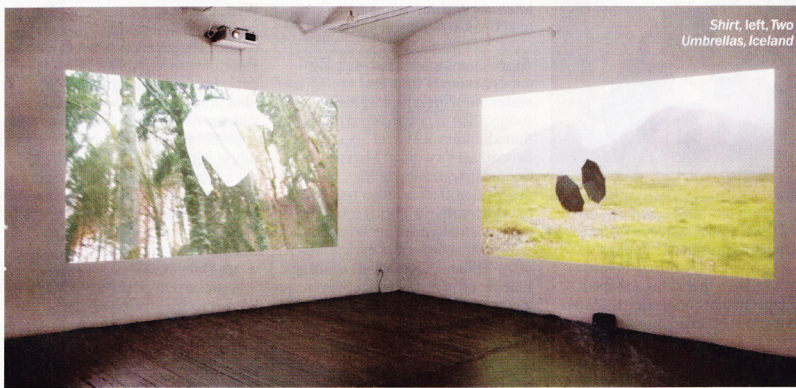


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Time Out New York
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By Anne Wehr



Reviews

Roman Signer, “Four Rooms, One Artist”

★★★★★

Swiss Institute, through Nov 12
(see Soho)

Until the artist is given the full-on survey treatment, this solo show will have to do. By **Anne Wehr**

Don't mess with Mother Nature, they say, but of course plenty of artists do. Take the indefatigable Swiss artist Roman Signer, who documents his experiments with wind, water, fire, velocity and other forces in low-tech videos, made with just one or two cameras. He's been at it for more than 30 years. A refreshing alternative to the work of better-known eco-interventionists who make, say, huge scaffolding waterfalls or meticulously crafted cairns in the woods, Signer's art suggests a workaday relationship with the elements not unlike that of genial Looney Tunes antagonists Ralph and Sam: Go outside, make art, clean up, clock out.

At times, the overall effect can be pleasantly cartoonish. Consider *Kayak* (2000): The artist sits in the titular vehicle, roaring like Speed Racer down a one-lane country road by dint of rope attached to a truck. Signer points, and the camera obediently pans over to a herd of confused cows keeping up alongside, bells clanging like crazy. The pan also reveals a babbling brook

running parallel to the road.

If you haven't seen it, it's worth catching the bootleg someone put on YouTube, even though it's crooked and incomplete. That's the best you'll do with most of Signer's older work, as he's woefully overdue for a real retrospective in New York. (Hello? New Museum?) His videos have made appearances in group shows; Dan Graham, a self-professed “big fan” of Signer's, recently included him in one such exhibit at Marian Goodman Gallery.

Thank heavens for the Swiss Institute, Signer's longtime go-to outlet in the city. His last New York solo show was here too, in 1997. “Four Rooms, One Artist” features recent work from this year and last. Those who come to see fireworks—one of Signer's signature mediums—might be disappointed, but nobody else will. Three new videos have him working from his wheelhouse, carting man-made objects into the great outdoors and liberating them, for the moment, from functionality.

Office Chair (2010) shows the eponymous object in white, sitting in the middle of a creek, spinning round and round in the current in a simple, perfect demonstration of action and

reaction at work. In *Shirt* (2010), the identified flying object catches the weak winter sunlight as it descends a zip line down a woody, snow-spotted hilltop, rapidly transforming from tiny, heavenly creature to life-size, plain old white clothing item.

Signer's art suggests a workaday relationship with the elements.



Waiting for Harold Edgerton

Two Umbrellas, Iceland (2009), made in more severe circumstances, best reveals Signer's ingenuity as an opportunistic matchmaker of material and elements. Clad in an all-weather anorak and sensible shoes, and working fast in the face of what seems like a hurricane-force gale, the artist duct-tapes a pair of open bumbershoots handle to handle. He lets go and off they tumble, like a pair of wagon wheels, flipping end over end, before briefly taking flight. Bounce, crash, show over. A final shot reveals them crumpled and done for.

And that was a good day. The show's central work, *Cinema* (2010), features one of what Signer calls his *restenfilms* (“leftovers”), a compilation of Super-8 footage of old, failed experiments, projected in a theater of wooden chairs. In the back row, one chair attached to a chain gear thinks rhythmically as if operated by an invisible class clown. It's a fairly generic installation, but makes for a fine place to view Signer's collected attempts to open an umbrella by dangling it in a stream, or to pinwheel a boot nailed to a tree by lighting a fuse at its heel. Repetition underscores dual themes of anarchy and organization in his work, while all that hazy footage of Switzerland's gorgeous wilderness and pretty countryside confirms the utter appropriateness of the show's venue.

In contrast, Signer's sculptures and installations seem like the staid work of a less interesting artist. Oh well. *Piano* (2010), an open-topped grand piano wired for sound, is reasonably good. Two oscillating fans blow Ping-Pong balls back and forth across the piano strings, resulting in a restrained cacophony that sounds a bit like the soundtrack for a made-for-TV suspense film. But

Waiting for Harold Edgerton, an apple dangling by a thread (seen only through the window of a locked door), is a disappointing homage to a kindred spirit, the pioneering stroboscopic photographer best known for his arresting image of an apple pierced by a bullet. Still and open-ended—one surmises the apple will decay throughout the show—it's the polar opposite of Signer's succinct visual narratives. No biggie, but if I have to wait another 13 years for Signer's next show, I kind of regret the waste of space.