

ROMAN SIGNER: FROM THE FOREWORD

by Elsa Longhauser

(From the catalog)

Roman Signer was born in 1938 in Switzerland, in the district of Appenzell in the town of the same name. A rural area, Appenzell is characterized by centuries of tradition, rolling hills, farms, and a distinctive architecture of low, heavy-roofed buildings, both ample and sheltering.

Signer was one of three sons (a doctor, a banker, and the artist). His father was an accomplished musician, the director of music in Appenzell and St. Gallen, and earned a modest living by giving piano and violin lessons to local children; his mother tended the household and their sons. Signer's great-grandfather owned a small match factory, which exploded twice and burned. (Part of the building, a silo for gunpowder, remains standing today, as an emblem of an earlier time.) His paternal grandfather was a cheesemaker and restaurateur; his maternal grandfather was the proprietor of a general store that sold hammers, clothing, salami, and gunpowder. Both of Signer's grandfathers were fire chiefs in Appenzell, as is his uncle, even today.

The artist remembers his childhood as beautiful and idyllic—a paradise enriched by the lore of ghosts, black cats, and magic. “My grandmother believed in ghosts,” he has said; “ghosts were a part of normal life. When her father died and the family sat in mourning, they heard nearby the sound of clinking glass and silverware as my great-grandfather’s spirit roamed their restaurant, setting tables as usual. She told me of a man who lived in our village, a lonely man of questionable reputation. If you chose to approach his house, he would erect an invisible wall and you could walk no further. The man sat in front of his house and created an impenetrable wall. I could feel it,” says Signer; “it was surely there. It was, I think, my first encounter with concept art.” Signer worked as an architectural draftsman before becoming an artist in the early seventies.

Although formally trained in the traditional art academies of Zurich, Luzern, and Warsaw, his work has been consistently characterized by a distinctly nontraditional sensibility and form. He refers to himself as a sculptor, but he broadens the concept of the discipline. Staging his actions outdoors or in the empty rooms of museums and buildings, he transforms everyday objects—boots, bicycles, tables, and chairs—into sculpture via the elemental forces of nature: fire (in the form of explosives), earth, wind, and water. Both in method and design, Signer’s work is unique. Poetic and funny, paradoxical yet logical, it is resonant of a childhood in which spirits were palpable and the invisible real.