

# SETTING

Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words*, begins with a sole actor "flung backwards" onto the stage.<sup>1</sup> After getting up confused, he dusts himself off, and reflects as he wanders under the dazzling light of the desert. There is no spoken dialogue as he engages in a struggle with external forces: a carafe of water, a tree, some scissors, a rope. The play has been interpreted as Beckett's attempt to non-verbally reveal the primacy of art as a metaphor, and the objects he confronts may be read as symbolizing God, instinct, tradition, mythology, human nature, or even the struggles of artistic rebellion.

Taking this kind of theatricality as a point of departure, *Setting* is arranged like a set: Miroslaw Balka's sculptures delineate the stage, and Helena Almeida's black and white photographs serve as the actors performing the action. Balka's sculptures take the shape of dismembered legs, spiral down from the ceiling, and project from the walls like waste disposal drums turned on their side, creating a dramatic and suspenseful ambiance. Stuart Morgan describes Balka's work as "poor theater," writing that it "evokes a sense of dignity and strength, but does so simply and modestly."<sup>2</sup> Its austerity, and the melancholic and deathly aura that surrounds it point to a personal narrative, with references that range from a painful vision of Poland to the vast history of darkness. Meanwhile, Helena Almeida's images are a fascinating amalgamation between performance and photography, in which

she dramatizes her own body as muse and protagonist, a mime captured mid-act through the instantaneity of photography.

The theatrical dimension of Almeida's work is not self-representation in the strict sense, but rather figuration. She delivers choreographed gestures, poetic acts that have been carefully staged. The way she positions herself in front of the camera hints at the refusal of her pictures to exist as mere self-portraits. On one hand, she plays two roles—artist and actress in a “theater of painting.” On the other hand, she often intervenes in her own photographs with external marks—horse-hairs appearing as graphite lines, or brushstrokes of blue acrylic applied onto the photographic surface. By incorporating drawing and painting into her artistic process, Almeida detracts attention away from her own body to the liminal space of the picture, her body becoming trapped in that interstice, subject to forces incomprehensible to us from the other side of the picture plane.

If in Almeida's work the body is always represented, in Balka's work it is never depicted, but always evoked. Balka's interest in the body can be traced back to his first important sculpture, *Remembrance of the First Holy Communion* (1985), depicting the figure of a boy in concrete and clay standing by a table with a white cloth draped over it, while the guests attending the ceremony stick needles into a red heart on the boy's chest. Balka continued to stage a number of participatory art projects through the 1980s, developing figurative sculptures that evoked mythical figures and symbolic materials like ashes, different types of wood, and neon. As Balka's interest began to drift away from figuration, he created pieces that retained certain elements of human physiology in their dimensions, and often in their appearance as semi-functional objects, like beds or coffins. Though he memorializes events through symbolic abstraction, he explains, “it is not abstraction that interests me, but rather the past, history.”<sup>3</sup>

The persistence of personal narrative in Balka's work is perhaps an assertion of the individual against of the collective

in Polish culture, while his use of ordinary industrial materials could be understood as a protest against the influx of western consumer capitalism into Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Almeida grew up in Portugal under the right wing regime of Antonio Salazar, which may lead to a psychological reading of the rebellious nature of her work. In particular, her body resists a univocal message, becoming both a sculptural form and a space, object and subject, signifier and signified. It is in this discontinuity that Almeida justifies her use of photography. As Susan Sontag has written, photography implies “disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way, bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity.”<sup>5</sup> Almeida shares this principle of co-creation, but her message is broken down into intelligible concepts in a semantic study of the history and language of art. From her body to the surface of the photograph, the viewer moves through the different layers of meaning, as in her series *Pintura Inhabitada* (Inhabited Painting, 1978) in which her hands hold a stroke of blue paint, and her fingers move it around the surface of the photograph.

From her inhabited drawings and paintings, in which the image emerges from the two-dimensional space of the support to the three-dimensional space of the spectator, Almeida follows a path in which she seems to have physically internalized the force of the act and the very substance of painting. In series like *Dentro de Mim* (Inside of Me, 1998) we find her hands and feet dragging through the empty space of the studio, “in the erratic movement of the Beckettian body.”<sup>6</sup> Almeida's works resonate with Balka's in that they both seek to perpetuate gestures that were once significant, or that bore some meaning, but that are now governed by absurd repetition, as if part of a behavioral experiment. In *How It Is* (2009), Balka's prestigious Unilever commission for the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London, he installed a huge container, a mighty sculpture with a powerful presence, which the viewer



penetrates only to realize that its back wall has been lowered to form a ramp into darkness. The title of the piece was inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Comment C'est* a word play for *commencer*, French for 'to begin,' the dark description of a man's endless crawling, yard after yard, towards nothing at all.

In *Setting*, Almeida's provocative self-inhabited artworks draw gestures from the past into the present, while Balka's sober sculptures are a memorial to a painful past. In view of their common theatricality, it is perhaps pertinent to cite literary critic's G. C. Barnard's interpretation of Beckett's *Act Without Words*, in which he writes: "the climactic ending of the mime may signify not a pathetic defeat, but a conscious rebellion, man's deliberate refusal to obey."<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, one could say that Almeida's and Balka's works confront the very challenge of being an artist itself, punctuated by the elements that attest to that struggle: brushstrokes, lines, and forms, and the will to contain them all within one single setting.

1. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 43.
2. Originally coined by dramatist, Jerzy Grotowski, the term "poor theater" conveys the idea that theater should focus on the act of live performance, actors co-creating with spectators, since it cannot compete against the overwhelming spectacle of film. Working in this mode, other directors and playwrights like Samuel Beckett, profoundly transformed the classic theater space. Stuart Morgan, "Last Rites," *Frieze*, iss. 14 (1994). Accessed Oct. 25, 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/last-rites>; see also Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1969).
3. Emmanuel Guignon, *Mirosław Balka: Bon Voyage* (Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, 2005), 30.
4. John-Paul Stonard, "Mirosław Balka Artist Biography," Tate Online. Accessed Oct. 25, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/miroslaw-balka-2360>.
5. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 96.
6. Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, "Signs of Immovable Writing" in *Helena Ameida: My Work is My Body, My Body is My Work* (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2015), 31.
7. G. C. Barnard, *Samuel Beckett: A New Approach* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970), 109.