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## Roman Ondák's Fertile Twist Is Simply Inspired

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VENICE -- *Third in a series of articles about the 53rd Venice Biennale.*

Contemporary artists have a kind of Holy Grail: to make a work that is so new in everything it does, it barely even registers as art.

But how to achieve that in an era when almost anything, from old snapshots to found sounds to a Thai curry, can seem to count as art? When a urinal fountain is classic, big-ticket art?

There might be the beginnings of an answer in this Venice Biennale's Czech and Slovak pavilion, assigned to an artist named Roman Ondák, a 42-year-old born in Zilina, Slovakia. (Others know him already: He's about to show work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.)

Judging by the number of people who walk through Ondák's Venice installation without even knowing they've seen it -- without even knowing they've been in his *pavilion* -- he's come close to achieving that elusive non-art goal. I watched Washington painter Maggie Michael enter the pavilion, and assume its art *was* hidden by the people gathered there. Then she realized the pavilion itself was the art.

Ondák's conceit could hardly be simpler. He's taken the tended garden that surrounds each pavilion on the Biennale grounds (known to all as the Giardini) and brought it right inside the structure he's in charge of. The gray-gravel path that normally leads to his pavilion's door now continues through it and out the building's other side. The floor to either side of the new path -- normally terrazzo that dates back to the structure's founding in 1926 -- is now hidden under precisely the same planted beds that border paths throughout the rest of the Giardini. Several tall trees reach close to the airy building's skylights. Ivy, low grasses, garden detritus even maybe the occasional weed cover the space below them. Ignore the plain walls and ceiling of the modern white-cube space, and you wouldn't even know you were inside.

Ondák, hovering on opening day to watch over his plants, says that in Venice "the pavilion is the concept that the artist is invited to work with" -- the one fact and constraint no Biennale artist can escape. So instead of letting it constrain or condition his art, Ondák turned his pavilion *into* a work of art he's titled "Loop." "It's about reality being transposed into the art space, without manipulation," he says.

It is realism without representation -- the real itself, for its own sake. And with the title "art" to bring it into focus.

Ondák's project, for instance, takes the simple truth that all buildings are set down in or on a landscape and makes it a blatant fact: This building's walls seem to spring straight from the earth, like mushrooms growing out of it.

And he's taken the common art of gardening, neglected at the Biennale in favor of "higher" forms, and made us notice it. (Ondák gives the credit for his plantings to Valentina Vianello, the gardener in charge of all the Biennale grounds -- and someone who is never mentioned otherwise.) Instead of acting as a neutral backdrop for framed works of art, here the pavilion itself becomes the frame, crisp and white and modern, that sets off the view of nature it contains. As we search for the fine art in this pavilion, we come upon the art of gardening instead.

Ondák's art also points an accusatory finger. By giving his project the smallest possible environmental footprint, he draws attention to the piles of lumber and drywall and exhausted art supplies most artists leave behind in the Giardini once the Biennale closes. Ondák's plants and earth will be used to help restore the grounds around them, battered by a season's worth of art-seeking crowds.

As Ondák speaks about his art -- quietly, modestly, like someone who could care deeply about the welfare of a plant -- the sun comes out, and you realize things are heating up, greenhouse-style, under his building's glazing. A work of art that started out seeming barely there begins to sound apocalyptic notes. As we heat up our Earth, will other buildings start to look like this pavilion? Will other human structures become home to carbon-hungry plants, happy to take up where we've left off?

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