Failed Fall:
Time and Matter Out of Place

The desire, on the part of Roman Ondák, to restage and reorder the seasons by infiltrating a glasshouse garden with autumn leaves in February may seem Canute-like in its vain intention to stall and control the diurnal course of nature. However, the human manipulation of the seasons is a task already performed by the architects of a winter garden, a temperate urban oasis of evergreen plants presenting a perpetual summer. In this context the project represents a performative interruption into an already highly constructed reality.

As with many of Ondák's projects the final piece represents a 'contextual discrepancy'[1], a modest incursion into the everyday, behind which sits a rigorous conceptual alchemy of site and action, time and matter. To stop and isolate the seasons seems a quixotic task requiring, in equal part, the collaboration of local authorities, street cleaners, botanical experts and the availability of overwintering leaf depositories, but one that concluded in a subtle and strangely joyful intervention in the public realm.

During their hibernation period, when the leaves were held in a large warehouse, there was a certain sublimity in their mute and multitudinous 'there–ness', an artificiality in this purely natural medium, en masse. In contrast and also surprising was their apparent naturalness in the context of the installation. Like dazzle camouflage (a form of elaborate wartime camouflage aimed at producing confusion rather than concealment) the work, though highly visible and anomalous, also somehow displaced itself within its environment. Though entirely out of place and time, the leaves lost their previous sublimity and became more modest, almost to be expected. Yet they nonetheless worked on the viewer a slow perceptual dislocation.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* famously suggests that dirt is just 'matter out of place', implying both the existence and the contravention of a pre-ordained order governing society. She describes how every society creates divisions and classifications, which give it a sense of order and ostensibly make it civilized. There is no more 'civilized' space than a traditional winter garden; an orchestrated garden in a glasshouse, redolent of a patrician, Sunday afternoon, ambulatory conservatism. It has in common with the classic white cube an origin in bourgeois lifestyle and education and the exclusion of the messy business of life in favour of a structured, timeless aestheticism.

Despite the more radical umbrella-like architecture of the glass structure in Sheffield's Winter Garden and its enthusiastic use by all kinds of people – in this it conforms to Henri Lefebvre's denomination of 'social space', formed and used by those seeking a city-centre space to sit inside at leisure, without the necessity of buying anything – it is still essentially a hermetically-sealed, ersatz garden in which the seasons are ordered to man's desires, producing a stalled summer. *Failed Fall* (2008) generated a tiny breach in this order of civilization and in the order of nature, introducing an atemporal autumn into the strident summer, implying by its very temporary presence of just five days a suggestion of the potential transience and failure of the structures which order our existence, even the seasons.



The most resonant art, particularly in the public realm, often functions as 'matter out of place', drawing us up short out of habitual patterns and creating a moment of pause in the everyday, a temporal or spatial dislocation. In doing so it opens up the potential for other orders, other patterns of behaviour, other social and political possibilities. *Failed Fall* certainly seemed to do this.

For Lefebvre town planning, which would presumably include such structures as a winter garden, prescribes a set social programme for everyday life, but one which can nonetheless be short-circuited by what he terms 'irreducible remainders' (such as desire, love, play, rest), which produce 'dysfunctional disruptions' to this predestined programme. These disruptions are defined as 'intensely experienced, limited in duration, punctuating taken-for-granted routines', all very appropriate descriptions of *Failed Fall*. Similarly he suggests that the linear time of everyday life (influenced by capital accumulation and digital technologies) cannot entirely supercede cyclical time (based on the physical processes of equinoxes and biology), which reasserts itself by means of 'discontinuous moments'[2], such as that staged by Ondák.

Reception of the work, after the initial double take or discomposure as the spatio-temporal dislocation of this 'discontinuous moment' was felt, was often joyful, a kind of carnivalesque inversion of structures, which functioned both within and without the classification of art. It was described in one review as 'holiday-spirited seasonal adjustment, aural as much as visual, and the frisking children were capable of grasping its license without delimiting it as art'[3]. But there was clearly also (perhaps inevitably in such public projects) for some of those invested in the space, the feeling of over-stepping the boundaries, overturning the natural (un-natural) order of the place – a feeling that this matter was out of place. Both responses seem to function as vital components of the work.

Failed Fall was a fleeting intervention, which even before its removal marked an absence rather than a presence. It represented a yearning for the season or situation we are not in, or perhaps a longing for such absent control of natural forces – indicated in the human desire to set up such structures as winter gardens in the first place. It also evinced a desire to suspend time, step out of everyday routines and 'smell the flowers' or in this case play in the leaves, to extract ourselves from the tyranny of time and mortality, merged at the same time with the rational knowledge of the impossibility of sidestepping such forces. Nonetheless in that moment of out-of time perceptual imbalance, there is a transformative possibility of introducing hitherto unimagined shifts in the structures that surround us. If the time is out of joint and matter is out of place, why should we not also try to shift our position within things, even if that attempt may fail?

1 Jessica Morgan, 'Insite and Outsite' in *Roman Ondák*, eds. Silvia Eiblmayr, Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck and Maria Hlavajova, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2007), 20.

2 As noted in Alex Law's 'The Critique of Everyday Life and Cultural Democracy', online at: http://www.variant.randomstate.org/29texts/law29.html.

3 Ian Hunt, in a review of Art Sheffield 08, the biennial citywide contemporary art event, of which *Failed Fall* was a part, published in *Art Monthly* (April 2008).

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