

Roman Signer: Dead-pan Chaplin with bombs?

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Right: ROMAN SIGNER Cap with Rocket 1993

IN A SEQUENCE of four photographs a man dressed in black stands in a snow-covered Swiss meadow, a dark coniferous forest in the background. A white woollen hat, pulled down to conceal his face, is tied to a large firework standing to his right. Once he has lit the fuse his hands rest by his side, reminiscent of a condemned man before a firing squad. The rocket takes off with such a force that the hat is whipped from his head, revealing the face of the artist.

In his experiments, Roman Signer discovers in his own back yard, laws that Isaac Newton discovered 300 years before. Signer is, in his own words, "somewhere between scientist and explorer, between exploration and explosion." His show at the Photographers' Gallery in London in March, is curiously his first major British exhibition. Having trained in Poland as an architectural draughtsman, from the early 70's Signer began creating 'actions'. Possibly a kind of personal reconstruction following an asthma-related illness that meant extended periods in hospital. Previously, a competitive canoeist and mountain hiker, he now put his energy into constructing what he has referred to as little 'Alpine Dramas'. In 1971, influenced by Lamorisse's 1956 film *Le Ballon Rouge*, he documented balloons released at intervals across the Bodensee. Signer takes the word 'action' (not happenings) from the Vienna Actionists, a group interested in masochistic body-ritual in the 50's and 60's. Signer prefers not to draw blood, but his works are nonetheless perilous. There exists a natural impulse to institutionalise unfamiliar work by

classifying it in our own terms. To disregard anything as original and look to our own 'stream of consciousness' associations.

Smithson's Wake

Everyone has a favourite Python sketch. In one of mine, a series of neat bushes on a supposed MOD training ground are blown up in an attempt to reveal the camouflaged troops behind them. Like Monty Python, part of the enjoyment is in the recounting, time and again playing out the scene as if it was as fresh as first shown. In the tradition of surreal comedy, the collision of unlikely elements in fundamental.

Signer spends much time experimenting with a ready-made vocabulary, which might include: 'bicycle', 'case', 'barrel', 'explosives', 'boots' and 'table'. The energy to trigger the actions could be natural, a river or gravity, or manufactured, explosives or a catapult. Timing and speed are also important components. Signer sees the greatest part of these solo trials to be the preparation, the actual (often momentary) event does not hold special significance for him.

Signer's gallery exhibitions have included actions and installations, their resulting traces and—as here—their photo and video documents. For his 1990 show at American Fine Arts in New York, a sack of sand was suspended from the ceiling. Mid-exhibition at a pre-designated time, Signer telephoned the gallery from his studio in Switzerland and introduced himself. His call mechanically released the hanging sculpture which plummeted to the floor. Sand burst across the gallery, where it remained for the duration.

While his works indeed seem frivolous, Signer has the credibility of other early 70's time-based artists, reliant on the photo-document. But placing him in the wake of Smithson, Kaprow and the Happeners, some criticise him for not being overtly discursive. It is true, the playing out of entropy, the authority of the document, the relation of unconfined location to museum are unmistakable qualifications. Counter to that casting, I would not expect to see 'The collected writings of

Roman Signer' in the shops next Christmas; he is more interested in 'practical questions.' But compare and contrast the dignified silence Signer often maintains, with the enigmatic public persona assumed by Warhol at interviews. Or Sherman—who one suspects greatly appreciated the role of witness to her own critical acclaim—seldom accepting or denying any theoretical account. Signer, not peddling sophisticated irony, is completely sincere. On a Sunday afternoon when the weather is fine, perhaps the Signers would go into the country to film some experiments, trying out proto-actions—play and trial are his favourite means of discourse. "It's me" he insists, "it's not another language—it's me all the time." Roman Signer is not Robert Smithson.

No More Flat Feet

Neither is he (as has often been implied) consciously positioned in the legacy of the Situationist International or Zurich Dada. The directness of means should not be simply construed as guerrilla tactics. In one example a table catapulted from a hotel window hurtles vainly towards the snow-capped mountains, diving into the trees. Another was a timed device in an exhibition, the viewing public kept in the dark as to detonation time. To the extent that violence is presented in Signer's actions, it tends to be directed nowhere in particular. His exercises take place in the Swiss landscape and make not the slightest bit of difference to the outside world. At their most elaborate they are once in a lifetime events—uncompromising potlatch—and Signer still has energy to waste. Where else but in a general economy would we see such an unashamed expenditure of energy for absolutely no gain? The point is, Signer's project is not consciously engaged in the social realm.

