

Roman Ondak  
Infinitum

Exhibition  
12.5 – 22.11.2023



## Roman Ondak Infinitum

The work of Roman Ondak belongs to the artistic context of the countries of Central Europe. Ondak is one of the artists of his generation that rediscovered the Conceptual art, readymade and performance art developed in this geographical region during the 1960s and 1970s. Following this tradition, while observing everyday reality, he began to infiltrate a subtle, poetic and imaginative edge to his works. His art explores various practices, from the collaborative and performative, in which he plays on the relationships between members of his family, various groups or spectators, to found objects that have been modified by the artist, together with site-specific spatial installations. Space and time, intertwined with his personal history, usually play an important role in his works, retrieving fragments of memories from his childhood and adolescence in Czechoslovakia, then relatively isolated by its autocratic communist regime.

From early on, Ondak learned to understand society as an attempt to order existence through divisions and classifications of inclusion and exclusion. The artist addresses the failure of this structure in his work, while deploying the potential of other orders, other patterns of behaviour and, ultimately, alternative social and political possibilities. His work often gives the impression that reality has been slightly readjusted, which in part is a tactical response to the propagandistic alterations of image and word that were the norm during the artist's formative years.

The exhibition *Roman Ondak. Infinitum* moves between fiction and reality, and is founded on personal past experiences in a society where reality was often lived as fiction. The sculptures, spatial installations and photographs featured in the exhibition pay tribute to the everyday. The found or built objects, or the situations he sets up, alternate between what they were when still part of reality, and their present state where they are subtly transformed and presented as fictional accounts.



Roman Ondak  
*Infinity*, 2021  
Lead, steel string  
Variable length  
Installation gb agency, Paris  
Courtesy of the artist and gb  
agency, Paris  
Photo: © Aurélien Mole

The core of the exhibition is made up of three works that overturn the viewer's perceptive understanding of the Fundació's space. The first of these is *Zone* (2010), a work made for the 6<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, consisting of a vast cloakroom seemingly belonging to another era, a time when museums favoured blockbuster exhibitions with popular appeal that attracted large visitor numbers. In Berlin, *Zone* was installed at the entrance to the Biennale, and, in fact, many visitors did not realise that it was intended as a work of art. Characteristic of Ondak's subtle and almost invisible types of intervention, given its dimensions, *Zone* is both paradigmatic and an example of the artist's sense of humour.

Presented in an exhibition gallery, *Zone* confuses the viewer through its potential functionality yet absurd presence in an area dedicated to displaying works of art. However, beyond this misrepresentation of the use of space, the work is infiltrated by the artist's personal history and takes on political connotations. Being physically isolated from the visitors, yet allowing them to establish a mental relationship with it, the internal space of the cloakroom could keep and watch over their belongings, and therefore, symbolically make them part of a controlled area, as happens in autocratic societies. The installation thus creates a tension between two zones, the free space around the exhibition as a whole and an internally controlled space within the parameters of *Zone*.

The second work is *Infinity* (2021), a subtle sculpture consisting of several hundred drops of lead, which draws a vertical line linking levels 1 and -1. Its repetitive formal structure could be understood as an allusion to Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Endless Column* (1937), an impression that is reinforced by the title, *Infinity*. However, instead of suggesting an infinite expansion, the drops in this work have the effect of falling under gravity, while lead as the chosen medium lends it various connotations, from dripping, molten matter to the trajectory of a lead bullet penetrating the floor of the institution.

*Inside Out* (2017) is the third work in the central axis of the exhibition. For this, Ondak dismantled the old porcelain insulation supports that previously held the cables supplying electricity to several houses in his neighbourhood in Bratislava, and installed them

inside the exhibition space. With this gesture, Ondak gives the art institution the character of a street, and reverses the perception of interior and exterior space. Inside and outside, past and present, are confused and superimposed.

Around this central axis are a series of works that surprise and startle the viewer by poetically and subtly shifting their perception of reality. For Ondak, space is not an immutable or static physical entity, but is continuously transformed through use, regulations and the social relationships that are established over time. To understand a space, to reconstruct its multi-layered changes and modifications, we must resort to memory, which allows the historical reconstruction of a place's identity. Therefore, it is not surprising that the exhibition includes the work *Memoirs* (2023), a glass jar filled with fountain pen ink. As the title seems to suggest, there is enough ink to write hundreds of pages about what happened in the past, but the text has been reduced to its liquid material essence, sealed inside a jar in a museum, so that its message becomes inaccessible, drowned in its failed potential.

