

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Chen, Aric, "Art Crawl," *Hint Fashion Magazine*, February 2007



UGO RONDINONE
AIR GETS INTO EVERYTHING EVEN NOTHING
GET UP GIRL A SUN IS RUNNING THE WORLD
FEBRUARY 1 TO APRIL 30
RITZ-CARLTON PLAZA, BATTERY PARK, NEW YORK

Ugo Rondinone may be up to nothing—but it's plenty good. The Swiss-born, New York-based artist funnels his keen observations and personal meanderings into works that underscore the disorientation, escapist impulses and "nothingness," as he calls it, of contemporary existence. Including anything from paintings and photographs to sound pieces and installations, his repertoire can seem free-associative: clown sculptures lazing about, as if inactivity were entertainment enough; fashion models superimposed with his own countenance (left) alongside blurry target paintings rendered equally ambiguous; and the artist, cast as a sculpture, sitting passively in a faux studio, a video projection of his making being the only connection

with the outside world. For Rondinone, it seems, isolation is our greatest commonality, and futility our only purpose. He is a versatile introvert who, with wit and charisma, maps out a world that is perpetually searching for meaning in its own existential meltdown.

From February 1 to April 30, with the public art nonprofit **Creative Time**, Rondinone will be laying roots in New York's Battery Park with life-size aluminum casts of two millennia-old olive trees—signifying time and displacement—from his family's ancestral village in Italy. And this fall, he's curating a group show, opening September 14, at Paris's Palais de Tokyo while helping to reopen New York's New Museum by emblazoning its freshly-minted home with one of his well-known rainbow signs. (Picture a candy-striped rainbow with the pronouncement "Hell Yes.") Recently, we met with the 43-year-old artist in his loft on lower Broadway, where he told us how he got into gender-bending, why his Palais de Tokyo show will be "worthless," and why three minds are better than two.

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So tell me about your latest project, the cast olive trees in Battery Park.

It started with a trip I made to Italy [outside Naples], where my parents were born. It's a very unusual village built into the rock, and while we were there, I saw these trees and it came into my mind to do this because I had roots in this situation. Then, a year later, they found Roman ruins on a field and had to get rid of these old trees for an excavation. They had to dislocate them; there's a law in Italy that you cannot cut down olive trees. So we made casts of them, and these trees [in Battery Park] are part of that.

Your work is pretty diverse.

Yes, but it has a lineage. I use the medium just as a tool. But the body of work is always connected to a personal situation.



What was the personal situation that got you into making, say, clown sculptures?

I had a previous work where I made three different casts of myself—always in a passive position, either lying, sitting or sleeping. So I used these same positions for the clowns, and we titled one for every day of the week, so there are seven clowns. And I like that they aren't doing what they're supposed to as entertainers. They're just sleeping or passive, the

way I portrayed myself in those first sculptures. The clowns humorize the scene, while representing the week, because the work is about nothingness and doing nothing—how you organize your days doing nothing.

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It sounds like you have a Warholian sense of time, of not necessarily being engaged but just passively watching the world go by.

Yes. Because as soon as you make a decision, you just cancel out all the other situations you could be involved with.

In other words, there are so many choices, why bother making any choices at all?

Right. An important ongoing work for me is this project called Days Between Stations. What I did, like Warhol, is lead a camera around for an hour, without editing, and that becomes the work. Each tape represents one hour. I started it in 1992 and it will end with my ending.



I've always loved your fashion photographs, where you superimpose your head on the bodies of models. What made you do that?

Initially, it was for an invitation for a show where [my cast body] was just sitting on the floor. So I extended the persona into that twilight situation where you couldn't really see if the image was masculine or feminine. At the same time, I showed these fuzzy [target] paintings—something you couldn't really put into focus, so it makes another ambiguity.

But is it more than that? Fashion photography is so loaded.

It was just easy to project myself into these beautiful girls.

Have you always wanted to be a beautiful girl?

Just in photos is enough.

Did you grow up looking at fashion magazines?

Not really. There weren't any in Brunnen, the little village where I grew up—a very remote place in the deepest part of Switzerland.

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Did that remoteness inspire the escapism that permeates much of your work?

Maybe. For me, art gives you the possibility to isolate yourself and just build up your own world without any social demands. When I draw landscapes, for example, it means I can spend my days walking in the woods. And when I've shown [the landscape drawings], I closed off the gallery's windows. It's a bit inspired by Joris-Karl Huysmans, the turn-of-the-century romantic who wrote [in the book *Against Nature*] about this figure Des Esseintes who inherits money and buys a house where he closes the windows and just follows his neuroses within this world he creates.

There are a lot of dark wood walls here in your apartment. Kind of like a forest. Are you recreating—

My own nest here? Yes. I can't stand having people around me, so that's why I don't work with assistants.

I'll be gone soon.

No, no, that's okay. It's just in general, the way I live my 24 hours.

You're also curating a group show at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

The director's idea was to invite an artist to curate a show so it becomes a portrait of that artist, or that's what I understood. So I will bring together the influence of whatever I like in art and, together, it will give a portrait of myself. So it will be worthless. The catalog will contain just images, no introduction. No opening party, no press releases.

What's the show about?

It's titled after a 1965 work by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs called *The Third Mind*. Gysin introduced Burroughs to the cut-up [or collage] technique and they decided to do a book of it called *The Third Mind* out of the idea that if two minds come together, they create a third one. And for me, it was the basic ideology for a group exhibition.

You're also creating one of your rainbow signs—this one will say "Hell Yes"—for the reopening this fall of the New Museum in New York.

Since the beginning, I've given my shows titles and, in 1996, one of those titles became my first rainbow. I was thinking about outside sculpture, so I needed something that could communicate to a wide range of society, without restrictions, and the rainbow is appealing for everyone. Everyone can relate to it.

Maybe you're not so introverted after all.

Maybe. But between my private persona and my public persona, there's always a schizophrenic situation.