I had already imagined him as a Chaplinesque figure but when I spoke to Signer it was he who broached the subject. I think *Modern Times* may be a favourite, because Chaplin arrives in New York carrying a case—part of the Signer vocabulary. Consider the slapstick, and Chaplin too is not unaccustomed to failure.

Now picture Guy Debord, bodily preventing the press from entering the Paris Ritz in 1952 for Chaplin's great press conference promoting his film, *Limelight*. This was how the Lettrist International (preceding the SI) chose to launch its first assault. They chanted: "No More Flat Feet!" Also the heading of their leaflet, which read:

...Because you've identified yourself with the weak and the oppressed, to attack you has been to attack the weak and the oppressed—but in the shadow of your rattan cane some could already see the nightstick of a cop...but for us, the young and beautiful, the only answer to suffering is revolution... Go to sleep, you fascist insect... Go home Mister Chaplin.

To the Lettrist's, Chaplin had defected to the Spectacle. Signer's self-sufficiency makes him no revolutionary, his is a distant trajectory of personal discovery. His work manages to particularise the so-called universal. I asked, "why do you make actions?" His response: "Why climb a mountain?"

Not included in the present classification

When Signer says, "I must get to grips with transience," I believe he refers to physical actions and their consequences, not least his own impermanence. But he could just as easily be referring to the impermanence of the artwork and its photo-document. He told me (dryly) that the video works would degrade first, then the photographs. The most lasting testimony would be his diagrammatic drawings of actions. Another kind of transience is similar to the void which lies within Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*: the photograph refers to the 'core' of the work, but the 'core' was never visible. Very



often for Signer nothing much really happens.

In one film Signer is seated with a blow torch and candle mounted on the floor in front of him. As he tugs on a string the candle is blasted with a 2 foot jet of flame. But after repeated attempts, no change. I heard that Wordsworth visited the Swiss mountains, expecting to experience some sublime, life-changing transfiguration but returned unchanged and probably a little morose. Lots of Signer's actions are a bit crap too.

As the show's curator, Jeremy Millar says: "If we think that his experiments fail, then it is because we have misunderstood the nature of enquiry." It is precisely this lack of sophistication that is so appealing. They are low-tech with low production values and yet the photo-documents are spuriously seductive. Their all over amateurism is the currency of up-to-the-minute 90's advertising imagery. The unexpressive document floats, as the image quality causes it to be at once immanent and distant. Like a telephone voice, the removed is confronted by the direct and intimate.

Millar has arranged video monitors nonchalantly behind screens, so you meet the actions as if stumbling across them in a wooded glade. You would sit on a tree stump in the shadows and watch the private ritual being acted-out beneath shafts of sunlight. A single rocket propelled boot rotating furiously around a nail on a tree gets one of the biggest laughs.

In another video Signer emerges from the back of a gallery wearing a metallic protective suit including boots, gloves and helmet, marching a circuitous route, each deliberately placed step activating a small explosive device in his path. There's a self-evidence only before seen in the kind of safety training videos the fire service produce for company employees.

Signer's latest works show he is aware of his new younger audience. Protective gear suggesting a fetishistic reading of the vocabulary, and new elements added to it: model helicopters, a net-wrapped Christmas tree as an inept javelin. Others are greatly enthused by the unhinged aspect of the work, brought about by its lack of explanation. Signer agreed that in the absence of a caption or prior knowledge of the work, the viewer was inclined to invent other stories as explanations of the photograph. Viewing the unguarded image outside the context that reveals it as loaded with concept, evinces a resistance to the classification impulse I mentioned before. But rather than the didactic subversion typical of other 70's art, Signer's is included in a more contemporary institutional critique based on mockery, the absurd. The subtle undermining of the system is reinforced by the dematerialisation of the artwork—the document also being a distancing device.

An attraction of the deadpan, unsentimental documentation which has become increasingly a persistent 'style' of the 90's, is its ambiguity. Whether it be Hilla and Bernd Becher's, typographical shots of industrial structures or Fishli and Weiss' random video footage, uninflected documents are most open to misunderstanding. Like Signer, this 'loose cannon' effect is part of their achievement.



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