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# **The Art of Impossible Possibility.**

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## The Art of Impossible Possibility

on my face in the mud and the dark I see me it's a halt  
nothing more I'm journeying it's a rest nothing more

Samuel Beckett

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts  
but also their zero-hour [*Stillstellung*]. Where thinking  
suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with  
tensions, there it yields a shock to the same, through  
which it crystallizes as a monad.

Walter Benjamin

### How it is

A metal ramp leads to the giant steel 30x10x13 meter container whose ribbing resembles the architecture of the former power station, today Tate Modern gallery of art, where it is housed. It is placed on two-meter stilts. Thus one can walk underneath it (almost physically sensing the several dozen kilos of its weight suspended right over one's head) or around it. The entry is strategically placed so that from ground level one cannot look in and prepare oneself for what to expect inside. The ramp pounding under one's feet leads the viewer to the 10-meter-high, completely darkened interior. The inside of the container is lined with black satin which contrasts with the steel coating outside. Inside nothing can be seen. Nothing can be seen. And it is silent, as if the viewers abided by the unwritten rule to keep quiet. The space draws one in. It is difficult to determine its boundaries. The viewers' steps are uncertain. A number of commentators and critics

have pointed out the historical and social dimension of Mirosław Bałka's work. According to them, in the context of his earlier work, the container, the ramp, steel, carry unambiguous associations. But what are they? To suggest that the work says a lot about the universal human condition is to say nothing.

My thesis is the following: Bałka's *How It Is* is an example of art which undertakes the challenge of the aesthetics of trauma, as perhaps the most interesting and ambiguous example of such art in recent years. In the subsequent successive close-ups I will attempt to describe elements of that aesthetic and point out the possible contexts of situating them in art and theory.

As Hal Foster observes, "In contemporary art and theory, let alone in contemporary fiction and film, there is a general shift in conceptions of the real: from the real understood as an effect of representation to the real understood as an event of trauma."<sup>1</sup> From a certain perspective, particularly in literature, art, and theory, "this trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means."<sup>2</sup> Foster points out that in the purely psychoanalytic register (he himself refers mostly to Lacan's version of psychoanalytic theory) the subject of trauma does not exist, for this position has been evacuated, and therefore the critique of the subject seems most radical here.<sup>3</sup>

As Cathy Caruth emphasizes, however, what is at stake here is not a pathology but a reformulation of the structure of experience: what happens is not fully experienced and assimilated in its own (proper) time, but with a delay, in recurrent nightmares, retrospections, acts of possession by the experience, possession of the one who experiences.<sup>4</sup> The point is not to associate all experience with trauma, but to allow within the experience for something unforeseen, for a break, a lack of continuity. The traumatic possibility does not come from beyond experience but is inscribed into it as its paradoxical impossibility.

In the conceptualization proposed by Marie Torok and Nicholas Abraham, the traumatic can be found in any experience which evades psychological metabolism: it is the element which cannot be known, thought, or verbalized and included in the symbolic field. Such unassimilated and unassimilable experience creates wounds in the psychic web thus destroying the individual sense of cohesion and continuity. The unassimilated fragments of experience break off and are deposited intact in the isolated regions of the psyche, those parts of the I, which, consequently, also become detached and isolated. Separated from the experiencing and experienced I, beyond the reach of its knowledge and self-awareness, secret and hidden, they become a veritable psychic no-man's land, toward which, however, a substantial part of the individual's symbolic field begins to weigh.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. Foster, *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic*, „October,” Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 110.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 123.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> See: C. Caruth, „Introduction” in: *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, 10.

<sup>5</sup> See: N. Abraham, M. Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word. A Cryptonymy*, trans. N. Rand, introd. J. Derrida, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005.

## The whale

What does Bałka's *How It Is* consist of? It consists of a ramp, a giant steel container, and 3900m<sup>3</sup> of darkness. Bałka's work does not represent anything, does not tell anything, does not make anything present. It is itself a presence, a possible situation, a potential event. The list of inspirations, possible analogies, and sources presented by the artist in a book – which can be called without hesitation an artistic book and an integral part of the project – that list is long and almost dizzyingly diverse. This is the reality or even the truth of how it is. And the way it is, darkness is, paradoxically, everywhere the same and everywhere different. The work calls up numerous associations with the horrific, the strange, the fear of the night, dread, industry, the railroad, depth, the abysmal, the beast, danger, the uncanny, the black box, the cellar, the air-raid shelter, hell, *The Heart of Darkness*, the trench, but it can also serve as the figure of the unconscious.

