

Twelve Labours of Heracles.

Janusz Bałdyga

curator: Jacek Sosnowski

Documentation submitted for the competition
for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022

CURATORIAL CONCEPT SUMMARY

Twelve Labours of Heracles is an installation consisting of three sculptures and four video works by Janusz Bałdyga. With use of simple gestures and universal symbols the artist analyses notions of time, border and balance. He creates so-called “performative objects”, that require action to exist in a completed state, which makes them exceed traditional notions of both sculpture and performance. The myth evoked in the title is a starting point for the story about taking up impossible challenges, such as the one posed to the spectator by the exhibition itself, and the source of possible interpretations.

The focal point of the presentation are three sculptures placed at the center of the pavilion, constructed of the same elements but in different configurations. Together they create the ideal sculpture, which can be imagined but cannot exist without breaking the laws of physics. The symbolism of the objects constituting the sculptures is repeated in videos, activating and expanding the context of the exhibition. As a whole, the installation creates a layered narrative in which each element leads the viewer towards understanding the work of art as an ephemeral construct. This particular artistic strategy of Bałdyga has been described by Wojciech Krukowski: “Depriving (...) the installation of pragmatic features does not, I believe, suggest that we are deprived of all hope of realising eternally cherished ideals. It rather indicates the inevitability of repeated attempts to experience the labyrinth of possibilities, not excluding the option that one of them will bring us closer to our goal than the previous one.”

The main signifiers of *Twelve Labours of Heracles* are: a fence with a gate as a tangible representation of border and its crossing, a black pedestal/mastaba acting as an unmovable boulder or an eternal tomb, and twelve classicizing plaster statues directly referring to the twelve labours of Heracles. All these elements are juxtaposed so that they cannot exist without each other, but they also cancel each other out. The gate rests on the mastaba's

CURATORIAL CONCEPT SUMMARY

slopes, permanently suspended between opening and closing. The mastaba acts as a pedestal for the statues, but can fulfill this role only in one position. Together they lose their individual meaning and become objects of speculation in this impossible puzzle. This is one of the most important characteristics of Bałdyga's works, which are objects in a state of impossible balance, thus materializing the present and talking about the time that organizes this experience. They are a testimony to the task completed without leaving traces, because its starting point is the same as its ending point.

Looking at these elements and how they're repeated, it becomes apparent that they're merely another of many efforts to restore the world to its unattainable state of balance. This experience is furthered by video works that direct us towards the meaning of the myth of Heracles itself, which is the tale of laws that both men and gods are bound by, as well as how we are all bound by the consequences of our actions. The artist, confronting the myth, at the same time touches upon the challenges facing the contemporary world and the individual's loneliness in the face of them. He also speaks of the possibility of creating new monuments, of perpetuating memory, of the vitality of the old sources of collective identity, which here - in the form of a gate, a mastaba and statues, although recognisable and obvious, appear to be a challenge beyond measure. Although Bałdyga's practice is always reflective of abstract and universal notions determining the artist's position in the world and the art itself, as performances they are at the same time deeply rooted in current reality and the political and social context that shapes it.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Entering the pavilion we can see its distinctive high entrance to the exhibition hall, blocked by a black solid figure of human height. In the vestibule, on the golden, reflective floor there are twelve partially broken cast statues. Coming closer, we can see that there is in fact nothing blocking the way and it is possible to enter the hall. Once inside, it becomes apparent that the black object fills the space between wings of an open gate mounted into a metal fence stretching almost the entire width of the pavilion. Going further, we notice that the fence, the mastaba and statues create a set of objects that is being repeated in the pavilion twice more. In the very center of the hall, the fence lies flat on the floor and the gate's wings rest on the sides of the mastaba, while twelve classicizing statues are placed on top of it. Against the longer wall of the pavilion, the composition is turned upside down. The fence rests on the wings of the gate, the mastaba stands on its top, and the figures are not visible at all. On the pavilion's shorter walls, videos of Janusz Bałdyga's performances are being displayed on LCD screens, introducing movement and sound into the pavilion's space.

