

FROGS, KNOCKS AND OTHER BLINKS

*A conversation between Mirosław Balka and Gregory Salzman
on February 4, 2009 in Amherst, Massachusetts*

GS: Mirosław, one of the things I've noticed about your work is that it is quite involved with poetry, and I am wondering why this is so and how this interest translates into visual work? As I see it, some artists are poets and some artists are not and you, however one looks at it, are among the poet artists.

MB: Yeah, but being a poet doesn't mean being better than not being a poet.

GS: No, it's not a matter of better or worse, but it is a quality that some art has and some art doesn't have.

MB: That's right. I think it's a kind of unique quality which... I mean, I don't like to describe myself as a poet because the word "poet" sounds very old-fashioned, but maybe my art is also a little old fashioned. My art doesn't follow the mainstream, I think. I am swimming in my own stream. Sometimes it is very shallow, sometimes it is very narrow, but it is mine. Reading poetry... you can recognize the person behind poetry much easier than the person behind prose, I think. Poetry is closer to the truth.

GS: I understand your reservations about being called a poet because this epithet is often debased and frequently is identified with conservative ideas about art and culture. It is necessary to distinguish work that debases poetry from work that is authentically poetic. What makes your work poetic, in my mind, is that it and all poetry are somehow indirect. Also, perhaps there is no abstract or purely formal poetry. Poems always describe a real experience and the poet tries, first of all, to identify and to convey his or her precise feelings about something to himself or herself. Good poetry is precise in its relation of thought and feeling.

MB: That's why for me what is important, in what I do, is to leave some space. My work doesn't occupy the whole space, the exhibition space. It occupies just a little bit of space, and the space which surrounds the work has the same importance as the space occupied by the object.

GS: And the space that surrounds the work is not just physical. It could be metaphorical. It could be anything really.

MB: Very much so, yes, but this is the space which the visitor uses. Because usually you don't sit on the work of art, you don't touch the work. You touch the space around and also my sculpture or projections in some way are placed in the space and also touch the space. So there is an exchange of bodies.

GS: Between the body of the viewer and the body of the artist?

MB: Yes. Using the body of the space.

GS: When you say space, could you also say situation?

MB: I could say situation, as well.

GS: Because your work, I find is very much in response to a particular situation that can have both a cultural and a personal basis. It is always in relation to some concrete state of affairs, namely a situation.

MB: Yeah, but that is what I am always saying. What is clear to me is that the structure of my work is very similar to that of a Japanese haiku. Haiku poetry is made in response

to a particular situation. I mean, you have a few solid words like moon, mud, frog, and then you have to build a sentence out of this. Not even a sentence, because it is not about thinking in sentences...It's about bits and pieces that you can glue together in your mind. Even sometimes it's not necessary to glue it but just to get it and carry it, and sometimes it's like a throw of dice. Using the same elements you can build different situations.

GS: Does your work have different moods?

MB: Yes, I am trying to work on different moods but very often they turn into one mood, that of sad stories, I would say. For example in the exhibition in Wroclaw, titled '*Jetzt*',. The selection of the works was quite sad because there were many works there touching a very serious subject. So I decided to include something that would be fun and nice, so I made this film, *Mapping The Studio, Too*.

GS: Especially for that exhibition?

MB: For that exhibition...because I was thinking about changing the situation, by introducing a more positive note.

GS: Let's talk about this humorous yet also pathetic work. What is the meaning of the title and what is the connection of this film with Bruce Nauman's video *Mapping the Studio*?

MB: Well, I had moved into a new studio one year previously, and I am still mapping the studio. I still don't trust this new environment. So I am just trying to touch the studio and the element that I felt would help me to touch it, would be this small mouse. I had this mouse on the shelf for maybe three years or so. She was waiting to perform.

GS: Does the situation of the mouse in this film represent your own discomfort in being in this still unfamiliar place?

MB: Probably.

GS: This work is somewhat absurd, isn't it?

MB: Yes, yes very much. I wanted to make something amusing as I told you before, but unfortunately the final result isn't funny because it turned quite obsessive and even quite sad. That's what people said at the opening—that they were very afraid about the life of this mouse. A hard life.

