

Art in America

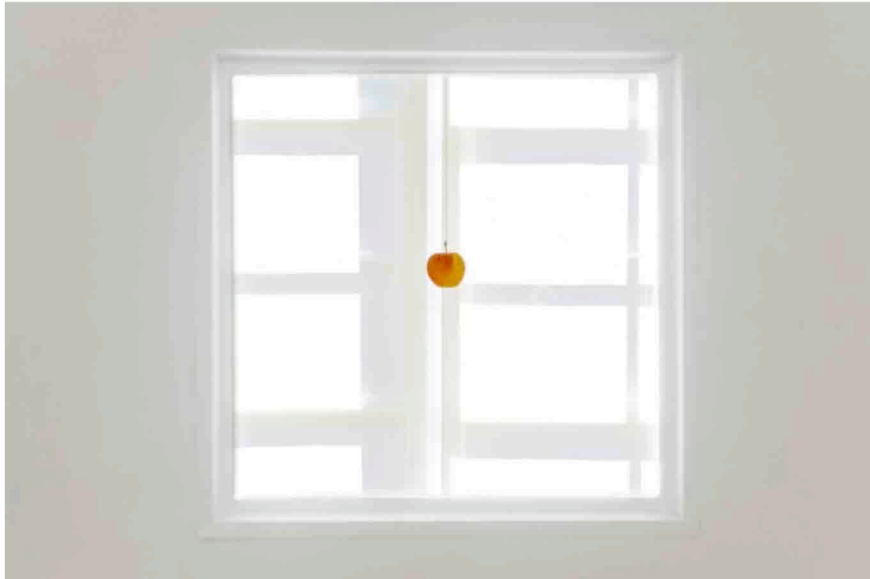
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Roman Signer: Suspended Moments

by *aimee walleston* 09/30/10

"Four Rooms, One Artist," Roman Signer's current solo show at the Swiss Institute New York, gives viewers the experience of a blockbuster museum show in miniature form. In said four rooms, curated by Gianni Jetzer, Signer's decades-long practice reveals the artist's synthesis of comic and romantic effects housed in an economy of motifs and material.

The show begins with a new work, *Waiting for Harold Edgerton* (2010), comprised of a single apple that levitates in a cordoned-off room, visible through a window. The title references Edgerton's famous still photograph of an apple being pierced by a bullet, and the impetus of the piece is the action, or non-action, of waiting: "It's kind of similar to Edgerton because the image in that photograph is also frozen in time. I like the idea that I could wait in front of an apple tree until the moment that an apple falls down," says Signer. "The idea of waiting for an apple to fall has a similar structure [to Edgerton's work]: waiting until something happens. But I would need a bit budget for Super 8 film to do that. And probably what would happen is that the apple would fall down at night!" As it stands, the piece elicits its own anticipatory emotion, which is of a part with its conceptual premise, according to the artist. "It's very crucial that people not be able to enter the room—it's like a safe room, or a forbidden room. I would be very upset if people started to touch the apple or move it around."



WAITING FOR HAROLD EDGERTON, COURTESY SWISS INSTITUTE NEW YORK. PHOTO BY DANNY PEREZ

At the age of 72, Swiss artist Roman Signer makes work that seeks to unbind normative space and time. The artist has lived in Switzerland for nearly his entire life, barring a stint in school in Poland, and his focuses are decidedly less urbane than other artists of his generation. His film, video and photographic works deal with their natural settings and give little pause to contemplate the urban rumblings of the world at large. The body of this practice comprises simple, elegant forms, animated and detonated to elucidate the cinematic ideas of suspense, climax and conclusion. His best-known works are Super 8 films and video wherein the artist stages a spectacular event—sending a Piaggio truck over a ski jump (*Piaggio on Jump*, 2003), for example—or makes a banal moment spectacular in its slapstick simplicity: shown within this exhibition, *Shirt*,

2010, features a simple, ghostly white button down shirt gliding up and down a hill on a pulley. Signer is also perhaps best-known for works involving rockets and combustion, though the works here are newer, and perhaps illustrate the artist's desire for a quieter and more circumspect output.

A second room within the exhibition shows a work that uses the artist's simple, workaday magic to produce a rumination on music. Two large fans blow ping pong balls slowly and chaotically around the strings of an open piano, producing eerie, inconsistent tones. In the last two rooms, four screens showcase Signer's films and video. *Office Chair*, 2010, exemplifies the artist's ease at effecting visual seduction with an economy of devices: an office chair spins wildly—yet statically—in the flow of a wooded creek. The HD video is a departure from the artist's beloved Super 8. "I want to get back to Super 8, not for questions of nostalgia, but because I think it's a very interesting medium, much more filmic to a certain extent," says Signer. The exhibition also calls into the question the difference between a Signer work created for a film, and the installations he creates specifically for galleries. Parsing this difference, Signer explains: "Film asks for narratives, and you have to think in narrative terms. The installations are more like organisms, that just have a life in themselves. Also, you can enter and exit an installation. Film has fluidity; it's more spontaneous. Before I used film, I would [use still photographs to document] a sequence of different movements."



CINEMA, COURTESY SWISS INSTITUTE NEW YORK. PHOTO BY DANNY PEREZ

Cinema (2010) combines film and installation, and features a viewing room staged as a schoolhouse, replete with a chair mechanized that rocks back and forth. On the viewing screen, a series of mixed-together outtakes spanning Signer's career presents a quiet, unresolved "greatest hits." While viewers have become used to Signer's devotion to rocket-launch suspense, the montage produces an ambient retelling Signer's career that focuses on the quieter moments in his films, recalling the interstitial events-caught glances, true smiles, guards let down. For all the combustible, narrative energy that drives Signer's work, it is interesting to think of those in-between moments, and how they illuminate a human pathos inherent in each of the artist's little machines.