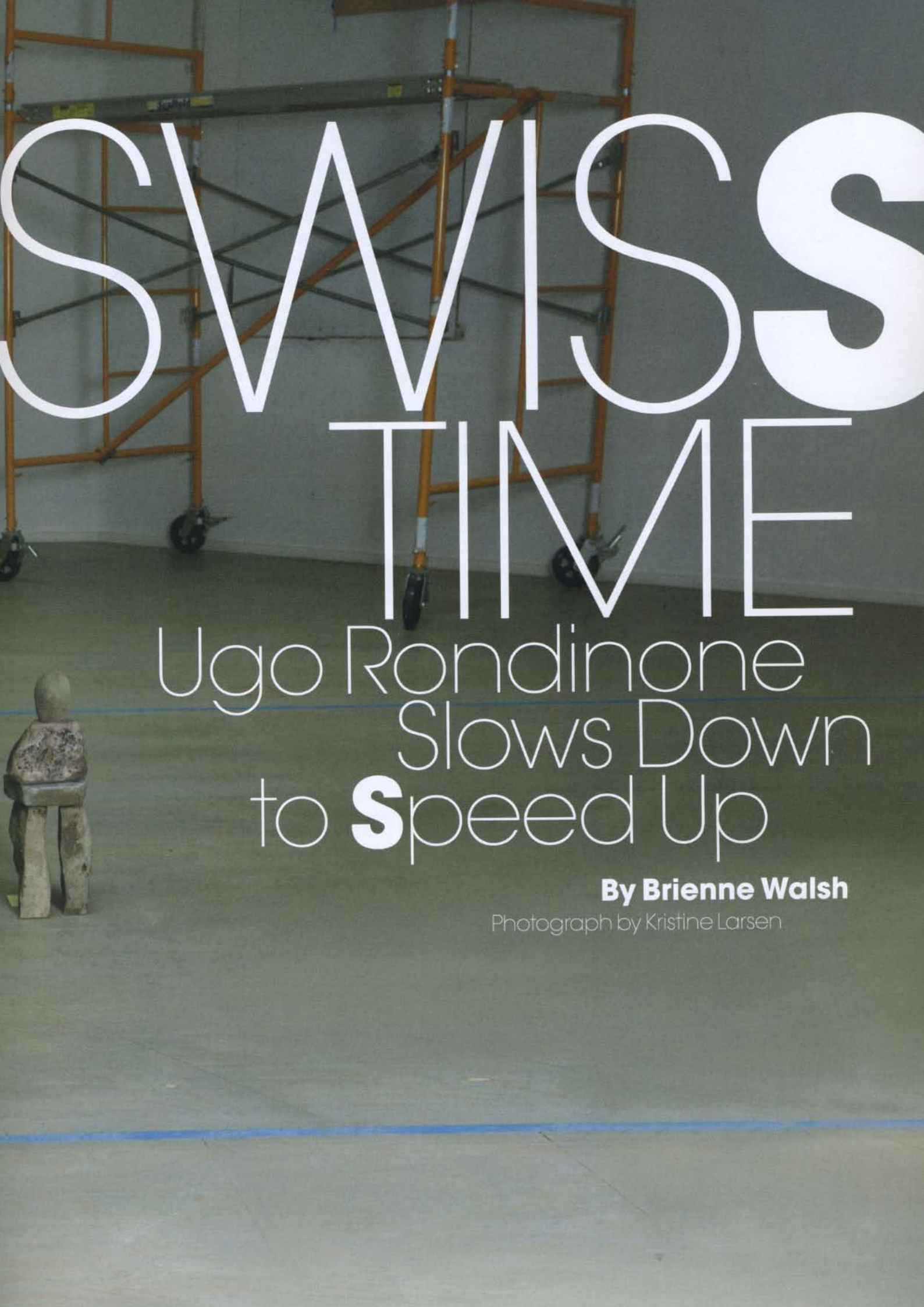
BLOUINARTIBFO.COM : 'Swiss Time, Ugo Rondinone Slows Down to Speed Up', by Brienne Walsh, October, 2013.



SWISS TIME

Ugo Rondinone Slows Down to Speed Up

By Brienne Walsh

Photograph by Kristine Larsen

BELOW:
Installation view of "Human Nature," 2013, at Rockefeller Center, New York.

OPPOSITE:
Hell, Yes!, 2001, which spent a decade on the front of New York City's New Museum. Neon, Perspex, and translucent film, 9 x 24 x ½ ft.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Ugo Rondinone in his Harlem studio, 2013.

