

*Kajak (Aarau), 1998-9,*  
colour photograph, 24 x 36 cm.  
Photo: Stefan Rohner.  
© the artist. Courtesy  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Friedrich Christian Flick  
Collection, Hamburger Bahnhof.

## ROMAN SIGNER

HAMBURGER BAHNHOF, BERLIN  
30 SEPTEMBER - 27 JANUARY

Roman Signer's sculptures, photographs and films document the effects of incalculable forces and satisfy a very basic curiosity. The question behind these works is the hypothetical 'what would happen if...?', which the artist then translates into a precarious reality. With a seemingly childlike naivety, Signer propels himself on an office chair by the force of fireworks held in his outstretched hands (*Bürostuhl*, 2006), manoeuvres a kayak dragged behind a car until it is worn through by the rough street (*Kajak*, 2000) or shoots at a target while being shaken by an old-fashioned belt massager (*Old Shatterhand*, 2007). The clarity and humour of his experiments resemble the simplicity of cartoons, yet at their best, their directness relays a nearly physical experience of what their recordings depict. Viewing the film of Signer painting a dot by exploding some device behind his back (*Punkt*, 2006), one can almost feel the force with which the brush hits the canvas, a force combining both the blast itself and his startled response to it. And in *Pfanne* (1988), the force of a Bengal light used to heat a pan reverberates violently in the physical remainder of the installation, ultimately burning a large hole through both the pan and the metal tray on which it is standing.

This retrospective is certainly one of the season's highlights in Berlin, and it showcases the breadth of Friedrich Christian Flick's collection – temporarily and partially on loan to the Hamburger Bahnhof – from which much of the show is taken. At the same time, though, it again exposes the weak position of this national institution in negotiating loans – or possibly worse, its naivety. Notices throughout the show state that all pieces on loan directly from the artist – the majority of those not from the Flick Collection – are 'courtesy' of no less than six different galleries. During the Berlin art fair, the exhibition felt like a commercial showroom, and one would hope that the institution at least participated in some of the deals and was not oblivious to its active role in the art market and the problems this might pose.

The exhibition is clearly divided into two very different parts. On the lower floor it presents an overview of Signer's videoworks, noisily documenting his actions on film, with shots and explosions in every corner, while on the upper floor there is a selection of his sculptural work, consisting of various remnants of previous actions and some possible setups for new ones. In the safe museum environs, some of these lose the original action's sense of danger and immediacy. Yet at times this further degree of abstraction creates some extremely poetic results. *Installation* (2006) consists of two rows of ten monitors apiece placed one atop the other; in the lower row, some of Signer's earlier Super-8 films are shown, while in the upper row a woman recounts what can be seen below in Swiss sign language. Upon repeated viewing, the two visual accounts come to correlate, turning Roman Signer's visual one-liners into complex narratives of expectation and experience. Axel Lapp

