

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Roman Ondák's *Camouflaged Building*, 2009

Max Delany

First published on www.onedaysculpture.org.nz, 2009



SITUATIONS

Roman Ondák
Camouflaged Building, 2009
Friday 27 March 2009, from 07.00
Old Government Buildings, 15 Lambton
Quay, Wellington, New Zealand

On Lambton Quay in Wellington, diagonally opposite the new Parliament Buildings, stands the largest wooden building in the southern hemisphere and the second largest in the world. Old Government Buildings (curiously only one building) was constructed on reclaimed land, specifically recovered from the sea for the purpose, and designed by architect, William Clayton in the Italian Renaissance style. Completed in 1876 at a cost of £39,000, it was built from kauri, one of New Zealand's premier native timbers, to resemble a structure made from more precious stone. In 1990 the building underwent major restoration when it ceased to be used by the civil service and was officially reopened in 1996 as a university and mixed-use facility administered by the Department of Conservation. During the restoration, over 500 cubic metres of recycled kauri timber were sourced for the craftsmen who painstakingly recreated the building's original grandeur.

Slovakian artist, Roman Ondák is known for his understated interventions in the public sphere, which draw attention to the social and political contexts of specific sites. In a number of projects, the artist has effected very subtle changes in the everyday goings on of specific urban environments. In 2002, Ondák staged *Occupied Balcony*, which consisted of a Persian rug hung over the balcony of the town hall in Graz, Austria. The gesture of casually airing a rug in a setting designed as a showcase for political power was both funny and unnerving. In *Failed Fall*, 2008, for the Winter Gardens in Sheffield, Ondák covered the floor of the indoor gardens with autumn leaves collected from trees around the city in the previous season. Seen in the spring, the intention of this work was to effect an interruption as passers-by made their way through the gardens from the shopping centre to the city square.

Ondák's *Camouflaged Building* consisted of ten piles of sawdust, which were installed at particular intervals around the foot of Old Government Buildings from 7am to 6pm on Friday 27 March 2009. Abutting the façade of the wooden structure, the modest piles no more than knee height may have suggested a state of transition, whereby the artist gently and temporarily unsettled the building's protected status under a Category One Protection Order by the Department of Conservation. Encountered by those who made the pilgrimage through one of Wellington's windiest autumn evenings or seen out of the corner of an eye by a casual passer-by, the piles of mundane building material were elevated to the status of public sculpture, effecting a shift in the status quo through the most modest of means.

Max Delany

Wellington's Old Government Buildings are deceptive. At first glance, the complex presents as a grand nineteenth-century edifice, Neo-Renaissance in style, of imposing scale and monumentality, representative of political authority and nationhood. But things are not quite what they seem. Designed to mimic the appearance of stone, the Old Government Building is a building in disguise. It is, in fact, constructed entirely of wood. Completed in 1876, it remains the second-largest wooden building in the world.

In addition to its camouflaged character and its status as an impostor the building sits upon a major geological fault line, evidenced by a surrounding topography of seismic drama and magnitude.

In response to this context and in keeping with the artist's ongoing interest in questions of architecture, memory and critique of institutions, Roman Ondák's *Camouflaged Building* invoked the dismantling of a public monument through subterfuge, disruption and entropy, albeit at a more subtle, modest scale.

SITUATIONS

Encounter

Mine was not to be a chance encounter; rather, as a visitor to New Zealand attending the *One Day Sculpture* symposium, I went looking for Ondák's work. Like other audience members, I had only one day to visit the project, creating a particularly choreographed and deliberate mode of spectatorship. In the company of colleagues, I walked from Te Papa, the National Museum, to the parliamentary quarter, site of the Old Government Buildings, where Ondák's work was located. Upon arrival, on an especially gusty Wellington day, we stopped to survey the scene, to locate and identify the work. At the threshold of encounter and revelation, the work was pointed out to us by persons unknown. 'It's right in front of you' we were told. And still we had to look...

Circumnavigation

Camouflaged Building involved the discrete placement of piles of sawdust at the foundations of this palatial heritage structure, suggesting an institution not so much on the brink of collapse, but being undone by subtle, yet significant, changes.

With my own 'discovery' of the work denied – pre-empted and mediated by passers-by – I dutifully walked the circumference of the building, surveying its architectural features, identifying further piles of sawdust (perhaps as many as a dozen), which lay at its threshold and which called into question the stability of this political edifice.

I lingered, watching others, in the vain hope of experiencing – albeit vicariously – how others might encounter the work if they were to come across it unawares. It was not to be. Roman Ondák's work was resolutely uneventful, insubstantial, seemingly incapable of eliciting an effect. Someone had parked a bike up against – in fact on top of – one of the piles, the artist's work mistaken for builders' left-overs, indistinguishable from the world around it.

In a symbolic sense, Ondák's intervention staged a tactical, albeit asymmetrical, contest against an architecture of political authority. Formally, it represented a strategic withdrawal from the

conventions of event and spectacle associated with major exhibitions. Semantically, it made apparent, and at the same time changed, our understanding and experience of a site and an event. Ondák's camouflage arguably staged reality itself. It did this through the humblest of means, yet remained full of paradox and contradiction.

White Anting

In the context of a wooden building, piles of sawdust immediately call to mind the activity of termites and bora (also known as white ants) and the act of feeding on dead wood. To 'white ant' is to 'bring down from within; to undermine'. Just as surely, Ondák's white anting was a subtle, absurd form of subterfuge – a poetic fiction of monumental entropy enacted as a sculptural situation.¹

In one sense, *Camouflaged Building* served as an alibi, confronting viewers with the question of their own expectation and desire. In seeking to emulate a series of termite or bora piles, I figured that the work might more properly be composed of piles of different scale, in keeping with the organic undoing of things, suggesting the anarchic order of nature becoming undone. This was not the case. Such an approach would be too artful. Each pile of dust was generally of the same scale and formation, laconically situated. Aesthetic considerations of composition and arrangement were seemingly at odds with Ondák's simple gesture.