GS: There's no possibility for development or for a life.

MB: Exactly.

GS: A futile life.

MB: Actually the mouse made the circle in some way, you know. In the studio, knocking, touching the wall, touching a few places and ending on the palette.

GS: Yes, always with the hard knock.

MB: Yes.

GS: Sound is very prominent and significant in your work. Almost all the works in this exhibition have sound. One work here that doesn't is *The Fall*. Why is this work silent? Is the absence of sound from it a conscious decision on your part?

MB: You see, usually whenever there is actual sound present in the situation, the work has a sound. *The Fall* is without sound because the object itself is silent and there was no ambient sound.

GS: It also doesn't need sound.

MB: That's another thing, but I am trying not to manipulate the situation. I am trying to use the raw material. My function in making the video is just to extract the right piece, to

take it out of the tape. My only manipulation is making the loop, gluing the beginning with the end, and making the circle. That's the creation.

GS: Repetition, in all these films, is partly a presentational device. The looped format allows the film to recycle itself automatically. But this repetitive format also has an expressive character. The repetition of image and sound can become very obsessive and disturbing, as is the case with many of these films.

MB: Very true, but I think that the motivation is a lot more prosaic because I don't like long movies. I never feel comfortable viewing long action videos.

GS: Why do you dislike long videos? Because the viewer is required to watch the entire film?

MB: Long videos are good for cinemas where viewers are seated. Mine are for vertical viewing... So, in my work, the viewer, after 5, 10, 15, maximum 30 seconds, can see the whole work from the beginning to the end. Repetition is important for me. Repetition of a situation builds a story.

GS: As in *Mapping the Studio, Too*, which, through repetition, creates a sad story.

MB: You asked me about Bruce Nauman and his connection to this film. Do you remember?

GS: Yeah, well, Bruce Nauman's work is the all night movie.

MB: Yes, so mine was in contrast to this, so I made *Mapping the Studio, Too* which lasts seven seconds. But to make this movie I spent a few hours in my studio trying again and again to film the wind-up mouse in the space, so I made like a...

GS: ...until it made a knock?

MB: Yes, before it made the right...

GS: The right trajectory?

MB: Yeah, when I could say it was good. So I was doing this almost a few hours.

GS: The sound, in those films that involve sound, is always striking. As in *bottom*—the film in the bath house at the Majdanek camp. This film, largely through its use of sound, sets up a very powerful tension between presence and absence.

MB: Yes.

GS: The sound ricochets like a dry echo. The grating and percussive sounds of metal against metal and metal against wood, creaking doors and the hollow reverberation opposes the comforting thought of the wetness of the shower. The acute presence of these sounds is contradicted by the derelict state of the place and the sense of absence it harbors.

MB: Yes. It's important, but like I told you before, it's not the element which I had in mind walking with the camera in this space. While walking in the space, I noticed that my steps made this sound, and then I concentrated harder on this.

GS: You were conscious of it while you were making it?

MB: Yes, so my steps became more emphatic, almost like marching, like the march of the dead.

GS: Yes, the sound has that rhythm.

MB: Yeah, because I am not so blind an artist, I try to be conscious of what I am doing.

GS: As any artist.

MB: Yes.

(laughter)

GS: Returning to our discussion of poetry. The titles of your shows are all suggestive and ambiguous. *GRAVITY. Nothere*, which can be read as ‘Not here’, ‘Not there’ or ‘No there’. *Bitte...* which is the word printed on an old metal waste can you found and turned into a sculpture. And you once made a work that consists of all your previous exhibitions’ titles engraved on stone. A litany of titles presented as a kind of monument.

MB: Yes, the title is always very important for me. From 1990 onwards, I started to be conscious of the titles. From 1990, if you look at my solo exhibitions, if you read title after title, you can follow the line of my art. So just reading the titles you can go through my art, you can have a short voyage through my art. Just by reading my titles.

GS: Not exactly a voyage, because one title doesn’t lead to the next.

