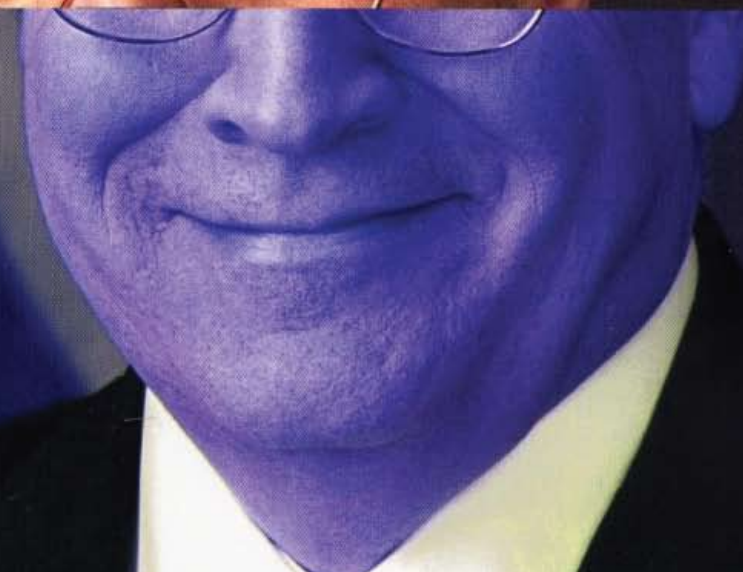


a contemporary magazine / ISSUE 03 / September-October 2009 / FREE

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## METAHAVEN

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# **DETERRITORIALIZED**

## **ROMAN ONDÁK'S CONSPIRATORIAL ART**

words by PIERRE BAL-BLANC



**Real and symbolic territories, the factors that define them and their subversion. An interpretation of the work of the Slovak artist representing his country this year at the Venice Biennale.**

Loop, 2009

Courtesy: the artist, gb agency, Paris, Martin Janda, Vienna and Johnen Gallery, Berlin





*The Stray Man*, 2006  
 Courtesy: gb agency, Paris  
 and Gallery Martin Janda, Vienna  
 Photo: Rainer Iglar

In May 1968, Emilio Prini took part in the exhibition "Il Teatro delle Mostre" (The Monster's Theatre) at the Tartaruga Gallery in Rome. The show was organized like an ongoing laboratory, encompassing the presence of artists, critics and intellectuals alike by way of reading programs throughout every phase of its development. That project was based on an exhibition model that broke with the notion of a trajectory created by works and presented as an end product. The exhibition plunged visitors into the time-frame and activity of a work in progress, proposing a daily renewal of its content. It would contribute to the birth of Arte Povera, but this observation is perhaps not the most relevant one to be recalled today about that event. For if the notion of Arte Povera was helpful in deciphering the Italian art scene in the 1970s, it tended to become a barrier to understanding the challenges and issues of the works of some of the artists who, like Emilio Prini, had gathered beneath that banner that was a tad too underdeveloped. When, in the late 1990s, Prini declared that in addition to the three traditional visual arts—architecture, sculpture and painting—there existed a fourth one, in Italy, called Arte Povera, the irony of his statement implied that that movement was a victim of academicism, and not vice versa. The title of "Il Teatro delle Mostre" encourages us to have a broader point of view of its stakes.

