Gravity's Rainbow – On Ugo Rondinone

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'A screaming across the sky' reads the first line of Thomas Pynchon's sprawling, encyclopaedic 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. In its first chapter alone we find: technical details of a V-2 rocket; a Porky Pig cartoon; two real fish behaving like the one-up/one-down fishes in the astrological symbol Pisces; and a smouldering romance. From an introduction to *Gravity's Rainbow* we read:

> To attempt to create a summary of such a work is to embark upon the fabrication of a catalogue of Linnean proportions, a delineation of the bewildering flora and fauna which populate that distinct global topography we call the [...] *œuvre*. But attempt it we must.

In the same spirit of determination and marvel, 'attempt we must' a summary of the work of Ugo Rondinone, the Swiss artist and poet now based in New York, whose art presents a similar confounding admixture. Since the early 1990s Rondinone's work has taken many forms: cross-gendered, fashion-photograph self-portraits; large, colourful, hallucinatory 'target' paintings; Arcadian forests rendered in the manner of 18th-century engravings, enlarged to billboard size; hyperreal effigies of the artist himself or of clowns, slumped against gallery walls; videos, sound installations, rubber masks, photo-based, gallery-sized constructions. Confused? Perhaps you have seen some of Rondinone's large, rainbow-like illuminated signs arching over the cities of Europe, with their reassuring messages calling out in the night sky: 'Dog Days Are Over', 'Guided by Voices', 'Love Invents Us' and 'Hell, Yes!'. Pynchon's term 'gravity's rainbow' referred to the semi-circular path produced by a rocket; once launched it momentarily travels straight upwards, then succumbs to gravity and follows a parabolic trail, inescapably nose-diving back to earth. Ugo Rondinone's work follows a similar trajectory, ever-changing, hovering between the vertical and horizontal like a lonely, sometimes desperate and sometimes ironic screaming against the sky.

In many of Rondinone's early installations, the artist depicts himself alone, physically exhausted and idle, oblivious to the sanctimony of the art gallery. In *Yesterday's Dancer,* 1998, the artist-effigy leans against a black wall, eyes closed as if emerging from a long and gruelling night of excess. He is wholly indifferent to our presence, semi-delirious, consumed by the darkness of his existence. In *Cry Me A River,* 1995, the same figure sits forlorn and pathetic, staring down at the empty floor and ignoring the large picture window beside him, occupying the gallery more like a squatter than an invited guest (*Heyday*). Finally, in *Bonjour Tristesse,* 1997, he's lying flat-out, like a teenager lost in the lonely pleasure of his music-filled bedroom. Is he asleep? Anaesthetised? Maybe he's passed out drunk? How embarrassing! Why, this artist is obviously in no fit state to contemplate – much less create – works of art. Art theory has taught us that the very act of beholding art, of human 'contemplation, wonder, scientific enquiry, disinteredness, aesthetic pleasure'[1] requires that we occupy an attentive, standing position, eyes wide open. For centuries, the very condition of experiencing art – observing a painted picture hung on the wall, or walking around an object of sculpture raised on a pedestal – required that we assume our distinctly human, vertical posture. As Rosalind Krauss has identified in *Informe,* art has conventionally been a 'function of the upright posture', well distinct from an animal-like, 'base' position closer to the ground: the horizontal 'expanded field' where so much contemporary art takes place.

Indeed much of Rondinone's art is literally knocked off the pedestal, on the floor, shed of any lofty dignity – like *Heyday*'s figure slumped on the ground. Spilled black ink spreads outwards in messy puddles (*if,* 1993). Photos and sheets of paper lie scattered about, like so much litter (*House of Dust,* 1994 and *Pastime,* 1992). In *Thank You Silence,* 2005, bits of white paper flutter briefly overhead before floating to the ground in a snowy heap. Clownish, overweight figures lie in shameless abandon on the parquet floor (*Now How On,* 2002). In *Moonlighting,* 1999 – his black-on-black, fetish-like photographs – leather-clad, faceless figures creep on all fours in the semi-darkness, barely human. This persistent horizontality has been noticed before; critic Francesco Bonami observed that the 'latent reality of Rondinone's vision [is] the desire to fall'.[2] In *Heyday,* the sitting (horizontal) figure/self-portrait is contrasted with a vast (vertical) picture window opening onto the street, as if inverting the postures associated with the art experience. The condition of art-viewing (here represented by the sculpture, and the artist himself) occupies a horizontal plane, sitting inattentively and dishevelled on the floor; while the 'art-object' is the unmediated, non-art reality outside, the framed window 'hung' on the wall's vertical plane. In the sound installation *Sleep,* 1999, photographs of a man and of a woman, each alone and wandering along a beach, are hung on a wooden, slatted wall. This wall is hardly solid: light shines right through it, and we can see the flimsy, tilted wooden support behind its precarious construction. Meanwhile, the humans depicted appear to sleepwalk through the experience: the frailty of art's dependency on the vertical, via the gallery wall itself, and of the vigilant upright *homo sapiens* are both equally laid bare.

