

40 YEARS  
KALDOR PUBLIC  
ART PROJECTS

2003  
UGO  
RONDINONE



# 2003 UGO RONDINONE

## PROJECT

---

Our magic hour

25 June – 31 August 2003

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Clockwork for oracle

28 January – 7 March 2004

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

**'Is there an element of frustration at work here, with these protagonists who never meet?'**

**'I don't know, really', Rondinone says. 'Not really, we all die alone so we should live alone', he adds, with a big chuckle. 'There's a lot of desire in it, and [the] underlying melancholy of this desire.'**

Ugo Rondinone interview with Gabriella Coslovich, 'My twilight zone', *Age*, 30 January 2004

UGO RONDINONE

View of Rondinone's exhibition in 2003  
at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney,  
including his sculpture **If there were  
anywhere but desert. Wednesday 2000**

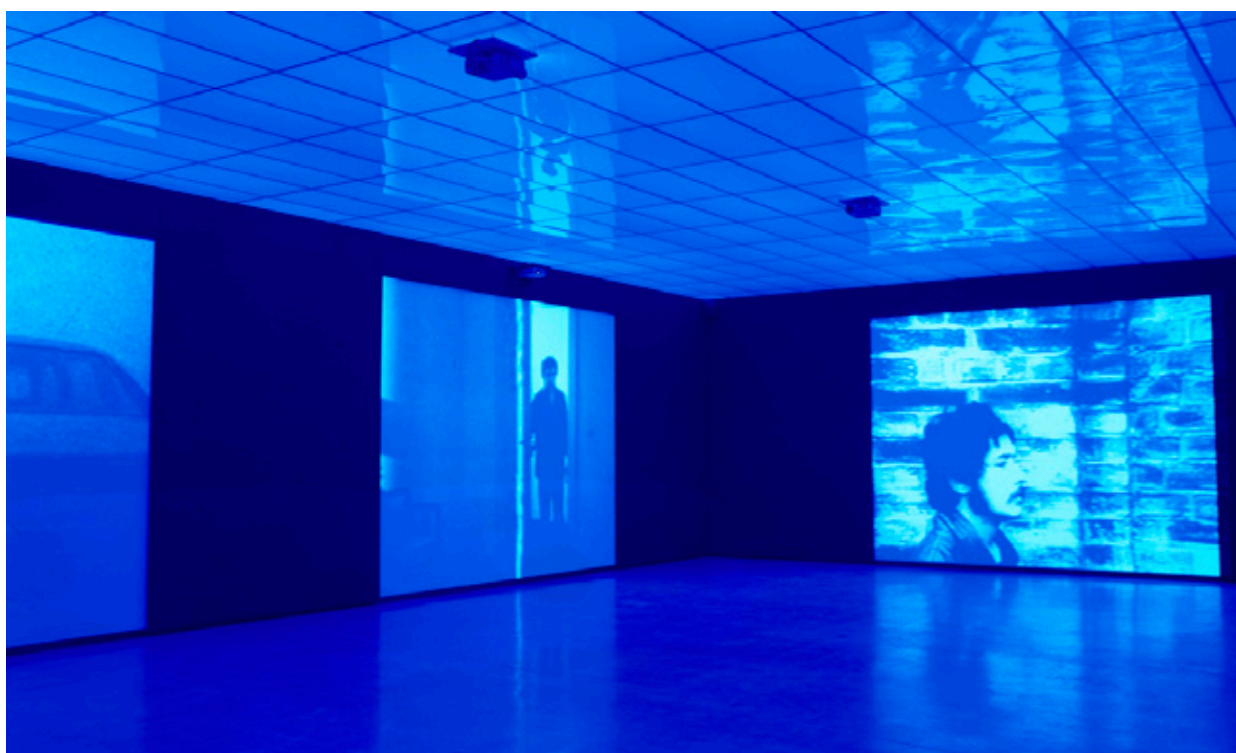
Photo: Nick Bowers  
Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney



UGO RONDINONE

View of Rondinone's exhibition in 2003 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, including the video installation **It's late...** 1999 (top), 'target' paintings and the video and sound work **Dog days are over** 1996

Photos: Nick Bowers  
Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney



# 2003 UGO RONDINONE

Poets and artists have long given voice and shape to the incongruous – seeking to make sense of it, or simply to underscore its mystery. Some, like Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone, manage to do both, turning the absurd into a kind of de facto logic, and vice versa, primarily through visual means. Still, language, sound, and a penchant for the lyrical often figure prominently in Rondinone's work.

