

Roman Signer

Revue de presse
Press review

ROME

Roman Signer

ISTITUTO SVIZZERO DI ROMA - VILLA MARAINI

via Ludovisi, 48

March 23 - July 1

This survey of Swiss artist Roman Signer comprises thirty-four works that highlight the artist's concept of "action sculpture," a mode that combines empirical creation with the intrinsic potential of the object's nature. The show begins on the villa's exterior porch. *Planschbecken mit Schwimmflügeln* (Wading Pool with Water Wings), 2018, an inflatable pool full of water and floating plastic water wings—starkly superimposed against the circular geometry of the mosaic floor paving—establishes an immediate relationship with the architecture of the site. This piece opens up a central sequence that involves two other works: *Teppich* (Carpet), 2002, consists of a rifle resting on the ground, aimed at a target positioned beyond a raised-up red carpet. In *Kayak Spitze* (Kayak Tip), 2010, half a canoe is positioned vertically, similar to one outside that functioned as a spuming "volcano" during the opening performance.

In large adjacent rooms, black-and-white photographs with identical gray frames, made between 1973 and 1986, reveal the enchanting and experimental qualities in Signer's work. The artist uses man and nature to describe a world hovering between artifice and physical forces, preferring to capture on film the crystallization of experimental processes. This is evidenced by *Tish*, 1986, in which a table balances on buckets brimming with liquid, as if to illustrate Archimedes's principle—or in *Krater und Kegel* (Crater and Cone), 1973, where, due to the force of gravity, a parallelepiped containing sand creates a cone and its corresponding void. Always products of their time, Signer's works often make use of new technologies. *Deckenbemalung* (Ceiling painting), 2018, a constellation of blue dots painted onto the ceiling, was made using a drone equipped with a shaving brush.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

— Maria Chiara Valacchi

Roman Signer "Flaschenpost" Century Pictures



Roman Signer "Flasche (Bottle)" (2007)]

Ends in 59 days

Century Pictures presents an exhibition featuring 2 distinct works by Roman Signer alongside a continuously running film documenting many of the artist's performances and experiments.

Roman Signer is an artist who, on the surface, is interested in the kinetic influence of physics on the real world. Known for referring to his studio as a Lab, Signer often falls into the category of "engineer artists" such as Jean Tinguely, and Peter Fischli & David Weiss. His practice has no doubt been influenced by a background as an architect's draughtsman, radio engineer, and a stint in a pressure cooker factory before studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland.

Signer's works often document his attempts to capture certain experiments, sometimes spectacular, sometimes mundane, predominately with the backdrop of the natural world. In his documentations, Signer seems intent on quantifying surroundings, allocating resources to fit one's needs, or forcing energy to flow in a predetermined direction, compelled by pyrotechnics or some other mechanical means. More often than not however, Signer, along with the viewer, learns the lesson that in the end, Nature writes the script and we adapt to its changes.

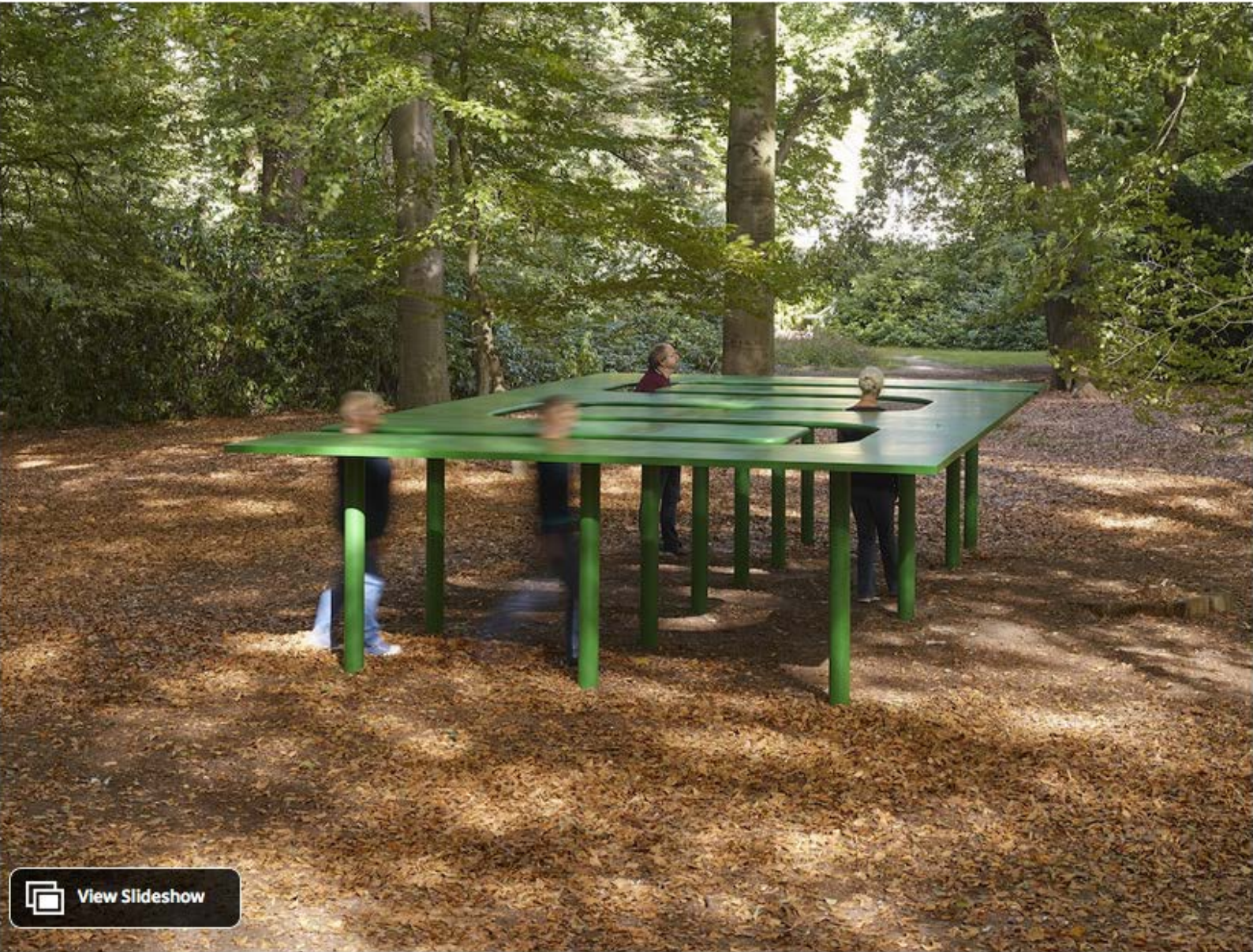
In Peter Liechti's film, Signer's Koffer- Unterwegs mit Roman Signer (Signer's Suitcase: On The Road with Roman Signer), the director has set out to capture Signer in his environment; documenting the artist's experiments within them. A fairly comprehensive mélange of Signer's allegorical investigations, Signer's Suitcase runs the gamut from oddly poignant to hilarious, all the while remaining steadfastly unpredictable.

In other work, unpredictability intersects with the constant of time. In *Läuten auf dem Fluss*, we see an alarm clock floating on a wood raft on a river. Farcically conveying man's attempts to quantify that which is fleeting, the scene conflates all clichés about time and its passing. Yet the image suggests a more profound reading than that of the most obvious comic intent.

In *Flasche* (Bottle), a bottle miraculously floats midair, seemingly suspended by an ordinary household fan. Can the bottle be rescued? And if so, who will take the prize? Will the contents crash onto the floor and be lost? The drama inherent in this simple slight of hand cues Signer's entire body of work. Simplicity, farce, trial and error, all work against a backdrop of frailty throughout Signer's performances and images. The message, underpinned with a dose of slapstick, laughs both with and at the human condition.

Roman Signer (born 1938 Appenzell, Switzerland) is best known for his sculptural installations and experimental performances. He has exhibited in numerous international museums, galleries, and institutions. Some of his major projects include: Häusler Contemporary München, Munich (2016), High Line Channel 22, New York (2013); Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau (2012); Kunsthalle Hamburg (2009); Rochester Art Center, Minneapolis (2008); Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2007); The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2007); Kunstpreis Aachen, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2006); Camden Arts Centre, London (2001); Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (2000); Secession, Vienna (1999); Venice Biennale (Swiss Pavilion) (1999); Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (1998); Skulptur Projekte, Münster (1997); documenta 8, Kassel (1987). Roman Signer is represented by Hauser & Wirth.

Roman Signer's 'Projet pour un jardin' at Middelheim Museum, Antwerp



[View Slideshow](#)

Roman Signer, *Projet pour un jardin*, 2016 / Permanent work Middelheim Museum - Courtesy of the artist / Photo: Simon Vogel.

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Roman Signer

Middelheim Museum is playing host to Roman Signer with two actions and new work specially created for the museum. The exhibition is on display until April 2, 2017.

Through “Projet pour un jardin,” the museum offers a chance to be acquainted with the idiosyncratic works of the Swiss artist Roman Signer, a sculptor who combines poetry, science and action in his work in his own unique manner. “Projet pour un jardin” links Roman Signer’s international career with his love of Sankt Gallen in Switzerland, where he has lived and worked since 1971. ‘Jardin’ is about something homely, something personal, and something familiar. Signer combines natural elements such as water, wind, earth and fire with simple props such as rockets and balloons. The result is often surprising, absurd and poetic.

The exhibition is on view at Middelheim Museum, Middelheimlaan 61, 2020 Antwerp, Belgium.

For details, visit: <https://pers.middelheimmuseum.be/roman-signer-brprojet-pour-un-jardin#>

Click on the slideshow for a sneak peek at the exhibition.



REGARD

Roman Signer fige les accidents du paysage

Le Centre de la photographie de Genève expose ses clichés de voyage, qui n'ont rien de ceux d'un touriste ordinaire

3 minutes de lecture

Arts plastiques
Expositions

Elisabeth Chardon

Publié lundi 17 octobre 2016 à

19:32

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Le nom de Roman Signer est synonyme de performance explosive, le genre de rendez-vous où chacun tente d'être à la meilleure place, l'œil et l'oreille aux aguets, et depuis quelques années, avec de quoi témoigner qu'on y était, puisqu'on a tout bien vu dans le cadre de son smartphone. Voir, capter le moment, c'est le défi de l'artiste à ceux qui le suivent. Lui se débrouille plutôt bien en la matière. En regardant ses clichés de voyage pris en Pologne, ou en Ukraine, en Islande ou en Suisse, exposés au Centre de la photographie à Genève, on se dit que tous ces instantanés qu'il a fabriqués pour nous depuis des décennies, qui nous semblent si inattendus et artificiels, il les avait en fait lui-même entraperçus une fois ou l'autre dans le réel. Les choses sont plus étranges et passionnantes que ne le prétendent les ennuyeux, les blasés, et il faut des Roman Signer pour nous le rappeler.

Il y a par exemple cette bouche d'égout d'où surgissent quatre jets de vapeur, ces grandes couvertures sur un étendage au milieu de la campagne avec sur l'une un tigre géant et sur l'autre un ballet de dauphins, cette cascade de glace tombant d'un toit jusqu'au trottoir, ce vélo dont les roues sont posées comme en miroir au-dessus de deux pavages arrondis de même diamètre. Ou encore, cette paysanne en jaquette rose accrochée à l'arrière d'un tracteur ou cette laveuse de vitres en blouse ciel debout dans l'embrasure d'une fenêtre élevée

Roman Signer, Suisse,
1995. Roman Signer



Le paysage comme laboratoire

Toutes ces situations qui prêtent à sourire, à s'étonner, à philosopher parfois, le jardinier et paysagiste Gilles Clément en collectionne aussi les clichés et ils lui ont d'ailleurs permis de développer un *Traité succinct de l'art involontaire* (Sens & Tonka, 2014). Roman Signer et Gilles Clément en frères d'observation et de création? Ils ont en tout cas en partage le même atelier, le même laboratoire de prédilection, le paysage. Depuis 2009, ils font d'ailleurs partie des artistes intervenus dans l'estuaire nantais de façon plus ou moins pérenne, le paysagiste avec un Jardin du tiers-paysage, l'artiste avec un long pendule de sept mètres qui bat le temps, inexorablement, sur la façade d'une ancienne centrale à béton. L'un s'absente presque de sa création quand l'autre semble s'y imposer, l'un observe et modèle le temps qui passe et l'accident qui le bouscule, quand l'autre les sculpte, les provoque.

Dans l'exposition genevoise, quelques sculptures mettent ainsi en lien le travail d'observation et de création de Roman Signer. Dont cet *Autoportrait par le poids et la hauteur de chute*, posé au milieu de la salle, au risque qu'on s'y prenne les pieds. Justement, il s'agit en fait d'une empreinte des pieds de l'artiste dans la glaise. Mais c'est aussi la trace d'une action. Nous pouvons peser sur le monde, et le regarder, c'est déjà s'impliquer, nous dit l'artiste, c'est vivre vraiment, ne pas passer à côté de tout.

Roman Signer, le temps gelé. Centre de la photographie, rue des Bains 28, Genève. Ma-di 11-18h, jusqu'au 13 novembre.
www.centrephotogeneve.ch

ROMAN SIGNER : «MON TRAVAIL PARLE DU DANGER, DU RISQUE»

Par [Clémentine Mercier](#)
— 15 octobre 2016 à 19:35

A l'occasion d'une son exposition à Genève, l'artiste suisse parle de son regard photographique. Un déclenchement tout aussi nécessaire que ses célèbres explosions.



Roman Signer : «Mon travail parle du danger, du risque»



Rencontré lors de l'inauguration de sa belle exposition au Centre de la photographie de Genève, où il montre ses clichés méconnus réalisés lors de voyages ou au cours de performances, l'artiste suisse revient sur la spécificité de ses photographies. Légendaire pour ses interventions sur la matière qu'il transforme très souvent avec des explosifs, il loue aussi

Quand sortez-vous votre appareil photo ?

«

Je ne suis qu'un amateur. Je le sors quand je vais en voyage ou alors quand je dois faire une explosion. A l'étranger, quand je vois quelque chose d'intéressant, je fais une photo. Je vois tout en sculpture, ma vue est « sculpturale ». Et cela devient une sculpture quand il y a des couleurs, comme ce tas jaune dans un port, ou alors quand il y a une situation. Ici à Vienne, (il montre la photo de la femme qui nettoie les carreaux sur un rebord de fenêtre), j'ai trouvé cela extrêmement dangereux. C'était au cinquième étage.

Quelle est la part d'improvisation ?

«

Pour la photo du vélo, il était là, je n'ai rien bougé. Ce sont des situations trouvées, rien n'est mis en scène. Comme ces lampes tordues en Islande dans un village où il y a eu beaucoup de morts après une avalanche. Ce n'est pas toujours rigolo ce que je fais.

Vos explosions, c'est dangereux ?

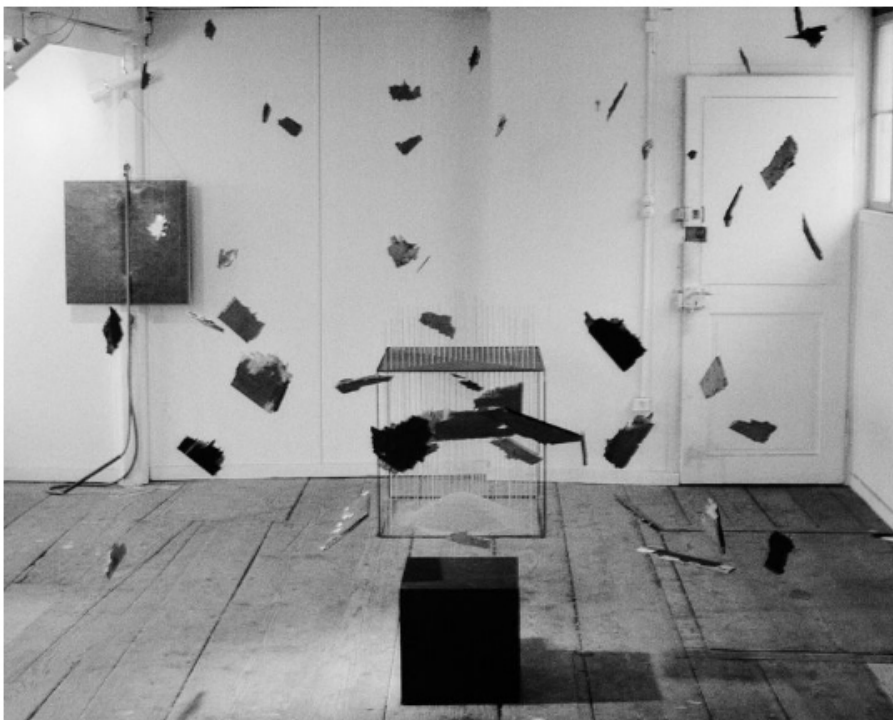
«

Mes explosions sont moins dangereuses que ce que fait cette femme sur la fenêtre car, moi, je me tiens à distance, avec des fils électriques. Le plus dangereux dans les explosifs, c'est la poudre noire. Parce qu'il faut une toute petite flamme. Je ne suis pas un expert mais je comprends bien les explosifs, j'ai fait beaucoup de tests. J'en connais bien les dangers.