This theatre of exhibitions, which took place in a Roman art gallery, overlapped almost simultaneously with the May '68 riots in Paris. The title of the Roman project associated two disciplines, theater and exhibition, and neutralized their respective powers through a game governed by time, space and process. "Il Teatro delle Mostre" deterritorialized both theater and exhibition by toning down the signs of one in the other's space. The displacement of a theatrical method into the space of an exhibition and the simultaneous use of the spatial mode of exhibition associated with theater formed a gray area whose respective boundaries were in crisis. The improvisation particular to this process introduced impurity as a form of expression in a climate where the purity of the modernist standard was associated with the hierarchal, compartmental construction of society. The work *Perimetro d'aria* (*Perimeter of Air*) on view in that exhibition was made up of five stacks of lead sheets with words carved in them by hand, distributed in the middle and in the four corners of one of the exhibition areas. That work stemmed from an earlier work entitled *Perimetro* (*Perimeter*). *Perimetro* consisted of five neons, which produced a sound as they gradually lit up, and were placed in the four corners and the middle of a room. *Perimeter* was exhibited and coiled around a reel at the artist's last major exhibition, held in 1996 at the Musée de la Ville in Strasbourg. The work radiated out over the street through a window, and seemed to demarcate the exhibition area with light, despite not being properly unpacked and exhibited. These two perimeters, one made out of lead and the other made out of neon, collapse together public space and the intimate relationship of the body, like a separation between inner feeling and exterior perception. Whether the work was deployed on the boundaries of the space or

interwoven around an axis, or whether it was isolated in several snippets of text scattered or organized in the visitor's memory into a narrative, it proposed the experience which Michel Foucault would describe in those very same years as "that of a body dilated in accordance with a whole space that is inside it and outside it at the same time."

Some time later, in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would continue their ongoing analysis of "undoing lands" and "deterritorializing the phony territories of capitalism," "for territorialization is not only the land, it is any scaling down of signs to do with what can, sign-wise, act as territoriality." While Deleuze gave his courses at Vincennes, Gianni Pettena and his architectural students committed the affront, in Salt Lake City in 1972, of achieving this "scaling down of signs" in reality. With *Red Line*, using a pick-up truck fitted with a compressor, he drew a line of red paint on the ground about 40 km/25 miles long, which scrupulously followed the city's administrative boundaries. The social corpus was here confronted with abstract limits, defined by a hierarchic and vertical vision that, once rendered concrete and tangible, demonstrated their arbitrary nature and the impossibility of grasping them fully. "A body is not defined by the form determining it, nor as a determined substance or subject, nor by the organs it has or the functions it carries out. In terms of consistency, a body is defined solely by a longitude and a latitude [...]. Latitude and longitude are the two elements of a mapping."

Roman Ondák's work *Occupied Balcony* was produced in Graz, Austria in 2002. The artist lay a Persian rug over the guardrail of the balcony of the city hall. The object, placed on the neo-classical façade that ostensibly symbolizes administrative power over the local territory, could be seen from the square. The rug was slightly off-center in relation to the building's symmetry, thus seeming, to the inattentive passer-by, to have been forgotten by a member of the impressive institution's cleaning staff. That simple and discreet work showed no sign of creativeness; it was introduced like a haphazard anomaly into the environment, giving rise to confusion the moment any onlooker really dwelt on it. As a rule, the impact caused by the Ondák's work is inversely proportionate to the subtle presentation of the elements composing it. Roman Ondák is not a provocative agitator, he is more like a conspirator; he draws and plans and produces maps.

If I have introduced his work by taking as an example certain works by Emilio Prini and Gianni Pettena, this is to show the bonds existing between the strategy of deterritorialization and re-territorialization used by these artists in the 1970s, and Ondák's own strategy. It is to help open up other avenues which deserve to be explored for the reading of his work, in the spirit of artists who, like him, reincarnate Conceptual art and apply performance to the fields of urbanism and architecture.

"Capitalism," write Deleuze and Guattari, "is inseparable from the movement of deterritorialization, but this movement is kept at bay through phony and artificial reterritorializations. It is constructed on the ruins of territorial and despotic representations, at once mythic and tragic, but capitalism





reinstates them for its use and in another form, by dint of images of capital." Ondák was born and raised in former Czechoslovakia, and has continued to live at the same longitude and latitude, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, because he has been the object of the re-territorializing of names, identities and borders. His biography thus probably helps him, as the work *The Stray Man* would seem to suggest, to better grasp the presentation of the modern State, and better master its processes in order, precisely, to foil them. Nowadays the body is confined within transparent and abstract perimeters, like the man who peers into the exhibition venue from the street but does not enter it. Roaming is internalized.

