the history of art is quite clear, like in my other sculptures probably. Which does not necessarily arise from the need of referring to the history of art, what is important for me is the dialogue with my own life; I am constantly entering a dialogue with my own experience.

BC: This dialogue is much more direct in later works, in which you avoid symbols, presentations; you minimise the language and the range of associations which easily impose themselves.

MB: The over-interpretation of one of my sculptures made me aware of how careful one to be when reaching for certain symbols. In Glasgow, during the 'Polish realities' exhibition *St Wojciech's red axe* was read as a symbol of Communist oppression, which was absolutely not among my intentions. You have to remember that certain symbols or images introduce threads which cannot later be controlled. This is obviously a question of the cultural context, for example in Poland the use of red is a very risky decision. The perception of red is limited by the perspective of the Soviet flag. Here red has lost its openness to other meanings - red could be the colour of blood and it could equally well be the colour of Coca-Cola.

BC: In connection with the reception of another of your works '*Korytarz mydlany*' ('Soapy Corridor'), you mentioned the pressure of associations arising from historical experience, the pressure of associations of certain threads with the experience of war, concentration camps.

MB: Soap placed on the walls was immediately read in the context of experiences from the Second World War. I would not argue with this interpretation, unless it were to exhaust the entire meaning of my work. You see, in following this line of reasoning, you would have to find some sort of reference to the Holocaust in your daily use of soap. How many people when reaching for the soap during the morning or evening wash think about the Holocaust? When I showed '*Korytarz mydlany*' in Poland, in the *Zachęta Gallery*, there were immediate voices of outrage, because this work was associated with the Holocaust. The whole situation was almost absurd, you could equally well say: let us not wash, let us not use soap, because soap carries with it associations with the Holocaust.

BC: I suppose that this kind of opinion is symptomatic of a certain experience. Certain aspects of our history are still a kind of taboo subject, their infringement is treated as trespassing on forbidden ground. The fact that we are unable to cope with our own past, to enter into a discussion on this subject, creates a rather dangerous situation. Each reference to this past which does not fit the unambiguous schema, causes protests, outrage. This is both absurd in that it does not agree with the ambiguity of history and dangerous in that it denies the ambivalence of the world in which we live.

MB: I come from a concrete, historically defined place. Although I was born 13 years after the end of the war, which was part of my parents' experience, at that time it was still a very fresh experience. In my childhood I drew concentration camps, scenes of war, Poles oppressed by Germans. At night I used to dream that an SS-man was chasing me, that I couldn't escape. This was a result of the atmosphere of those years, an atmosphere of the thread of neo-fascism. Most films which we watched then were war films, in which Poles were the victims oppressed by cruel Germans. This was the atmosphere of my childhood, the memory of which made itself known in '*Mydlany korytarz*'. But this work also carries other threads within it: the passage along the soapy corridor is like the first and last contact with reality. The operation of washing the body is one of the first things with which we come into contact on coming into world, and likewise after death, before we are placed in the coffin, the body is washed. In '*Korytarz*' I wanted to show the experience of passage, in essence a very physical, sensual experience.

BC: A certain author, not a Pole and therefore with a burden of different historical associations, read this work in the context of

domestic rituals remembered from childhood: a great washing-day.

MB: Every so often there would take place a great washing of bed-linen, for example the spring-cleaning before Easter. There would come a woman, who had white, dehydrated hands, and in the whole house there was the smell of soap-suds. The system of maintaining hygiene was different then, there were no automatic washing-machines (at least not here, in Poland). In my house there was no bathroom, until I was 15 I washed behind a curtain, in a great tin-bath. Those were very embarrassing moments. Soap and washing in my memory are also an experiencing of shame, shyness, uneasiness. As a fourteen-year-old boy with certain problems connected with puberty, with sexual maturing, I had to take a bath in the kitchen behind a curtain. In a work realised in the Polish pavilion in Venice, there was a rope situated at eye-level dividing the room and there were steel plates on the floor, arranged like the kitchen in which I used to wash. There were also pieces of soap in small containers, also linked with this experience. Although it was transformed into an almost abstract shape the starting-point was a concrete and very personal experience. Obviously later there appeared other threads and further ways of reading this. Anda Rottenberg recalled the story described by Zofia Nałkowska in 'Medaliony' („medallions”), a story about some children who in the concentration camp had to pass under a rope which was 1.2 metres above the ground. Those who were small enough to pass underneath without touching it went to their deaths. For the others the rope was a measure of life.

BC: In the case of 'Korytarz mydlany' you yourself suggested a certain circle of associations, quoting in the catalogue a fragment of the reminiscences of Father Bezym. What made you reach for the diaries of a missionary from almost a hundred years ago?