Vous venez d'une famille de bricoleurs ?

66

Non, mon père était musicien. Il donnait des cours de violon et de clarinette. Mon grand-père était serrurier. J'ai fait beaucoup d'essais dans ma jeunesse car mon oncle avait une quincaillerie qui vendait des explosifs pour les paysans qui les utilisaient dans la forêt. Quand j'ai commencé à faire des essais, ce n'était pas dans un but artistique, c'était pour le plaisir mais cela m'intéressait aussi beaucoup de voir comment le bois était découpé par une explosion. J'ai commencé en 1975 à travailler avec. On pouvait encore en acheter librement, bien sur, si l'on avait 18 ans et si l'on avait pas fait de prison. Ensuite, mon oncle n'a plus pu m'en vendre. J'ai pris des cours et j'ai obtenu mon permis en 1985. Il y a différentes catégories: j'ai le B qui permet d'utiliser des choses électriques. Le permis C, c'est pour les maîtres. Moi, je ne peux pas démolir une maison avec de la dynamite. Le permis B, cela me suffit, car je peux tout acheter – c'est très important- mais il y a des règles, mais je ne peux pas démolir des maisons, alors je fais des petites choses, je fais des petites choses pyrotechniques. On dit toujours ça de moi pour faire un peu rigolo. Aujourd'hui, on voit d'autres artistes qui font des explosions.



«

Dans l'explosion, il y a quelque chose qui rappelle l'acte photographique.

Quand j'ai commencé à faire des explosions, j'ai commencé à filmer aussi. J'ai regardé ensuite mes films au ralenti pour les étudier. Pour moi, le « bang » n'est pas intéressant, ce sont les mouvements qui sont intéressants. Il se passe beaucoup de choses que l'on ne voit pas à l'œil nu.

«

Pour cette sculpture, vous avez sauté à pieds joints sur de la terre glaise.

Oui, d'une hauteur de 45 centimètres. J'étais plus léger à l'époque (!). Je n'aime pas que l'on dise le « Spreng Kunstler ». Je ne veux pas qu'on me fixe dans ce domaine. Les gens qui disent ça, ils ne comprennent pas grand-chose. L'explosion pour moi est fascinante, non pas pour sa force terrible mais pour tous les éléments que ça déclenche. L'explosif est beaucoup plus compliqué qu'on ne pense. Il y a beaucoup d'usages. Par exemple, dans les voitures, les air bags marchent à l'explosion. Les fusées aussi. Il y a beaucoup de choses qui reposent sur cette technique. Cela se déclenche si vite, en un millième de seconde.

«

Un air bag, c'est comme le big bang ?

Oui, et ça sauve des vies. Dans les air bag, ce sont des pilules qui explosent et qui libèrent un gaz. Et les moteurs, c'est aussi des explosions. Dans une voiture, imaginez, nous sommes assis sur des explosions : pouf, pouf, pouf, pouf. On ne pense pas assez à cela. Ce sont des moteurs à explosion : c'est simple, c'est clair, ça fait brrrr, mais ça marche. Cela ne m'intéresse pas seulement techniquement mais culturellement. Car cela a changé notre vie. Au commencement, on a essayé de faire des moteurs avec de la poudre ou avec de la vapeur, mais cela n'a pas marché. On peut tout faire avec de la dynamite même des diamants, en creusant des tunnels.

Votre travail parle de l'absurdité du monde contemporain ?

«

C'est complètement absurde que le prix Nobel de la Paix soit financé par les explosifs, avec l'argent de la dynamite ! Oui, cela me fait un peu rire, car c'est absurde. Moi, ce qui m'intéresse aussi, c'est la culture que cela entraîne. Alfred Nobel avait une villa à San Remo. Il avait un bateau et il a été sur la mer faire des explosions. Bang. A l'époque, c'était encore possible et les gens ont pensé qu'il était fou, cet Alfred Nobel. Aujourd'hui, ce serait impossible.

Surtout en France...

«

Oui, c'est déjà dangereux de se promener avec un sac à dos car c'est l'image même du terroriste d'avoir un sac sur le dos. Mais il y a d'autres possibilités de faire du terrorisme que les explosifs. Les voitures, le poison...



En Suisse, pourtant, il n'y a pas l'air d'avoir de danger...

«

Aujourd'hui, en Suisse, presque tout est protégé. Tout est réglé. Alors, moi, je fais quand même des choses illégales. J'ai un terrain dans le canton d'Appenzell et là, je peux faire ce que je veux. Près d'un hôtel, le directeur m'a fait des papiers pour m'autoriser à faire des choses, pas trop fortes quand même. Je fais attention aux hôtes de l'hôtel, alors je ne fais pas toujours exploser des choses mais je lance plutôt des fusées. J'ai le droit officiellement de le faire et la police ne peut pas entrer. C'est privé et c'est très bien. Chaque année, un policier vient contrôler ce que j'ai, mon trésor. J'ai un cahier où je note tout ce que j'achète et tout ce que j'utilise. Mais le policier est gentil, il m'appelle toujours avant de venir. Il est venu d'ailleurs en septembre et il m'a fait une signature et un tampon. Il m'a dit « es stimmt alles, wie befürchtet » (tout est parfait, comme je le craignais).

Vous aimez les explosifs mais aussi les matériaux pauvres...

«

J'ai toujours travaillé avec des choses qui existent déjà : les sceaux, les parapluies. J'aime les choses qui ont une histoire. Non je ne pense pas à Magritte, avec le parapluie. Mon travail n'est pas surréaliste. Moi, c'est absurde, pas surréaliste. Ce que je fais n'est pas calculé, je suis mes envies. S'il y a de l'humour dans mon travail, ce n'est pas forcé ni recherché. Cela vient. C'est naturel. On me compare toujours à Buster Keaton. C'est un grand artiste mais lui voulait faire rire les gens et moi je ne veux pas les faire rire. Je n'attend pas cela d'eux. Je cherche à ce qu'ils gardent les yeux ouverts. C'est une autre démarche. On peut bien sûr rire, mais ce n'est pas le but.



«

Vous photographiez ou utilisez dans vos installations une paire de bottes noires ?

J'aime les bottes car c'est une part de ma jeunesse. Mon grand-père avait une serrurerie au bord d'une rivière et il avait de grandes bottes. J'allais souvent dans la rivière elles. Je trouvais cela fantastique, on sentait le froid de l'eau et on était au sec. Il avait un atelier de métal et de construction. Lui était bricoleur mais mon père non. Il n'était pas doué. Chaque année, avant Noël il fallait poser le sapin et faire un trou. C'était une catastrophe. Je viens d'une famille d'artisans. Mais mon père était musicien, son père était fromager. Et avant, c'était des paysans.

Pourquoi les artistes suisses utilisent-ils tant l'humour ?

«

Parce que c'est nécessaire. Parce qu'ici, tout est sérieux. Les artistes ont ce pouvoir. Cela a une fonction de soupape. Moi, je n'appartiens à aucune direction de l'art. Je n'appartiens pas au land art, pas au surréalisme, ni au minimalisme. Je n'appartiens à aucun « isme ».

Au «Roman Signerisme», peut-être ?

«

Oui.

A LIRE AUSSI

Roman Signer, le doigt sur le déclencheur ➤



PARIS

Roman Signer

Galerie Art : Concept / 30 octobre - 23 décembre 2015

La phrase de Roman Signer, « J'ai éternué très fort et ça a déclenché une explosion dans la glaise fraîche », pourrait être considérée, pour sa dimension performative, comme un bon prélude ou même comme une synthèse à cette exposition, puisqu'elle la clôture en quelque sorte.

On y repère en effet des réminiscences sonores, un émiettement de la matière et la recombinaison de formes, autant d'éléments caractéristiques de son œuvre (y compris les vidéos, absentes ici) et de ses expositions. Une de leurs particularités est leur dimension sonore ; celle-ci n'échappe pas à ce principe. Bruits de ventilateurs divers et de claquement de pieds de chaises provoquent une sourde cacophonie sonore. Celle-ci ne se contente pas d'être la résultante de l'animation des objets concernés, dans la mesure où des éléments mobiles sont entraînés par le souffle produit – leur déplacement même contingenté produisant un son secondaire au premier –, mais elle conduit le regard du visiteur, comme s'il se disait : « mais d'où vient tout ce bruit ? ».

Ces sonorités sont autant synonyme de déplacements, ou de légers mouvements, de ces objets ou des éléments qu'ils contiennent, même si ceux-ci sont parfois bridés dans leur élan, comme cette partie centrale d'un kayak enfermée dans une malle, ce sablier gigantesque, cette vitrine bloquant le déploiement de parapluies qui y sont enfermés. Pour chacun d'entre eux peut se poser la question de leur

identification à la notion de sculpture, titre de l'exposition (*Sculptures*). Inanimés ou non, tous ces objets appartiennent à la même « famille » et sont emblématiques de la pratique de l'artiste suisse. De leurs mécanismes visibles et élémentaires se dégage une grande poésie visuelle, un peu comme si Signer se plaçait au croisement minimaliste du double héritage de Jean Tinguely et des adeptes de la poésie sonore, héritage qu'il appliquerait à une sculpture indéfinissable, dont le sens de l'ellipse et de l'économie de moyens lui octroie une dimension conceptuelle.

Adeptes de la mise en boîte plutôt qu'en abîme, l'œuvre de Signer ne cesse d'interroger les conditions de son apparition et de son existence : le point d'équilibre est-il synonyme de point de rupture ? L'humour défie la raison comme le contenu défie le contenant, dans un exercice d'équilibre qui rend ses constructions en bois plus fragiles et surtout plus vulnérables qu'il n'y paraît.

Cet effet de mise en boîte est élargi à l'ensemble de l'espace de la galerie, qu'il s'approprie par une œuvre in fine, *Pomery*, façon pour lui de baptiser les lieux avec le même humour distancié qui se mesure aux traces colorées laissées par un geste circonstancié.

Bernard Marcelis

Roman Signer a en outre bénéficié d'un focus dans le cadre du 30^e anniversaire du centre culturel suisse à Paris (28 octobre - 1^{er} novembre 2015).

Roman Signer says, "I sneezed very loud and that set off an explosion in the unhardened clay." Because of its performative dimension, that sentence could be considered a good prelude or even an encapsulation of this exhibition because, in a way, those words encompass it. In them we glimpse remembered sounds, a shattering of matter and the recombination of forms, all signature elements of his work (including in video, a medium not represented here) and shows. One of his shows' particularities is their audio dimension, and this show is no exception. The noise of various kinds of fans and the clatter of chair legs—both the movement of objects and the gusts of air that carries them along—produce a dull cacophony. This sound actively draws our gaze as if someone were saying, "Where is all this noise coming from?"

These sounds are synonyms of the shifts and slight movements of these objects or the elements they contain, even if sometimes their momentum is hindered. Take, for example, the cockpit of a kayak enclosed in a suitcase, or the gigantic hourglass, or the showcase that blocks the unfolding of the umbrellas entrapped within it. Each piece poses the question of their identification as *Sculptures*, which is the title of this exhibition.

Whether inanimate or not, all of these objects belong to the same

category as emblematic of the practice of this Swiss artist. Their visible and elementary mechanisms secrete a powerful visual poetry, almost as if Signer positioned himself at the minimalist crossroads of the double heritage of Jean Tinguely and the adepts of sound poetry to make his indefinable sculpture whose elliptical quality and economy gives it a conceptual dimension. Preferring to put things in boxes rather than mirrors, Signer constantly interrogates the conditions of his work's existence and appearance: is the balancing point also the breaking point? His humor defies reason just as content defies its container, in an exercise in equilibrium that makes his wooden sculpture more fragile and especially more vulnerable than appearances would lead us to believe. This effect of putting things into boxes is expanded to include the whole of the gallery's space, which he appropriates to make it an artwork in itself, baptizing it with *Pomery* champagne with the same distanced humor measured by colored traces left by a circumstantial gesture.

Translation, L-S Torgoff

Roman Signer's work was also highlighted as part of the Paris Centre Culturel Suisse's celebration of its thirtieth birthday (October 28-November 1, 2015).

« *Sculptures* ». Vue de l'exposition (© Darine Patel). Exhibition view



Roman Signer *Sculptures*

Art: Concept, Paris 30 October – 23 December

Among the ten sculptures in Roman Signer's fifth exhibition at Art: Concept is *Stiefel Rot-Blau* (2015), a pair of rubber boots displayed in a poorly lit, glass-fronted wooden box. In his studio, the seventy-seven-year old Swiss artist had ignited blue and red smoke-bombs inside the right and left shoes respectively, soiling the case internally with soot and dyes. With its burnt blue and red hues – colours that, since the terrorist attacks in Paris, have never felt so patriotic – the dim ensemble on a table in a back corner now conjures, however involuntarily, the horror and desolation that overtook the city at nightfall on 13 November. Yet to be fair, the first time I saw Signer's grimy boots, prior to the deadly attacks, I was absolutely thrilled at the prospect of ironising explosive art. My digression about the sorrow they convey to me in the aftermath is only to demonstrate the evocative and cathartic power of the artist's unconventional aesthetics, which are concerned with completely nonsensical yet meticulously orchestrated engineering experiments that propel trifling forms into high art.

On the opening night, for example, Signer set off *Pommery* (2015), cautiously inserting a half-opened bottle of champagne – whose cork he'd just painted blue – into a curved metallic tube fixed on a metre-high post at the entrance. Pressure popped the cork out of the other end

like a bullet: it hit the opposite wall, leaving a dribbly stain. Signer then proceeded *not* to serve the champagne and left the full bottle on the floor as part of his sculpture, thus keeping all subsequent visitors thirsty upon entering. While creating suspense out of ordinary objects, diverting their purpose absurdly, he certainly enjoys teasing us as much as he likes to play with fire. *Kabine* (2015), the remains of an explosive charge in a cratered piece of clay, which was detonated outside, is no exception: Signer blew it up from a wooden booth by sneezing into a microphone connected to the payload through an amplifier (a wall text informs us), then moved the entire apparatus into the gallery, leaving the microphone on for the curious to cough into, should they so wish.

Any sympathetic sneezing would be drowned out by the cacophony produced by three other sculptures. While *Stuhl* (2014), in which the front legs of a motorised chair rocking up and down on its back legs plunge in and out of a basin filled with water, damply beats time throughout the gallery, the remainder truly makes a terrific racket. *Kamin* (2012) resembles a chimney pierced at eye-level by a hole: visitors are invited to throw in red crumpled sheets of paper, metaphorical flames that are quickly expelled by a hidden fan, sparkling around until they fall and somebody else picks them up to repeat

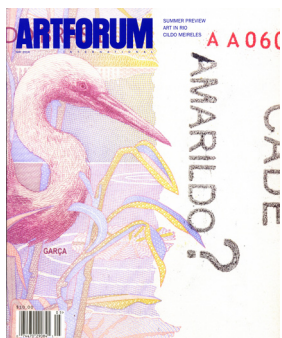
the gesture. *Ventilator mit Brett* (2015) simply consists of a sheet of hardboard, its base aligned with a wall, blown continually back and forth by the gusts of another fan, which faces it. Contrary to the other artworks, these three don't crystallise any past explosion or action, but are meant to be in perpetual motion during opening hours (if, that is, they don't drive the staff insane).