The oriental rug was, originally, a representation of the Persian garden; it maps the territory within which all the world's exemplary and perfect vegetation could be brought together. Placed on the balcony of the public edifice of a country that expresses in ballot boxes its xenophobic relations with immigrant workers from the Orient, who have been refused any kind of inclusive policy of integration, it becomes the sign of an underlying territorial conflict. Is the balcony occupied by the expression of the conquest of territorial power, or is it occupied by the resistance to this power as expressed by an immigrant, a rootless person, or a *Gastarbeiter*? Roman Ondák does not wax dialectical: territorialities are interlinked precisely by the absence of any apparent link, and this is what we find disquieting. The Persian rug, strictly speaking, is a "winter garden," as Michel Foucault reminds us. Invited to Venice to represent Czechoslovakia in the national pavilions exhibition, Roman Ondák is renewing his praxis of deterritorialization, drawing inspiration once more from those spaces that mix the natural and the artificial. A precedent for his contribution was already set with the work *Failed Fall*, produced in England for Art Sheffield 08, for which Ondák chose to make use of a greenhouse in the botanical gardens located in the heart of the city. From the outside, the building looked more like an air-conditioned shopping mall or a corporate lobby. We have grown accustomed to being in these sterilized natural spaces, less to examine their vegetation than to appreciate the décor during our professional activities or in the course of our everyday tasks. The winter garden came into being in northern Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in temperate climates. Embodying an idealized tropical nature, it offered a break from the rigors of the daily grind. After serving as a

place of education and leisure, designed to help people forget about the harsh life of the industrial age, the winter garden has gradually become a transitional space for preparing consumers and employees to comply with more or less precise objectives, by insulating them from the continuity of their environment. For *Failed Fall*, Roman Ondák collected large amounts of dead autumn leaves in the city and its surroundings, acting—not without irony—like a curator of dried plants and spices in a colonial museum. He arranged the dead leaves like a carpet covering the entire floor of the "Evergreen" hothouse. Trampled by the visitors' feet, the leaves charted the cartographic layout of the users' random paths. By introducing the temporal discontinuity of the seasons into that place where it is forever springtime, Roman Ondák scaled down the idealized signs of the winter garden, using the coordinates of nature's rhythms and the subjective behavior patterns of its visitors to assess these signs against reality.

If the winter garden in Sheffield was re-territorialized, the artist uses exactly the opposite tactic for *Loop*, his contribution to Venice this year. In *Loop*, Ondák uses the artifice of the winter garden to introduce territorial continuity, deterritorializing the "Giardini" inside the Czech pavilion. In a biennial, this artifice might be enough to inspire the joys of reveling in illusion, but Roman Ondák's work invariably comes up against reality. The garden's continuity unifies a pavilion split into two national representations (Slovakia and the Czech Republic), the name of whose former territory—Czechoslovakia—still remains on the pediment. This work modestly conceals the history of a divided community behind its harmonious façade. Roman Ondák is probably the artist of his generation who best grasps the game of deterritorialization undertaken by capitalism on the ruins of former territorialities. Not simply because he has intimately experienced this himself, but because, by redirecting the movement peculiar to capitalism to unforeseen terrains, he disrupts its ends.

—Pierre Bal-Blanc is Director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain – CAC Brétigny. He is curator of the travelling exhibition series "La Monnaie Vivante/Living Currency" and has recently conceived "The Death of the Audience," a large group show presented at Secession in Vienna.





From left, clockwise:

Fluid Border, 2009  
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris  
Photo: Rebecca Fanuele



Awaiting Enacted (installation view at CAC, Brétigny, 2006), 2003  
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris  
Photo: François Doury

Passage (detail, installation view at Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich), 2004  
© Haydar Koyupinar

Resistance, 2006  
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris and Gallery Martin Janda, Vienna

Is that the way it was ? (installation view at CAC, Brétigny, 2005), 1998  
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris  
Photo: François Doury

Measuring the Universe, 2007  
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris and Martin Janda, Vienna  
Photo: Haydar Koyupinar