Jane Harris, 'Strange gusts and aluminum giants from Ugo Rondinone', *Village Voice*, 9 October 2007

## INTRODUCTION

---

Ugo Rondinone first came to people's attention at the São Paulo Biennale in 1996 and has since made a name for himself in contemporary art for the uniqueness of his approach, the fecundity of his productions and the diversity of his styles. His installations integrate trademark elements: fuzzy spraypainted target painting, mandala design, fibreglass sculpture, video environments and sounds that he himself has created out of tape-loops. Along the way he has devised a strange persona or artist-subterfuge that he sets up, a kind of slacker anti-hero or hungover Buddha, in the form of a half-dressed, overweight, inert clown, who opposes the mad super-efficiency of contemporary society. Rondinone brought it all to Australia in 2003 for his Kaldor project, with exhibitions of his work in Sydney and Melbourne.

## ARTIST

---

### Ugo Rondinone

born 1964 in Brunnen, Switzerland  
lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland and New York, USA

Like the great Alberto Giacometti, a sculptor of sombre aesthetic scruples, Ugo Rondinone was born in Switzerland to Italian parents. He later studied at Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna.

A multimedia artist, Rondinone often joins forces with other artists like Urs Fischer in collaborative installations.

Rondinone's wide-ranging interests and idiosyncratic style suggests a person tunnelling into his own psyche. His audacious choice of literary antecedents seems a good way of trying to get to grips with the nature of that psychosphere. He draws inspiration from not-so-well-known yet brilliant writers, such as New York performance poet John Giorno (star of Andy Warhol's 1963 film *Sleep*) and Edmond Jabès, a writer known for his meditations on exile in the desert of language (the title for Rondinone's project, *Clockwork for oracle*, was taken from one of his poems).

However, the novel that most influenced him was Joris Karl Huysmans' *Against nature*; Rondinone has said that the way in which the protagonist builds his own world in a castle, without any outside contact, is very much the way he sees artists.

Controlling every aspect of a space, and all the corresponding and contrasting elements – such as clowns, mirrors, targets and windows – Rondinone often transforms art sites into just such a self-contained world. Life is undecipherable and repetitive, controlled by time and order, while emotions are pesky and chaos stirs.

Like his compatriot Giacometti, Rondinone knows the paradoxical rules of a game where the closer you get to the truth, the further you are away, or the more conscious you are of your distance. The payoff: a feeling of potent compassion and the startling thrill of art, as a place where detached contemplation can yield some access to life's engulfing mysteries.

## PROJECT

---

For Ugo Rondinone, the architecture is always a framework and a stimulus. Whether it was the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in South Melbourne, known as the 'urban Uluru', or Sydney Harbour's Museum of Contemporary Art, Rondinone contributed amazing works for each of the two venues. Both exhibitions were realised as Kaldor projects in a partnership with Naomi Milgrom Kaldor.

In Sydney in 2003, *Our magic hour* was a neon text in a gay-friendly rainbow arc on the MCA rooftop, shining across Circular Quay and heralding the kind of dysfunctional funhouse we were about to enter.

Inside, slumped in one corner of the exhibition space, a Buddha-bellied, fibreglass clown with a small bowler hat (*If there were anywhere but desert. Saturday 2000*) invoked the shade of one of Samuel Beckett's clochards, having waited for Godot for too long. On one window, black plexiglas that just threw back your reflection; on the other, one of his large, out-of-focus target paintings, with a mesmerising white core. In *If there were anywhere but desert. Wednesday 2000* and *Dog days are over 1996*, more sprawling clowns as sculpture and in video. There's an uncanny mood, like a circus after hours. Your entry triggered a canned laughter track, and we smile but with that weird, embarrassed smile you offer when you feel left out of a joke.