A tension between the finite and the infinite thus informs the exhibition as a whole, further symbolised by *Uhr* (2008), a shallow wooden box that supports a stopped clock next to a cut-out hole of the same shape, which confronts an instant – the frozen hands – against eternity – the void. Between these two poles, some of Signer's actions are purposely constrained. For *Drei Regenschirme gleichzeitig geöffnet* (2014), he had electrically triggered in his studio the simultaneous opening of three umbrellas within a vitrine too narrow to contain their full extension, therefore ending up displaying them neither completely put up nor down. Finally *Kajak* (2014) offers another paradox: here, the artist cut a kayak – his signature form – into three sections, confined the middle one with the cockpit in a trunk, which he left opened for view, and threw out the others. Forever amputated, yet ready to ship.

Violaine Boutet de Monvel



Stiefel Rot-Blau, 2015, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Photo: Dorine Potel. Courtesy the artist and Art: Concept, Paris



From left: Roman Signer, *Unfall als Skulptur* (Accident as Sculpture), 2008. Performance view, Kunstraum Dornbirn, Austria, 2008. Charles Ray, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997, fiberglass, paint, 5' 7" x 6' 6" x 14' 3". Vern Blosum, *Planned Obsolescence*, 1963, oil on canvas, 67 ¼ x 53 ¼".

ST. GALLEN, SWITZERLAND

ROMAN SIGNER

KUNSTMUSEUM ST. GALLEN • June 7–October 26 • Curated by Roland Wäspe and Konrad Bitterli • Roman Signer

is the only artist that I know of who possesses an official license to blow things up. And it isn't just for show. The Swiss artist, who creates much of his work outside, takes his sweeping native landscape as his studio, often staging destructive processes and massive performances involving fire. Though this exhibition will be installed predominantly indoors, it will nevertheless feature Signer's signature alchemical transformations of everyday objects (such as chairs, tables, or a model helicopter) into assemblages of newly exploded elements. Viewer wariness is not entirely unjustified: To be sure, there are various levels of pyrotechnic accreditation in Switzerland, and Signer apparently has the authority to detonate any object he likes save for entire buildings. Which is to say: Will there be rockets in this show? Yes. But the kunstmuseum itself is likely to survive.

—Daniel Birnbaum

frieze

Roman Signer



Roman Signer
Piano
2010
DVD still

Swiss Institute Contemporary Art, New York,
USA

Roman Signer's work – which is about trial and error, humour and simplicity, nature and machines – is subtle even if his actions (i.e. explosions) are anything but. 'Four Rooms, One Artist', the septuagenarian artist's recent exhibition at the Swiss Institute, comprised all new works. The reading room was turned into a life-size Joseph Cornell-like box: a small glass window in the door allowed viewers to peer into the bright white room where there was only an apple hanging from ceiling. Some watched for ten seconds, others for ten minutes. They were all waiting for something to happen. Was the string leading to an explosive device? Would the apple start to twirl around the room? Titled *Waiting for Harold Edgerton* (2010), those who got the reference to the eponymous MIT professor – who was credited with making the strobe light a common device – might have expected the apple to be shot at (Edgerton was famous for using strobe photography to capture the split-second moments of a bullet during its impact with an apple). Like Edgerton's photographs, Signer's work is frozen in time: the title suggests that the ghost of the professor was playfully summoned to shoot the apple. Signer captures the stillness of anticipation – a moment frozen in time before a potential action.

Acoustics played an integral part in the show. In another room, a piano was flanked by two oscillating fans that were pushing a dozen table tennis balls across the piano's strings, the delicate strumming noise and the whirring of the fans amplified through speakers (*Piano*, 2010). It was a calming sound, like the ocean or the wind.

In the central gallery, the largest of the four rooms, rows of wooden chairs were lined up facing a wall-projected film (*Cinema*, 2010). In the back row a chair attached to a string was being tipped backward, the string being pulled mechanically into and out of a large black box on

the floor. There was a clicking noise as the chair was tipped, like the sound of a film projector. The screen showed water rushing through a kayak, the bow and stern of which had been hacked off. The scene then cut to wet leaves. The room felt like the makeshift theatre of a small-town primary school, the constant rhythm of the chair tipping like the ticking of a metronome. It was comforting and autumnal; Signer's cinema a place to burrow from the impending cold winter.

In the adjacent gallery, three separate films were projected, creating a vista of Signer's brilliant 'happenings'. *Shirt* (2010) shows a lush forest located near the artist's home in St. Gallen, Switzerland. On a rope usually used to transport wood, a white shirt is ferried back and forth, waving elegantly as it recedes then returns to the foreground. In *Two Umbrellas, Iceland* (2009), filmed in Iceland, Signer is shown struggling to gaffer tape two wooden-handled umbrellas together, his jacket flapping in the violent wind. Signer lets go of the umbrellas – now one entity – and the wind carries them across the foggy, barren landscape; it's a mesmerizing scene. In the third film, *Office Chair* (2010), also made near the artist's home, Signer places a chair in a rushing stream, the current of the water spinning it around on its base. In all three works the natural and manufactured are married in a poignant and simple picture. The delicate trial and error processes in Signer's works make them unpredictable and playful, simple but not empty. This is Signer's trademark, despite his intention not to have one.

Marina Cashdan

Kajak (Aarau), 1998-9,
 colour photograph, 24 x 36 cm.
 © the artist. Courtesy
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
 Friedrich Christian Flick
 Collection, Hamburger Bahnhof.



ROMAN SIGNER

HAMBURGER BAHNHOF, BERLIN
 30 SEPTEMBER – 27 JANUARY

Roman Signer's sculptures, photographs and films document the effects of incalculable forces and satisfy a very basic curiosity. The question behind these works is the hypothetical 'what would happen if...?', which the artist then translates into a precarious reality. With a seemingly childlike naivety, Signer propels himself on an office chair by the force of fireworks held in his outstretched hands (*Bürostuhl*, 2006), manoeuvres a kayak dragged behind a car until it is worn through by the rough street (*Kajak*, 2000) or shoots at a target while being shaken by an old-fashioned belt massager (*Old Shatterhand*, 2007). The clarity and humour of his experiments resemble the simplicity of cartoons, yet at their best, their directness relays a nearly physical experience of what their recordings depict. Viewing the film of Signer painting a dot by exploding some device behind his back (*Punkt*, 2006), one can almost feel the force with which the brush hits the canvas, a force combining both the blast itself and his startled response to it. And in *Pfanne* (1988), the force of a Bengal light used to heat a pan reverberates violently in the physical remainder of the installation, ultimately burning a large hole through both the pan and the metal tray on which it is standing.

This retrospective is certainly one of the season's highlights in Berlin, and it showcases the breadth of Friedrich Christian Flick's collection – temporarily and partially on loan to the Hamburger Bahnhof – from which much of the show is taken. At the same time, though, it again exposes the weak position of this national institution in negotiating loans – or possibly worse, its naivety. Notices throughout the show state that all pieces on loan directly from the artist – the majority of those not from the Flick Collection – are 'courtesy' of no less than six different galleries. During the Berlin art fair, the exhibition felt like a commercial showroom, and one would hope that the institution at least participated in some of the deals and was not oblivious to its active role in the art market and the problems this might pose.

The exhibition is clearly divided into two very different parts. On the lower floor it presents an overview of Signer's videoworks, noisily documenting his actions on film, with shots and explosions in every corner, while on the upper floor there is a selection of his sculptural work, consisting of various remnants of previous actions and some possible setups for new ones. In the safe museum environs, some of these lose the original action's sense of danger and immediacy. Yet at times this further degree of abstraction creates some extremely poetic results. *Installation* (2006) consists of two rows of ten monitors apiece placed one atop the other; in the lower row, some of Signer's earlier Super-8 films are shown, while in the upper row a woman recounts what can be seen below in Swiss sign language. Upon repeated viewing, the two visual accounts come to correlate, turning Roman Signer's visual one-liners into complex narratives of expectation and experience. Axel Lapp

Le Journal des Arts

L'ACTUALITÉ DE L'ART ET DE SON MARCHÉ À TRAVERS LE MONDE

UN VENDREDI SUR DEUX | Numéro 244 | Du 6 au 19 octobre 2006

FRANCE 5 € | BELGIQUE 5,5 € | SUISSE 11 CHF

PAROLES D'ARTISTE **ROMAN SIGNER**

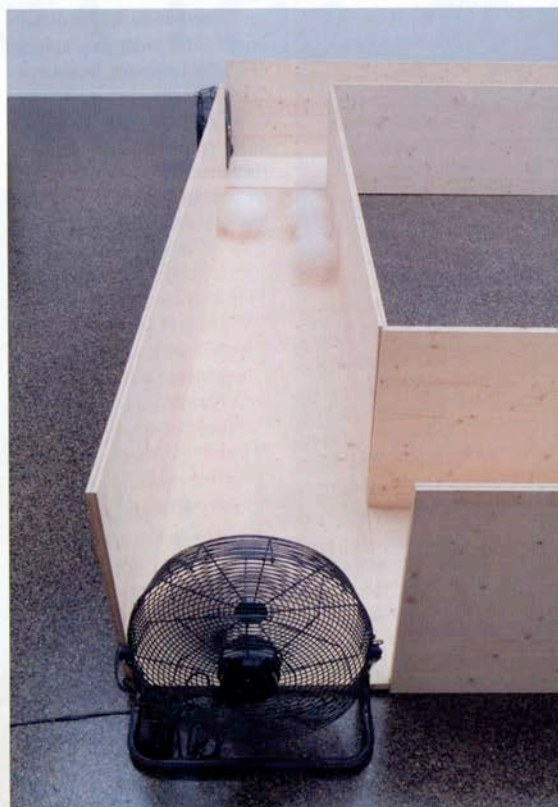
« Je crée des situations sculpturales »

ROMAN SIGNER, ALLER/RETOUR 3, du 10 octobre au 12 novembre, Centre culturel suisse, 32-38, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, 75003 Paris, tél. 01 42 71 44 50, www.ccsparis.com, tlj sauf lundi et mardi 13h-20h, jeudi 13h-22h.

Une piscine en plastique aspirée vers le plafond (*Bassin*, 2006), un carré de bois où deux ballons propulsés par des ventilateurs se livrent à une course sans fin (*Kanal*, 2006), une table où une cigarette attend d'être allumée par un bâton de dynamite (*Table fumeur*, 2005), un pommier soumis à une traction permanente sous l'effet d'une corde et d'un moteur (*Zittern*, 2006)... En quelques œuvres récentes Roman Signer, délivre au Centre culturel suisse, à Paris, une leçon de sculpture concentrant les caractéristiques de son travail.

En visitant l'exposition, et dans votre travail en général, on perçoit comme une opposition entre ce qui se passe et un sentiment d'attente de ce qui pourrait advenir...

Je travaille avec le temps et il y a chez moi trois choses importantes : celles, immédiates, qui passent devant vos yeux, tels les ballons (*Kanal*), celles qui peuvent se produire, comme la *Table fumeur*, et celles passées, que l'on retrouve dans mes films. Le passé est important car dès que vous faites quelque chose, que vous parlez, c'est déjà le passé, non ? J'aime aussi le futur, l'idée que ça peut arriver ou non. On pense toujours que je ne fais que des installations spectaculaires, des explo-



Roman Signer, *Kanal*, 2005, sculpture, bois, ballons, sable et ventilateurs, 4 x 4 m., Centre culturel suisse, Paris. © Photo : Marc Dornage

sions, mais ce n'est pas vrai. J'affectionne aussi beaucoup ces tranquilles sensations d'attente.

Pourquoi ?

C'est optimiste, vous ne croyez pas ? Vous avez le choix. Par exemple, lorsque vous recevez un paquet, est-ce que vous l'ouvrez tout de suite ? Moi non, parfois j'attends une heure. Attendre pour savoir ce qu'il y a dedans crée une joie. Attendre

Noël est une plus grande joie que le jour lui-même... qui est déjà passé. Ouvrir les paquets et regarder, c'est déjà triste pour moi.

Vous utilisez souvent des forces contraires voire antagonistes. Est-ce pour dynamiser l'œuvre ?

Je ne peux pas l'expliquer de manière théorique, mais j'aime les forces, qu'elles soient puissantes ou faibles. J'aime travailler avec

Vous avez besoin que les forces se confrontent ?

Oui, et qu'elles changent aussi. Confrontation, changement, transformation... il y a souvent un passage d'une forme à une autre. Je ne veux pas seulement détruire des choses, c'est le changement d'état qui m'intéresse.

Puisque le temps est très important pour vous, diriez-vous que vous créez des événements sculptés ?

Je crée des situations sculpturales. Que je fasse des objets, des installations ou des films, c'est toujours un problème sculptural dans l'espace.

À propos d'*Installation vidéo* (2006), où vous superposez des films d'actions passées avec une lecture actuelle faite en langage des signes, s'agit-il de réactualiser vos anciennes performances ?

Ces vieux films reçoivent, avec cette femme qui les explique en langage des signes allemand, une nouvelle perspective. Ce langage varie selon les langues. Il est pour nous très drôle de le regarder dans ce contexte. J'ai demandé à cette femme si ça l'était aussi pour les sourds. Elle était fâchée et m'a répondu que pas du tout. Pour eux, c'est tragique, c'est la vie !

Avec *Zittern* ou *Kanal*, des œuvres qui sont comme un déroulé sans fin, faites-vous une recherche sur l'absurde et le dérisoire ?

Je ne trouve pas que ce soit absurde. On parle toujours de l'absurdité chez moi...

Vous n'êtes pas d'accord ?

Non parce que pour moi c'est sérieux. C'est étrange, ce sont des recherches, et elles sont impor-

tantes. C'est peut-être irrationnel pour le spectateur mais pas pour moi.

Sur quoi porte l'essentiel de vos recherches ?

Je n'ai pas de programme strict. J'ai un sentiment, une idée dans mon lit, dans ma baignoire... et je veux essayer de voir si ça fonctionne. Par exemple pour *Bassin*, je trouvais intéressant de savoir si ça pouvait fonctionner. J'ai été très étonné de voir que oui, ce fut une surprise ! Je suis un peu joueur aussi.

Une part de la forme que prend votre œuvre résulte donc du hasard ?

Il y a beaucoup de hasard mais pas seulement. Je ne veux tout de même pas être trop chaotique. Je souhaite garder une certaine forme, mais je laisse toujours au hasard la possibilité de se manifester.

Vous ne cherchez donc pas à tout contrôler ?

Non. J'aime quand les éléments ont aussi un langage et se manifestent. Je ne veux pas tout faire moi-même. Je fais une construction et je laisse une ouverture pour ces forces. C'est comme une trappe pour la nature.

Y a-t-il de votre part une volonté manifeste de faire rire ?

Il est vrai que les gens rient beaucoup, mais ce n'est pas vraiment intentionnel. Je ne me dis jamais : « Je vais créer quelque chose pour que les gens éclatent de rire. » Ça vient naturellement. Finalement pourquoi pas ? Je ne fais pas de cabaret, mais rire fait du bien.

Frédéric Bonnet

Paris

Roman Signer

Art: Concept

10 SEPTEMBER – 29 OCTOBER

Fans of Roman Signer's comic-violent spin on 'event-sculpture' will find little to get their blades turning at this tiny, hyper-ventilated exhibition of the Swiss artist's recent work. Absent are Signer's signature elements – bombs, fire suits, crash helmets, forage blowers, black rubber boots, bicycles, guns, toy remote-control helicopters and kayaks. Absent, too, is the artist himself, who, since the 1970s, has used his Buster Keaton-like persona, and a penchant for light explosives, to blow a small niche for himself in the international art-scene edifice.

