

SHAKING HORIZON

ROMAN ONDÁK

INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROMAN ONDÁK AND ÉRIC MANGION

FREE



Breath on Both Sides, 2009 (detail of the installation at Villa Arson, Nice)
Courtesy of gb agency, Paris, Janda gallery, Vienna and Johnen gallery, Berlin

Before talking about your work, there's something I would like to specify. We usually create a document to complement our exhibitions, regrouping the notes written by the artists or the curators. You preferred to do an interview rather than to have this kind of document. It seems that you don't like it when visitors spend more time reading the texts about the works than they do looking at them.

Yes, that's right! In fact, I believe that any work of art must have a message incorporated in its form. What interests me is playing with the way one can catch the visitor's attention directly. If I read a text in an exhibition, this gesture becomes an art work in itself, similar to a performance that I could stage. Therefore I prefer the interview form, because there is nothing ambiguous in its status.

The show opens with two works that make us look outside of the art centre. These two pieces (*Breath on Both Sides* and *Room Extension*) go through a picture window, as if you wanted them to divert our attention.

These works have the potential to make the visitors ask themselves questions and become conscious of being in an exhibition. Directing their gaze outside, through the window, drawing attention to something they have just passed by, the garden or exterior of the center in general, is to diffuse this experience which they might have had outside, in the exhibition itself. If you look at anything that is outside



Pocket Money of My Son, 2007
(coins, shelf made from a section of a table, 30 x 21,5 x 2,5 cm)
Courtesy of gb agency, Paris, Janda gallery, Vienna and Johnen gallery, Berlin

the white cube, you see it as reality. But if you are "in" the exhibition, and you see objects, anything that is or relates to art, you perceive it or you tend to perceive it as a representation of this reality. The work *Breath on Both Sides* (2009) shows this paradox. Outside, the balloon looks like a balloon, but in the exhibition we see it as a work of art. Actually it's only the air in the balloon which answers this ambivalence between art work and real object.

When one wanders through the show, one is struck by the precision and rigor of the installation. Each work seems to be in exactly the right spot. Nonetheless, your works often evoke a sort of indetermination between two states. To what degree is this paradox intentional?

It often happens that my works get overlooked, or at any rate that they are misinterpreted on first glance. Either because some of them are on the edge of being understood as works of art, or because their main potential, or substance, is beyond their form. I remove objects, images or situations from their original context, and I place them in a different space. This displacement is central to my practice. So the tension that you find in the works themselves, and the way that they are exhibited, is an intentional paradox, because you don't expect them to appear in this way. To give you a very simple example, I did a work called *Pocket Money of My Son* (2007). It's a piece of board cut out of a table top, with a few coins on it. It's installed on a wall like a shelf. What you see is just some change placed on a piece of table. These coins belonged to my son, or could have belonged to my son if he had taken them from the table. But the way the work is exhibited, this situation which is ripped from reality becomes ambiguous, precisely because the presentation is very simple, minimalistic. Once again, we don't know where the limit is between reality and the work of art.

Most of your exhibitions stage displacements or phenomenological diversions. This is also the case in your show at the Villa Arson. But after looking at photos of your previous exhibitions, it seems to me that until now you have staged this sort of thing in spaces that were much more compact or unified. So how did you face the constraint of the art centre's labyrinth, and the risk that it entailed of repeating a gesture?

It is indeed a different challenge to do an exhibition in this kind of space. That is why this exhibition is different from all my previous ones. Here there is no one room that we could call the center of the exhibition, and this is unusual for me. So it's definitely one of the most complicated spaces I've ever worked in, in the good sense of the word! Indeed, it's not easy to maintain the attention of a visitor on the same level during the whole exhibition. So instead of showing six or seven larger works like I usually do, I decided to select over fifty smaller works and to create a sort of chain, so that each work, whether it is a photograph, a drawing, an installation, or a film, is like a small satellite in space, and you can't see it without thinking of its neighbor.

Your piece gathering a hundred or so photographs of parachutes, *Fail to Fall* (2010), seems to have a special meaning in the context of the exhibition. You notably chose this work to be printed on the invitation to the exhibition. Yet it seems to deal with something you have always tried to avoid, the spectacular aspect of a gesture. I have the feeling that this is something very new, and therefore surprising.

