

SWISS INSTITUTE / CONTEMPORARY ART  
495 BROADWAY / 3<sup>RD</sup> FLOOR  
NEW YORK / NY 10012  
TEL 212.925.2035  
WWW.SWISSINSTITUTE.NET

SI

Frieze  
November-December 2010  
By Marina Cashdan

# 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