Elsewhere you entered a deep blue neon-tiled room with flickering, swimming-pool blue light. The submarine effect came from six video projections of looped fragments sampled from 30 different films and scenes shot by the artist: swimming in water, moving through fog, from a dark room into light. Entropy looms.

In the series *Sleep* 1999, 165 framed photographs hung wall-to-wall told an unresolved narrative of two star-crossed solitary figures scouring the same bleached-out coastline but never meeting. This failure to connect was played out again in *What do you want? 2002* where a funhouse mirror warped all reflections of a self, while on a sound loop a lengthy quarrel was enacted between a man and a woman: 'What do you want?', 'What do I want?', 'Yes, what do you want?', 'I don't want anything'... ad nauseam.

With painstaking artisanal craft, Rondinone carries on in a more unsettling branch of the circus of life. A funhouse is fun, while also being a place of fear and confusion: it's fairy floss on a stick but also those spooky dark passages.

In Melbourne in 2004 for *Clockwork for oracle*, Rondinone presented several of the works seen in Sydney along with another video work, from which the exhibition takes its title, in which a man and a woman again walk alone, this time through a cityscape. A monumental X (six metres high, seven metres wide and a metre deep) titled *Twentyfourhours* subdued the exhibition space, emitting breathing sounds from tiny speakers. X is a cancellation mark and an unknown destination (according to philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Since Copernicus, man has been rolling from the centre towards X'.) On the walls to either

side hung a series of sinister black rubber masks, recalling commedia del arte masks and perhaps something more primitive, with each one subtitled with a month from the lunar cycle as part of the *Moonrise* series.

## WORLD EVENTS: 2003

---

- \_ Space shuttle Columbia explodes during take-off
- \_ Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein captured by US troops
- \_ Second Life offers a parallel 3D virtual world on the internet
- \_ Social networking website MySpace.com launched
- \_ Dan Brown releases his bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code*
- \_ US President George W Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao visit Australia simultaneously
- \_ Bushfires around Canberra kill four people and destroy more than 500 homes
- \_ National Gallery of Victoria opens The Ian Potter Centre in Federation Square, Melbourne
- \_ Art Gallery Society of NSW celebrates its 50th anniversary
- \_ Art Gallery of NSW opens new Asian galleries
- \_ **13th Kaldor project:** Udo Rondinone exhibition *One magic hour* held at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art followed by *Clockwork for oracle* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne

## THEME

### Installation art

---

There is a psychological, even moral, quality to inhabited space that philosopher Gaston Bachelard detailed so eloquently in his book, *The poetics of space*. The space we inhabit is never geometric, but oneiric (related to dreams). Space, he wrote, is compressed time. Think of the daydream-soaked house of childhood; the heady intellectual space of the attic; or the basement into whose subconscious levels we descend with a metaphorical candle, even in the age of electricity. They each conjure a super-sensory, even sub-sensory, dimension: centres of boredom or reverie or silent beholding.

In 1976, Brian O'Doherty wrote three articles in the journal *Artforum* that later became the book *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. O'Doherty was looking at the modern gallery and what a very controlled context it is. Its whiteness bleaches out the past, giving the artwork a sense of being out of time, beyond time. This kind of eternity of display became so overbearing, we now tend to see the space first. According to O'Doherty, the modern museum space derives its sepulchral force from painted caves, Egyptian tomb chambers and medieval churches. The secular modern gallery has lost some power, but it still has a sanctity that mixes the formality of the courtroom and the mystique of the experimental lab.

Decades earlier, in the 1920s and '30s, Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin had broken away from the ideal sculptural space

on the pedestal, as traditionally offered by a gallery. Working from his sailor's knowledge of physical things, he set up his sculptural works, like his 1917 *Corner relief*, made from vernacular materials, in the angles between the walls themselves. This shift to the use of real materials in real space – interior corridors, ceilings, walls or floors, or even outdoor sites – announced the emergence of installation art.

Installation transforms the foursquare, stable cube designed by architects into an existential or actualised space produced by a reader or viewer. It also dismantles the tidy groups of spatial experiences we associate with museums – those neat rows of eye-level art – by forcing us to enter other spaces and take in other information.