In Rondinone's photographic series *I Don't Live Here Anymore,* the artist's face is seamlessly overlaid (through the miracles of computer technology) on the body of a female fashion model. Particularly in an early red-tinted series of these (made in 1997), the figure is never upright: crouching, cross-legged or kneeling, s/he is as much half-human/half-animal as half-male/half-female. In a 1998 sequence in the same series, the mustachioed 'model' masquerades as some kind of chic butcher, holding the formless, 'base' meat in his/her hand. Elsewhere, more blood-red meat slumps shapelessly on the cutting board. Transvestite portraits have long permeated the photographic performances of 20th-century artists, from Marcel Duchamp to Claude Cahun to Andy Warhol, to the androgynous self-portraits of fellow Swiss Urs Lüthi in the 1970s. In Rondinone's work, however, this cross-gendered content is enhanced by the artist's borrowing from the vast lexicon of awkward, uncomfortable fashion poses – sitting upright on one's knees with a hand holding an extended high-heel; extreme *contrapposto* with hips jutting straight out; or a full-frontal pose with face and gaze turned away from the camera in an extreme neck-twist (1998). In their uncomfortable and deliberate posing, Rondinone makes us aware of the manipulation of these passive (female) bodies, heightened by the contrast with the active (male) face. Finally, in a black-and-white image from 1998, the bare-breasted female figure only becomes vertical by being literally hung from a hook on the ceiling: strung up like meat or dangling like a puppet – a suggestion reinforced by her impossibly skinny, doll-like legs. This violently upright posture at once contradicts and reinforces her passivity: she is erect, yes, but never grounded, swinging hopelessly like a living pendulum.

There is often in Rondinone's work this contrast between the animate and the inanimate, artifice and nature. In *Grand Central Station,* 1999, the canned, recorded sound of two lovers' rambling and conflicted dialogue emanates from speakers hung from a pair of real trees. These are leafless, lifeless things, wrapped in black tape as if bandaged – like a post-apocalyptic orchard bearing mechanical fruit. Similarly, the figures strolling along an unspoiled (natural) beach in *Sleep* are idealised and rendered unreal, like the 'perfect' (artificial) people of a fashion shoot or a perfume ad. In *Heyday,* the stiff artifice of the unmoving body

1   Krauss, Rosalind, 'Gestalt', in Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless A User's Guide,* (New York: Zone Books), 1997, p. 90–91.

2   Bonami, Francesco, 'Ugo Rondinone: Grounding', *Parkett* 52, May 1998, Zurich, p. 108.

and the electric light of the gallery are contrasted with the movement and daylight of the 'real' world outside. An Arcadian wood is rendered in wholly unnatural, engraving-like images (*House of Leaves,* 1994, and similar). These are actually drawn from the artist's outdoor walks – 'unnatural' artefacts of his encounter with 'real' nature. Both nature and artificiality occupy a seamless world of 'Dream and Dramas', a phrase used in another of his rainbow signs: 'real' and 'unreal' are equally illusory, determined only by the way they are shaped by artists and poets in words and images.

As in *Sleep* and *Heyday,* figures are always alone in Rondinone's work: alone in the forest, alone in the fashion template, alone in the gallery. Isolated figures occupy vast wall-sized screens (*It's Late and the Wind Carries a Faint Sound ...,* 1999).[3] A man and, separately, a woman walk through a city (*Roundelay,* 2003). As with the isolated figures in the paintings of another 'romantic', Caspar David Friedrich, these lone figures are confronted with a beautiful yet potentially hostile setting. Perhaps Rondinone's most emblematic image of isolated figures occupying the 'base horizontal plane', are the clowns from *Where Do We Go From Here?,* 1996. Here the viewer is first led inside a giant plywood box/isolation chamber, then confronted by four wall-sized video projections of potbellied clowns lying lazily, provocatively on the floor. Are we being confronted with our own or the artist's 'pathetic indolence' – in making or receiving art, perhaps in responding effectively to the changing world around us? The strong verticality of the screens is contrasted with the reclining figures, which are behaving in no way as a clown should – that is, performing the 'stand-up' comedy act of a circus entertainer. This is a clown who landed on his bottom some time ago in a routine pratfall, and decided rebelliously to stay there forever, refusing to come up again for another laugh. (In the same way Rondinone also pointedly refuses to fulfil a few of the artist's traditional jobs, such as establishing a recognizable aesthetic 'style', or rendering our world more comprehensible to us.) This grounded clown is a foil to Italo Calvino's character Cosimo in the novel *The Baron in the Trees,* 1957, a young 18th-century nobleman who defies convention by literally climbing the family tree one evening never again to return down, wandering the earth forever – in defiance – from tree to tree. He too, in refusing the constrictions of human social behaviour, chooses never to walk upright again.