In László Krasznahorkai's novel, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, one day a small Hungarian town is visited by a circus with the world's largest (stuffed) whale. The whole menagerie fascinates at first, then becomes progressively more disturbing, to ultimately lead to a complete deconstruction of the order of this apparently normal place. The plot, which takes place as if beyond time and in a non-place, involves the disoriented community attempting to reconstruct order. What if the stuffed whale is the return of everything that has been deposed and hidden, repressed and covered up with the apparent order of structure, conforming to the principle of collective pleasure? "Seeing the whale did not mean [one] could grasp the full meaning of the sight, since to comprehend the enormous tail fin, the dried, cracked, steel-grey carapace and, halfway down the strangely bloated hulk, the top fin, which alone measured several meters, appeared a singularly hopeless task."<sup>6</sup> What if *How It Is* were such a whale?<sup>7</sup>

As Cathy Caruth points out:

The full impact of this notion of trauma can be understood when we look at it in terms of the inside/outside model of the psyche implied in the theory of the pleasure principle, which implicitly suggests that what is inside the psyche is a mediation of the outside through desire, repression, and so on. In trauma, there is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's mediation, hence without any relation to the self, and this consequently becomes a threat to any understanding of what a self might be in this context.<sup>8</sup>

Bałka's "whale," a veritable anti-Moby Dick, allows for a peculiar (aesthetic) experience. But one cannot speak here of the sublime, such as would depend on the calculated aesthetic effects, on expressing vastness and power or on the suggestion of unrepre-

<sup>6</sup> László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, New Directions Publishing, 2002, 142.

<sup>7</sup> This association is not accidental: the whale appears on Bałka's list of inspirations, and Krasznahorkai is the author of the story "On Velocity," placed in the book which accompanies the exposition.

<sup>8</sup> C. Caruth *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, 131-132

sentability.<sup>9</sup> Although *How It Is* pulls the viewers out of narrative continuity, it does not offer any special epiphany. Neither is the point to create a feeling of impotence in the viewers, to oppress or humiliate their imagination. On the contrary, the point is to deeply move their imagination by surprising their consciousness and putting it off course. The point is not, finally, to create a momentary feeling that something unrepresentable does exist or happens in ecstatic moments arrived at through the transcendental calling of the subject. *How It Is* is rather calls the viewer-subject inside (literally and figuratively), not to go beyond but to move within the self. In the absence of light and as if deprived of “mirrors,” the viewer ceases to occupy the position of the static center of the visual experience and unavoidably moves down: into the cellar, the dugout, the hole, the trench, the crypt; and all those figures point toward the unconscious, or perhaps they do not.

### The crypt

And what if *How It Is* is a crypt?

“Between the idyllic moment and its subsequent forgetting (we have called the later ‘preservative repression’), there was the metapsychological traumatism of a loss ... This segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality – untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual, assimilative work of mourning – causes a genuinely covert shift in the entire psyche. The shift itself is covert, since both the fact that the idyll was real and that it was later lost must be disguised and denied. This leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego.”<sup>10</sup> A live correlate of loss rests in the crypt, reconstructed from words, images, and feelings.

The most important quality of this object placed in the inner crypt is its being unsayable, and thus its absolute exteriority. The creation of the crypt is thus the result of a failed or never undertaken work of mourning or, to put it in Abraham’s and Torok’s terms, of incorporation, which takes place where knowledge and language fail to work out and through loss and understand absence.<sup>11</sup>

The crypt is the place inside the subject, in which the lost object is devoured and preserved. Cryptofor is the one who becomes the carrier of the crypt, who has incorporated the absolute exterior into his/her interior. The dialectic of the inside and the outside, as has been pointed out above, is crucial to Bálka’s work. I believe one could suggest the following experiment: to think about *How It Is* as a crypt that has been unearthed and

<sup>9</sup> See J.-F. Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” Trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson, *The Inhuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 89-107; and A. Rejniak-Majewska, “Obraz jako sytuacja,” *Teksty Drugie*, 2009, no. 5, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Abraham, Marie Torok, “The Lost Object--Me,” in: *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 141; quoted in: Michał Paweł Markowski, “Perekreacja,” in: Georges Perec, *Gabinet kolekcjonera*, trans. MP Markowski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Michał Paweł Markowski, “Perekreacja,” 98.

opened, a crypt which becomes the possibility of any crypt, when we are fumbling in the dark and unable to be (with) ourselves anymore. After all, it is an interior entirely devoid of sense and emotion, which does not encourage any effort to name or categorize.

