

VIENNA

Roman Ondák
 GALERIE MARTIN JANDA

A video shows a group of people on the banks of a river. They are occupied with the game of skipping stones. But the "river" is actually the Panama Canal. In order to carry out this deceptively simple project, *Across That Place*, 2008, in the Panama Canal Zone, the Slovakian artist Roman Ondák had to confront all manner of bureaucratic hurdles—expending much logistical effort in the service of perceptual experience, in the attempt to make things visible that are not visual, including temporality and political boundaries. In the context of the exhibition, this experience was manifested as the aforementioned video, signs on the wall, and drawings, maps, newspaper clippings, and carefully written postcards in vitrines.

Whether through installation, photography, drawing, or performance, Ondák takes process as the basis for his work. An action stretches itself out over time, transforms a scenario, and manages to condense it into a radically minimalist construction. Take, for example, *Path*, 2008, the white cube one entered in the foyer of Galerie Martin Janda. *Path* stood at the center of the complex show, not only physically but conceptually. A thin, horizontal cut runs along the walls of the cube at the height of the artist's head, an echo of his presence and a discreet invitation in the vein of LaMonte Young's directions for his *Composition 1960 No. 10*: "Draw a straight line and follow it."

In this case, one could follow the line into every corner of the gallery, from the cellar to the upper level, leading the viewer through a small but well-selected survey of Ondák's work. All the grand themes of his oeuvre were in evidence: the displacement of people; places, presence, and absence; the economy of time. Ondák restages everyday actions in order to demonstrate how these temporal and spatial shifts play out. The photo diptych *His Affair with Time*, 2003, deals with a universal theme: As children grow, parents like to mark their height on the door frame—turning it into an archive, a storehouse of temporality; likewise, the artist documents the passing of time through successive photographs of one door frame. In *Snapshots from Baghdad*, 2007, an undeveloped roll of film snapped in Baghdad can be found in an Instamatic camera, placed nobly in a vitrine on a museum pedestal; the work evokes the eventual ossification of the circulation of both people and images. *New Territories*, 2005, consists of a fictional *carte-de-visite* for Ondák, with a fake address, as well as photographs, images from the Trans-Siberian railroad, and the printed sentence, 100 VISITING CARDS BEARING ONDÁK'S FICTITIOUS ADDRESS WERE DISTRIBUTED TO LOCAL PEOPLE WHO BOARDED THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILROAD ON ITS WAY FROM MOSCOW TO BEIJING BETWEEN 12-19 SEPTEMBER 2005. Truth or fiction? Documentary report or hoax? In the same way, the film *Concealed Episode*, 2007, is another story linked to art and life, reality and fantasy, people and political circumstances. It shows a parachutist taking off over Miami's South Beach. A group of Cubans have marked the location on the ground with flares. The impression is of some sort of getaway. Later, the chartered professional parachutist recounts the history of his family, a true story of escape and emigration in counterpoint to the imaginary one we'd been primed to invent for ourselves. Ondák hunts for situations that might remain unnoticed without his intervention, freighting them with new energies—esthetic, social, and political. He may not have all the answers, but his cross-references are superb.

Roman Ondák, *His Affair with Time*, 2003, diptych, archival color photographs, each 24 x 16".



—Brigitte Huck

Translated from German by Emily Speers Mears.