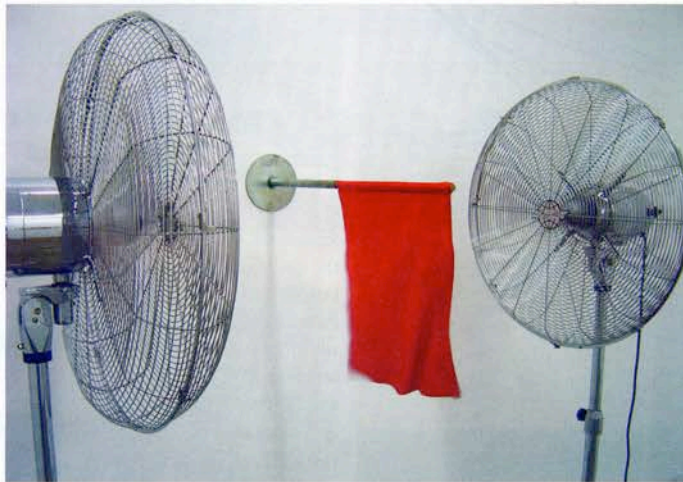
Unlike the vast gunpowder orchestrations of the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, Signer's work has always been modest and intimate. Four pieces in two rooms, however, is, perhaps, too modest. Still, traces of Signer's eccentric wit and obsession with gratuitous causality are in every piece, from the three-photograph series of two red balloons suspended on a flimsy wooden T-bar (in the first photo, the balloons are equipoised at both ends of the horizontal cross-piece; in the second, one balloon has popped; in the third, the arm holding the un-popped balloon has risen, while the arm holding the popped balloon has fallen) to the two stand-up electric fans blowing wind at each other while holding a red flag in perfect stasis.

Air has an elemental force that influences events: it moves Signer's objects about, or, in the case of the two big fans, holds them still. The struggle and tyranny of equilibrium is a dominant theme, especially in *Espace Rond* (2005), in which a Chinese paper lantern performs endless laps around a ring of metre-high sheet metal. The poor object is cruelly thrust ever forward by a dozen powerful electric fans, until, once a day, battered to bits, it is unceremoniously tossed in the bin and replaced by another. Meanwhile, the gallery-goer watches from the sideline, enjoying the stiff breeze.

Existential metaphors, political statements or just a lot of wind? There is a quietly vital poetry in Signer's repertoire of elements, even here, where the vocabulary has been reduced further than usual. And there is certainly beauty. Perhaps the best piece is the large-format photograph of a pair of cross-country skis – similar to those the artist used in *Zakopane* (1994), a video 'action' in which he skied across a field in Poland with flares strapped to his heels trailing

pink smoke. This time, the skis are skier-less, and held securely buoyant on the surface of an alpine lake by two sets of blow-up plastic water wings. The skis, like the photograph, like the show as a whole, are safe; the comic *faux-danger* one associates with art's great pyrotechnician of the absurd is entirely missing. The four artworks Signer has produced from his 'actions' are nice, easy to consume. This is not a criticism, just an observation; it must be maddening for Signer that people have such explosive expectations of his work, and he, of course, has every right to create nice objects and offer them for sale. Yet one can't help wishing that there were an accompanying video of him wearing the skis, in his protective suit and silly helmet, and traipsing across the water like some sort of Swiss holy clown. Perhaps chased by a big red balloon. One looks forward to January's giant retrospective in Santiago de Compostela and the new Phaidon book devoted to his 30-year career for a more substantial and satisfying viewing.

CM



From above
Roman Signer, *2 ventilateurs avec drapeau*, 2005, 2 fans, flag, dimensions variable
COURTESY ART : CONCEPT, PARIS



*This spread, video stills of Roman Signer's **Kayak**, 2000, in which the artist is towed along a country road in a kayak; outside St. Gallen, Switzerland. All Signer works this article, unless otherwise noted, are actions documented on videotape by Aleksandra Signer.*



Roman Signer's Acts of Wonder

Though little known in the U.S., Swiss artist Roman Signer has been making his "temporary sculptures"—actions that he documents with film and video—since the 1970s. These events, which can involve anything from amplified snoring to small rockets, are usually short-lived, often funny and always cathartic.

BY GREGORY VOLK

Outside St. Gallen, Switzerland, in the Rheintal district at the edge of the Alps, a dirt road runs alongside a small canal that leads through rolling pastures and herds of grazing cows. This bucolic locale is a prime site for Swiss artist Roman Signer, one of several in the area that he visits for what he likes to call his "experiments," essentially actions that he considers to be temporary sculptures and which eventually come to his audience through documentation in videos, Super-8 films and photographs. Recently, Signer undertook a new experiment. It was a brief kayak trip, not in the canal, as you'd expect, but directly on the road (*Kayak*, 2000). The kayak was attached to a small van via a towline. In the video, taken from the back of the van, you see Signer wearing a leather jacket and strapping on his motorcycle helmet. He climbs into the kayak, gives the thumbs-up signal, and takes off, to start careening down the road at about 20 miles per hour. The noise is frightful, and you think that the kayak is about to veer off into the trees, tumble headlong into the canal or break into smithereens. Hunched there, hurtling along, Signer reminds you of some lonely astronaut navigating an alien planet.

At one point, Signer passes some wide-eyed cows which, inexplicably, do not scatter, but instead start frantically galloping beside him at the edge of the road, as if they can't get enough of this astonishing rift in their routine. Finally, Signer reaches his destination down the road; he slows, then stops. In the kayak, he is up to his waist in gravel and dirt, for a gaping hole

has been ripped in the bottom. He gets out, dusts himself off, turns the kayak over and inspects it; it's almost ruined, but not quite.

After you stop laughing—and many of Signer's works can be downright hilarious—the complex power of this piece begins to sink in. For one thing, Signer himself, kayak, curving towline, accidental cows, country lane and quiet Swiss countryside add up to a luscious ensemble that rivets your attention. In general, Signer's idiosyncratic events-as-sculptures are strikingly, at times dazzlingly, visual. For another, there is the work's poetic resonance, involving multiple associations and layers of meaning. It juxtaposes speed and stasis, exuberance and danger, accident and precision, and there is more than a hint of mortality in its imagery—someone rushing through a life as the body wears down. It also takes a perfectly normal activity and transforms it radically; a pleasant excursion on a sunny afternoon near the Alps was never quite like this. Moreover, for all this work's verve, there is something unnervingly lonely about it, too: a single person making his eccentric way through a local environment that also serves as a stand-in for the cosmos.

If you wanted to make a list of major contemporary artists who, for whatever reason, are comparatively little known in the U.S., Roman Signer should be right near the top. During the past few years there has been a surge of interest in his work in Europe, but he has exhibited rarely in the U.S., and his work has been written



Using a variety of means, Signer constantly seeks out the exact moment of volatility when one body or form abruptly changes into another, in the process fusing creation and destruction.



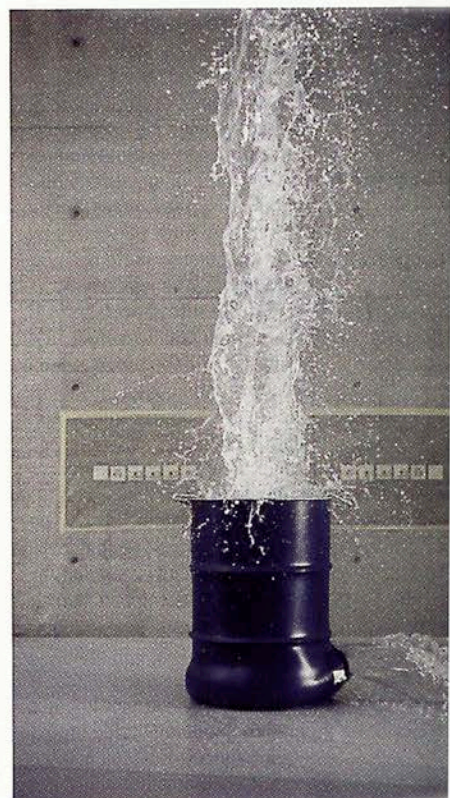
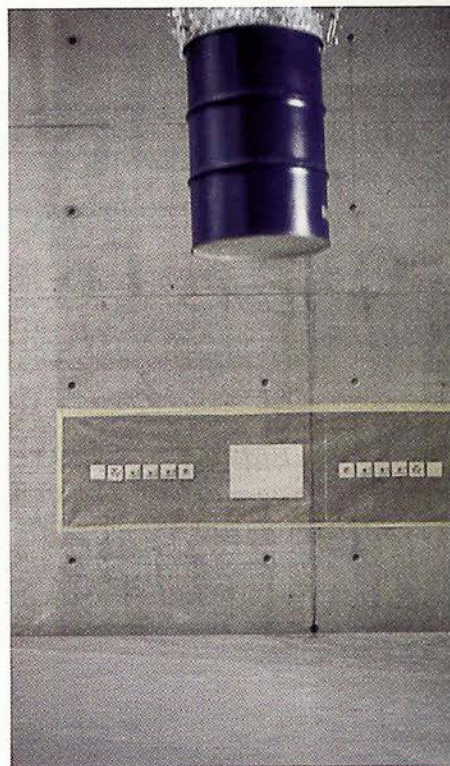
Water Boots, 1986, an electrical current causes water to erupt from a pair of rubber boots; in Weissbad, Canton Appenzell, Switzerland. Photo Marek Rogowicz.

about even less. This neglect is unfortunate, because since the early 1970s, Signer, now 62 years old, has been developing an extraordinary body of work, consisting of brief, transitory pieces and durable sculptures that are evidence of a process as well as an event, along with drawings and endless documentation. Many of his projects mix an air of quasi-scientific research (although of a decidedly homemade variety) with an impish, pranksterish humor. Sometimes this "research," this desire to see what happens if a brief chain of events is set into motion, can be wildly funny, with slapstick

mishaps, moments when things break down or veer off unexpectedly into mini-disasters. For *Sink* (1986), a table, each of its legs in a metal pail, sailed forth on a precarious voyage into a river, only to tilt and sink two minutes later in a kind of tragicomic denouement—certainly among the most short-lived, fragile and awkward outdoor sculptures that you are ever likely to see. At other times, Signer's events-as-sculptures yield images so beguiling that it's easy to forget that they were more or less instantaneous and not painstakingly made over weeks or months. For *Falling Barrel* (1996), a metal barrel filled with water was dropped from the ceiling to the floor. As the barrel plummeted, silvery water flew up in a ragged column, and at the point of impact more water jetted from the barrel's punctured side. The whole ensemble, including a rising and falling spray of droplets and the thudding impact that contorted the barrel, is heartbreakingly beautiful—and it also took about one second to execute, tops. That's Signer at his best: a sculptor whose works embody pure transformation. Using a variety of means, he constantly seeks out the exact volatile moment when one body or form abruptly changes into another, in the process fusing creation and destruction.

A number of historical sources feed Signer's unorthodox art, including post-Minimalist austerity, Fluxus high jinks, various kinds of process or performance art and elements of land art. Signer first made his mark in the early to mid-1970s with outdoor sculptures such as spare geometric forms blasted into snow fields via explosives; a gridlike structure of vessels that collected, and then spilled over with, rainwater; or an explosion in a metal box in a forest sending smoke out of four openings to make a cross shape. Works such as these suggest that Signer is very much an heir to land artists like Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and the early Dennis Oppenheim. However, Signer rarely alters the landscape in any lasting sense and typically eschews anything monumental in favor of brief actions or events in dialogue with their surroundings, finally to disperse into the environment altogether, leaving only the scantiest of traces, or none at all.

No trace, that is, except for documentation in photographs, videos and films. Right from the beginning of his career, Signer has assiduously documented just about all of his actions in a before-during-and-after manner reminiscent of the laboratory. Photographic documentation, of course, was also important for the first generation of land artists, and was in fact the primary way that most viewers encountered their works. With Signer, however, documentation is central to his oeuvre. It reveals his process—little cause-and-effect vignettes—and it also captures and preserves the startling beauty of



Falling Barrel, 1996, a water-filled, 50-gallon metal container drops from ceiling height; in St. Gallen. Photo Stefan Rohner.

his actions. While Signer has had many collaborators through the years, since 1994 his chief documenter, in videos, has been his Polish wife, Aleksandra Signer, herself a compelling artist whose medium is video. For all his eccentricities, Signer remains an image-maker par excellence, which his trove of documentation clearly reveals.

One thing I noted in conversations with Signer, and in traveling with him to some of his favorite outdoor sites where he's been working for years, is how deeply felt his engagement with nature really is. Working outdoors in the landscape has a particular importance for him. It's where he feels most free as an artist, most concentrated and unencumbered, and it's where, in his terms, "poetry" happens, albeit his kind of quirky poetry, which can involve surreptitiously flinging a bundled Christmas tree off a bridge like a spear into the void (the tree spiraled to the ground far below with surprising elegance), or sprinting across a field trying to outrun a small rocket.

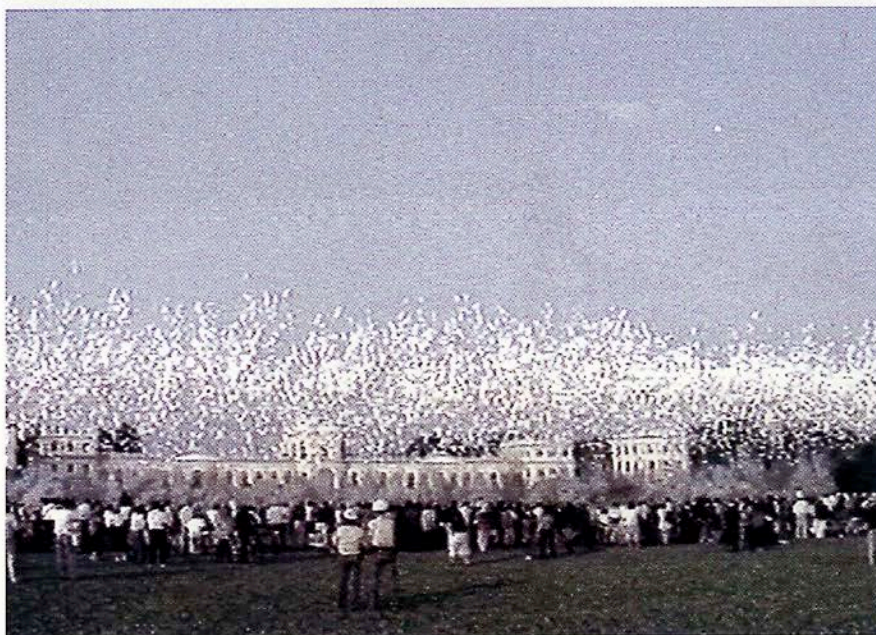
Some of Signer's actions occur in remote and dramatic locales—volcanoes or mountaintops, for example—but they can also involve things near at hand, like an electrical tower in a field on the outskirts of town. For *High-Voltage Electrical Tower* (1996), Signer inflated a large red balloon with helium, then released it inside an electrical tower, where it rose to the top and stuck, as if in a cage. Suddenly this balloon, with delightful suggestions of children's play or of raising a flag atop a ship's mast, became a focal point in the landscape, an aerial burst of pure color.

Occasionally during the 1970s, but increasingly during the 1980s and continuing to this day, Signer has appeared in his work, and when he does it's as both instigator and subject. He's like an inscrutable Everyman going about his odd business in lonely places, his slightly rumpled appearance, deadpan expression and deliberate motions all a signature part of his aesthetic. In other respects, he is famously reticent, adverse to showmanship and actually something of a camera-shy recluse. Once, Signer went up to a remote part of Iceland, pitched his tent, set up powerful loudspeakers outside, hooked up a mike inside it, went to sleep and then snored into the bleak, yet haunting landscape, producing an earthshaking roar (*Snoring, Iceland*, 1994), all of which is recorded in a sustained, head-on video shot. Another time, in Poland, he made a vivid yet fleeting sculpture (or, one could equally say, a painting) by cross-country skiing across a field while flares fixed to his heels trailed pink smoke; the wavering line they left in the air suggested exhaust from a rocket or an airplane (*Zakopane*, 1994). Both works temporarily mark Signer's position in time and

space. Implicit here is a personal dialogue with vastness—with huge empty landscapes, with the sky and geologic formations, ultimately with the universe itself. At the same time, there is also something clownish or foolish about these works, but then again, Signer's antics can easily shade into a profundity tinged with spiritual largeness or openness that seems more Eastern than Western, his St. Gallen kind of Zen.