MB: You know, very often, before I begin to work, I have a title of the show in mind. So, very often the process of making the show starts from getting to the title. So this is the task that I set for myself. Once I have the title I know the limits that I want to measure in this exhibition. I build the exhibition around the title. So, the exhibition’s title is in the middle, in the heart, and then I build around it.

GS: Could you give me an example of an exhibition where the title corresponds to a body of work?

MB: For example, the exhibition, ‘*Jetzt*,’. The title, ‘*Jetzt*,’ which means ‘now,’ from a poem by Paul Celan.

GS: May I cite the poem, the section of the poem?

MB: It’s very short, so you can read the whole poem.

GS: In English (of course it was written in German), it goes:

Now,
The hassocks are burning
I eat the book with all of its insignia.

Celan is a difficult poet because his thoughts and images are fragmentary. So what I gather from this poem in relation to your work is that the insignias of the book represent all the different aspects of life. A good poet is not just dealing with one dimension, but rather with the totality of life—the good, the bad, the evil and the indifferent. Everything matters. Do you, as an artist, want to speak of all sides of life? Is this the gist of Celan’s poem for you, or is there more to it?

MB: I think you said it in the right way.

GS: To elaborate on what I just said, in your work there is a sadness, but there is also another side to it. Like you said, when you wanted to change the tone, you introduced some humor by adding *Mapping* to the show, ‘*Jetzt*,’. I detect traces of the spirit of Dada in your art alongside its gravity. The spiritual seriousness and beauty of your art embrace the abject conditions and circumstances of life. The humor and wit of your art concern the rejection of linear thinking, and reflect an interest in the discontinuity and in the ungraspable dimension of life. The other day we were talking about Zen, another spiritual discipline that invokes all the insignia and contradiction. Zen is...

MB: Well, it’s like we also said, Zen is not only about sitting in silence with closed eyes. It is also about watching the frog jumping in the mud. Actually, I suddenly understood Zen when I was in Korea and we went to the Temple of the Rising Sun near Kyongju. We went very early in the morning, almost in the night, to see the Buddha touched by the rays of the sun, the rising sun. But it was a terrible day. It was raining, so we couldn’t see

the Buddha touched by the light. Standing in the heavy rain under a kind of shelter, with the big fields in front of me, I saw lots of puddles being created rapidly by the rain, huge puddles, a lot of mud and puddles. And standing under this shelter in the beginning of day, I saw a very little frog jumping through this big field. Jump after jump. And I understood then, not what life is about, but what is important in life, that even little things matter. I already knew this, but this was the illustration of what I knew. And I just smiled.

GS: A moment of awareness?

MB: Yes. I like to give importance to even little pieces of nothing. I like to pick up things and give them dignity. I think, my work whether in the field of sculpture or film is very much about this, about picking up things and saying that this is a valuable thing, giving it a wider meaning. Like in our exhibition, I am showing the inside of the toilet in the train, which the title, *The 3rd Eye*, changes into a mystical object.

GS: *The 3rd Eye* represents intuition or consciousness...?

MB: Yes, but also represents us being in the chain of consumption. I mean like the function of shitting which even the...

GS: The Buddha did. (laughter)

MB: (laughter) Yes, even the Buddha did, which is quite interesting because very often the Dalai Lama talks about these simple life functions in the same way as giving wise advice. So I think it is a good thing not to be afraid of showing your weakness because, probably, I am even more on the side of weakness, rather than on the side of braveness, I would say.

GS: Part of the precision of your early work was the placement of your work in the space. When I first encountered your work in the mid-1990's, you were doing non-figurative sculptures that referred to your body negatively, by its absence. These objects were presented as ensembles and the pieces were assigned very definite locations in the space. As ensembles the rooms spurred contemplation. I wouldn't say that these installations had a religious sense, but they had the aura of a sanctuary, a place where one wants to linger, that touches you with its aura. A place for contemplation. Now, with the films, something different is going on because there is movement and sound and the subject matter has become tougher and the tone, harsher. In the present show, most of the work occupies one large space and the sound from the different films merges to produce a clamor verging on noise.

