

# I WAS HERE OR ROMAN SIGNER: THE BUSTER KEATON OF ART

by **Bice Curiger**

(From the catalog)

The artistic events that Roman Signer constructs for us are based on process, play, experiment, and wonder. His materials are elemental physical phenomena—observations all the more astonishing in view of the humor that informs this artist's oeuvre. It is an extremely subtle brand of humor yet to be discovered by the art world. The serenity, clarity, and lightness of Signer's actions impress us. They are devoid of the tautological leadenness of certain art in the seventies that agonized righteously in an attempt to demonstrate that water flows and a chair is a chair.

Signer's gestures are not heroic, although, appearing as a dramaturge of suspense, he causes an explosive release, even a psychosensual detonation. He does not fill the expected role of the ingenious, individualist artist; in every situation, he is, and remains, the ironic, modest Homo faber. We may admire Signer's skillful manipulation of dynamite. When an exploding umbrella shoots into the ceiling and stays there without blowing up the entire building, the charge is so precisely calculated that his audience gasps in relief.

A poetic, anarchist gaze is suddenly aimed at the world—at things and their relations—and it shatters ancient but unrecognized shackles of perception. Roman Signer, a sculpturally oriented artist, draws attention to an object by discovering and releasing its startling, unsuspected potential. We know about the possibilities of ordinary spray cans and rubber boots and bicycles and kitchen chairs, but we also learn how limited are both the horizon of our knowledge and our relationship to the things of this world!

Signer's quickening magic drops things through the functional grid, which seemed so secure and inalienable, and imposes new laws upon them. His activities are reminiscent of fairy tales, where wishes literally can move mountains and a grain of sand can make the world grind to a halt. What we presume to call reality is merely the one-dimensional appearance of potential relations between ourselves and nature. In an age of global electronics, in which physics represents all that is beyond our grasp, Signer evokes an image of an assiduous putterer and directs our gaze toward the fascinating aesthetics of the quotidian. In fairy tales, access to kingdoms also depends on highly tangible objects: pebbles. bread. ashes, frogs, nails, and ladles.

Because Signer spends so much time outdoors, far from the conventional venues of art, he gives serious thought to the site of his interventions. A new piece for Moore College of Art and Design, in Philadelphia, is entitled *I Was Here*. Once the artist has departed, visitors will see, among other things, a pair of boots and an oversize ink pad left in the room; a rope hanging from the ceiling will guide their gaze to footprints high above their heads. It is as if Signer were saying. Sculpture is always an act of intervention, always somehow obtrusive. But the artist's job lies in fleshing out presence, which, in this case, means making the process of intervention manifest and confidently championing the human will to change.

Anyone who has ever attended one of Roman Signer's events will have divined the inner glow of delight that lies behind his poker face. It comes from the certainty that his knowledge has long been public domain and from the desire to make a mark the desire of every human being who has been on this planet a little while.

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*translated by Catherine Schelbert*