Inspired by Abraham's and Torok's metapsychology and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Bracha Ettinger offers *transcryptum* as "an artobject, artevent, artoperation, or artprocedure which incarnates transcription of trauma and...its traces."<sup>12</sup> In this way the work of art works through the world's amnesia and transforms it into a memory. Ettinger calls this process transcriptomnesia: "the lifting of the world's hidden memory from its outside with-in-side."<sup>13</sup> Transcryptum is an occasion to share and affectively recognize the unknown Thing and Event. "The art as transcryptum," says Ettinger, "gives body to a memory of the Real...Our posttraumatic era becomes, by virtue of this art, transtraumatic."<sup>14</sup>

Trauma as the absolute other of representation evades its grammar, the structure of time and space, and demands calling to life a new grammar (and even a new vocabulary). According to Griselda Pollock, the aim of art is different from that of representation, because art leads to an encounter, during which and through which trauma will be transmitted, however, not in the form of paralyzing and confounding weight, but as irreducible otherness. Obviously this is not a reference to art understood as therapy, but a type of aesthetic of confrontation, as opposed to presencing; not a bringing over to oneself but a bringing of oneself over to the shaky ground of an encounter, during which, after all, ultimately nothing may happen. The ground seems very fragile: on the one hand, we are dealing with a destructive abyss, emptiness, and nothingness, and on the other, with the danger of covering them up, talking them down/to death.

## Passages

Under this title the Israeli artist, Dani Karavan, created in Portbou the installation-monument dedicated to the memory of Walter Benjamin. It is a fold in the landscape, on top of the hill, in the vicinity of a cemetery, by the sea, in the Pyrenees. A triangular, steel, brown shape is sticking out of the rock. On the ground, in front of the entry to this peculiar dark corridor, there is a steel sheet that looks like an open door. 87 steps lead down, almost as far as one can see, all the way to the sea. Reality upside down: the mountain opens up to admit us into an impossible passage, impossible, because one is separated from the last jump into nothingness by a glass wall, behind which the waves crash on the rock. An inscription on the wall (in German, Spanish, Catalanian, French, and English) reads: "It is more arduous to honor the memory

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<sup>12</sup> Bracha Ettinger "Transcryptum: Memory Tracing in/for/with the Other" in *Matrixial Borderspace*, (ed.) Brian Massumi, foreword Judith Butler. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007. 166-7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.”<sup>15</sup>

Inexact and incomplete historical records say that escaping from France, Walter Benjamin reached the French-Catalonian town of Port Bou in the Pyrenees. It so happened that on the day he arrived there, the border patrol was not allowing anyone to pass. Benjamin probably committed suicide by swallowing a lethal dose of morphine. The circumstances of his death, however, remain unclear. He was buried at the Roman-Catholic cemetery in the niche number 563. His companions were allowed to cross the border on the next day, safely arrived in Lisbon on the last day of September, and boarded the ship for the US. In the summer of 1945, Benjamin’s remains were moved to a mass grave, *fosa comun*, nameless, and thus joined what Canetti called “the nameless crowd of the dead.”

Michael Taussig writes that a cemetery and, above all, the grave, is meant to create an illusion of direct contact between the name and the body, to (re)tie the word to the object. How to mark the death of tens, hundreds, thousands? How to mark the presence of absence, how to memorialize? At the Port Bou cemetery and in Caravan’s monument-installation, the beauty of the landscape mixes with the terror of death (and history): the human world is arrested and naturalized into what we call a *still life* or a *landscape*. The danger releases flashing images which hold both the past and the future suspended. It is an experiential state of exception in the tunnel between the sea and the sky, in the face of the real inability to pass.

Balka does not claim this as an inspiration. But *How It Is* is also such an impossible passage.