*The Day Before Now* (2022) consists of a small bronze plaque installed at the entrance of the Fundació, which bears the inscription, 'Yesterday the river waters rose to this level'. Normally, this kind of plaque would be installed on the façade of a building indicating the high-water mark of a flood or inundation. Here the plaque plays with fiction and absurdity, both in reference to place and time. In stating that the flood was 'yesterday', and given the lower part of the plaque shows signs of being corroded by water, its daily presence on the wall calls into question what is real and what is not. Also, for those familiar with the history of the Fundació and who know it was flooded in the past, this reversal of reality can lead to even greater confusion.

The perception of reality through the exercise of looking is particularly apparent in the work *Our Son Watching His Parents* (1998). Together with *Bad News Is a Thing of the Past Now* (2003), these are rare examples of the physical presence of the artist in the situations he constructs. *Our Son Watching His Parents* is an attempt to capture the gaze of the artist's son when he was two months old. Ondak placed the camera in the cot, next to the

baby's face, and let the self-timer capture the image of the parents looking at their child, the camera becoming a double of the baby's gaze. The viewer intervenes in this game of crossed glances to become an involuntary participant in an intimate scene, while, at the same time, the work places viewers in a situation of being observed, as they were in childhood.

Perception, but also the avatars of history, both on a large and small scale, and the role of art in the social context are intertwined in *Bug* (2017/2022). The work takes as its starting point a Socialist Realist painting depicting Moscow at dusk, and painted in 1970 by a Slovak artist close to the communist regime. *The City of Hope*, which is how the work is titled, was to be included in an exhibition in Moscow, but it was rejected and returned to the artist. Because of an unexpected quirk of fate, this work ended up in Ondak's studio as a discarded object from the Slovak National Gallery. Ondak, for whom contradictions and the absurd are often a source of inspiration, wanted to take advantage of this circumstance to highlight the geopolitical context in which this painting was made, the servility of the artist to the directives of the regime, and the lengths to which that regime went when interfering in the lives of its citizens. In an early version of *Bug* (2017), Ondak stuck a table covering the central part of the painting, with its legs facing the viewer. Looking closely, you discover a small object, a covert listening device used to spy on

Roman Ondak  
*Our Son Watching His  
Parents*, 1998  
Inkjet art print on  
Hahnemuhle paper mounted  
onto the wall  
55 × 80 cm  
Courtesy of the artist







people who were considered suspect by the state. In a reworking of this piece in 2022, it now hangs from the ceiling, such that the visitor becomes a witness to this hidden history.

An interesting aspect of several of Ondak's works is the reference to the irreversible temporal distance between the present and the past, and the attempts to bridge it through re-staging and repetition. This is the case with *Tomorrows* (2002) and *Bad News Is a Thing of the Past Now*, where Ondak uses different generations in identical or similar environments to suggest this transit. *Bad News Is a Thing of the Past Now* is composed of two black-and-white photographs: the one on the left shows Ondak sitting on a bench in a public garden reading a newspaper dated 22 August 1968, immediately after Czechoslovakia was invaded by Soviet and Warsaw Pact armies, putting an end to the Prague Spring. The image

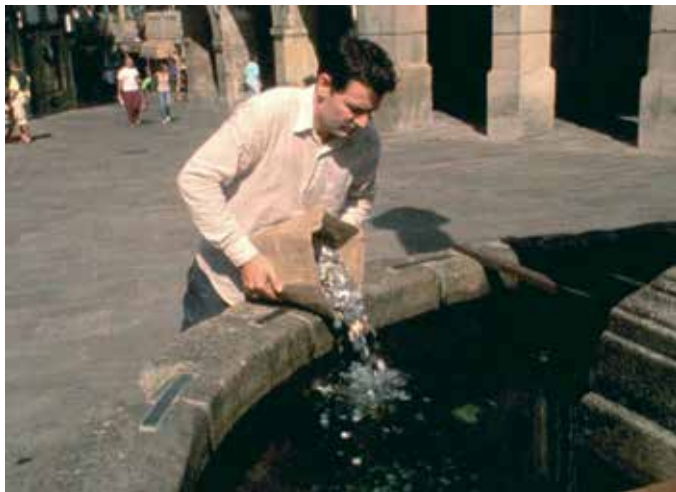
Roman Ondak  
*Bad News Is a Thing of the Past Now*, 2003  
Two inkjet art prints on Hahnemuhle paper, mounted on Dibond  
140 × 175 cm each  
Courtesy of the artist