As much as Signer has been associated with temporary pieces like these in the landscape, he has also been identified with explosions, which frequently occur in his work, leading others to categorize him—somewhat erroneously—as "the explosion artist," even though they're just one part of his repertoire. He is one of the few people in St. Gallen, and probably the only artist, to have a license to keep explosives, which he has to itemize for

Closing Action for Documenta 8, 1987, stacks of paper are dispersed by explosives; in Kassel, Germany. Photo courtesy Documenta Archives.



local officials each year: how many blasting caps he has used, how much bomb fuse, how much dynamite. In order to make a series of self-portraits, Signer (wearing his requisite protective gear) once hunched over an exploding paint bomb in an oil drum (*Portrait Gallery*, 1993). The paint erupted, covered his

To venture fully into Signer's work is to encounter dozens, possibly hundreds, of explosions, which, over the years, have shattered tables, chairs and crates; sunk kayaks; toppled small towers; reverberated through studios and galleries; and sent various objects soaring into the sky. However, Signer is not

enthralled with pyrotechnics for their own sake. Rather, working with explosives allows him to effect the kind of decisive transformation he favors. For *Black Cloth* (1994), a piece of fabric was draped over a mysterious object. Fastened to the edges of the fabric were several tin cans and on the ground were four metal pails filled with water. You watch the video for a while, and nothing happens. Suddenly, everything erupts: the cloth flies upward with an aerial splendor like some dark spirit bird ascending, water flies from the pails, the cans fly off in different directions and the object is revealed to be Signer himself, wearing one of his protective suits and a helmet while calmly sitting in a chair.

This is one of many instances when Signer's experiments obliquely suggest enigmatic myths or ambiguous rituals—some spiritual birth or rebirth, perhaps a reference to folklore or a fairy tale, maybe a scrap of magic from pre-Christian rites which have long since vanished from memory. It's also one of many instances, like Signer's kayak trip on the road, when he put himself in what could have been a very dangerous situation. The possibility of bodily harm, however, is not something Signer seeks out, and his works have nothing to do with physical punishment or endurance. On the contrary, he does everything possible to shield himself from danger, and his work is devoid of bravado altogether. In fact, if it is possible to make discreet explosions, or cause humble moments of destruction, that's precisely what Signer does.



Zakopane, 1994, the artist cross-country skis with flares strapped to his heels; outside Zakopane, Poland.

face in a flash and turned him into a weird alien creature from another galaxy; the documentary photographs were then hung as legitimate portraits.

By contrast, *Action with Fuse* (1989), another event with explosives, lasted a full 35 days. Alongside the train tracks from the Appenzell station to St. Gallen, a distance of approximately 12½ miles, Signer laid out fuse in 328-foot segments. When ignited, the fuse burned for more than a month, all the while yielding intermittent flashes and mini-explosions as one segment lit the next: excitement in the hinterlands, a lonely festival in the middle of nowhere. This work, accomplished shortly after the death of Signer's mother, had an intensely personal dimension. It connected Appenzell, where Signer grew up, with St. Gallen, where he lives now, in a memorial act linking himself and his mother, a kind of slowed-down, by turns wispy and fiery voyage parallel to the train tracks, along which he's presumably traveled hundreds of times. This precisely calibrated venture, once again unfolding in both time and space, also hauntingly evoked the truly vast time that extends beyond one's own brief life.

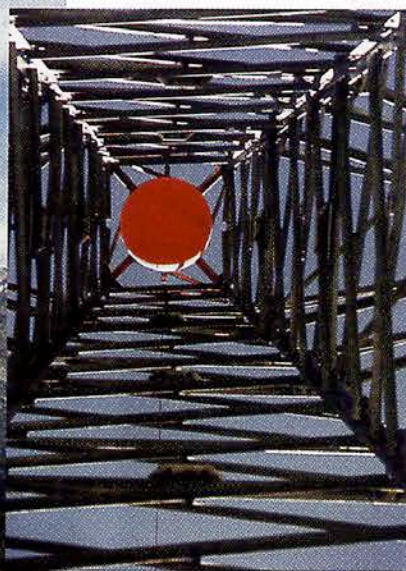
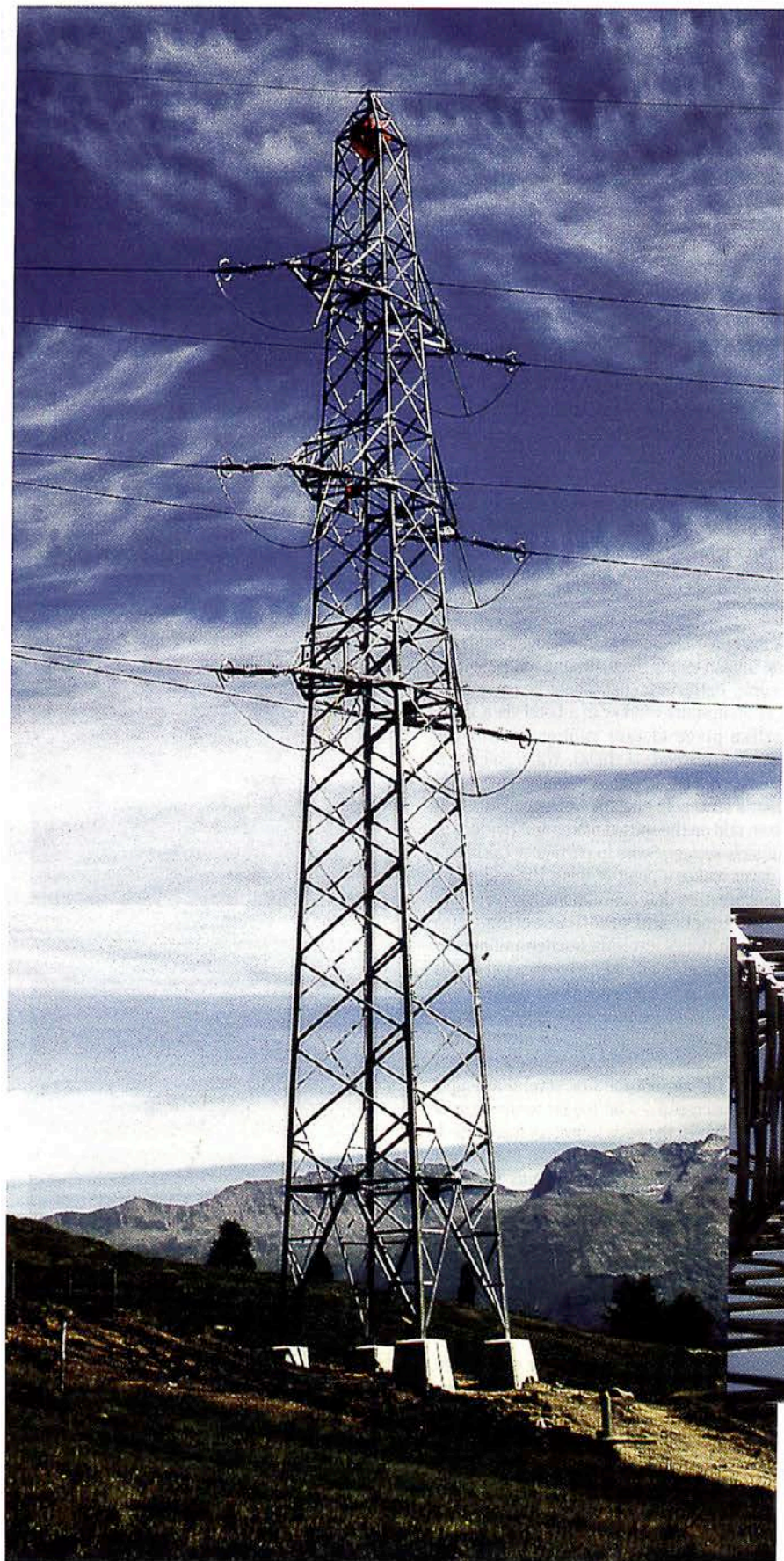


Panorama 2000, 1999, a loudspeaker housed in a red box broadcasts the voices of visitors in a nearby belfry; in Utrecht, Netherlands.

Vivid images emerge from Signer's humble objects, and you can't help but notice how an irrepressible humanity seems to course through them, alluding to various states of being.

Still, danger is often a factor, and it's an integral part of the whole way he conceives sculptures: not as things laboriously made in the studio but as in-process constellations of forces which contain his signature flash points of crisis, catharsis or both.

Over the years, Signer has also developed a significant body of object-based works designed to be shown indoors, some of which, while hardly traditional, are more immediately recognizable as sculpture per se. But even with these works, which can be at once scruffy and elegant, you see how attuned Signer is to his process. A 1999 exhibition at Secession in Vienna featured a waist-high rectangular stack of two-by-fours on the floor bound by two bands, an upright bicycle on one side jutting into the stack and several boards protruding from the other side (*Bicycle and Wooden Boards*, 1997-99). From this sculptural evidence you could deduce that Signer rode a bike



Left and inset, High-Voltage Electrical Tower, 1996, a helium-filled balloon is trapped inside a power-line tower; outside St. Gallen. Photos H.J. Ruch.

To venture fully into Signer's work is to encounter hundreds of explosions, which, over the years, have shattered tables, chairs, crates, and sent various objects soaring into the sky.



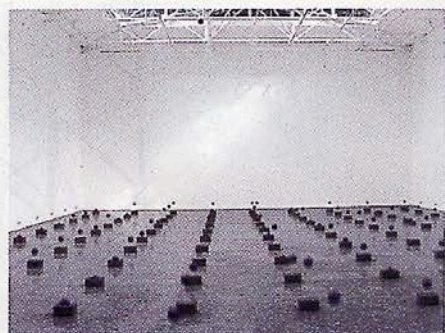
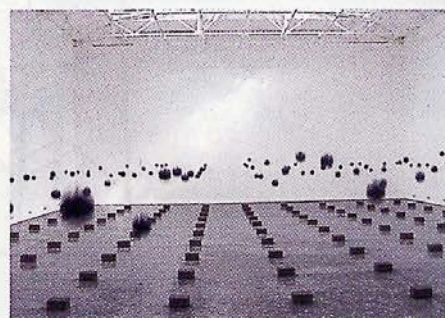
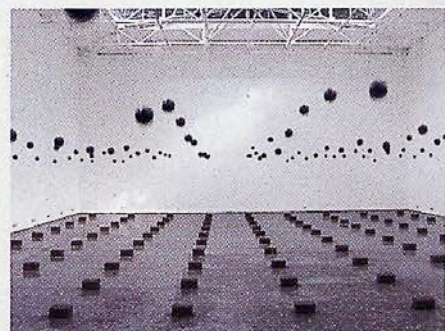
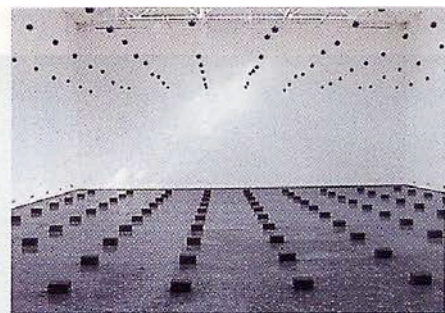
Shift, 1995, a box explodes out from under the artist, leaving behind his suspended hat; at de Appel Foundation, Amsterdam.

into the stack, kept pedaling to push the boards out on the opposite side, and then left everything just as it was. Many of Signer's "instant" sculptures (such as this one) do actually require a great deal of planning, measuring and preparation.

Whether working indoors or outdoors, Signer has a personal lexicon of objects that he recycles into different works, including bicycles, buckets, metal barrels, ladders, balloons, toy helicopters, a three-wheeled truck and various types of secondhand furniture, among others. These common household objects can seem humble to the point of banality, but when subjected to the various pressures Signer has concocted for them, they take on a new kinetic life as intensely sculptural but also poetically vital forces and, indeed, as unpredictable forces of nature. Vivid images emerge from these objects, and you also can't help but note how an irrepressible humanity seems to course through them, alluding to different states of being: fear, shyness, keyed-up energy, agitation, grace.

A flying bicycle, for instance, might suddenly burst into an empty room, trailing roiling smoke (*Bicycle*, 1991), or a chair might be catapulted out of an upstairs window in a hotel via a sling-shotlike piece of taut rubber (*Action in Kurhaus Weissbad AI*, 1992). When you see a piece like the latter, you also realize how much Signer's strangely elegant works constitute a brazen raid on the settled mores and routines of bourgeois society, Swiss in particular (although he never makes a point of this). His sculptures misbehave, they defy convention, they turn utilitarian objects and practical actions into outlandish things involving wonder and humor. Signer, after all, is an artist who once put on his own hat via explosives (*Hat*, 1997). The hat was on the ground, on top of an explosive charge, and Signer was leaning out of an upstairs window. When the small bomb went off, the hat shot into the air, but the first several attempts were unsuccessful—a bit too far to the right or the left. Finally, the hat's trajectory was perfect. It was right there in the air before him. Signer clutched it with two hands, abruptly put it on his head and that was the end of the action. Delivered in Signer's typically deadpan, expressionless way, this coolly ludicrous action (captured on video), with its rhythms of longing, futility and—finally—success, winds up as something surprisingly touching.

Signer is an artist's artist par excellence, and he has long been a kind of cult figure. There have been many lean years, with relatively few chances to exhibit, little money and scant attention from the art-world establishment. Only since 1995 or so has Signer begun to be much more visible, thanks to major



Above, Simultaneous, 1999, the synchronized release of 117 blue-painted iron balls onto 117 slabs of clay; at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

gallery representation through Hauser & Wirth in Zurich and participation in important international exhibitions and museum shows. It was also in 1995 that Peter Liechti's excellent fea-

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Bed, 1996, the sleeping artist is "buzzed" by a remote-control toy helicopter; in Wil, Canton St. Gallen.



Art in America

Signer

continued from page 98

ture film *Signers Koffer* (Signer's Suitcase), comprised almost entirely of scenes of the artist engaging in his actions, appeared to considerable acclaim in Europe, significantly extending Signer's audience.

The past couple of years, in particular, have afforded a lot of opportunities in Europe to see new works by Signer, including his series in the Swiss pavilion at the last Venice Biennale. It's not that Signer is making up for lost time; he has long been a ferociously diligent artist. Rather, the art world is belatedly catching up to this trailblazing figure.

A brief survey of some recent works suggests that Signer is making good use of his newfound visibility. Hauser & Wirth also has an impressive, if unorthodox, museumlike space in a converted train depot in St. Gallen. On the grounds, there is a circular water tower, which housed a recent installation by Signer (*Installation in Water Tower*, 2000). As you entered this darkened space, you saw a video projection on one wall: two blue metal barrels slowly revolving, drifting, sometimes touching and moving apart as they spun about in perpetually circling water. From above, you heard the occasional metal clanking as the barrels struck one another. It took a while to realize this video-and-sound piece was not a recorded work at all, but a live feed from the water tower above, where those barrels were actually floating, drifting and colliding. What's more, the sound wasn't from loudspeakers, but from the actual barrels bumping into one another. The work was marvelously simple and straightforward. It also created a distinctly meditative aura, giving the water tower a chapel-like peacefulness. When I attended, several elderly people were sitting on benches, staring and listening with a kind of rapture.

For an exhibition in the southern German city of Singen, Signer contributed another water-and-sound piece with much the same effect. In a small, circa 1903 neo-Romantic building in the botanical garden that once housed a spring, he installed a simple metal table beneath droplets of water falling from the ceiling (*Spring Room*, 2000). As the drops struck the table, they softly resounded: an elemental music with a suggestion of bells. For most of the century, the building had been sealed off. Signer opened it up, and his "water music," together with the cool air, made it seem as if one were crossing some threshold into a purified corner of the world.