MB: But I think the part that was and is still always important to my work is the order of the things in the space. I put a lot of attention on the placement of the films or sculpture in the space.

GS: Yes, that is still very much present in the work.

MB: I think there is still a lot of discipline in this gesture. It is not that things can be here or there. I spend a lot of time analyzing the space. Previously the work was, perhaps, more silent. Now, these films from the last two years... yes, they produce sound, but I think that they are also still, and that you can find silence in them. Even in this terrible clamor.

GS: Maybe due to the hypnotic aspect of the films?

MB: What aspect?

GS: Hypnotic.

MB: Hypnotic aspect. Yes.

GS: Where the work's charged subject matter and its disorienting qualities are anaesthetized by repetition.

MB: Yes, it is also like the point of a mantra. Like 'Om'. When you repeat it, you hear it, but then, finally, you don't hear it any longer.

GS: This is true of bottom. If you look at this film for a short time, it is very unsettling, but if you stay with it longer it becomes less so. Not so with *Primitive*. The longer you listen to that work, the more intolerable it becomes. In this respect it is unlike the other films.

MB: Because it is the only work that involves words...which are real. 'Primitive, real primitive.' Whereas, the sounds in the other films...

GS: Are musical in some way.

MB: Are almost musical in some way. The sound of the running train, the sound of the mouse hitting the walls.

GS: ...so, through repetition, the very instability and jerkiness of the image and the tensions that comprise the work come to be perceived as rhythmical.

MB: Exactly. This is the case with the hissing and clicking sound of *BlueGasEyes*, and in *T.Turn*, the shadow voice of the guide who says something in Hebrew that is muffled. And *Primitive* is the only film whose sound is from our language. That is why I consigned it to the entrance space, so it is not in the main exhibition space. And it was the same when I showed this work in the exhibition, 'Jetzt,' in Wroclaw and *Nothere* in London. There it also occupied another space. Here in Amherst, I first thought to put *Primitive* in the show, but later I decided that it has to be kicked out. Because it belongs to a different world, uses different language.

GS: Did the idea to extract three seconds from Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*—occur to you straight away when you first saw this it?

MB: Not the first time I saw *Shoah*. Because I saw *Shoah* in the '80s for the first time on television, where it was presented in installments. Since at that time, I didn't watch much television, I missed seeing parts of it. But I started to analyze the film when I bought the set of DVDs, and then I really watched it carefully, about ten years ago.

GS: And these two or three words that you fixed on. By isolating this clip, the effect of these words is greatly intensified. In the film these three words pass by quickly, whereas in your looped excerpt, what this man is saying impresses itself on the mind as something terrible.

MB: Yes.

GS: As Piotr Krajewski wrote in the catalogue 'Jetzt,' these three seconds from *Shoah* capture "a glint of evil."

MB: Yes.

GS: A 'glint of evil'. It's a good description of the essence of this piece, I thought.

MB: Yes, very much, especially as evil here has a baby face, as you noticed.

GS: Yes, the same writer referred to the face of Suchomel as 'ectoplasmic'. Unformed and deformed, a primitive form.

GS: In Poland, do the young people have any recollection of the war or interest in its events, or just total amnesia?

MB: Usually not so much, but the Holocaust as a subject in art has become fashionable. So there are quite a few artists now who are saying something about this.

GS: But are the young people searching for this kind of information?

MB: Yes and no, but rather not.

GS: Are you the only artist in Poland dealing with this subject matter?

MB: Of course not, but maybe in the way I approach it, maybe yes. Some of young artists try to touch it, but I am a little bit afraid of the shock value of these works. You take photographs in the gas chamber with the unreflectiveness of a stupid gesture and consider the result to be a good work of art because it is shocking or provocative. I think that in dealing with such a subject you need to have some knowledge.

GS: The films we are showing here... some of them were filmed in the concentration camps yet this subject matter is not so evident...

MB: But I think my art is a little bit about blinking.

GS: Blinking?

MB: How do you call the movement of your eyes?

GS: Yes, blinking.

MB: So sometimes you see...and then you don't see. You know something, but it's always bits and pieces. You are able to see the light, but just after the light, there is darkness.