I had the idea for this piece without seeing any of the photos. Later I started "collecting" them by looking for them on internet. Like everyone else I knew the image of a parachute caught in a tree, seen in cartoons, in movies, with its often dramatic side. But what interests me in this work is the recurring notion of people missing their target. In many ways this work illustrates the other objects which are in the exhibition. Nonetheless I disagree about the fact that this piece refers to what is spectacular, be-

cause in a way the action remains hidden from our eyes. It is spectacular when you see the jumper fall and you wonder what happened to him. But here what interests me is the movement of the object, this parachute ending up where it shouldn't be. You find this interest in some of my other works, for example when I borrowed eight Skoda cars with my friends in Bratislava, and drove them to Vienna and then left them for two months parked behind the Secession, *SK Parking* (2001).



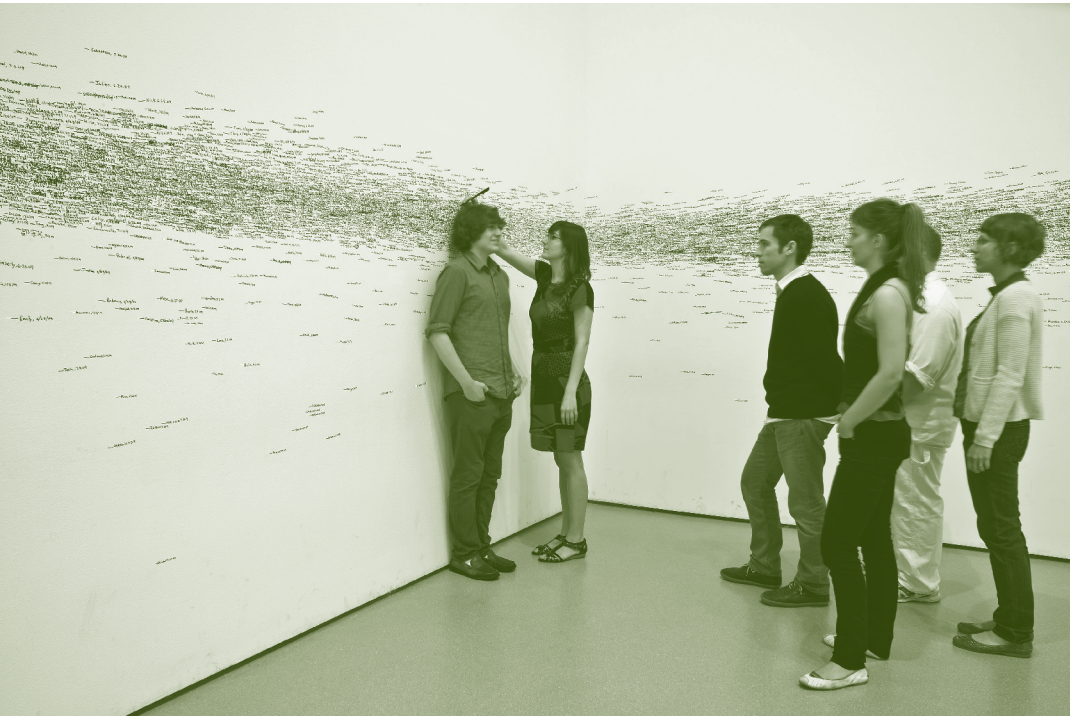
Lucky Day, 2006
(16mm film, colour, silent, 4 min)
Courtesy of gb agency, Paris, Janda gallery, Vienna and Johnen gallery, Berlin

You just evoked this idea of missing your target. One could apply this to life in general, and not only to objects. I have the feeling that many of your pieces, like *Lucky Day* (2006), look like fables. Beyond the very formal aspect of your work, some art critics or commentators talk of an existentialist dimension, even a humanist one.

Each work of mine illustrates my life in some way. Since the beginning of the nineties, or in the course of the years, since the fall of communism, I have tried to understand my own position, my individual role in society. But I wasn't interested in documenting any of these feelings, any of these principles, in a literal way. What I'm interested in is transforming them into objects or situations which would have more abstract qualities, which could be understandable, perceptible in different cultural contexts. So therefore concerning



Fluid Border, 2009, (transparent hose, water pump, glass container, water)
Photo : Marc Damage - Courtesy of gb agency, Paris, Janda gallery, Vienna and Johnen gallery, Berlin



Measuring the Universe, 2007, (performance at Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009)
Photo: Courtesy of MoMA, New York



His Affair with Time, 2003 (diptych, two colour photographs
each 61,2 x 40,8 cm)

your question about the fables, these fables always rely on works that refer to my family, to my community of artists or friends. Most of my inspiration comes from my local experience.

There are two works that in my opinion illustrate what you just said : *His Affair With Time*, (2003) where you measured your child by making marks in a doorframe of your apartment. And then the piece evolved four years later in a huge space, where all the visitors were measured, *Measuring the Universe*, (2007).

