

The Architectural Review

Architecture's responsibility towards history

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For the past year or so, the British School at Rome has hosted a series of lectures, exhibitions and events – titled ‘Meeting Architecture: Fragments’ and curated by Marina Engel – that address ever-important questions in the fields of architecture, archaeology, art and culture: how are ideologies shaped, and how is this stirred by buildings, their contents and contexts, their ruins and their absence? And how can we reconstruct personal or collective identity in areas that are torn by conflicts of the past or present?

The most recent contribution to this series, an exhibition of select works by the internationally renowned Polish artist Miroslaw Balka entitled *Emplacement*, was formally closed on 17 October with a panel conversation of exceptional speakers. Balka himself was joined by fellow countryman and one of the most eminent voices of our time, architectural historian and writer Joseph Rykwert. The event was skilfully chaired by Pippo Ciorra, an architect, writer and senior curator at the MAXXI in Rome.

The two men share a hometown of Otwock, near Warsaw, from which Rykwert fled in 1939 and where Balka was born under Communism in 1958. They are further united by a deep sense of how important it is to remember the past, and our role and responsibility as a society and individuals: how we build our identities and histories in the face of destruction and change.

The exhibition displayed works of drawings, installation, video projections and a sculpture, arranged with careful attention and Balka’s typical pared-down aesthetic in three spaces in the BSR. The works clearly focused on the responsibility of Modernism in the Second World War, concentrating on memory, loss, absence, pain and the preservation of traces.

Some of the issues that were raised by the exhibition – the roles of memory, architecture, thinking and reaction, and what history brings – were beautifully expanded and enhanced by the artist in the panel discussion.

For example, deliberate subtlety is a theme of Balka’s work by his own admission. His work ‘Modulor/AF/1944’ (2015) was somewhat overlooked by visitors, unless someone purposely drew attention to it. Balka himself forgot to talk about it initially, and only later came back to it. In the process, he highlighted that life is not only about responsibility, but also about forgetting and hiding, which this work is concerned with.

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It is a pencil drawing made delicately on the white wall of the gallery, connecting Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor* – which is of course based on the height of the average man (male, white, European), the proportion of modernity – with the figure of Anne Frank. Both height measurements were made in 1944, one being concerned with defining the ideal proportion of the body in public buildings – and of course Le Corbusier's involvement with the Fascist Vichy regime in France is germane – the other offering the measurements of a Jewish girl in hiding, made by her parents. The physical presence of the little girl is connected with the body of the important architect. Balka thus contrasts the fragility of Anne Frank as a young Jewish girl and the fragility of her memory against Le Corbusier's ideal man with such delicacy it is overlooked, until he explained it. But once noticed, the contrast is haunting.

Another concept articulated by Balka both in his work and again in conversation with Rykwert and Ciorra is the importance of pain: 'We need pain to generate reflection and understanding. And once we understand the pain we can start the healing.' The artist can take part in the dialogue of understanding: helping first himself to understand, and then helping others. 'This is the responsibility of the artist.' The sculpture '50 x 50 x 91 (Pain Relief)' (2012) subtly illustrates this responsibility of the artist: embedded in an architectural concrete block are three pills of aspirin – aspirin being of course a brief pain relief that does not actually heal. Balka expanded that aspirin, which was produced by Bayer AG, as part of IG Fabern, used concentration-camp inmates as slave labourers in their factories.

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What made the conversation between Rykwert and Balka curious, was the juxtaposition of scale in ideas. Both men are clearly united by certain factors: their hometown, their interest in the past, and their understanding regarding the responsibility of our built environment, art and architecture. Consequently, the mutual respect they brought made for joyful listening. Balka works on fragments of personal views, intimacy, history, to come back to the point at which he started. Rykwert's career is applying the same trajectory on a much larger scale. He can examine how buildings reflect the entire world and sections of its history. Thus, whereas Balka focuses in his work and conversation on the Second World War, Rykwert looks at the responsibility of architecture throughout history, providing an intellectual framework fundamental to much of what Balka creates.

This in itself proved fascinating to follow, but it was, at the same time, also somewhat frustrating. Rykwert offered golden nuggets of wider ideas, which were not always fully picked up by Balka. Instead, Balka gave detailed insight into his work in particular, and into the exhibition, which seemed particularly appropriate.

At the heart of Rykwert's input is the deep responsibility of architecture to the wider users of the building. He argued that great architects manage to bridge the conflict between this responsibility and the paying client. Though historically emphasis was placed on the architect's responsibility to the often unsavoury patron, he points out that truly lasting and successful buildings always managed to fulfil a wider, popular purpose. He quoted the Czech philosopher Jan Padočka, 'History is not a spectacle, it's a responsibility'. This ideal demands a far more conscious discourse between memory and architecture, something which art, and Balka in particular, already manages to a far greater extent.

Rykwert recalled that those buildings of oppression – in Berlin, central Moscow and concentration camps (which are the burden of Balka's work) – were all created in one sense or another by an architect. It is of course an old ethical problem of architects: do you design prisons? Do you design condemned cells, scaffolding for execution? Do you draw them? What do you think when you draw them? Are you entitled to do it? In what we do as architects we are responsible to our users, but at the same time we actually cannot always control what happens to our works.

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The speakers agreed that art over the past few decades has managed to become far more connected to the people of a wider audience. It has entered the streets, studio doors are opened, the internet and modern technology enable a far wider discourse between artist and 'public'. One could take this further than they did, these movements have even blurred the lines on what constitutes art and an artist. Balka placed particular emphasis on the importance of teaching for him as an artist, as a way of sharing ideas. Of course, implied throughout and somewhat hinted at by Ciorra and Rykwert, was a certain criticism of the architectural profession and architecture, which currently lags behind art in this regard. There is still too much of an emphasis on 'the architect' and the client, and in some cases the gap between this relationship and the wider public becomes worryingly big. However, as architect Marc Kushner has talked about on TED, social media and new technologies have increasingly democratised architecture. From the moment a building is commissioned, the public can become involved, documenting the process and engaging with the building from its conception. What the speakers discussed in theory, as their aim for the future and what they aspire to, may already in fact be blooming on the ground among young architects.

Balka's moving exhibition and the concluding conversation thus remind us of ideas both hugely relevant to architecture and art, but also something universally human; key to setting in motion the process of understanding and of healing. As Balka said: 'We all have a responsibility, artists and architects especially. And whilst it might sound lame, we all need empathy. For humans to be humans.' This exhibition and conversation calls for that.