

JESSICA MORGAN ON ROMAN ONDAK

You may have seen Roman Ondak's work and not realized it. Among the Slovak artist's projects that easily disappear into the fabric of quotidian life are Good Feelings in Good Times, 2003, a queue of ten to twenty people that formed daily outside the Kolnischer Kunstverein main entrance for half an hour; Teaching to Walk, 2002, for which the artist invited a young mother to bring her one-year-old boy into an otherwise empty gallery space for his first steps; and Silence, Please, 1999, in which attendants at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum dressed in the original guard uniforms from the periods in which they were born (the 1940s to 1960s). Ondak's work questions the "real" or tangible quality of lived experience--and the always provisional nature of representation--through the doubling of event and nonevent, staging and reality.

His work is distinct from Peter Fischli and David Weiss's replication of the banal disarray of the workaday world, or Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's investigation of the exhibition as a site of both concrete and symbolic production. Though also informed by the legacy of Conceptual art and institutional critique, the idea of "disappearance" in Ondak's work most closely resembles the tactically subversive strategies of fellow Slovak artist Julius Koller. Koller's public interventions--such as his "Anti-Happenings" of 1965, in which he left "invitationcards to an Idea" around Bratislava and elsewhere--reflected a desire to remain independent from the Communist government and institutionally sanctioned art forms. With such works, Koller aimed to generate a commonality and reveal connections between past and present, lived and imagined experience. Ondak, though less institutionally constrained than Koller, deploys a similar subterfuge to effect empathy and intimacy among his performers and viewer participants.

Like Koller, Ondak has used children in various projects, not for any association they might have with non-art-world innocence or sincerity but to suggest instability and flux, the potential repetition of past and present in the future, and the effect of time and memory on our understanding of space. Teaching to Walk, for example, mobilizes various, often contradictory meanings: The traditional stillness of the gallery is transformed into a performative space; a movement-based activity becomes an object; and the child's achievement is simultaneously undermined and monumentalized by his (overlooked) presence in the gallery. While Ondak appears to present an unmediated "reality" within the gallery space, he also questions the construction of the reality-versus-art relationship. Teaching to Walk asks when this transformation takes place: At what point does reality become art, or vice versa, and how does this happen?

Ondak's most fluid and translatable work is Good Feelings in Good Times. Initially realized outside of the relatively quiet Kolnischer Kunstverein, the line implies the presence of a popular attraction rarely associated with contemporary art and also alludes to the construction of value through the visual evidence of supply and demand. A clearly coded form of social gathering, the line has vastly different connotations according to location, and Ondak's work subtly plays with cultural specificity, historical memory, and behavioral difference. His own sense of the work was informed by his memory of lines in front of Slovak shops during the Communist era, when passersby, lured by the promise of scarce goods, would eagerly wait, mindless of the reward. A repeat performance of the piece in London this year at the Frieze Art Fair also drew attention to the uniquely British custom of patient waiting, which leaves the hierarchy of the queue--like the country's class structure--largely unchallenged.

Just as those who unwittingly joined in the performance Good Feelings in Good Times on the off chance that something of "value" could be had at the end of the line (whether entrance to the museum or otherwise), visitors likely remained altogether unaware of their complicity in the work Announcement, 2002. Here Ondak placed a radio in the gallery space, tuned to an international Slovak radio station broadcasting a prerecorded imperative statement by the artist: "Your attention please for the following announcement: As a sign of solidarity with recent world events, for the next minute do not interrupt the activity you are doing at this moment." Asked to perform the action of not performing, the visitor takes part in Ondak's complex structural analysis of producer and produced, implication and imagination.

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