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ROMAN ONDÁK

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JOHNEN

by *gregory volk*

BERLIN In the late 1990s Slovakian artist Roman Ondák rocketed out of Bratislava to become a rising force on the international art scene. His exhibitions in 2006 at Tate Modern and 2007-08 at Munich's Pinakothek der Moderne were followed by his quietly spectacular Slovak Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale—among its must-see shows. Filling the pavilion with local flora, Ondák fused outside and inside, nature and artwork, temporarily transforming the building itself into a *giardino* within the Giardini. Over the course of a concurrent exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, viewers marked their heights on the walls in pencil, along with their first names and the dates, as children do on bedroom walls. What gradually resulted was a ragged black band around the perimeter of the room, a minimal drawing packed with maximal humanity. Now Ondák has been shortlisted for the prestigious 2010 Hugo Boss Prize. Following such successes, a recent exhibition by Ondák at the newly relocated Johnen Galerie offered particular insights. An assortment of early architectural interventions and displacements from 1996-2001, the show clarified the origins of his subsequent, attention-grabbing projects.

The centerpiece was *Shared Floor* (1996), a stretch of parquet flooring and electrical sockets that Ondák excised from an apartment. Here it was reassembled atop Johnen's floor, effecting the juxtaposition of a domestic setting and a gallery. The nonfunctioning electrical sockets were attached to metal rods along the edges of the floor, precisely where you would have found them in the apartment's walls. This spare work (with a nod, perhaps, to Carl Andre) is willfully humble but also surprisingly elegant, like period furniture displayed in a museum, or an ornate Persian carpet.

With Ondák, the nature of everyday things as they normally are coexists with their decisive transformation. A white panel leaning against a wall could be a remnant from the installation process, in *Untitled (Wall)*, 1997. Or is this routine structure angling to climb onto the wall as a valued white monochrome painting? Leaning against another wall, a white door with a glass window conjured an ambiguous mix of liberation and confusion (*Freed Doorway*, 1998). It was as if the door had finally been freed from its stuck condition, but now had no clue about what to do next.

The gallery's second room looked almost empty, until one noticed Ondák's subtle alterations. A few electrical sockets and a light switch protruded from the walls on thin rods, but in the wrong locations—too close to the floor, for example. Three small sections of water pipe were attached to the wall in such a way as to loosely resemble a human face with a thoughtful yet somewhat bewildered expression. Placing plausible objects in abnormal locations and subverting their usual functions, Ondák created a bare-bones installation with an air of the marvelous and uncanny.

Photo: View of Roman Ondák's Shared Floor, 1996, and Freed Doorway, 1998; at Johnen.

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