I didn't measure my first son with the intention that this would be an art work: I just kept measuring him for a couple of years, like any other parent would do, on the doorframe of our apartment. Then I realized that this was the first conceptual encounter of a child with the notion of time. Obviously children don't perceive things in this way. We, only, see this through our own experience as adults. So I decided to take two pictures of that doorframe with the measuring marks, keeping the camera in the same position, one being taken only a few minutes after the other. These two photos are identical. There's nothing you would recognize as different, except that one is a little bit darker than the other because of the light changing between the two shots. I show this as a diptych. If you look at them carefully, you have the feeling that there is a much bigger time span between one image and the other. You suppose that there is an-

other mark somewhere on one of the photos defining three or four months between the moments when these two images were taken. But in fact, it's not the case. Then, four years later I came up with this idea of expanding it to a performance, offering it to adults, asking them if they would like to be measured and to make a public event of something that is usually very private. It can also remind each adult of his or her own experience from childhood. And at the same time this single work in its simplicity defines the exhibition, by very simple means.

I'd like to go back to the very beginning of our discussion. You said that it was important to you that the visitor should be fully conscious of being in an exhibition. You say this, and yet at the same time in this exhibition our attention is constantly diverted by a great many things, not only outside the art center like we said previously, but also inside it, by a rich and diversified installation.

Concerning the consciousness of a visitor, what I'm interested in when he looks outside, is that he should become a real observer. I want to make it possible for him or her to really finish the work by agreeing to get pulled into this game. This is why I try to maintain a certain ambiguity in the works, in such a way that one can't find just one single explanation of what this piece is about. For many of my works any interpretation can add an understanding of what it is, or reversely it can negate another interpretation. Some of my pieces actually weren't seen, even when they were part of the environment, for example my installation *Loop* (2009), conceived for the Czech and Slovak pavilion at the last Venice Biennale. Some people walked through the pavilion without knowing that they were going through a work of art.

The same thing happened for my last installation in Berlin, *Zone* (2010) where I built a huge cloakroom for 1600 people. People were standing in front of the cloakroom. They were checking in their bags and jackets. They were looking at the work confronting them, without knowing that it was only a work of art. They didn't see it because apparently everything

seemed normal. The cloakroom seemed to be functioning. Yet at the same time, the place where it stood and the scale they were confronted with were completely absurd.

For you, the fact that visitors did not see the cloakroom or the Slovak pavilion as a work of art, was this a failure?

No, it's not a failure, it's just a game. That's how I like working. I'm trying to find how far you can go with an art object. I play with this invisibility.

What you are saying reminds me of a piece by Michael Asher from 1974, shown at the Claire Copley gallery (Los Angeles). He merely removed the wall separating the exhibition space from the administrative offices of the gallery. So that the only thing there was to see was, the people working.

I know this work, it's marvelous.

During all these months that I've been working on your exhibition, I've often thought of this quote by Bergson : "form is merely taking a sample in a flow." I feel that this quote is completely suited to your work.

To me, that's a compliment!

ROMAN ONDÁK

was born in 1966 in Zilina. He lives and works in Bratislava in Slovakia.
He is represented by gb agency in Paris, Martin Janda Gallery in Vienna and Johnen Gallery in Berlin.

ÉRIC MANGION

is director of the Centre national d'art contemporain - Villa Arson Nice and is curator of *Shaking Horizon*.



Loop, 2009 (installation view Czech and Slovak pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009)
Courtesy of the artist

ART CENTER TEAM

Éric Mangion (director of the Art Center)
Patrick Aubouin (technical manager)
Alexia Nicolaidis (in charge of exhibition support)
Michel Maunier (in charge of communication)
Christelle Alin (manager of the department of relations with the public)
Céline Chazalviel (in charge of relations with the public and of publications)
Cédric Moris Kelly (in charge of documentary research)
Jean Brasille (photographer)
Cécile Torun (trainee)

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PRACTICAL INFORMATIONS

Exhibitions open from July 2nd to October 17th
14 - 18 PM every day, 14 - 19 PM during July and August
Closed on Tuesdays. Free entrance

Access

By tramway – station Le Ray
By bus n°4 and n°7 – station Deux avenues
By car : from promenade des Anglais follow boulevard Gambetta then boulevard de Cessole
Via the A8 motorway, exit at Nice nord

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Zone, 2010 (installation, 6 Berlin Biennale, Berlin)
Photo: Courtesy of Berlin Biennale

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