Signer's less-is-more elementalism does not always result in this kind of meditative sublime, however; on the contrary, it can also

be frantic, obsessive, manically repetitive and psychologically conflicted. For the influential "Sculpture Projects in Münster" exhibition in 1997, he contributed a walking cane suspended above a canal on a sloping cable which also functioned as a pumping system (*Walking Cane*, 1997). Electronically wired, Signer's magical cane periodically twitched, jerked, shuddered, whipped about in the air and went into attack mode—spewing water at startled onlookers. The result was a tragicomic rendition of an irascible old person raging in anger, helplessness and pride. The work also effectively mimicked an Action painter like Jackson Pollock, but instead of applying paint to canvas, it applied water to water, so as to make an endlessly materializing and disappearing "painting" on the surface of the canal—one of numerous references to painting that crop up in Signer's oeuvre.

Another work consisted of a toy remote-control helicopter caught in a small room with no possibility of escape (*Floating in a Box*, 1999). The helicopter flew up and down, back and forth and occasionally collided with the walls, each time with more serious damage. In the video, it's both captivating and disconcerting to watch the helicopter slowly smash itself to bits while trying to fly. In the end, when it's lying on its side, twitching like an animal in its last agony, you're ready to weep, except for an insistent rational voice in the brain announcing that this is only a ridiculous toy helicopter.

Whether you're seeing videos of transient events or physical installations, you note how Signer consistently develops situations marked by a balance or a juxtaposition of large opposites: plenitude and emptiness, sound and silence, violence and peacefulness, presence and absence—that St. Gallen Zen thing again. For a recent museum show at Villa Arson in Nice, France, a radial layout of tubes ending in boxes resulted in explosions on the hour: each time the clock struck the hour, over the course of one day, another box exploded (*Time Installation*, 2000). In an era of brand-name excesses and high-cost production, Signer's low-tech, frequently unstable objects are the proverbial breath of fresh air, in this case not a work destined for the auction block but one which calmly and patiently blew itself to bits.

For many viewers, the last Venice Biennale was the first opportunity to see a significant group of works by Signer. Curated by Konrad Bitterli of the Kunstverein St. Gallen, who has long been one of the most astute and sympathetic observers of Signer's art, this exhibition featured a linked selection of Signer's works in different genres, including sculptures, installations and videos of events [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '99].

The centerpiece was a grid on the floor consisting of 117 blue iron balls nestled into small

clay blocks (*Simultaneous*, 1999). A nod to Minimalism, one thought, until the next room disclosed a slow-motion video of the event which yielded this sculpture. The balls were originally attached by strings to a construction on the ceiling, with a blasting cap fixed to each string. When the blasting caps were ignited, the balls fell en masse through the air like a descending, but slightly ragged, plane into the wet clay, which eventually dried and hardened. Here was evidence of an event that only lasted a split second but that encompassed the whole volume of a room, making its space almost palpable. More videos showed other projects, like another of Signer's remote-control toy helicopters perched on a raft in a stream (*Helicopter on a Board*, 1998). When the raft tumbles over a waterfall, you think disaster is imminent, but in the nick of time the helicopter nervously takes flight, only to land again on the raft downstream and continue the shaky voyage. With *Blue Barrel* (1999), Signer rolled a barrel down a ramp into a room full of upright sticks. Before stopping, it cut a swathe through this "field," flattened everything in its path, and effortlessly joined physics and poetics.

Signer's inventiveness seems inexhaustible. Consider another action with a toy helicopter, for which Signer went to sleep in a bed (*Bed*, 1996). In the video you see him motionless, peaceful, a picture of perfect relaxation, but then suddenly a helicopter flies into the room. It comes nearer, then darts away. It moves up, descends and then inquisitively comes within inches of Signer's head, as if it were some way wild creature overcome by curiosity. Signer never twitches, shifts position or lifts his head—fortunately, because one false move here could have left him seriously injured or dead, as this was a powerful device. (When questioned about the danger, Signer merely says that the person operating the helicopter via remote control was the best "pilot" in Switzerland.) A certain tension is apparent in the video, but then so, too, is tenderness, vulnerability, joy, stupidity and acceptance.

Roman Signer's achievement over the last 30 years constitutes one of the great idiosyncratic forays of the era. Pushing the idea of what a sculpture can be to extremes, he has consistently come up with "experiments" that fuse formal intensities, a deadpan craziness and an equally deadpan wisdom. Meanwhile, this artist who has often stuck close to St. Gallen and environs is increasingly being recognized as among the most important artists around. □

"Roman Signer: Drawings and Films" is on view at the Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Switzerland, through June 10. The show then travels to the Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster, where it opens Sept. 28. New works by Signer will be exhibited at Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Zurich, June 11–July 28.

Author: Gregory Volk is an art critic based in New York.

interview par MARC-OLIVIER WAHLER

ROMAN SIGNER

artiste élémentaire

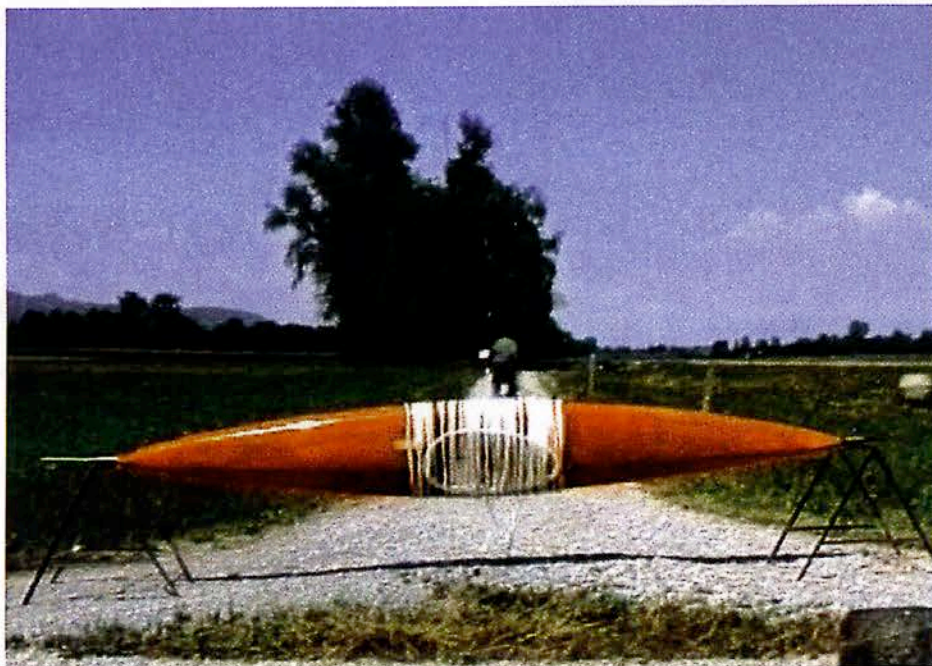
Artist of the Elements

Les travaux de Roman Signer fonctionnent à l'inverse d'une bombe à retardement. La tension ne précède pas la détonation, elle lui succède. La fumée se dissipe, le spectacle est terminé... Un doute s'insinue alors dans l'esprit du spectateur. Derrière la fumée, derrière l'image donnée, semblent se dessiner des zones instables où la notion de temps se dilate à l'infini, où le réel se réduit en termes de «possibilités». Concrètement, derrière l'image, il n'y a rien, strictement rien. Et c'est dans ce rien que tout se joue, dans ce rien que Roman Signer laisse entrevoir des réponses qui ne sont qu'au bout de la langue.

■ Depuis bientôt 30 ans, votre travail évolue en fonction d'éléments récurrents, comme le kayak, le bidon, l'explosif, la fumée...

J'ai commencé en 1970 ; je me suis toujours intéressé aux forces de la nature, aux forces tranquilles comme la gravitation, avec des éléments très simples. Mais de temps en temps, de nouveaux éléments in-

terviennent. Au début, je construisais les éléments moi-même, en bois, en métal. Puis, au fur et à mesure, j'ai utilisé des objets existants, des ballons, des seaux, des aspirateurs, des moteurs, des bidons... Cela n'avait aucun sens de les construire. Donc je les ai achetés, bien qu'au début cette démarche ne m'était pas familière.



«Eskimorolle». 1995. Kayak, vélo, corde. (Court. galerie Art : Concept, Paris). Kayak, bike, rope

The works of Roman Signer are the contrary of a time bomb: the tension they generate does not lead up to an explosion, it is what follows it. The smoke clears, the show is over, and yet the spectator doubts: behind the smoke, behind the image, they seem to perceive an unstable world where the notion of time dilates ad infinitum, where the real becomes just a set of "possibilities." There is nothing concrete behind the image, strictly nothing. But this nothing is where it all happens, where Roman Signer gives a glimpse of answers that tremble on the tip of the tongue.

■ You've made increasing use of recurrent elements such as kayaks, cans, explosives, smoke, etc., in your work for almost 30 years now.

Since I began working, in 1970, I think, I've always been interested in the basic physical forces, forces such as gravitation that exert a steady attraction. I've always worked with very simple materials, but new elements come in from time to time. At first, I made the elements for my pieces myself, out of wood or metal. Then little by little I started using existing objects—balloons, buckets, vacuum cleaners, motors, cans and so on. There was really no point in making them, so I bought them, even though in the beginning I wasn't used to working that way.

How does a new element get integrated into your vocabulary? For example, how did you happen to choose helicopters?

It's hard to say. There's been a slow development in my work. With the helicopters, it began with some drawings in the 1970s, then an action at the Ittingen Kunstmuseum in 1985 using a real helicopter. In the '90s I started using scale models. Maybe it could be said that what these elements have in common is that they move, more and more so. For me, there's a certain logic in working with things like airplanes, balloons, etc. I just happen to really like them, that's all.

Structuring Time

Because they have to do with the air and gravity?

Yes, I like things that float in the air, but I can also use them as tools, like a hammer, for instance. The helicopters have a complicated but logical mechanism, which is often left exposed, like a robot. With a helicopter I can paint, for example, either using a paintbrush, as I did at the Centre de Gravure in Geneva, or with a spray can fastened underneath. The pilot flies the aircraft and I can direct the spray. Last year at the Philadelphia College of Art, I placed some newspapers on the ground. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to be exact. A helicopter equipped with a small surveillance camera flew over the newspaper pages and radio-transmitted images to a monitor and a VCR. Afterwards, the helicopter landed, we checked out the cassette recording, and you could read the newspaper. The piece is called *Survoler les journaux*, which means, both literally and figuratively, an overview of the newspapers. I think you can do a lot of things with a helicopter. You can make explosions, paintings, photos and so on.

De quelle manière un nouvel élément s'intègre-t-il dans votre vocabulaire ? Comment, par exemple, le choix de l'hélicoptère a-t-il été décidé ?

Pour l'hélicoptère, cela a commencé avec des dessins dans les années 70, puis une action au Kunstmuseum d'Itingen en 1985 avec un vrai hélicoptère. Dès les années 90, j'ai travaillé à partir de maquettes. Peut-être peut-on dire que les éléments choisis se caractérisaient par une mobilité toujours plus grande. Travailler avec les avions, les ballons, etc., relève d'une certaine logique. Ce sont des objets que j'aime, tout simplement.

Parce qu'il s'agit d'éléments liés à l'air ?

Oui, j'aime les choses qui flottent dans l'air, mais je peux aussi les utiliser en tant qu'outils, comme un marteau par exemple. L'hélicoptère comporte un mécanisme complexe mais logique, souvent sans châssis, un peu comme un robot. Avec un hélicoptère, je peux peindre avec un pinceau, comme au Centre de gravure, à Genève ; ou avec un *spray* fixé sous l'hélicoptère : pendant que le pilote dirige l'engin, je peux commander le *spray*. L'année dernière, au College of Art de Philadelphie, j'ai posé des journaux – le *Philadelphia Inquire* – à même le sol. Equipé d'une petite caméra d'espionnage, l'hélicoptère a alors survolé les journaux et transmettait des images relayées par un moniteur et enregistrées sur bandes vidéo. Ensuite, lorsque l'hélicoptère a atterri, on pouvait voir l'enregistrement et regarder les journaux. La pièce s'intitulait *Survoler les journaux*, au sens propre comme au figuré. Avec un hélicoptère, on peut faire beaucoup de choses : des explosions, de la peinture, des photos.

Structurer le temps

C'est comme une plate-forme qui permet d'explorer divers lieux ?

Oui, chaque objet fonctionne comme un instrument qui active l'imagination. Je ne sais pas où cela conduit ; peut-être que j'arrêterai un jour et passerai à d'autres choses. J'ai à disposition certains éléments : des bidons, des ballons, des fusées et je peux les combiner les uns avec les autres. La fusée peut s'associer avec du sable ou de l'eau, le parapluie avec le ballon, etc. C'est comme un langage, avec une multitude de combinaisons. Et je tiens à jouer avec le même vocabulaire, en essayant d'être rigoureux. Je veux limiter le choix des possibilités, parce que la situation se complique de plus en plus lorsque de nouveaux éléments interviennent.

La notion de contrainte traverse l'histoire de l'art. Et l'on se rend compte que la contrainte a toujours été source de création. Oui. Je réduis volontairement mon vocabu-

laire, mais je ne suis pas un artiste minimaliste. Je suis plutôt un artiste «élémentaire». Je travaille avec les éléments et les formes qui me paraissent les plus simples.

Les gens ne connaissent souvent que votre travail lié aux explosifs.

C'est vrai que j'ai toujours aimé travailler avec les explosifs. Dès 1975, j'ai eu recours aux fusées, à la dynamite, à la fumée. Cela s'intégrait de manière logique à mon travail. Mais, progressivement, je me suis rendu compte que les gens ne voyaient chez moi que cet aspect-là. J'étais devenu l'*Explosif Artiste*. Cela ne reflète pas la vérité. L'explosif est un outil que je

Like a platform from which all kinds of places can be explored?

Right. Each object functions like an instrument that activates the imagination. I don't know where all this is going. Maybe some day I'll stop and go on to something else. I have some elements at my disposal—cans, balloons, rockets—and I can combine them with each other. The rocket can be associated with sand or water; the umbrella with a balloon, etc. It's like a language in which the words can be put together in a multitude of combinations. I like to work consistently with the same vocabulary because it imposes the rigor I seek. I want to limit the number of possible choices because the situation becomes increasingly complicated when new elements come into it.



«Bottes». 1986. 34 x 24 cm. (Court. galerie Art : Concept, Paris ; Ph. M. Rogowiec). "Boots"

travaille au même titre que les autres, et j'y vois beaucoup de variations possibles. Mais les gens ne comprennent pas beaucoup le domaine des explosifs. On imagine toujours que je veux faire un grand bruit. Or je travaille la plupart du temps avec de très petites choses. Je m'intéresse bien plus aux éléments qui amorcent les explosions, comme les mèches, les détonateurs. Je ne tiens pas à produire une énorme explosion. Avec de petites choses, je peux structurer le temps : agir lentement, rapidement, simultanément. Ouvrir, fermer, monter, descendre. A l'intérieur ou à l'extérieur. Je peux jouer comme avec un piano. Ce sont ces aspects-là qui me passionnent. Pas de multiplier les explosions. Cela m'attriste quelquefois que l'on me prenne pour un mini-terroriste, ou quelque chose comme ça. Car j'ai une relation très sobre avec les éléments explosifs. Un sculpteur travaille avec un ciseau, un peintre avec un pinceau, et moi je travaille avec ces moyens-là.

Regarder l'ensemble

Quels rapports entretenez-vous avec le public. Il assiste quelquefois à une action, mais la plupart du temps il est convié après l'intervention. La dimension temporelle est-elle différente d'un cas à l'autre ? Y a-t-il un avant, un pendant et un après ? Ou s'agit-il d'un tout indissociable ?

Chaque étape est importante. Par exemple, le moment où un objet est dans l'air et qu'il tombe est très important. C'est comme un rêve. Comme tout le monde, j'aime bien les feux d'artifice, je trouve ça joli. Mais je m'intéresse beaucoup plus à ce qui précède les feux : à la construction, la préparation. Il s'agit là de sculptures anonymes. Et le moment qui suit l'événement est également important. Lorsque j'étais enfant, j'allais toujours à la recherche des restes de fusées plantées dans la terre. Cela me semblait plus intéressant que l'événement en lui-même. Cela me rendait heureux.

