

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Roman Ondák

12 October – 14 December 2013



Some Thing

Roman Ondák's exhibition at The Common Guild comprised a series of works in vitrines which coupled early, still-life paintings and pencil drawings by the Slovakian artist alongside the actual objects depicted – a chair, a length of rope, a helmet, a vase, and so on, which were placed in a deadpan way on top of them.

Karl Kraus was a firebrand critic and key figure in the intellectual life of Vienna in the early 1900s. 'Heine and the Consequences' his 1910 essay on popular journalism, gives us some hints at how we might begin to think about what seems to be happening in Ondák's *Some Thing*. While the exhibition sets up a disconcerting pairing between Ondák's early, artful representations and the mundane objects that once "posed" for him, Kraus identified an intellectual dichotomy, both poles of which comprised for him a "vulgarity". An excess of content on the one hand and an excess of form on the other. "The one experiences only the material side of art", he wrote, "It is of German origin. The other experiences even the rawest of materials artistically. It is of Romance origin".^[1]

Kraus evidently positioned himself with an overview of both sides of such a span, writing in a different mode to that which he observed. He thus stood in a position somewhere outside of both these problems of too much attention to the utility of content (where we only see the instrumental reality of what might be art) and too much attention to the ornamentation of form (where everything becomes something to be experienced artistically). Likewise, the precise glass vitrines which encapsulate and seal-off Ondák's assemblages have a distancing effect. Both the unremarkable, everyday objects and the artist's youthful attempts to transform them into tasteful high art become newly exhibits. As they become reframed within something more like a museological overview, Ondák's new works, it seems, are a very plausible form of satire. A wry riddle about reality and its representation. An apparent self-deprecating satire about the frivolity, narcissism and persistence of the still-life genre which reprises the Romantic mythology of the expressive realist artist à la Paul Cézanne. And on the other hand, a caricature of Conceptual art's bad reputation for dryness, humourlessness and highfalutin philosophical laboriousness. (Moreover, one of Ondák's pairings is a coffee mill with a pencil drawing of a coffee mill, a combination which cannot avoid reference to the grandfather of

Conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp, and his protean early painting *Moulin à café*, 1910.)

Some Thing is clearly concerned not only with presenting distinct artworks, but in dramatising a situation in which content and form, utility and ornamentation are brought together through display. The paintings and drawings possess a kind of additional value that lies beyond our trying to appreciate their brush skills or eager draughtsmanship. They become more analogous to nostalgic documents or archival material, which are bearing testimony to Ondák's own personal history as a student of art in Slovakia in the 1980s. They are witnesses that reflect the prevailing notions of artistic formation and Ondák's studiousness at the time. As a consequence they are disavowed or invalidated as the "proper" art that forms part of his current practice. At the same time the original objects, which had no pretensions to being artful, strangely enough become more like ready-made art.

Does it make any sense to ask what the real subject of the work is then? Are we dealing with technique or technicalities? Ondák's exhibition has some very thoughtful fun by redoubling a realisation that the concept of art is changeable and very volatile, no longer merely a fixed quality of objects or autonomous representations, but something that can be produced, or withdrawn, through selections and editing linked to the moment and manner of display. A companion work in the upper gallery at The Common Guild comprised the window frame fittings from Ondák's studio in Bratislava, transposed in an identical configuration onto the wall of this (once domestic) gallery space in Glasgow. As a cunning coda to what we might call the 'still-life real-lives', Ondák proposes a miraculous kind of portable experience. It's an open window to a space intimately linked with his personal history as much as to the production of his art which, if we have the imagination, we can look into. Or leap from!

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[1] Karl Kraus, 'Hein and the Consequences'
(1910), in *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus*
by Jonathan Franzen, Karl Kraus, 2013

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