

Miroław Bałka

PROMISE

Promise to Miroław Bałka

Promise, the title of Miroław Bałka's show at the Zagreb branch of Galerija Manuš — reportedly borrowed from Sade's second album — inevitably evokes, for most of us in the contemporary art scene, another, long-unfulfilled promise: the restoration of his installation *Eyes of Purification* in Zagreb's Museum of Contemporary Art. For over a decade, Bałka's dreamlike 2009 work with its parallel waterfalls has sadly languished in disrepair on the museum's monumental staircase, reduced to an unsightly, poorly constructed concrete block.

Addressing this issue seems crucial, as does confronting another urgent problem: the lamentable state of Zagreb's public sculptures, commissioned and funded with public money, yet now largely damaged, dismantled, dented, unlit, defaced, or obscured by parked cars and glowing billboards. With his new group of works for Manuš, Bałka in a way compels us to recognize this neglect.

Unlike most public institutions in Croatia, the Mrduljaš family approach artists with a rare sense of responsibility, persistence, and respect, engaging in the production process, especially when sculpture is involved. Notably, every artist who has exhibited in their relatively new Zagreb space had previously shown work at Galerija Kula or the original Galerija Manuš in Split, with each Zagreb presentation thoughtfully reimagined and installed anew.

Miroław Bałka belongs to a generation of contemporary European sculptors who have redefined the field through a multidisciplinary practice that spans existentialist figuration, monumental installation, and multimedia. Last year, at Galerija Kula, Bałka created an interactive installation, titled *Fadensonnen*, after a poem by Paul Celan, while now in Zagreb he unveils a loosely interconnected group of untitled objects.

Conceptually and in terms of production, the group draws on the principles of *Arte Povera*, the late 1960s art movement that became synonymous with the use of cheap, everyday materials in art practice. A pair of sculptural forms, rising at sharp angles toward the ceiling in a zig-zag formation, evoke an ascension of sorts of coconut fiber doormats. The humble doormat, as the sculpture's initial module, is first placed flat on the floor, fulfilling its utilitarian purpose, before being mounted on a welded metal substructure that propels it upward to ascend— both spatially and symbolically — through a sequence of variations, almost reaching the ceiling.

The second sculpture resembles a fragment of a broken terrazzo flooring that, by leaning on its own metal framework, has managed to lift itself into space. Transformed into an artwork, it maintains a precarious balance, supported by slender steel legs. On the wall hangs a charcoal rubbing (*frottage*) of that same terrazzo fragment, rendered with the gravity and presence of a portrait.

Both sculptural groups share a unifying theme: the elevation of something belonging to the lowest plane of existence toward the stars. This transformation is enacted tautologically - through literal elevation and through reclassification of materials intended for everyday use into those employed in the making of art — an inherently elevated category of object.

Galerija Manu

The message of apotheosis and the closeness between the everyday and the sublime, the profane and the spiritual, the cheap and the potentially precious, remains as vital today as it was in Baroque depictions of mortals ascending to sainthood in marble, or during the emergence of *Arte Povera*, with its installations of potato sacks.

Given the condition of Bałka's *Eyes of Purification* — arguably the only public sculpture by an internationally relevant artist in Zagreb — this message feels both liberating and forgiving. One might say that artists still believe in us; perhaps it is time we made an effort to prove ourselves worthy of that faith.

Branko Franceschi

Miroslaw Balka was born in 1958 in Warsaw, Poland. He lives and works in Otwock, Poland, and Oliva, Spain. Balka is a sculptor also active in the field of experimental video and drawing. In 1985 he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where he has run the Interfaculty Studio of Activities. Professor nominated by President of Poland in 2012. Awarded the Mies van der Rohe Stipend by Krefeld Kunstmuseen. He is a member of Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Miroslaw Balka has participated in major exhibitions worldwide including: Venice Biennale (1990, 2003, 2005, 2013; representing Poland in 1993), documenta IX, Kassel (1992), Sydney Biennale (1992, 2006), The Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (1995), Sao Paulo Biennale (1998), Liverpool Biennial (1999), Santa Fe Biennale (2006). In 2009 he presented the special project *How It Is* for the Unilever Series, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. He is the author of the Memorial to the Victims of the *Estonia* Ferry Disaster in Stockholm (1997), and numerous spatial works including *AUSCHWITZWIELICZKA*, Cracow (2010), and *HEAL*, University of California, San Francisco (2009). A series of conversations between Miroslaw Balka and professor Zygmunt Bauman were published in 2012. In 2015 the artist created the stage design for Paweł Mykietyn's *Magic Mountain* opera. He has participated in panel discussions with many distinguished speakers including Julian Heynen, Anda Rottenberg, Kasia Redzisz, Anja Rubik, Joseph Rykwert and Vicente Todoli.

Between 1986 and 1989 together with Miroslaw Filonik and Marek Kijewski he established the artistic group Consciousness Neue Bieremiennost.

In 2015 the exhibition *Nerve. Construction* at the Muzeum Sztuki in Lodz initiated a series of three large individual exhibitions. They were an attempt at a retrospective of the past thirty years of Balka's creative work. Subsequent exhibitions have taken place in 2017: *CROSSOVER/S* in Pirelli Hangar Bicocca in Milan and *DIE SPUREN* in Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen.

Earlier selected solo shows include: Freud Museum, London (2014); Centre for Contemporary Art, Vinzavod, Moscow (2013); Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw (both 2011); Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe (both 2010); Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro (both 2007); Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen K21, Düsseldorf (2006); Museum of Contemporary Art, Strasbourg (2004); Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw and SMAK, Gent (both 2001); National Museum of Art, Osaka (2000); Museu Serralves, Porto (1998); Museet for Samtidskunst, Oslo (1997); Tate Gallery, London (1995); The Lannan Foundation,

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## **Galerija Manu**

Los Angeles (1994); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Renaissance Society – University of Chicago (both 1992).

Balka's works are in numerous institutional collections including: Tate Modern, London; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; MOCA, Los Angeles; SFMOMA, San Francisco; MOMA, New York; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC; The Art Institute of Chicago; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Museu Serralves, Porto; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Kiasma, Helsinki; Kröller-Müller, Otterlo; EMST The National Museum of Art, Athens; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; Collection Lambert, Avignon; Middelheimmuseum, Antwerp; Fundación Botín, Santander; Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb. In Poland his works are in the collections of: Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz; Centre of Contemporary Art, Warsaw; Zacheta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; The National Museum, Wrocław; MOCAP, Cracow; Labirynt, Lublin; Arsenał, Białystok; IVAM, Valencia; National Museum in Warsaw.

### **LIST OF WORKS**

1. "2 × (285 × 40 × 104), 40 × 60 × 2"  
steel, coconut fiber, 2025.
2. "93 × 80 × 90"  
steel, terrazzo, 2024.
3. "Frottage portrait of 93 × 80 × 90"  
50 × 35 cm, paper coal / frottage, 2025.