Ugo Rondinone is a bit obsessive-compulsive. On the surface, his works appear carefree—naive, even. In fact, they are the result of a meticulous logic that exists solely in the artist's mind. "At the beginning of the year I know that I have a certain number of exhibitions, so I create for myself a dualism in my head," he explains, sitting in a small office off the main entrance to the 15,500-square-foot church in Harlem that he is currently renovating (bought in 2011 for a reputed $2.8 million). "If I do something big, I must do something small. If I do something in black and white, the next thing must be in color."

New Yorkers may already know Rondinone for two prominent installations: "Human Nature," 2013, the group of monumental stone figures unveiled this past spring in Rockefeller Center (they resemble rudimentary robots hewn from the rocks of Stonehenge), and his exuberant, rainbow-colored word installation, *Hell, Yes!*, 2001, which graced the façade of the New Museum until 2010. Parisians know him for "Sunrise East," 2009, a group of 12 colossal bronze heads that were mounted in the Tuileries Garden. In the rarefied realm of the art world, he is known for his mandala paintings, his sleeping clowns, his sound installations, his bite-size sculptures—Rondinone told me that people sometimes mistake his solo gallery shows for group exhibitions. This year his schedule has forced him into overdrive: In October alone, Rondinone has shows running in locations as far-flung as the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas; the M-Museum in Leuven, Belgium; and the Sommer Contemporary Art gallery in Tel Aviv. By the end of 2013, he will have created work for 13 solo exhibitions, 3 art fairs (Frieze London, Art Basel, Art Basel Hong Kong), and the upcoming Biennale of Sydney.

What characterizes Rondinone's work is how uncharacteristic it looks from exhibition to exhibition. For the Nasher, he designed a vibrantly colored dock that will extend into Fish Trap Lake, the former site of a utopian community founded by French, Swiss, and Belgian settlers in the 1850s. At the Sommer, he presents "Primal," an exhibition of 59 tiny horse sculptures (roughly 11 inches long) that are arrayed on the floor like a miniature toy army; they are part of a menagerie that also includes "primitive" (birds) and "primordial" (fish). The M-Museum show, "thank you silence," consists of, among other works, hyperrealistic wax sculptures of reclining nude human figures, clocks made from stained glass, and 300 children's drawings of the sun, commissioned by the artist.

Still, every piece is part of a continuous, lifelong series that Rondinone dates back to 1989, when he was in art school at the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst, in Vienna. After growing up in a working-class family in Switzerland—his parents were originally from Matera, an ancient town in Italy where the residents lived in cave dwellings for more than 9,000 years—he moved to Zurich in 1983 to become the assistant to Hermann Nitsch, who was represented by the gallery where Rondinone's then girlfriend was working. (Rondinone, the partner of artist and poet John Giorno for more than 20 years, got a twinkle in his eye when I asked when he came out of the closet and said that he was never in it.) In 1986 he enrolled at the Hochschule in Vienna, where the coffeehouse culture, a remnant of the World War II era, was still thriving. "When you ordered a coffee, a glass of water would always accompany it. The waiter would come back and bring you two glasses of water just to keep you there," he says. In the Viennese coffeehouses, he learned to take his time—slowness as an ethos would become a major theme in his work.

For his first solo exhibition, at Vienna's Galerie Pinx in 1989, he created a series of large-scale landscapes rendered in black ink that resemble both scholar paintings from the Song Dynasty in China and woodcut etchings that you might find in a German book of fairy tales. "Landscapes are at the root of my work," he says. "The whole of romantic imagery is in these landscapes. They portray a nostalgic view of time past."

When he refers to romantic imagery, he means specifically that used by German Romanticists in the 18th and 19th centuries. Notable for depicting scenes that were both beautiful and generic—sunsets, embracing lovers, dramatic vistas—artists in the movement, such as Caspar David Friedrich, were concerned with the strong emotions evoked by untamed nature and the solitary spirit of the artistic genius. "German Romanticism was the first movement to incorporate feelings and dreams and all the irrationality within the working process," Rondinone explains. They did so to elevate the mind from the crowded confines of the increasingly urbanized (and rationalized) world that emerged during the Industrial Revolution.

Rondinone hopes to do something similar with his imagery. As examples he cites specific symbols, such as the mirrors used in pieces like *Clockwork for Oracles,* a candy-colored installation at the ICA Boston in 2008; the constellations in his ongoing "Star" painting series; and the clowns that have appeared in many of his installations and videos, all of which he says are derived from the European movement. The visual language is simple enough that even a philistine would respond to it—with love, happiness,

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"MY **W**ORK Is Basic and **A**lmost Childlike."

sadness, or perhaps, depending on how you feel about clowns, fear. "My work is always very basic and almost childlike," he says. "It's something people can really rely on."