The Twelve Labours of Heracles exhibition is a story assembled around the idea of an impossible sculpture. The only proof of its existence are three failed attempts in constructing it, that serve as a base upon which the viewer can in turn try to reconstruct its ideal shape. In the imaginary space the gate and the fence fulfill their function – In the imaginary space the gate and the fence fulfill their function – they are in an upright position, while the pedestal-mastaba not only perfectly fills the space between the gate's wings, which are angled at sixty degrees, but also supports the twelve statues that stand on it. We can imagine it as a solid of revolution visualized for instance in the virtual space which isn't bound by laws of physics. In reality, maintaining it in this state is obviously impossible, and rotating it around its own axis destroys not only the construction, but above all its meaning.

For Bałdyga, the starting point are three regimes: mythological, symbolic and geometrical, all three being reflected in elements of the sculpture. The fence and the gate symbolize the border and its crossing and fulfill their function only when placed in an upright position. The fence is typical, made of steel mesh, a ready-made object devoid of any esthetic qualities that might suggest the context of its use in everyday life. It doesn't restrict the access to any part of the pavilion, serving as a mere organizational structure for the movement of the public. At the same time, they carry a certain spectacularity, both as a fence located in the light of the entrance to the pavilion and as toppled barriers.

The opening of the gate at an angle of sixty degrees forms the basis for an equilateral triangle in which the solid of the black mastaba is inscribed. This particular form has been selected as a primary example of the pyramid tomb, as well as its proportional shape referencing geometric ideals. The black painted solid doesn't resemble anything, it just is. In the first iteration of the sculpture it seems to break the laws of physics by standing on its edge, leaning against the gate's wings. As a foreign, geometric object it becomes the focal, attention-grabbing point of the entire installation, while being devoid of any meaningful characteristics itself. It also acts as a pedestal for the cast statues. The colour scheme is also of importance, with the golden floor playing a particularly important role, establishing the pavilion as space for the action of the myth, as the gold is a universal symbol of divinity, value and timelessness.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

With Heracles' twelve labours as an establishing point of the exhibition, one might feel compelled to look for them in the installation. An expectation of it to consist of twelve elements or twelve stories is justified, but remains unsatisfied, as it would destroy the true substance of the myth, where the plot is merely a medium for conveying meaning and symbols. Thus in *Twelve Labours of Heracles* the number twelve appears only as the aforementioned twelve cast statues, widely available in any garden or home improvement shops. They represent the challenges addressed by the labours and the artwork itself. As part of the performance they appear three times: as a destruct – the effect of rotating the solid, lying at the hall's entrance; as the actual statues placed on the mastaba in the very center of the pavilion; finally, as pure speculation about their existence under the upside-down mastaba.

Eventually, the viewer's attention turns to the video works. Four large LCD screens placed symmetrically on both sides of the pavilion display simple documentations of Janusz Bałdga's performances. Shot in long single takes, they show the artist interacting with objects repeating the symbolic elements of the sculpture. The most important category here is the state of balance which is being simultaneously established and violated by the performer.

In the first video he moves along the wall, against which elements of a temporary fence-barrier are leaning. They are set at an angle that allows the whole body weight to lean against them. The mechanics of the movement involve constantly rotating and rearranging the last piece to the beginning. The performer moves along with the wall, unable to free himself from it. In the second film this gesture is repeated, except that the elements are on the ground and the performer picks them up one by one, placing himself behind an ephemeral border. Another video work is a record of an action as an unwanted trace, where Bałdyga attempts to remove the fence by moving some of its parts elsewhere. However, they leave a trace of paint on his clothes, becoming a testimony to something that has happened but is unnoticeable. The final work is a trial of strength with one of the plaster figures. The statue, located on a revolving base, is wrapped in a rope, the other end of which is attached to the wall. The performer unwinds the figure from the rope by rotating the base, trying not to knock it over. All video works do not exceed several minutes in duration and are played in a loop without synchronisation. The sounds recorded during the performances provide an unsettling backdrop to the whole exhibition, bringing evidence of movement and the passing of time into the space of the pavilion.

The exhibition *Twelve labours of Heracles* by Janusz Bałdyga was conceived as a performance, thus it is an action stretching in time, which, however, is not predetermined. It begins with entering the pavilion and confronting the border sculpture. It has a momentary effect, but it also allows for immersion, providing space for contemplation. Its end is marked by the decision of the viewer, who must decide for themselves whether they have done this impossible work.