

Roman Signer

7 June 2014 – 26 October 2014

Display note

Roman Signer's "small and large happenings" as he calls them, have brought him international fame. Born in 1938 in Appenzell, he is one of the most important sculptors of contemporary art. The starting point for his unique creative process is a concept of sculpture that is disengaged from the object, making processes visible. Everyday items form the basis here. The objects he uses, such as tables, chairs, barrels, kayaks and the like, have a distinct character of their own. However, Roman Signer does not use these objects for their typical functions; instead, he transforms them in a way that exposes multiple potential layers of meaning. The familiar becomes alien; the functional appears absurd; the exhilarating and the unfathomable become visible in everyday life.

After presenting his first retrospective in 1993 and numerous contributions to group exhibitions, the Kunstmuseum St.Gallen is once again presenting a comprehensive showcase of Signer's work. The centrepiece of the exhibition is his installation work created between 2011 and 2014.

Staircase / foyer

The petrol-blue "Piaggio", 2014, in the impressive foyer of the Kunstmuseum is a genuine eye-catcher. It stands upright on the back of the storage section, whilst the driver's cab points its "nose" into the air. The contours of the three-wheeled vehicle reminded Roman Signer of the knight on a chess board, and it was exhibited under this title in 2013 in the "Flex-Sil Reloaded" exhibition at the Kunsthalle St.Gallen. Since then, Roman Signer thought about the object a little more and a video film was produced by Aleksandra Signer, in which the sculpture appears in a very different context. Like a cosmonaut, the artist says goodbye to his friends, gets into the Piaggio, is heaved into the launch position and the countdown begins...

Roman Signer's works have been labelled "time sculptures" or "sculptural happenings". These labels point to the artist's new approach to the aspect of time in sculpture. The video "Start" demonstrates this in exemplary fashion. Even if the object appears to remain static, as with "Piaggio", for the artist, it is always about endowing it with a potential eventfulness or the unfolding of an energetic process. Signer plays with expectations of reality and, with a wit that is as smart as it is playful, provides resistance to familiar norms. Thus he often gives onlookers a profound moment of pause and exhilarating reflection.

In 2013's "Wasserfall" ("Waterfall"), four projections of video recordings are used to reconstruct the appearance of the "Leuenfall" waterfall near Weissbad. The 35-metre-high "Leuenfall" is astoundingly symmetrical and is considered the most beautiful waterfall in the region. Roman Signer's cinematic analysis of this natural phenomenon is linked to his close relationship with the nature of his home country, and most importantly its waterscapes. The four projectors are spread over four shelf levels, so that they give the observer an astonishingly vivid image of the vertically falling water that he or she would never be able to perceive naturally. It is an entirely constructed image enabled by the medium of video, although which obviously corresponds precisely with the image we have in our heads. The artist's creativity is driven by his fascination for natural forces; here, for example, the gravitational force that pulls the falling water. Signer's playful lightness often hides another level of existential questions.

The viewer gets anything but a comfortable impression upon sight of the armchair "Balm" from This Weber, which was created for Atelier Pfister and in which Roman Signer has blown a circular hole in a

precise blasting operation. The object and its creation, captured on video, are interwoven with one another, and are representative of a new type of work by Roman Signer. The event is projected through the hole that it created in the chair itself. The object in the museum and the history that lies behind it are thus quite literally interpenetrated.

Room 1 / Rocket room

At the entrance to the first room, visitors are confronted with the installation “Stühle mit Raketen” (“Chairs with rockets”), 2011, which creates an almost threatening situation: to the legs of eight upturned, neatly lined-up chairs are attached rocket fireworks which point directly at the “intruders”. Everyone will associate their own experiences, both pleasant and tense, with the fireworks, which regardless lead to endless chains of association in the combination in which they are exhibited. The potential of the vehement propulsive force is implied in the sculpture’s form, the workings of the potential power are almost staged: the process that theoretically results from the arrangement, i.e. the firing of the rockets, and the likely results in the space are not hard to imagine, and a possible image of the event no doubt appears automatically in the imagination of every observer.

The result of a not only potential, but genuinely occurring process with rockets is presented by the 2013 “Haus mit Raketen” (“House with rockets”), which appears behind “Stühle mit Raketen”. All around the plywood walls of the model house can be seen umbrella-shaped traces burnt into the wood by ignited rockets. Here, the event appears already to have happened, but what was it? Ultimately the house appears relatively unscathed.

Inside, there is a small, open suitcase from the year 1985, which shows a burnt-out rocket and thus gives an idea of the process that must have taken place here. A hiss and a sharp fizz could be heard, and a lot of smoke emerged so that the room gradually emptied – at least this is what the exhibition catalogue recounts. The event took place in the exhibition “Schnelle Veränderungen / Fast Changes”, at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart.

Room 2 / North side room

Another form of force transmission is addressed in the newly created work “Schlauch mit Stühlen” (“Air tube with chairs”) from 2014. Here all three stages of an event can be experienced: when the ten metal stools initially lie with their backrests on the air tube, the process is ready for activation, although its concept is not hard to identify. Once the order is given, as by the artist himself at the opening, or as requested by the museum staff throughout the duration of the exhibition, the process unfolds: the tube is filled with air and thus develops a force that throws the chairs into the air in an almost synchronised action. They all land in synchronised fashion, ready on their feet, on the floor of the room. As a result of the process, the chairs stand facing outwards around the inflated air tube, giving the appearance of an oddly reverted table situation. The work reveals a system and simplicity of means that are characteristic of Signer’s happenings. The installation is an interplay of precise planning and variations of an ultimately incalculable coincidence: the event will never happen in exactly the same way twice.