On one screen from *Where Do We Go From Here?* we see a clown asleep. Certainly this is not the first time that we, ever-patient art lovers, have been asked to watch a nearly motionless human sleep: Andy Warhol's 1963 masterpiece, also titled *Sleep,* fixed its 8-hour gaze (a more or less unmanned camera) upon a sleeping man. Whereas in Warhol's version the subject is seductive, in a state of 'natural' sleep, Rondinone's clown is wholly unerotic, performing sleep. A clown appeals at best only to children but here is rendered altogether grotesque, dehumanised behind garish make-up that includes more Rondinonesque striped rainbows in painted arches on his eyelids. Warhol is a recurring referent in Rondinone's work. *Heyday,* for example, with its picture window framing an ordinary street scene, requires that we do exactly what *Sleep* or *Empire,* among other Warhol films, had asked us to do: watch at length a real-time non-event – the unmoving Empire State Building, say – and thus glimpse the unmediated, unseen beauty of the world around us. With Warhol's eventless films as their precedent, Rondinone's gel-tinted windows literally behave like filmscreens. Moreover, like Warhol, Rondinone accumulates artefacts of uninflected reality – the

debris of everyday life – collected compulsively and unjudgmentally. In *Days Between Stations* (1993 – ongoing), Rondinone presents over 900 silent, 60-minute videos of his everyday life, just as Warhol had relentlessly taped or filmed everything around him. Rondinone's videos are kept boxed, exhibited on inclined shelves alongside a vast sequence of equally uneventful photographs. Like Warhol's analogous *Time Capsules* – identical cardboard boxes replete with the formlessness of life, from restaurant napkins to ticket stubs – Rondinone's obsessive accumulation is stacked in a highly orderly fashion. He imposes the illusion of vertical (human) order on the sprawling randomness of the everyday in an obsessive, grid-like archive of time and space.

Such contradictions – between order/disorder, form/formlessness, male/female, vertical/horizontal – are the recurring strains in Rondinone's otherwise disjointed work. For example, in drawings and text paintings such as *Lines Out to Silence,* 2005, written words are hung on the wall. Just as the human body in Rondinone's work refuses its 'proper' erect position, the text – usually belonging to the flat plane of a book – is forced upward to attach to a wall. Similarly, sound – usually formless and occupying space weightlessly – is given substance through its technological embodiment, speakers, in such works as the poetically titled *I Never Sleep. I've Never Slept At All. I've Never Had a Dream. All of That Could Be True,* 1999.

In an art-world family tree, Warhol and Rondinone would be distant cousins genealogically linked through the poet John Giorno. Briefly Warhol's lover, young Giorno was the isolated dreamer filmed in *Sleep;* Giorno also, on occasion, works with Ugo Rondinone today. One of Rondinone's carnivalesque signs, *Everyone Gets Lighter,* is taken from the title of a Giorno poem (Carnegie International, 2004). And, for his 2002 exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, London, *cigarettesandwich,* Giorno recited at the opening his poem *there was a bad tree.* Often Rondinone – a poet himself – draws poets and poetry into his art this way. The title *I don't live here anymore* paraphrases a line borrowed from a poem by Baudelaire, 'Anywhere Out of the World' (1857): '*I think that I will be there where I am not'.* In fact, probably the best way to approach Rondinone's potentially baffling art is as you would a body of poetry: accepting the contrast between precision (the precise selection of words for a poet, the accuracy of form in Rondinone's art) with the vague, ethereal quality of the subject matter – broad themes such as equilibrium, isolation, hyperreality.

