

Roman Ondák

Kölnischer Kunstverein

Last year, when the Kölnischer Kunstverein moved into its new premises – the former British Council building, an elegant postwar structure in the centre of Cologne – long queues formed at the entrance between four and five o'clock every afternoon. This was a strange sight. In front of the nearby cinema, at the tram stop around the corner or even on the pavement outside a bakery, people waiting in line would not have been so unusual. In fact, however, no one was really waiting for anything; the queuing masses had been organized by Roman Ondák for his daily performance *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003), a vision of a world in which exhibitions of contemporary art are awaited by the public with great expectancy.

This year another artistic spectacle took place indoors, but, as well as not having to stand in line, one could watch events unfold through the large windows. Visitors hesitantly entered an elongated exhibition space bordered on both sides by windows. For in his first solo show at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Ondák laid out a piece of the planet Mars: red limestone, strewn with lava, its undulating surface set with sharp stone chippings. This is the red planet as we know it, since fuzzy pictures taken by robots began appearing on television news bulletins. Made of layered concrete, with tennis court clay and stones from landscaping suppliers, *Spirit and Opportunity* (2004) offered a close encounter with this heavenly body. But it was not a stage set, more a kind of habitat, as if geologists had used special equipment to slice out a piece of the planet's surface and then presented it under a tailor-made glass cover. The surface was inviting, but not easy to walk on: small steps for visitors trying out giant steps for mankind.

Ondák, who lives in Bratislava and whose work combines performance and installation, likes to point out that for someone like him who, now in his mid-30s, grew up in the former Czechoslovakia, most of the surface of the Earth was once as inaccessible as Mars and the moon. Even now he treats accessibility as more than just distance divided by speed. For Ondák even the relatively short duration of a visit to an exhibition, or the brief moment it takes to move from the entrance to the gallery itself, is treated as a carefully adjusted cog in a larger mechanism – a lifetime. For *Tickets Please* (1999–2000) he had the cashier's grandson sell tickets at half price, after which visitors were confronted by the cashier himself on the first floor in an exact replica of his ticket office, demanding the balance. *Teaching to Walk*

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(2002) took place in a gallery where every day a young mother spent half an hour helping her child take its first tentative steps. A further aspect that unites these two pieces is the way they ignore the assumed routes through the institutions of art: in the one, starting-point and destination are disconcertingly blurred, in the other, the beaten track along the gallery walls becomes entangled with the jumbled traces of the toddler. In another idea for a piece Ondák planned to arrange the museum attendants by age along the route through the show.

Because Ondák also exhibits people, his work involves many faces – often of friends or people he knows well. In this co-operation with his performers he sees his role as similar to that of a theatre director who eventually hands over responsibility for the project, knowing he can rely on the expertise of his company. For the opening at the Kunstverein, for example, he invited 70 locals who claimed never to visit museums, art societies or exhibition venues. For them the private view was a first encounter with the rituals of contemporary art. An even bigger surprise was reserved for the museum's chairman, during whose speech the invited guests suddenly flooded into the foyer from the first floor through a separate entrance. Finally, the video loop *Crowd* (2004), presented in the basement, explored how insiders and the uninitiated set foot on the Mars simulation at the opening of the show: all equally disorientated, they merged into one big colourful crowd of aliens.

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Frieze

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