Room 3 / North corner room

Eight round tables the shape and size of bar tables are spread out in the space. The round table tops display shiny blue mirrored surfaces one is instinctively drawn to. A theatre spotlight highlights one of the tables, so that its reflection results in a lovely play of light on the ceiling, which is changed slightly by vibrations. The poetically magical “Acht blaue Tische” (“Installation with eight mirrored tables and one spotlight”), 2014, was developed specifically for this room in the St.Gallen exhibition, and is like a relaxing anchor of calm on the visitors’ route. It is based on the elements light, water and reflection.

Room 4 / Skylight room

The house on skis played the leading role in an action that took place in Gstaad at the start of the year. Roman Signer named both happening and object after Vico Torriani’s catchy number “Alles fährt ski”, or “Everybody skis”, which had the whole of Switzerland hooked in 1963 and at the same time became

synonymous with the ski-loving nation. The 800-kg hut was placed on skids made from four standard snowboards and then dragged up the slope on a rope. Roman Signer then cut the rope with an axe, sending the hut flying down the snow-covered slope. In the opening near the ground on the back of the hut he had placed a camera, which captured its rapid trip down. The resulting video is now projected on the spot from which it was taken in the hut, which visitors can enter. In what is now an immovable property, the observer finds himself virtually sliding down the slope too: as the song says, "Alles fährt Ski".

From the actual window openings, meanwhile, our gaze is directed towards the shots from the series "Überfliegen der Zeitung", or "Skimming over the newspaper", which was created in Philadelphia in 1997. The artist had Armin Caspari fly a model helicopter fitted with a camera over the newspaper "The Philadelphia Inquirer". In 1997, there were still no cameras designed for this and no possibility of capturing data in a flying device, so Roman Signer was covering new ground on different levels here. In the attempted radio transmission, the data was changed by the interfering signals of the running engine. The resulting video, with its flickering images and the whirring sound of the model helicopter is replayed on a monitor tilted upwards, whilst the entire range of the surprising changes is displayed in rows in sixteen stills on the two long walls. The work thus forms a humorous and profound interpretation of "Überfliegen der Zeitung", in the sense of a superficial reading, and gives an evocative picture of the daily flood of images we are confronted with. There are abstract and insane impressions of reality caught up in the world's flood of images.

Room 5 / South corner room

The two halves of a blue bicycle made by Kristall, a Swiss bicycle manufacturer since 1945, lie in the diagonally opposite corners of the room. The centre is marked by an electric cutting disc, protective goggles and gloves. The scenario, with its visible traces of dust on the floor, is obviously the result of a completed action carried out by Roman Signer for the exhibition. The observer recreates the event – as if reading a crime novel – based on the objects he or she has found. After the "Fahrrad" ("Bicycle"), as this 2010 work is titled, was originally held taut in a brace diagonally in the room, it was cut in half with the cutting disc by the artist. The bicycle parts were then flung with great force into the corners.

Room 6 / South side room

Without exception, the works in the penultimate room all trigger a wink. 2013's "Motor mit Propeller" ("Engine with Propeller") is equipped with a functional paraglide propeller engine, which Signer has mounted on skis. This amusing mobile was tested on the Appenzell snow by the artist himself, and it is surely something that appeals to everyone. In the exhibition room, however, the suitability of the object is called into question – although we are well able to imagine the scenario the sculptor compellingly promises.

Through the peephole of an oil drum filled with blue-coloured water, we can spy a blue beam of light, and the reflected light makes the contours of the filled water vessel visible. The projected image comes from a super-8 film projector mounted on a small wooden plinth, indefatigably rattling away to itself, despite no film actually being inserted in it. Signer gave this 2011 sculpture the tongue-in-cheek name "Blue Movie", which is indeed what you actually see, although in this case it is the projection of a film without images. The "blue movie" in the more traditional sense is no doubt something we primarily see in our own heads.

The "Schrank mit Regenschirm" ("Cupboard with umbrella"), from 2013, may appear to be a wooden telephone box, in which an umbrella hangs taut on a rope, but the rope strung diagonally from the ceiling to the floor nevertheless reveals how the umbrella ended up there. The ropeway for the umbrella, if absurd, appears thoroughly poetic: how did the umbrella end up in the cupboard? Signer's sculptures are full of allusive codes and metaphors, the fundamental points of which always exploit the observer for their own ends. The small work "Brille mit Metallplatte" ("Glasses with metal plate") from 2010 also relates this: one false move, and these peeking glasses – and therefore also the wearer – get crashed.

Room 7

“Kabine” (“Cabin”) is a work Signer produced for the Venice Biennale in 1999, where it was placed at the entrance to the Swiss pavilion. We can see a table and a stool at the back of an open wooden crate, while a wooden beam stands in front. To this, the artist attached three tins filled with black paint, to which he attached detonators. In an action at the Biennale, he donned a protective suit and helmet, positioned himself behind the table and triggered the explosive charge. As the cans popped the paint sprayed the cabin, leaving behind a negative image of Signer's body and the table on the back wall: a ghostly self-portrait by the artist, without the use of a paintbrush, but simply through the power of explosion.

Presentation room / Museum basement

The museum's presentation room hosts “Kugel mit blauer Farbe, Shanghai Biennale” (“Ball with blue paint, Shanghai Biennale”) from 2012: this is a high-speed video film (800 pictures a second). In China, a hollow wooden ball with a diameter of one metre was built by local artisans in horizontal layers and sealed with tar. This hollow ball was filled two-thirds full with 800 litres of blue paint. The ball falls from a height of around 30 metres and bursts on the floor of the building.