Installations vary enormously: they can be small and intimate, or massive and theatrical, while each artist's efforts in this area are as intimate and revealing as handwriting. Photography, video, painting, sculpture, all the mediums of installation, shed their autonomy; the object itself is not the work but the system of relationships. All the tangled arteries of 20th-century art seem to lead to installation.

Installation art releases ways of thinking and feeling that have previously been marginalised by the pictorial and illusionistic orders of space. It can tap into the empowering forces of indigenous cultures, or make us aware of crippling forms of absent power (like dharma), while at the same time plugging into current metaphors of techno-immersion (like ambient music or omnidirectional acoustic space, interactivity, virtual reality). Installation is art finding new ways to go on despite frightening historical discontinuities.

Examples of other influential installation artists include Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski and Giuseppe Penone. Among the Kaldor project artists, Ugo Rondinone, Gregor Schneider, Martin Boyce, Tatzu Nishi, Richard Long, Barry McGee and Miralda all fit under the umbrella of installation art.

## COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

---

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection)

• **Mikala Dwyer** (Australia, b1959)

*Hanging eyes from the series iffytown* 1999

mixed media; dimensions variable

Gift of the artist 2002 129.2002.a-i

• **Adam Cullen** (Australia, b1965)

*Inside* 2002

intaglio: drypoint, black ink from perspex on ivory Arches paper; 60.7 x 80.1 cm (sheet)

Purchased 2004 114.2004

*Comedic relief* 2000

synthetic polymer paint on canvas; 152 x 213 cm

Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2008 with the generous assistance of Richard & Chrissie Banks, Peter Braithwaite & Gary Linnane, Stephen Buzacott & Kemsley Brennan, Andrew Cameron, Joseph Catanzariti, Trevor Chappell, Fran Clark, Peter English, Robert Gould, Ginny Green, Julian & Stephanie Grose, James Hill & Jen Dowling, Davina Jackson & Chris Johnson, Vasili Kaliman, Stephen McMahon & Robyn Norton, Jan Minchin, Morna Seres & Ian Hill, Vivienne Sharpe & Tim McCormick, Lucy Turnbull, Rachel Verghis, Ray Wilson 250.2008

• **Hany Armanious** (Egypt; Australia, b1962)

*Snake oil* 1994

plastic trays, hotmelt, oil paint; 30 x 200 x 122 cm

Purchased with funds provided by the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1996 490.1996.a-cc

## SELECTED REFERENCES

---

\_ Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston 1969 [originally 1958]

\_ Sophie Forbat (ed), *40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney 2009

\_ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999

### Ugo Rondinone

\_ Jan Avgikos, *Ugo Rondinone: guided by voices*, Hatje Cantz, Germany 2000

\_ *Heyday*, Centre d'art contemporain, Geneva 1996

\_ *Parkett*, no 52, 1998, pp 104–43. Special section, including essays by Francesco Bonami, Laura Hoptman and Jan Verwoert

\_ Ugo Rondinone, *No how on*, DAP, New York 2002

\_ Russell Storer, *Ugo Rondinone: our magic hour*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 2003

\_ Andrea Tarsia, *Ugo Rondinone: zero built a nest in my navel*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 2005

\_ *Ugo Rondinone*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna 2002

\_ *Where do we go from here?*, Le Consortium, Dijon 1997

### Websites

\_ Kaldor Public Art Projects  
[www.kaldorartprojects.org.au](http://www.kaldorartprojects.org.au)

\_ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor\\_projects](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects)

\_ Ugo Rondinone, Galerie Eva Presenhuber  
[www.presenhuber.com/en/artists/RONDINONE\\_UGO/works/overview.html](http://www.presenhuber.com/en/artists/RONDINONE_UGO/works/overview.html)

# ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Ugo Rondinone's site-specific neon sculpture *Our magic hour* set up a dialogue with other major cultural icons of Sydney Harbour: the Sydney Opera House, Sydney Harbour Bridge and Luna Park. Propose what series of discussions the artist raises about our relationship with contemporary culture and its dissemination and consumption within the wider community. Consider the artwork's significance in relation to its location above the Museum of Contemporary Art and its close proximity to the other buildings. Examine the relationships the artist's choice of location sets up between public and private space and within the high and low cultural frame.