MB: I come across the book by accident, in a second-hand bookshop. The fragments I quoted were chosen consciously, because I found in them threads which opened 'Korytarz' up to a different dimension of experience, which had nothing to do with the memory of the Holocaust. I wanted to show feeling of caring for the body, and soap is associated of course with caring for the body. Father Bezym led a mission on Madagascar, where he looked after lepers. In today's times he would probably have been looking after AIDS patients. In his reminiscences he very precisely described his daily activities: feeding and washing his patients, treating their wounds. The juxtaposition of these descriptions with the sharp smell of ordinary grey soap could carry the suggestion of a very physical, corporeal experience.

BC: Generally in critical commentaries (the better ones) your rootedness in your own locality is emphasised. You are regarded as an artist with a very Polish provenance, to which you reply that the area with which you identify is rather Otwock.

MB: The first fifteen years of my life were spent in Otwock, then Warsaw, later still other places, but the most important one, the key place for my identity remains Otwock. What does it mean: a Polish identity? I have just returned from Lublin, which is a completely different place from Warsaw, then you go to Łódź and you are dealing with yet another completely different locality. I do not want to say through this that I identify with Otwock, but I do identify myself with Otwock. If I did not talk about my origins, it would be difficult to find in my works any factors placing the works in Otwock.

BC: Despite these difficulties, the critics, particularly western ones. Quite precisely locate your art against the background of local traditions, they are possibly even more interested in these local traditions than Polish critics, seeking in locality a translation into universality. Perhaps this arises from a historically defined need to locate our art in a more universal dimension of associations.

MB: I get the impression that in Poland we avoid naming localisations, although some critics seek out at all costs Polishness in the works of Polish artists.

BC: Let us stay with locality, I don't even know in what categories we should talk about Polishness.

MB: We have a very poorly developed need for defining ourselves against the background of particular places. Although we have a consciousness of this need, which can be seen from the numbers of memorial tablets. In Warsaw on many buildings you can read various notices telling you that someone was born here, worked here, or died here, here and not somewhere else in Poland. Maybe this someone never even crossed over to the other side of the River Wisła, not to mention the rest of Poland. I think it is important to localise particular places.

BC: The place of your own localisation is your familyhome in Otwock, recalled in a number of your works. The realisation in Venice

was not the only one in which there appeared sketches of the plans of the rooms in your house.

MB: I felt the need to wear away at this place, my childhood home, then my workplace. The home in which I was brought up, in which I spent fifteen years of my life.

BC: This house is present in its substance in your realisation. You do a work, using various elements from its interior: doors, floors. The more there is of your house, of its traces, in what you are doing, the less there is of itself. Trying to cope with this house, or with yourself in this house, it is as if you are carrying it with you, you capture it in your works. From old linoleum, for example, you cut forms reminiscent of muzzles.

MB: I modelled them on the muzzle of my dog, which I had in my childhood. I wanted to show a form dealing with limiting, with what childhood can be. This is a muzzle of possibility, it is still hanging over me. Childhood is a kind of muzzle.

BC: In many works you have exploited this house, extracting from its nooks and crannies the memory of childhood. You have worried away at this memory, showing the house from the inside. Meanwhile in the project presented in the Kunsthalle in Malmö you showed the house from a different perspective, from the outside, and what is more, the house was closed, inaccessible. Perhaps this arose from the specific nature of the whole project, in which there also participated Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor. This was an invitation to do a realisation of a work in situ, a work from concrete, a material associated with the utopias of modern civilisation.

MB: For me this was an opportunity to in a certain sense close the house, the house of my childhood, to surround it with a high concrete wall, to close my childhood away within it, to leave this problem behind me. The only entrance to this house was a small semi-circle, radius about 60 centimeters, so that in a normal position, upright, only a small child would be able to go in. Quite simply, there is no way of returning to certain places or certain situations in our lives. The walls of this house were as if bent outwards at the top. From a greater distance this gave the impression of openness, accessibility. But as you approached, despite your expectations, it turned out that there was no access to the interior, and you were standing in front of high concrete wall. The confrontation with reality dispelled the deceptive expectations. What from a distance seems possible, from nearby turns out to be inaccessible. We expect some sort of understanding, after which we come across barriers which cannot be overcome, a wall of impossibility.

BC: In what you are doing you are very absorbed with yourself, and as a rule you perceive everything from the perspective of your own biography, your own experiences. You mythologise your own privacy and possibly also yourself.

MB: It is my life and my story, whom else could I mythologise?

BC: You are sketching a story about an isolated individual, you talk about the lost position of the individual.

MB: The individual will always be lost in relation to society, particularly an artist.

Translated into English by Tadeusz Z. Wolański