Another 'romantic' artist/poet who comes to mind is William Blake. Like Rondinone, he approached the turn of another century, 200 years ago, with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. They share such common themes as decaying love, dreams, arcadia and myth, seamlessly combining text and image. (Note the extreme attention that Rondinone always pays to his wordy, enigmatic titles, like the series of twenty-four light bulb sculptures entitled *First Hour of the Poem, Second Hour of the Poem,* and so forth.) Blake too was 'guided by voices', a visionary artist unique in the artistic climate of his day. Like Blake, Rondinone evokes an entire universe of his own fabrication, which responds to the complexity of his times and yet feels in touch with some existential pre-history. Both artist/poets are interested in great cycles of time and image, alluding to a distant, primal moment: Rondinone's cycle of primitivist masks, for instance, relate to the signs of the zodiac, under the title of 'Moonrise' (*Moonrise. West. January; Moonrise. West. February,* etc.). The image of a sleeping figure beneath an arching, celestial form above recurs in both Blake and Rondinone; compare Rondinone's installation of the round painting *No. 281 Siebenundzwanzigstermaizweitausendundzwei* swirling above the unmoving caveman/clown on the floor in *No How On,* 2002, with, among others, Blake's *Death of the Virgin Mary,* 1803. For both, the passive, sleeping figure is a cipher suggesting a vast, protective universe in flux, watching over an inert subject –

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3 Full title: *It's late and the wind carries a faint sound as it moves through the trees. It could be anything. The jingling of little bells perhaps, or the tiny flickering out of tiny lives. I stroll down the sidewalk and close my eyes and open them and wait for my mind to go perfectly blank. Like a room no one has ever entered, a room without doors or windows. A place where nothing happens.* This is also the text on one of Rondinone's vast nylon flags titled *It's Late,* 1999.

the artist himself? Both combine a strange mix of melancholy and escapism, stretching beyond the concerns of the everyday and yet mired within it, tirelessly navigating unfamiliar worlds of their own making.

Pynchon, Warhol, Blake: a mixture of this motley crew of heretofore unrelated talents would, perhaps, yield an artistic temperament not unlike Rondinone's. We would have to add some peculiar quality of 'Swissness', defined by the late Harald Szeemann as 'a series of conditions that favour a loner's attitude';[4] and Rondinone's peculiar, perverse pleasure in occupying this lonely universe on his own. 'In Rondinone's hyperreal world', writes critic Meghan Dailey, 'life is a melancholy path of futile searches and broken hearts on a rotting planet'.[5] In *Gravity's Rainbow,* Pynchon tells of a character named Nora, who 'has turned her face more than once to the Outer Radiance, and simply seen nothing there'.[6] At the heart of Ugo Rondinone's work there is this same kind of emptiness, this same void – whether the '0' we walk through to experience the 'empty', sound-filled space of *I'm Worried,* 2006, or the blank centre of his many target paintings, all pointing to what Rondinone has called the 'zero condition of the work'.

Recently, the art of this 'loner' seems intent on raising itself off the ground, so to speak, as if moving upwards – at times tentatively, at others in great bursts. In his 2001 installation *If There Were Anywhere but the Desert,* his recurring sleeping clown lies not beneath the pulsating skies of a round painting, but under a mirrored wall, criss-crossed by innumerable fragmenting lines, as if about to shatter. The wall may have been raised to the vertical, but is still on the verge of violent collapse. Other installations have grown (literally) more bold and erect: the heavy slanting walls in *Ultramarine,* 2000, and the giant, solid 'X' in *Lessness,* 2003, are inclined but stable, fixed between horizontal and vertical. Finally, occupying gallery installations since 2003 is a pylon-like black 'forest' called *All Those Doors,* a monumental *enfilade* that stands bolt upright, filling the space like the real forest of his photographic work *In the Sweet Years Remaining*, 1998. As Rondinone's work has lifted itself up, it seems to have grown more abstract: the standing position remains unavailable to the human figure, who at best is reflected ghostlike in its polished surface, and is constructed instead from inanimate minimalist forms. In Rondinone's recent installation also titled *Gravity's Rainbow,* 2004, Pynchon's rocket trail shoots straight up – its beam never returning to earth. The streaming colours pulsate ever upwards, as if the unseen vessel above is still sailing overheard – still climbing, still lonely, still screaming.

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4   Szeemann, Harald, *Visionäre Schweiz* (Visionary Switzerland), Kunsthaus Zurich, 1991, p. 7, as quoted in Daniel Kurjakovic, 'New Swiss Art', *Flash Art International,* no. 165, Summer 1992, p. 94.
5   Dailey, Meghan, 'Ugo Rondinone, Matthew Marks Gallery/Swiss Institute', *Artforum,* Summer 2002, p. 175.
6   Pynchon, Thomas, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Picador), 1973, p. 150.