The figure of the clown is a significant and recurring symbol within Rondinone's work, as sculptures within an installation and as subjects within his videos. Discuss the demeanour, mood and character of his various clowns. Would you say they are active or passive? Consider how they contribute to the composition of the work, physically, emotionally and psychologically. Outline how a viewer may respond to them. How might this differ from person to person, depending on their background and reading of the work?

Examine the function of the clown as an alter-ego of Rondinone or a metaphor for the artist. Outline how and in what contexts the clown has been used in symbolic ways in our and other cultures. Propose examples from the visual arts as well as across other artforms such as literature, film and theatre. As a metaphor for the artist, what position do you think Rondinone is taking in his use of the clown?

Compare and contrast Rondinone's *Dog days are over* 1996 and *Where do we go from here?* 1997 with Bruce Nauman's *Clown torture* 1987. Identify how the clown figure is treated by each artist in these video installations, noting the social and psychological metaphors. Consider technical strategies used within the presentation of each work, and outline the extent sound is used and the effect it has.

Assess the controlled spaces Rondinone constructs, physically and metaphorically, both for his contained video installations as well as within his gallery installations. Investigate the strategies he employs to create psychologically charged spaces for the viewer. Take into account the use of sightlines, scale, light, sound and other elements of design, in addition to the physical placement of technical equipment and objects. Detail how he carries over these strategies into the representation of space in his video and photographic works in order to compound the atmosphere. Contrast this with his outdoor work.

Titles from a number of Rondinone's installations and sculptures come directly from the poetry of Edmond Jabès. Explore Jabès' poetry and locate the poems Rondinone draws on for titles. Examine why Rondinone has appropriated elements from Jabès' poems. To what extent does Rondinone's work reflect the sentiments of Jabès writing? Outline how these sentiments are made manifest in Rondinone's work

Trace the development of Rondinone's body of work. Examine how he has developed themes associated with the contemporary human condition. Compare his early installation *Heyday* 1995 to his later work, citing examples. What material and conceptual elements have remained consistent in his work throughout this time? Present a case for how his practice has evolved and matured over this period.

In his review of the exhibition *Our magic hour* ('Ugo Rondinone: glorious cross-pollination', *Art and Australia*, vol 41, no 2, summer 2003, p 213), Ewen McDonald stated:

'Ugo Rondinone's art is an uncanny merging of physical, spatial elements with psycho spaces and associative memories – this recent grouping of installations suggesting that any moment could well be one's magic hour. The artist plays with time only to remind us of time passing – lamenting that which, too quickly, fades from life. Like rainbows ...'

Examine this statement, highlighting Rondinone's constant reference to time and space as evidenced in the titles of his works and as an important element formally and conceptually of his installations.

Rondinone's Kaldor project involved two exhibitions (*Our magic hour* and *Clockwork for oracle*) in two cities (Sydney and Melbourne) in two years (2003 and 2004). Research and establish the context behind them and why two different exhibitions from the same artist were presented. Consider what exchange of ideas between the artworks in each exhibition was taking place. Referencing the important aspect of audience development and participation as well as the role of private sponsorship and cultural institutions, discuss the purpose a project like this serves within the development of contemporary art in Australia.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coordinated and written by  
George Alexander, Tristan Sharp  
and Nelia Justo,  
Public Programs Department,  
Art Gallery of NSW  
Design Analiese Cairis, Zoe Cooper  
Editor Kirsten Tilgals

Cover: *Our magic hour* 2003 installed  
on the roof of Sydney's Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Photo: Greg Weight. Courtesy  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

All works © the artist  
unless otherwise indicated

Published to coincide  
with the exhibition:  
**40 years: Kaldor Public Art Projects**  
2 October 2009 – 14 February 2010

Produced by the  
Public Programs Department  
Art Gallery of NSW  
Art Gallery Road, The Domain  
Sydney 2000 Australia  
pp@nsw.gov.au

© 2009 Art Gallery of NSW  
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

---