Je ne fais pas de feux d'artifice : je m'intéresse à la vitesse, au temps. Ça m'agace qu'une fusée ne puisse faire autre chose que d'explorer. Paf ! et on l'oublie. Or c'est un matériau remarquable, autant avant, pendant qu'après son utilisation. Le caractère des objets me passionne.

En raison de l'histoire qu'ils portent ? Une voiture qui a fait le tour du monde acquiert par exemple une plus-value.

C'est le cas du triporteur «Piaggio». Je l'ai conduit de Saint-Gall à Thiers et intégré dans l'exposition au centre d'art contemporain le Creux de l'Enfer. Il faut regarder l'ensemble, comme chez un homme.

Lorsque l'on se trouve face à une peinture, on contemple un résultat. Face à des ac-

tions comme les vôtres, la notion d'une dimension temporelle s'impose.

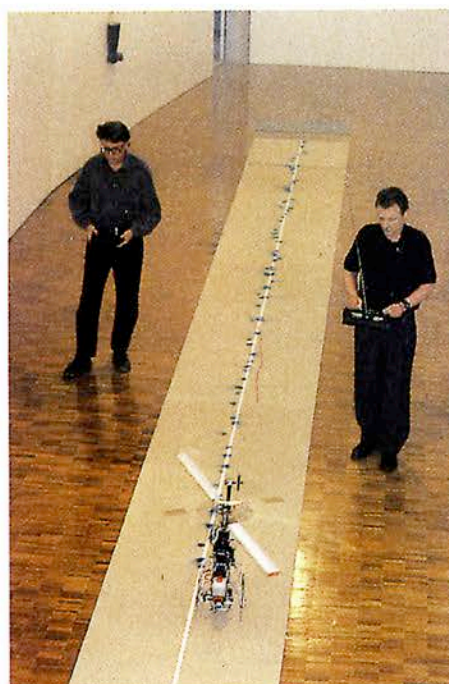
C'est vrai, beaucoup de gens ne regardent que ce qu'ils ont devant les yeux. Derrière l'image, il y a tout un monde. Pas seulement des faits, mais des relations.

Un système de correspondances ?

Oui, quelqu'un m'a dit que mon travail avec l'hélicoptère était très américain. Car le ciel américain est constamment constellé d'hélicoptères, qui surveillent le territoire ou qui effectuent des transports d'urgence.

Une grande partie de l'imagerie contemporaine est dominée par la vue aérienne. La plupart des films, par exemple, débute avec des vues d'hélicoptères.

Il s'agit peut-être d'un changement dans la



«Installation avec hélicoptère», 1998. Installation au centre d'art Jules Verne, Brétigny-sur-Orge. (Ph. M. Damage / Tutti). "Installation with Helicopter"

pensée de l'homme. Auparavant, nos références étaient la terre et notre corps, deux éléments liés à la pesanteur. Le siècle à venir se situera plus en l'air que sur terre. Nos yeux s'habituent déjà au flottement. Tout se met à flotter et les images suivent cette évolution.

Lorsque l'on survole un journal, on parle de lecture transversale ; le regard glisse et expérimente une transformation permanente, continue. Il n'y a plus vraiment de frontières. C'est comme le défilement d'un paysage. On distingue surtout les titres – brrrlrlrlrlrlrl (il imite le bruit de l'hélicoptère) – on voit l'ombre de l'hélicoptère – brrrlrlrlrlrlrlrl – l'image se définit lentement...

The concept of constraint is a thread that runs throughout the history of art. Actually, constraint has always been an impetus to creativity.

That's right. I deliberately limit my vocabulary, but I'm not a minimalist artist. I consider myself more of an "elementary" artist. I work with the elements and forms that seem the most simple to me.

Most people know only one facet of your work, the explosives stuff.

It's true that I've always enjoyed working with explosives. I've used rockets, dynamite and smoke bombs since 1975. I've integrated these things into my work according to a certain logic, but little by little I've realized that that aspect is all that people know about me. I've become Mr. Explosives Artist. That annoys me because it doesn't really reflect reality.

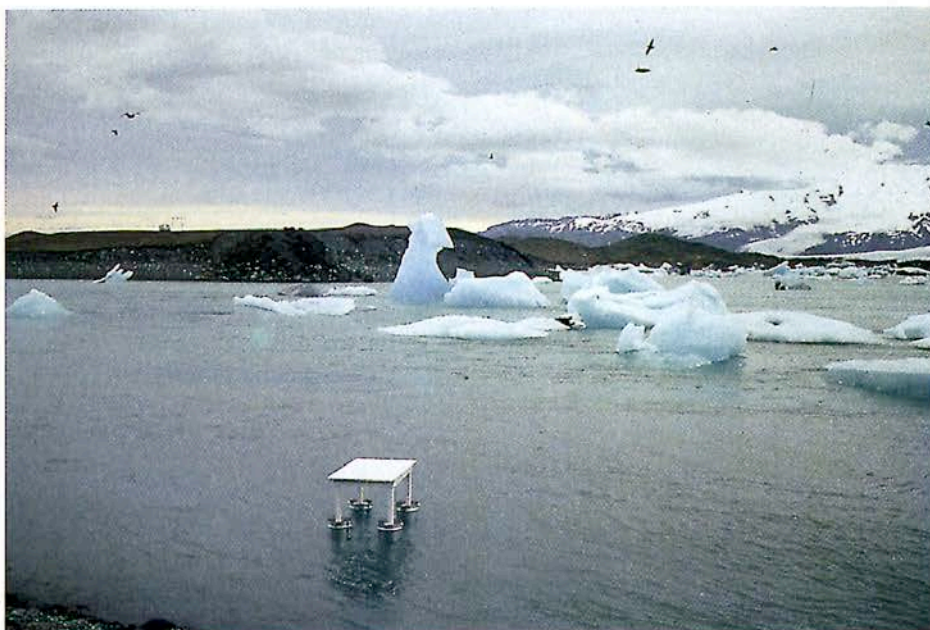
Is that an overly romantic image of your work?

Yes. Explosives are a tool I use just like any other, and I can imagine a lot of possible variations. But people don't know much about explosives. They think I just want to make a big noise. But most of the time I work with very small items. For example, I'm a lot more interested in the things that set off explosions, such as fuses and detonators. I'm not particularly interested in producing an enormous explosion. With small things, I can structure time. I can work slowly, quickly or simultaneously. Open, close, go up, go down. Inside and outside. I can play them like a piano. This is the aspect that fascinates me, not making lots of explosions. At times it bothers me that people take me for some sort of mini-terrorist. I have a very serious relationship with explosives. A sculptor works with a chisel, a painter with a brush, and I work with my material.

What's your relationship with the public? Sometimes they are called in for an action, but usually they're invited only after it's over. Is the temporal dimension different in these two kinds of situations? Is there a before, a during and an after? Or is it more a matter of a single, indivisible whole? For me, each of the stages is important. For example, the time during which an object is in the air and then falling is very important. It's like a dream. Like everyone else, I love fireworks; I think they're pretty. But I'm much more interested in the period before they are set off, the process of assembly and preparation. Fireworks are really anonymous sculptures. And the moment after they've gone off is just as important. As a kid, after a fireworks display I would always go and take a look at the launching tubes and so on that were left in the ground. I found all that much more interesting than the display itself. Seeing that stuff made me really happy. I don't do fireworks. I'm interested in speed and time. It annoys me that the only thing a rocket can do is go off. One bang and it's over. But as a resource, it's remarkable—before, during and after its use. The character of objects fascinates me.

Because of the history they embody? For example, a car that's been driven around the world acquires a certain cachet.

That's the case, for example, with the Piaggio



«Tisch» (Table). 1994. Action en Islande. Photographie couleur. (Court. galerie Art : Concept, Paris). Action in Iceland

Y a-t-il une dimension critique dans votre travail ? Ou une version plus efficace, qui est l'ironie ?

Je ne cherche pas l'ironie. Lorsque je parle, je peux être ironique. Mais pas tellement dans mon travail. Je crois que mes meilleures pièces ne contiennent pas d'ironie. Elles sont complètement sèches.

Des objets, pas des reliques

L'absurdité ?

Oui, c'est quelque chose qui est toujours présent.

La pataphysique ?

Je ne comprends pas grand chose à la pataphysique. Je ne suis pas un intellectuel, je sens simplement certaines choses qui sont dans l'air.

Pourquoi préférez-vous travailler sans public ?

Quand le public est présent, on a toujours tendance à considérer les objets ayant servi à l'action comme des reliques.

Vous aimeriez qu'ils soient vus comme des installations, des sculptures ?

Pour moi, il s'agit clairement de sculptures. Il existe peut-être trois ou quatre objets dans mon travail que l'on peut considérer comme des reliques. Comme cette mèche de vingt kilomètres qui a brûlé d'Appenzell à Saint-Gall. J'ai gardé les restes et cela constitue une relique. Mais lorsque j'installe un pistolet sur un hélicoptère, que je tire sur des sacs de sable suspendus et que le sable s'écoule en formant des cônes, il s'agit pour moi de sculptures.

La notion d'accident est-elle importante au cours de la transformation de la forme ?

Non, j'ai au départ une idée assez claire de ce que je veux faire. Si, par exemple, je suspends douze sacs, on va penser à Jésus, aux apôtres et à la Sainte Cène. On cherche toujours des symboles. Pourquoi ne peut-on pas regarder les choses telles qu'elles sont ? On voit quatre sacs, quatre cônes, une sculpture. C'est tout. ■

Marc-Olivier Wahler est critique d'art et directeur artistique du CAN (centre d'art Neuchâtel). Vit à Neuchâtel.

ROMAN SIGNER

Né en / born in 1938 à / in Appenzell (Suisse)
Vit à / Lives in Saint-Gall

Expositions personnelles récentes :

Recent personal shows:

1992-93 Le Creux de l'Enfer, Thiers

1995 Galerie Stampa, Bâle ; Künstlerhaus, Brème ;

Galerie Art : Concept, Nice ; Atelier Gallery, St-Gall

1996 Galerie Stampa, Bâle ; Slunkariki, Isafjörður, Islande

1997 Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphie

1998 Centre d'art de l'espace Jules Verne, Brétigny-sur-Orge (2 mai - 27 juin) ; Galerie Art : Concept, Paris (10 septembre - 17 octobre)

tricycle. I drove it from Saint-Gall to Thiers and integrated it into my exhibition at Le Creux de l'Enfer. You have to look at the show as a whole, just like you do with people.

When we look at a painting, we're looking at a result. But in the kind of actions you do, the dimension of time becomes an important part of it.

That's true. A lot of people can't see anything but what's right in front of their eyes. Behind the image there's a whole world. Not just facts, but relationships as well.

A system of correspondences?

Yes. Someone once told me, for example, that my work with helicopters is very American, because in the U.S. the sky is constantly full of helicopters, carrying out aerial reconnaissance and emergency transport missions and so on.

Much contemporary imagery has to do with aerial views. Most films, for instance, start out with an aerial shot.

It may be that mankind's thinking is undergoing a shift. Previously, our references were the earth and our bodies, two elements that are very heavy and inextricably intertwined with the concept of weight. In the coming century, what's in the air will be more important than what's on the ground. Our eyes are already used to floating. Everything is sort of floating all around us and this is reflected in our images of this evolution.

When we look at a newspaper from a bird's-eye view, our reading floats from article to article, jumps around, and undergoes a constant and ceaseless transformation. There are no boundaries. It's like a landscape going by. What catches your eye is above all the headlines—takatatatakata [imitates the sound of a helicopter]—we see the chopper's shadow—takatatatakata—he image slowly swims into focus...

Is there a critical dimension in your work? Or irony, a more effective form of the same thing?
I'm not particularly trying to be ironic. I might be ironic when I speak. But not much when I work. I think there's no irony at all in my best pieces. They're completely dry.

What about absurdity? And pataphysics?

Right. That's something that's always present. I don't understand pataphysics very well. I'm not an intellectual. I just feel certain things that are in the air.

Why do you prefer to work without an audience?

When there's an audience, there's always a tendency to consider the objects that were used in the action as relics.

They should be seen as installations or sculptures?

For me, they clearly are sculptures. In all of my work there are maybe three or four things that could be considered relics. That's it. Like the 12 mile-long fuse that burned all the way from Appenzell to Saint-Gall. I saved what was left and that is a relic. But when, say, I attach a handgun to a helicopter, and then shoot some hanging sacks so that the sand runs out and forms cones, then to me, that's sculpture.

Is the concept of accident important in the process of the transformation of the form?

No. From the start I have a pretty clear idea of what I want to do. If, for example, I hang up twelve sacks, it reminds people of Jesus, the apostles and the Last Supper. People are always looking for symbols. Why can't we just see things as they are? We see four bags, four cones, a sculpture. That's all. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

Marc-Olivier Wahler is a critic and artistic director of the CAN (Centre d'Art, Neuchâtel).

A wooden beam floats down the Rhine Valley Canal. Its length spans nearly the full width of the canal. It collides with a tripod, placed in the middle of the canal, to which an underwater camera is attached.

Rupture or Continuity

The weight of the beam causes the tripod to topple over onto the canal bed. During the event the following series of photographs are taken automatically at regular intervals by the camera attached to the tripod.

1)

The instant before the beam and the tripod collide: The image is taken close to the surface of the water, which is as white as the glare of the sky and as blue-black as the surrounding trees; the beam appears in the foreground. The perspective of the canal is enhanced by a row of trees on each bank. The trees are black in their shadow and the grass-covered banks stretch green to bluish towards the horizon. There are a few drops of water on the lens.

2)

As the tripod and camera tip over: The vertical rhythm of the black tree trunks is revealed by the abstract nature of the image taken in motion, out of focus, black, blue and green, against the contrast of the white sky.

3)

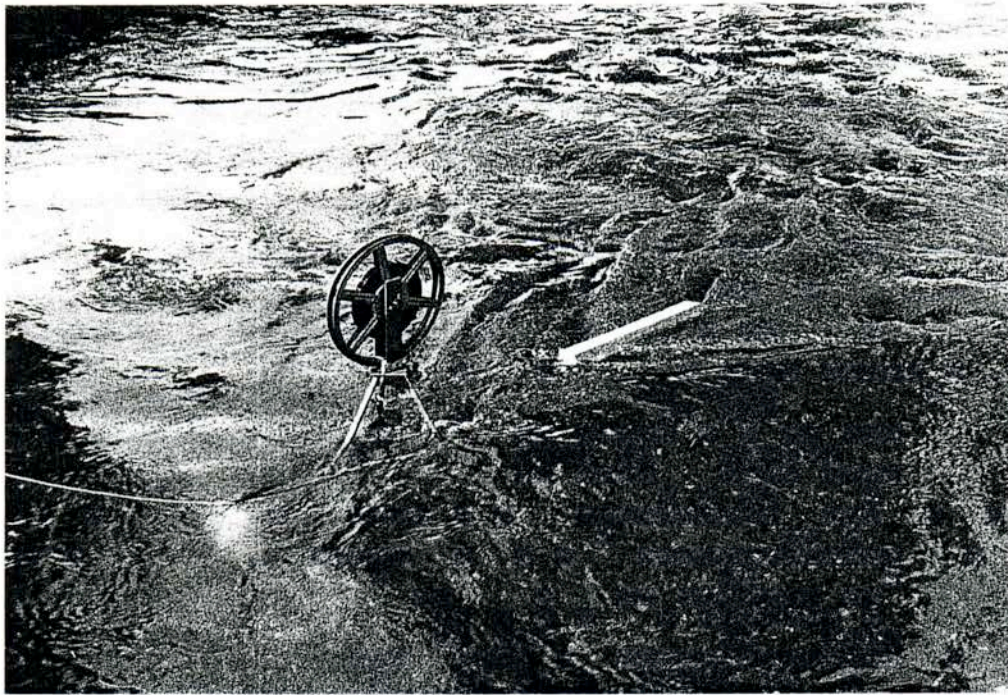
Underwater: The image shows the density of the water, a particular dim green and yellow hue, the naturally filtered light revealing the still obscurity of the canal bed.