### (After)shock

If aesthetics is a theory of sensual impressions, the aesthetics of trauma would have to be concerned with a veritable shock to the senses. *How It Is* is not art which terrifies, but art as a space from which one experiences the world, in ways defined above. Unseeing, which is the elementary condition of the viewer inside Balka’s work, allows to critically approach seeing as such. Ernst van Alphen aptly describes it, emphasizing that in the context of the limit-experience, seeing does not mean knowing.<sup>16</sup> This, it seems, is the fundamental lesson of trauma. Balka produces a reversal: unseeing is to lead to a new knowledge and even self-knowledge. It is an opening of an epistemological possibility.

In the experience of the victims of the Holocaust, the relationship between seeing and understanding was radically disrupted. The analysis of the accounts of eyewitnesses proves that the visual functions here as an unmodified return to what has happened, rather than a way of reaching or penetrating what happened. The visual becomes raw

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<sup>15</sup> Underneath, there is an abbreviation “G.S.I, 1241,” which most likely is a reference to the collected works of Benjamin in German, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. See: Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin’s Grave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Ernst van Alphen, “Caught by Images: on the Role of Visual Imprints in Holocaust Testimonies,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, August 2002 vol. 1 no. 2, 205-221.

material. Seeing does not mean “being a witness.” Apart from seeing, one needs to formulate a narrative about what one saw. The problem, it seems, lies in the very mediation, in transmission. Seeing does not lead to the possibility of representation. Trauma, as I frequently emphasize, is a highly paradoxical phenomenon. The attempt to understand it may leave us facing an irresolvable conflict: the most intense confrontation with reality turns out to lead to utter numbness toward it and immediacy takes the form of delay, of belatedness.

## The structure of an encounter

To more fully understand the concept of trauma in the context of art and aesthetics, it seems necessary to introduce the distinction between structural and historical trauma. The former is an element in the shaping of subjectivity: those events in the history of a subjectivity that undergo a primal repression, the losses that the subjectivity is marked and shaped by. Historical trauma, on the other hand, refers to the catastrophic and overwhelming events and experiences that may (or may not) influence our lives as already shaped subjects. Structural trauma happens at a time when the psychic apparatus is not developed fully enough to deal with it, and thus it is subject to primary repression, leaving no knowledge or memory of the events, but handing down unbridled affects related to those events, which reside in the cracks created by those formative erosions. Those affects explode again when historical events take place that are somehow related to the affects. “The historical traumatic event becomes traumatizing in part because it inherits the hitherto virtual character of the structural trauma (sealed in primal repression) within the formation of a subjectivity who cannot know what was always awaiting this belated activation.”<sup>17</sup> This binary structure seems absolutely crucial. In order to understand the sense of contemporary traumatic experiences we need to take into account both structural trauma and the concept of trauma as an event in life and history whose magnitude and scale overwhelm and immobilize the psychic ability to deal with them, as well as trigger the effects of structural trauma, something that defeated, overwhelmed, and created an interior split in us already earlier, in an indefinite some/time, some/where.

One should pose the question now what can art do. What should it be called upon to do, to help us think not only about the traumatic dimension of subjectivity but also about history and politics, in the present which seems particularly marked by catastrophe. Pollock claims that the split subjectivity desires an encounter. Because of its special condition, the subjectivity is capable of sharing, and thus processing, the traumatic residues lingering in historical reality. The aesthetic of trauma is the aesthetic of the threshold, of liminality. The encounter Pollock demands from art, is not about intersubjective communication, not about conveying meanings or narration, but about the remnants of the event-encounter form another time and space, transported here and now thanks to the meeting of the artist and the viewer: this is to activate the traumatic potential. Traumatic

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<sup>17</sup> G. Pollock, “Art Trauma Representation,” *parallax*, 2009 no. 15:1, issue 50, 44-45.



experience is not so much a missed sublime encounter with death as an experience of rupture, a disruption in the matter of human communication.