A sign next to the entrance of the Old Government Buildings described the integrity and rarity of kauri pine, of which the building was made, which is known for its strength, resilience and beauty. I wondered whether the artist had paid attention to the material integrity of the work, to the old-school sculptural idea of 'truth to materials'. This seemed equally unlikely. On the one hand kauri is protected and no longer available; and, on the other, beauty and resilience seemed far from the intentions of a work which was to last for a day, if it hadn't been blown away by Wellington's notorious wind beforehand.

By withholding, even disappointing, the expectations of spectators, Ondák's *Camouflaged Building* might be understood as a critical form of the

ethos of event and spectacle culture that accompanies the staging of major exhibitions. The modest gesture – refusal of phallic presence, and *arte povera* production values – served to counter the rules of spectacle, commodification and service provision, in preference of a more precarious and ambiguous poetic of other possibilities.

Presence and Absence

Jan Verwoert has written of the ways in which Ondák's work focuses upon everyday, temporal experience, 'opening up spaces in which life happens in other trajectories'.² And so it was with *Camouflaged Building*, which produced an encounter between an art audience – attending to the presence (or one might equally argue absence) of the work – whilst others went about their business, oblivious to the very presence of an art activity.

It was a situation which led to my own anxiety that the work would go unnoticed, coupled with the recognition that our activity was largely invisible to those outside the art world milieu. But this too was deceptive. Given the humble materiality of Ondák's work, our attention was drawn not to the art itself, but to the context in which it was situated – and the life going on around it. For some, it remained largely invisible, save for the occasional congregations of cultural tourists, going about the curious behavior of art world activity. In the tradition of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), the spectator becomes attentive to the circumstances in which the artistic encounter takes place, aware of the work as a social experience, and the ambient conditions of the world around us.

In amplifying the relationship between the individual (viewer) and the body politic (as architectural representation), *Camouflaged Building* was a sculpture of epic scale and ethical dimension. As an essay on questions of political authority, *Camouflaged Building* underscored the inevitability of civic decline and entropy, and, at the same time, the measures that might be taken to cover things up, and keep things hidden from view. In this sense, as Verwoert has suggested, Ondák's work is both monumental and anti-monumental; it 'not only alludes to the realities of existing economies of time and circulation, but also interrupts them'.³

The absurdity of conceptual art and site-specificity.

Jessica Morgan has identified ways in which Ondák's work might be seen as expanding the critical understanding of conceptual art and site-specificity, whilst arguing that his slightly 'off-kilter readings' are the result of 'quite different origins and intentions', allied to Eastern European absurdist humour and political dissent:

Through the subtle and often disarmingly simple process of relocating, representing or duplicating a site or event, Ondák mines the notion of contextual discrepancy for the rich political and aesthetic questions it raises.⁴

If questions of scale, hierarchy and institutional authority lie at the foundation of Roman Ondák's work, as Morgan has noted, his unfixing of sites and monuments are indeed richly philosophical in their absurdist register.⁵ Like the work *Occupied Balcony*, 2002, where Ondák draped a large oriental rug over the balcony of the town hall of Graz, Austria, exposing hidden and repressed conventions, *Camouflaged Building* again appropriates the authority of a government building and, with a simple, quotidian gesture, turns it on its head to become banal and insecure, much like life itself. True to form, Ondák's intervention was resolutely provisional, which, by implication, is also the fate of old hierarchies and outmoded forms of social and political organisation. He reminds us that false pretences will prove our own undoing. In a witty riposte to monumental sculpture and with an impulse to upset the balance of things, Ondák's practice is one of subtle discord and dissent, allied to a candid, absurdist humour.

As a gesture in counterpoint – deploying the most humble and worthless of materials and the most modest of scales – Ondák's *One Day Sculpture* served to amplify the grandeur and artifice of a public monument. That he succeeded in doing so in a way that was both playful and comedic, derisive and perverse is testament to his clever take on scale and monumentality – excessive claims get a good dressing down, and false consciousness is deftly redressed.

SITUATIONS

Biography

Max Delany has been Director of Monash University Museum of Art since 2004. He was previously Director, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces from 1999-2004, and Curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art from 1995-1999.

For almost two decades Max has been involved with the development of contemporary art and the presentation of exhibitions, publications, cultural exchange and public projects for museums and contemporary art spaces at a national and international level. Max is an editorial advisor to *Art & Australia*, an occasional contributor to *Frieze*; a board member of Satellite Projects Inc.; and has held posts as Secretary of Contemporary Art Organisations Australia (CAOs); board member of the Public Galleries Association of Victoria Inc., and member of Asialink's Strategic Ties for the Arts – Japan Advisory Committee; as well as a member of various Arts Victoria advisory panels.

- 1 Termite mounds are models of decentralised, self-organised behavioural systems. Termites use swarm intelligence to exploit environments that could not be available to any single insect acting alone, which might be another metaphor for the consideration of Ondák's work.
- 2 Jan Verwoert, 'Towards a Different Economy of Time', in Silvia Eiblmayer ed., Roman Ondák (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2007) 84.
- 3 Ibid. 85.
- 4 Jessica Morgan, 'Insite and Outsite', in Silvia Eiblmayer ed., Roman Ondák, 20. 5 Ibid. 19-27.
- 5 Ibid. 19-27.

© Max Delany and Situations. Published by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 2011.

The person using Situations Papers online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title, Situations Papers Online, and the URL <http://www.situations.org.uk>. The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.