Here, there, close by or further away. FILM TAKE (1985) comes to a "natural" ending. A natural ending like its beginning. The wooden beam floats further down, its trajectory influenced by diverse currents. The tripod and camera disappear; sunk, they witness both the event itself and the state of things. The physical state, indeterminable, displays the verb: the action past, present, and future. The actual event: the transfer of energies creates a rupture, a break in the fluidity of experience. Time acknowledges change.

Change signifies evolution towards and away from, not only the experience in itself, but also the forming and deforming, the appearance and disappearance: part of a continuous motion. Here, as with other works by Roman Signer, motion is punctuated and displayed, even though at some point the sculpture is silent, still.

During FILM TAKE the photographs taken by the camera constitute elements of the work itself. These photographs are therefore a remaining part of the work, while all other elements no longer exist after the completion of the event. The work is also recorded by an "external" video camera. The viewer is faced with an artwork which has not been totally captured or which cannot be entirely transgressed. The photographs show fragments of the event and the video

PIA VIEWING is an art historian and curator who lives in Rennes, France.



shows the continuity; however, each event is unique and the existing traces of the events reflect the necessity and the meaning of its ephemerality. The work's entirety may only be appreciated through reflection, and reflection is partial in each case. "Of course, the familiar experience of seeing often seems to lead to possession; in seeing something we generally have the impression of gaining something. But the modality of the visible becomes ineluctable—in other words destined to the matter of being—when to see is to feel that something ineluctable escapes us, moreover: when to see is to lose."¹⁾

The work exists in the making and particularly at the point of rupture between mobility and immobility, as Signer himself declares, "I consider my events to be transforming sculptures. Spectators may be present while the event takes place. However, I can also make an event without any audience being present and only exhibit the result. In fact the initial

sculpture is exhibited in another form." This sculpture, *FILM TAKE*, is one of a series of events/sculptures composed of similar materials which manifest variation and mobility. The displacement and interaction of the components which the artist activates in order to form a work that takes place during a certain lapse of time, is unique in its realness and in the impossibility of its conservation. It is this form that is essential and singular to the character of Signer's work because the making or the changing is not literally illustrated in/by the work but is an enduring force present in the work, a force intrinsic to universal existence.

Temporary yet infinite, specific yet universal, such notions may describe the disturbing, basic truths that Signer's oeuvre portrays through a humorous precariousness that is so close to inventive curiosity.

1) Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1992), p.14.

Roman Signer's

Perhaps I have a different concept of sculpture.

Sculptural

It's one that has developed in the course of my actions. I've always thought of myself as a sculptor.

Events

The problems are always related to space, to events in space, to temporal processes. Roman Signer¹⁾

A modern-day knight in a protective suit and a visored helmet ignites a fuse with one foot, while bending deep over a metal barrel. A violent explosion ensues; a fountain of white paint shoots up into the air, spattering helmet and suit and obstructing the figure's vision. An enigmatic, absurd ritual? A destructive blinding of the self? What we have here is a description of one of Roman Signer's actions.

PORTRAIT GALLERY (1993) is the title of a work that comprises a row of four barrels. The exploded paint has long since dried up. Framed, black-and-white photographs on the wall are portraits of the artist taken after each explosion. The remains of the action have solidified into an enduring sculpture, the playful act of the moment has been frozen into a frightening image, the portrait has been robbed of

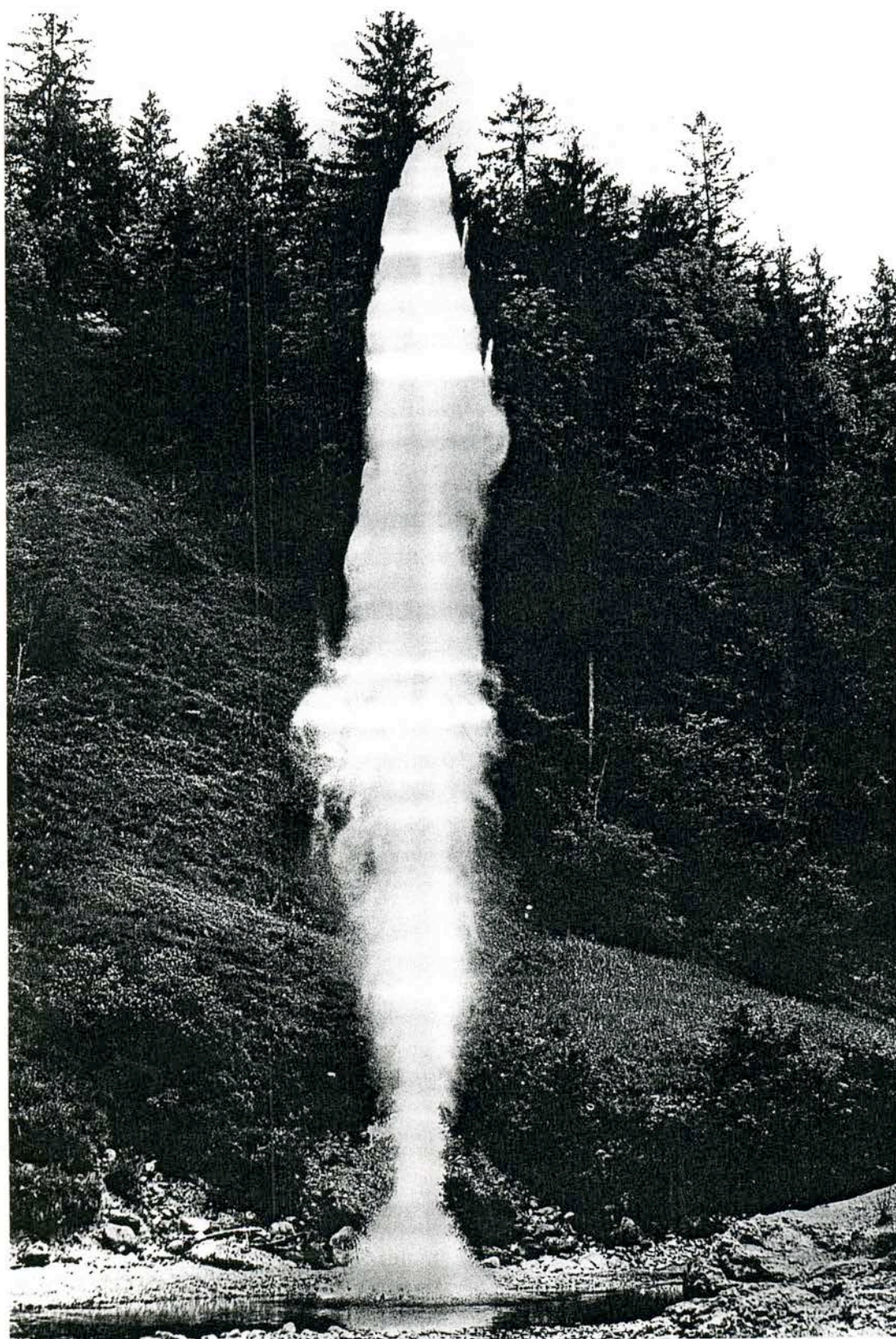
its face. A vehement gesture transforms the idea of a moth-eaten gallery of ancestral portraits into an urgent "monument of the moment," into a contemporary metaphor.

Action and sculpture, dynamics and stasis in Roman Signer's oeuvre do not oppose each other but are rather different states of the same structure. It is a structure that displays the potential of future, energetic change; it is transformation as transient shape; it is detritus as traces of past events. The sculptural form in Signer's oeuvre, the static object in space, is expanded—liquefied, as it were—to include the dimension of time. The visualization of process is a defining element in a concept of sculpture that recalls the artistic positions of the sixties and seventies. The mutually blurred boundaries of time and space and the dematerialization of the artwork into temporal structures, characteristic of these traditions, profoundly changed the entire organization of

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ROMAN SIGNER, WASSERSÄULE, 1976 / WATER COLUMN.

(PHOTO: EMIL GRUBENMANN)



sculpture. Roman Signer has given them an equally profound and contemporary impact by defining not only the static object but also the moment itself as a sculptural process.

Roman Signer's oeuvre in the early seventies began with works that visualize natural phenomena with near-scientific precision. His artistic research into fundamental principles of plastic art was devoted to the nature of immanent forces, to the potential energy inherent in the elements of our environment—in sand, stones, or water. Thus, the narrow metal bases with plastic funnels in *RAIN FIELD* (1975) collect the precipitation until the rising water gradually displaces the funnels and the wooden floats. Seen outdoors, this work acquires the aspect of a playful measuring device that makes visible the changes in natural forces over the course of time. Natural forces—in this case, the rain—are not reduced to standardized forms of measurement or to abstract vectors of energy but are instead manifested in their unmistakably physical materiality. In the museum space, these same processes are precisely perceptible as potential manifestations of an experimental artistic construct. In addition to works which expand the dimension of time, Signer also produced structures of the moment with the help of fuses or explosions, as in *SMOKE CROSS* (1975) or *WATER COLUMN* (1976). Common to these early works is the explicitly restrictive choice of materials and objects used over and over again—water, sand, stone, balloons, tables, stools, barrels, and so on—as well as the visualization of potential energies. These elements are essential to the evolution of Signer's work. Nature is both his material and his partner in the process of creation: *"I leave many of my objects half finished so that nature can do the rest, so that it flows somehow into the work and becomes manifest. (...) I play in and with nature."*

Signer has kept a record of all his ephemeral sculptures on celluloid or tape; these records now form a substantial, self-contained branch of his oeuvre.²⁾ What started out as the filmed documentation of time-space structures developed in the early eighties into independent artistic acts and actions in which the artist himself appears as the actor. He subjects himself directly to the natural forces unleashed

by his actions. This logical move "stage center" heightens the significance of the processual aspect of his work in contrast to the other, nonprocessual states of his pieces. In these actions—Signer calls them "events"—potential is compressed into the moment of explosion, the past coagulates in the split second, playfulness becomes existential, and life is manifested in confrontation with the elemental thrust of natural forces. The challenge of violent forces, the direct encounter with danger has been diagnosed by the artist himself as being *"almost like an addiction. I have to undergo these experiences, I have to go through the tunnel, through the danger, through the eye of the needle."*

Direct exposure to danger in such actions compounded by concrete experiences, such as the death of a friend while the two were kayaking together, lent an intense focus and an existential charge to Signer's oeuvre in the early eighties. This is most explicit in the extensive group of kayak pieces, sculptural metaphors for life's journey and death, but also in the *PORTRAIT GALLERY* and in one of Signer's key works, *ACTION WITH A FUSE* (1989). This latter, a quiet time-space sculpture, is not only a dramatic embodiment of the process of departure; it is also Signer's own metaphorical leave-taking from his hometown and the past, following the death of his mother.³⁾

Roman Signer's oeuvre—his precise choice of objects charged with personal experience, his sculptures that explode the dimensions of space and time—combines current plastic thinking and subjective living. It emerges at the interface between contemporary sculpture and existential token, uniting them in binding metaphors, in compelling emblems of entangled human life at the end of the twentieth century.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

1) All quotes are from the artist's conversation with Lutz Fittel in: *Treffpunkt Bodensee* (ex. cat.), Städt. Bodensee Museum, Friedrichshafen, 1984, pp. 83–93.

2) In addition to sculpture, actions, and film, Roman Signer has also produced an oeuvre of drawings. Cf. Konrad Bitterli, "Grundlagen skulpturalen Denkens" in: *Roman Signer Skulptur* (ex. cat.), Kunstmuseum St. Gall, 1993, pp. 36–60. This catalogue also contains a complete listing of Signer's oeuvre through 1993.

3) For a detailed description of this piece, see Max Wechsler's article in this issue, p. 147.

SCULPTURAL LABORATORY EXPERIMENTS

THE METHOD IN ROMAN SIGNER'S PYROTECHNIC MADNESS

Oh, the things we did as children in order to explore the world! We dropped stones and pine cones from a bridge—which object hits the ground first? We set fire to dry meadows next to the railroad tracks—how do ants and grasshoppers react to mortal danger? We made hot air balloons and watched them soar—what ever makes hot air lighter than cold?

Our knowledge of the natural sciences was rudimentary, our approach unencumbered and naive, our curiosity unbounded. And as often as not our experiments failed miserably. But we wanted to gather our own empirical evidence; we wanted to make our own personal discovery of connections regardless of the physical and chemical ground prepared by centuries of scientific research; we wanted to explore cause and effect by ourselves and acquire our own insight into the mysteries of the universe.

CHRISTOPH DOSWALD is an art critic and free-lance curator who lives in Baden, Switzerland.

In Roman Signer's sculptural pieces there lurks a similar spirit of exploration that puts to the test all over again assumptions long taken for granted as givens by a positivistic society. To him, the self-evidence of scientific logic is an artistic challenge and an opportunity to engage in field studies with an aesthetic actionist bias. Fireworks send ordinary kitchen tables flying through the air; wooden crates dropped off bridges burst into a thousand fragments on impact. The artist races a rocket or explodes a charge of dynamite in the water of an old gravel pit; he transforms sand cones into craters by detonating explosives or fills a balloon with gas under the ice of a frozen pond until the buoyancy of the fragile rubber membrane cracks the ice.

Signer follows a strict procedure in carrying out his sculptural laboratory experiments. The tests are divided into three aggregate states—before, during, and after the action—which are meticulously documented through photography, video, and film. The documents themselves become works because, on one hand, the sense of process inherent in his sculptural experiments can only be recorded chronologically and, on the other, the original composition of the piece self-destructs once the irreversible process sets in. The fact that Signer logs his experiments, always listing the materials used, the place of execution, the forces involved, and the length of the action, is also indicative of his protoscientific approach. His procedure is basically indistinguishable from that fol-

lowed in the conventional laboratories of research institutes, the only difference being that Signer leaves it up to the viewer to evaluate the results. Reception and interpretation are the responsibility of the scientist and not of the artist.

No matter how distinctive each of Signer's sculptural laboratory experiments may be, he has characteristically worked with the same clearly defined vocabulary of materials in untold variations for the past twenty years: water, sand, air, and explosives are the greatest constants. Kayak, elevator, chair, and table also make regular appearances. Finally, unlike the analytical, detached attitude of the scientist, the artist's own person is involved and is therefore a constitutive part of the experiments. Sometimes he uses visitors as his guinea pigs, putting them at the service of his experiments. He has, for instance, installed time bombs in his exhibitions without informing the public when they will go off. The uncertainty, the fear and respect with which visitors treat the work is not merely a question of reception: When physical distance is maintained, the existential reaction of visitors becomes a constitutive part of the work's own aura.

Signer's method in this context might, of course, also be read as an astute appropriation of scientific methodologies. But his sculptural laboratory experiments are neither critical nor hostile in attitude. His activities pursue no functional goals, nor are they intended to emerge as a production process. And finally, the experiments, although meticulously prepared and executed, rarely take place behind closed doors; the artist is oblivious to patent infringements or oaths of secrecy. His works are inspired by an attitude whose overriding trait is an unquenchable personal curiosity. Only secondarily do the sculptural laboratory experiments target an art public, where their impact on the viewer's mechanics of perception is all the more forceful.

Should one have to define the motives behind Signer's research, the most conspicuous would be his preference for untried experience, his interest in the paradoxical, his obsession with allusion, and above all, his devotion to energetic processes. He has a way of taking things literally and subjecting them to conceptual hyperbole; their significance often acquires a

humorous twist through the novelty of his gaze. By decontextualizing the vocabulary of his works, he comes up with inventive solutions. The kayak is a sled or a projectile; tables are turned into flying objects but also function conventionally as static supports. The form, function, and reception of the most ordinary items must reassert themselves in Signer's laboratory experiments, just as viewers are in turn forced to reassess supposedly proven patterns of perception and to call into question once again the essence of things, of technology, and of nature.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

ROMAN SIGNER, KAJAK MIT GUMMISEIL, 1984 /
KAYAK WITH ELASTIC ROPE. (PHOTO: PETER LIECHTI)