on the right shows his father in the same place and in the same pose. Ondak and his father share a reading of the past from the present. The duplicity and age difference between the protagonists suggest both the passage of time and a return to the past, and even a substitution in which the artist assumes the youth of his father and relives a historical event that conditioned the present.

*Tomorrows* pursues a similar theme. Some girls assume the place of Second World War retired generals in an Austrian town. In the original photograph, the military were standing in front of a Socialist Realist war memorial. For *Tomorrows*, Ondak portrays the girls in the same pose, but across the street, in front of a monument by Jenny Holzer. With this substitution, the girls recreate a situation from the past in the 'present' moment in which the photograph was taken, while experiencing its potential future, and hence the title, suggesting they may

become the ones to exercise power. The work can also suggest the reverse, in the sense that those generals in the original photograph were once children, too. Therefore, a timeline is represented, irreversible and endless, but which returns and repeats itself. However, the fact that the photograph is presented in a triptych format showing three fading stages of the same image may suggest that all ideals are doomed to diminish with time.

Photography and film are important in Ondak's work. Cinema is a visual art, but it is also a medium that is based on time and can incorporate past, present and future in the same production. *Lucky Day* (2006) is a film that follows the steps of a man who leaves his house with a cardboard box, and who walks the streets of a city until he reaches a fountain, where he stops, then tips out the contents of the box: a lot of coins. Finally, the man makes his way back home. The scene, repeated in a continuous loop, combines the futility of the gesture with the desperate desire to summon luck. Does it have anything to do with the fact that the city where the scene takes place is Santiago de Compostela, a site of pilgrimage? Is it a miracle that man invokes? Ondak's sense of humour is felt once again, while we are trapped in the cinematic medium's possibility for repetition, *ad infinitum*.



Roman Ondak  
*Lucky Day*, 2006  
16mm film transferred to  
video, colour, no sound  
4:10 min. loop  
Courtesy of the artist

**Roman Ondak** was born in Žilina, Slovakia, in 1966. He currently lives and works in Bratislava, Slovakia.

He studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava (1988-94) and later at Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania (1993).

He has been artist in residence at Collegium Helveticum, Zurich (1999-2000) and the CCA, Kitakyushu (2004), and received grants from the DAAD in Berlin (2007-08) and the Villa Arson, Nice (2010), as well as being awarded the Deutsche Bank Artist of the Year (2012) and the Lovis Corinth Prize by Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg.

His solo exhibitions include the Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava (2020); Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg (2018); The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago (2017); Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (2017); South London Gallery, London (2016); Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou (2015); The Common Guild, Glasgow (2013); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2013); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris (2012); Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin (2012); K21, Düsseldorf (2012); Kunsthaus Zürich (2011); Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2011); Modern Art, Oxford (2011); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2009); Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2007); Tate Modern, London (2006); CCA, Kitakyushu, Japan (2004); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2004) and Ludwig Museum, Budapest (1999).

His recent group exhibitions include বন্যাস / Bonna, Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka (2023); Aichi Triennale, Aichi Arts Center, Aichi (2022); Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome (2021); The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2020); National Gallery of Victoria, Victoria (2018); and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires (2017).

He has participated in the 10<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2014); DOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (2012); 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale and 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice (2011 and 2003); 6<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2010); 27<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo (2006); and Manifesta 3, Ljubljana and Manifesta 1, Rotterdam (2000 and 1996).

In 2009, he presented the installation *Loop* in the pavilion of the Slovak and Czech republics in the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice.

You can check the exhibition related activities programme on the website [www.fundaciotapies.org](http://www.fundaciotapies.org).

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Roman Ondak. *Tomorrows*, 2002. Second of three inkjet art prints on Hahnemuhle paper, mounted on Dibond. 54 × 80 cm each. Courtesy of the artist, 2023. DL: B-9238-2023