

Experiments and Experience

Getting inside the work of Roman Signer and Monika Sosnowska

A collaborative seminar

organised by The Fruitmarket Gallery and Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh

Speaker Biographies

Richard Coyne has authored several books on digital technologies and cultural theory. Recent projects include examinations of non-place, branded meeting places and the role of the voice in digitally-mediated environments. He researches and teaches in design and digital media. He is an architect and Head of the School of Arts, Culture and Environment at the University of Edinburgh.

Angela Dimitrakaki is Lecturer in Art History at the University of Edinburgh. Her research and publications focus on contemporary art with particular emphasis on Europe. She is currently working on gender, globalisation and artists' films and videos. Her latest article, entitled 'Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-first Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann' appeared in *Oxford Art Journal*, 30, 2007.

Moira Jeffery is a writer and journalist. A former lawyer, she has worked extensively as an art critic in print and broadcast media and contributed to a number of artists' catalogues. Recent projects include a new publication with Esther Shalev Gerz and an essay on Monika Sosnowska for the book *Arcade, Artists and Place-Making*. She is currently researching the impact of Darwin on contemporary art for the University of Edinburgh's contribution to the Darwin 200 celebrations.

Isla Leaver-Yap is the contributing editor of contemporary arts quarterly *Map Magazine* and curatorial fellow at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. A recent research graduate from the University of Edinburgh, Isla studied the work of contemporary artists Rosalind Nashashibi and Anri Sala in relation to the projected image as a social space of encounter. Current research interests also include the use of surrogate bodies in contemporary art. Her Stone Summer Fellowship at the Art Institute of Chicago centred on the question of a 'globalised art history', and her contribution will feature in a book published by Stanford University Press in 2008.

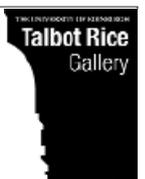
Tamara Trodd was awarded her PhD in December 2005. She worked at the University of St Andrews from 2005 to 2006 and has been employed at Edinburgh University since September 2006. She has published an exhibition catalogue essay on British artist Tacita Dean and has an article forthcoming in the January edition of the *Oxford Art Journal* on Paul Klee. She is working on two books: an edited collection of papers on artists' films based on the conference she organized here at Edinburgh last year, called *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*, and a monograph based on her doctoral research, called *Art After Photography*.

Roman Signer

The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2 November 2007 – 27 January 2008

Monika Sosnowska

Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 27 October – 8 December 2007



Monika Sosnowska and Roman Signer

Richard Coyne

Professor of Architectural Computing, University of Edinburgh



Cause and effect

Signer's *Punkt* (Dot) shows a video of a painter (the artist) sitting at an easel in the middle of a field, with his paintbrush poised at the surface of the canvas. The fuse (I assume) of an explosive device is burning behind him. He hears it and no doubt detects the smoke of the fuse wafting over him. The device explodes. He jumps, inevitably, and makes a mark on the canvas. The camera zooms in to the mark. Even though he has set up the situation the artist could not restrain his body from the visceral response of surprise.

The inevitability of the artist's startled response, against any attempt at restraint, reminds me of the challenge posed in William James's account of perception and the emotions. It is usual to think: I see a bear, I am afraid, and so I run. I hear the explosion, I'm surprised; I jump. According to the conventional view of causation, there is a strong stimulus, which we process cognitively and to which we then respond with some action: I jump. James is at pains to integrate the idea of emotions and feelings back into the entire event, and in so doing to confound simple accounts of causality: I see the bear, I run, I'm afraid. According to James "we feel sorry *because* we cry, angry *because* we strike, afraid *because* we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful." Following Signer's demonstration, I could add: we are surprised *because* we jump. The jumping does not follow from the surprise, but surprise is constitutive of the jump.

I like to think of Signer's collected work as so many demonstrators of the nature of causality, a theme that Fiona Bradley indicates is not so far from the spirit of Signer's inquiries and reflections on his own work. Signer's work is conspicuously temporal and plays on the event.

On the other hand Sosnowska's work is overtly spatial, involving rooms, walls and openings. Where there are moving parts, as in the new work in the upper part of the Talbot Rice Gallery, then these are in the manner

of room fittings or curtains.