If the German Romantics were interested in countering rationality with irrationality, then Rondinone is disposed to battle speed with slowness—speed as embodied not only by digital media and the Internet but also by the pace at which international art stars such as Jeff Koons churn out work, using the power of a massive, well-staffed studio. Granted, Rondinone just bought a behemoth space himself, but he does not intend to set up shop with a swarm of assistants. "One of the powers of art is its inherent slowness, because you are by yourself, you do it by yourself," he says. "I don't want to be a Hollywood production company."

Rondinone describes art as both his best friend and his 24-hour preoccupation. When he chooses a subject, his mind tends to filter out anything extraneous. "If I'm thinking about doors, for example, I see only doors," he says. "When I was making the stone figures, I would see all different kinds of stones on the sides of houses. It becomes a sort of tunnel vision."

Slowness entered his work directly with his mandala paintings, which he made in the early 1990s, right after his series of landscapes. "I needed something contemplative to do in the winter, so I started making watercolors of circles and then blowing them up," he says. "I didn't have to think about them—I just had to pass time." The mandala paintings, which look like colorful targets, led to paintings of horizons, then star

constellations, and finally the newest paintings, depictions of brick walls that he has hanging in the main room of the church studio in Harlem. On the surface, they don't appear related, yet they are all named after days on the calendar. Together, they form a sort of diary of Rondinone's existence. "All the paintings are about space and time," he explains. "You have a landscape and you walk in a space. Now with the brick wall, you have an isolated space. The targets open up like a tunnel, like a horizon, and the stars are like in space."

Rondinone says that another progressive logic dictates his public outdoor sculptures. Beginning in 1995 with his neon rainbow word installations—including *Hell, Yes!*—and such works as *Dog Days Are Over*, which inspired Florence Welch's pop song, these works also include ancient olive trees cast in white enamel, comical masks such as those seen in the 12 silvery "Sunrise East" sculptures, Chinese scholar's rocks made out of pebbles and concrete, and, most recently, the anthropomorphic stone sculptures in "Human Nature." The pieces in "Human Nature," Rondinone says, embody the way that humans interact with the natural world. His claim left me a bit unsatisfied, so a few days later, to clarify, he sent me the transcript of a 2009 conversation with Jean-Marc Prévost, now the director of Carré d'art, the contemporary art museum in Nimes. In it, Rondinone says: "In general I like art that is capable of organizing a space of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time and language and image in an immobile place." This is the closest I could come to understanding the connections that bind Rondinone's public sculptures—perhaps, by appropriating eternally recurring forms such as the rainbow and materials like rocks, he's aiming for timelessness, for something more than the merely contemporary.

Even so, he's still hard to pin down. In contrast to his sculptures and paintings, Rondinone's video and sound installations can be jarringly depressing. In *Zero Built a Nest in My Navel*, 2006, which was shown most recently at "Die Nacht aus Blei ('The Night of Lead')," a retrospective at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Switzerland in 2010, a couple argues in circles. "I think this conversation is going nowhere," the male voice says at one point. The work embodies another type of slowness, by which Rondinone means a lack of resolution: Nihilism can go on forever. At the same time, the artist is capable of a wry mischievousness, a comic playfulness. In a series of portraits from the 1990s, for instance—including one in which he, wearing a red dress, lasciviously sips a milkshake—he reveals his inner freak.

"Do you have strong dreams?" I ask him, curious about the subconscious responsible for such work. "I never dream," he says, "because I smoke a joint every night before I go to sleep." Dreams or no, Rondinone certainly has access to a different sort of consciousness; consider the installation he has planned for 2014 that will place seven 20- to 40-foot-high mini-mountains of neon-colored stones in the Nevada desert. With that psychedelic rock installation to construct—not to mention a church in Harlem to renovate—it might appear that slowness is slipping from Rondinone's grasp. "You can make your own island," he says when I ask how he plans to maintain the sedate internal pace he's cherished since those coffeehouse days in Vienna. "You can open your days as much as you wish." MP

OPPOSITE:
Installation view of *Dog Days Are Over*, 1996.

BELOW, FROM LEFT:
FUNFZEHNTER-FEBRUARZWEI-TAUSENDUND-DREIZEHN, 2013. Acrylic paint on wall.

ELFTER-FEBRUARZWEI-TAUSENDUND-DREIZEHN, 2013. Acrylic paint on wall.