

## Roman Ondák

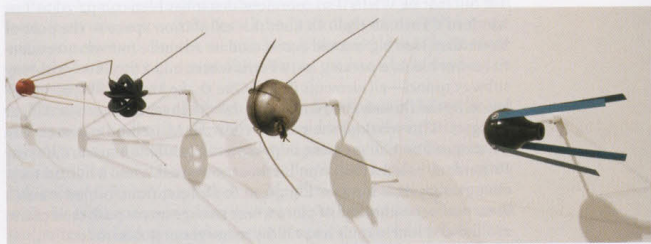
KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

The Sputnik lies there like a sack of sturdy linen with stenciled numbers. It's even got an address: ROMAN ONDÁK, SPUTNIKOVA 1, BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA. Seventeen stamps commemorating the launch of *Sputnik 1* in 1957 show the Earth as a blue ball encircled by a blue ring representing the spacecraft's orbit. The stamps bear cancellation marks. This work, *After Return from Orbit*, 2011, appears to be part of a dream that has haunted Slovak artist Roman Ondák for many years—at least since 2004 when, for one of his first major works, *Spirit and Opportunity*, 2004, he built up an artificial Martian landscape for an exhibition of the same title at the Kölnischer Kunstverein: the dream that one can take hold of the universe, somehow getting a grip on the simultaneously scientific and fantastical enterprise of conquering the cosmos.

This is also the theme of Ondák's work *Star City*, 2003—a small frame in which Ondák has arranged what seem to be two newspaper clippings. A cheerful photo shows children accompanied by white-smocked nurses; they are just leaving a modern satellite town of modernist high-rises among pine trees, while a brief text describes this blessed housing estate whose footpaths have been designed around the

monument to Yuri Gagarin, where every new generation of cosmonauts makes a pilgrimage before graduation, a ritual in which they vow to carry on his mission. Such seemingly passé enthusiasm for the future still inspires Ondák today. And yet the concrete outcomes of these missions are less important to him than creating an imaginative space where visions can unfold. Thus for his first solo museum exhibition in Switzerland, "Roman Ondák: Enter the Orbit," he asked artists to reconstruct how they imagine *Sputnik 1*, with astonishingly homogeneous results: Ondák must have specified the scale rather precisely, since these Sputniks are each approximately the size of a tennis ball, with legs sticking out—whether made of furniture hardware perched on lathe-turned legs or pencils, a plaster lightbulb, a copper sphere, a stainless-steel sphere, or a chestnut with four fireplace matches. There are also Sputniks made of taillights, a coconut, a billiard ball, a tea ball, a bell, a strangely twisted tree trunk, and a mousetrap.

Mounted on the wall, these anonymous maquettes comprise one long architectural ornament. They are pinned there like butterflies, combining to form a projecting relief while the shadows beneath them merge in a repeating pattern. Taken together, they paint a picture of spontaneous creativity, of the pleasures and joys of building things out of odds and ends. But certain pieces stand out amid all these hand-



crafted items; for example, the latex glove with the tied-off thumb blown up to form a sphere.

That contemporary Conceptual art might result in something that continues the tradition of the tiny Giacometti figures housed in the next room at Kunsthaus Zürich was unexpected, but Ondák pulled it off: He placed some gold nuggets into their vitrines, titling the resulting work *Man, Art and Gold*, 2011. Yet the primary strength of this installation was that it presented itself without return address or recipient, coalescing into a picture without being illustrative, authoritarian, or ostentatiously ingenious. In this it was clearly aligned with what may be Ondák's most famous work, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007, in which visitors are measured in order to leave behind a tiny height mark in the exhibition space—until enough of these tiny graffiti accumulate to form broad clouds of lines and data, reminding us that the true home of art is where many people join together in the work—as both observers and artists at once.

—Catrin Lorch

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

Roman Ondák.  
*Enter the Orbit* (detail),  
2011, mixed media,  
ninety-six elements,  
dimensions variable.