### The possibility of history

Apart from the critique of the subject and experience, trauma theory seems to play an important role in deconstructing history. As Cathy Caruth observes, by only attempting to understand the meaning of traumatic experiences, we can find the possibility of history, “the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). The very critical rethinking of reference “is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.”<sup>18</sup> The historical power of trauma lies not only in the experience being repeated after it has been forgotten, but in trauma being experienced in and only through forgetting itself. This necessary concealment of the event explains the peculiar time structure, the structure of retroactive attribution of meaning, the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*. As Caruth sums it up: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the inaccessibility of its occurrence.”<sup>19</sup>

A similar intuition seems to reside in Benjamin’s historical theses. As he observes, “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. For historical materialism it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject.”<sup>20</sup>

### Balka like Sebald

This correspondence is difficult to ignore when one holds in one’s hands Mirosław Balka’s book, *How It Is*. W. G. Sebald’s writing is founded on catastrophe which happened when he wasn’t there yet. That catastrophe was the Holocaust of the European Jews. The writer became heir to unredeemed suffering. He now wants to understand the being of humans in time, whose fundamental element is historical time. In this approach, all history after catastrophe is traumatic. We were not there when the historical event happened of such lethal power that it determines our lives in the world “after.” One cannot comprehend or include this catastrophic event in one’s life, and it returns belatedly overshadowing everything else. This is why Sebald’s writing is a specific kind of meditation on time. Catastrophe is not epiphanic here, and the prose does not try to represent the specific, historical catastrophe, the particular event, but is concerned, above all, with its

<sup>18</sup> C. Caruth *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin *On the Concept of History*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009, 6.

distance, its presence in the form of inherited, reproduced images and their senselessness. Writing seems to be the measuring of that distance and the photographs strewn among words paradoxically make visible only the absence of the Real event as such (without confirming or proving its truth), they do not constitute artistic ornament. The nomadic nature of photography parallels here the nomadic nature of people: photographs also travel, get lost, and are found in the strangest places and situations.

As his video works testify particularly pointedly, Bałka, similarly to Sebald, is the subject of this intergenerational transmission of the “phantom” created by trauma, the heir of a tradition not-his-own. In the complex structure of inheritance Abraham and Torok write about there is no place for a simple transmission from one generation to the next. Instead, it is a complex process based on the movement of trauma: the given meaning is first unsayable, due to the pain and shame it carries; then it becomes unmemorable: the subject can sense it but does not know its meaning; and in the following movement it becomes unthinkable, as something that exists but cannot be rationally accessed. Aesthetic experience is meant not so much to allow to reduce the distance or to break out of the vicious circle of traumatic heritage, as to search for an answer, for a reaction to pain (of being and history). The point is not to heal or soothe, but to reformulate, to transpose, to cross the boundary of pain, of the chasm dividing the past from the future.

### *Comment c'est – commencer*

Christopher Bollas says:

“aesthetic moments” are those points in life when we feel held and embraced by the spirit of things that are being considered or contemplated. And although such moments can subsequently be explained and articulated, they are fundamentally wordless occasions, notable less for thoughts than for the density of the subject’s feeling. These experiences, are existential memories, non-representational recollections conveyed through a sense of the uncanny... The ‘aesthetic moment’ is an evocative resurrection of an early ego condition, an instant when the subject is ‘captured’ by an object and enjoys the sensation of being engaged in a meaningful, and perhaps even reverential, experience. But the pursuit of such moments is an endless search for something in the future that actually resides in the past. In reality, we are looking for “transformational objects” that promise to change us, to bring us into harmony with the non-self<sup>21</sup>

*How It Is* does not introduce any harmony. Quite on the contrary, one would be tempted to say, it points to other than harmonious structuring of the world.

*Unheimlich*, or the uncanny, is what was meant to be hidden but saw the light of day. The container in the art gallery is a peculiar kind of the uncanny. It is a scandal of visibility, but not because modern art can still tremble in the face of a “shocking” work, but because it leads what I have been describing as “trauma” or traumatic experience into the sphere of aesthetic experience. “The uncanny reminds us that everything is far too

<sup>21</sup> Ch. Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object. Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, Free Association Books, London 1987. After: „Miroslaw Bałka,” in *Miroslaw Bałka. Dig Dug Dug*, ex. cat., The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin 2003.

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close to home...Our deepest wish is that there is no place like home, precisely because our deepest fear is that there is no place unlike home. Home is where the trouble starts.<sup>22</sup> Bringing the unhomely back home, in other words, normalising of an experience as if we were more or less transparent to ourselves in this more or less transparent world, renders our lives more, not less troublesome and obscure.

Balka's container is an empty archive. Here one should begin (again).

*Translation: Krystyna Mazur*

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<sup>22</sup> J. Hutchinson, "Miroslaw Balka," in *Miroslaw Balka. Dig Dug Dug...*