In architectural interventions of this kind I feel that causality is best translated into issues of anticipation. It is on the subject of anticipation that the two sets of work collide.

Anticipation

The mood of the painter at the easel is saturated with expectation, the condition of all of us according to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, but given exaggerated expression in Signer's *Punkt*. The subject is not only waiting for something to happen, but is willing it to happen, and in the artist's case is designing and engineering the circumstances for it to happen. In the case of *Punkt* he is orchestrating a particular event, anticipated in the title, the formation of a dot on the canvas. As spectators of the work we are perhaps caught up in this field of expectancy.

In the case of Sosnowska's room with rubber stalactites the expectation is not dramatised, presented for show or enjoyed vicariously, but experienced in the work. I visited the gallery when there were few people around. I looked for a sign saying "do not touch," and even looked over the balcony with the thought of asking the gallery attendant if it was OK to touch the rubber straps. Then my architectural knowledge kicked in, and I realised that there was a further gallery beyond this space and that the only way to get to it was through Sosnowska's installation. My next thought was of the smell of rubber, the disruption to hair and clothing, and the possible soiling of my work attire that the passage might effect. I then ventured into the flexible labyrinth.

This narrative of anticipation is of my own invention, and no doubt others would have a different story. I suspect that prominent in such stories would be the themes of anticipation, expectation, and promise. Whereas in Signer's work it seems that we are observers, Sosnowska invites participation.

Sosnowska's scale models on display are similar to Signer's works, in that we observe as if from a distance, but to the spatially aware, Sosnowska's models provoke anticipation, as if to pose and answer a series of questions: What would it be like to approach and inhabit those spaces? Under what circumstances would it be feasible to build them? Where would they go, and who would use them? I was fortunate to see one of the models as realised in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, last November. It was the one with a hole in the ceiling and shards of debris lying on the floor. As a curious architect my narrative of expectation simply

involved a journey to the centre of the room to look up through the hole in the ceiling, a less visceral and engaging act than walking through a rubber matrix.

As further evidence of the importance of expectation in our experience of art it is interesting to explore the extent to which these works invite us to *repeat* the experience.

Repetition

It is well known that children enjoy hearing the same stories, with the same surprises, recited over and over. Clever television commercials lure us with their familiar and often repeated narratives of transformation and surprise, and sitcoms catch phrases continue to amuse because the outcomes are predicted and anticipated. We inhabit a world of repetition, a theme elaborated by Sigmund Freud, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, to name but three theorists of culture. Paraphrasing Derrida, it is after all not the first time something happens that is the source of surprise, but really the very *idea* of a first time for anything that should strike us as surprising.

On the theme of the TV sitcom, I'm reminded of the comedian Catherine Tate's character who is always in a state of being startled. She jumps out of her skin at the slightest provocation, and even when she knows it's coming; a touch, a cold object, opening a letter, the ring of the doorbell. We know people who are highly strung in this way, but the sketches are also funny, or at least interesting, because we see this behaviour in ourselves. But by one reading of Freud it is the repetition *per se* that provides the fascination. There's something primal and basic about repetition, the cathartic mantra of the child mesmerised by its repeated enactment of acquisition and loss.

Repetition is an obvious feature in the current exhibition of Signer's work. Events are repeated on film and video, the videos are continuously looped, the barrel rolls from side to side, the plastic bag repeats its cycle. Of interest is the repetition of the process of anticipation, and release, as if to prove that it is the repetition that touches us, not the surprise. Perhaps we like to be surprised by the same thing, to anticipate again and again, to be jolted time after time.

We learn from the hermeneutical theory of Hans Georg-Gadamer, that there is variation in any repetition (at least in art), and it is the variation that excites interest. So seeing the video for the tenth time might reveal something new, as the circumstances of its viewing have changed. Someone else enters the gallery. We moderate our own experience with the opinion of another.

This variation in repetition is perhaps more evident in Sosnowska's work. As it happens I had to walk through the rubber room several times, and each time there was a difference: walking on a diagonal trajectory was

different to an orthogonal passage, or walking with arms outstretched, pausing in the middle, or being in the space at the same time as other people, talking, invisibly.

Threshold

The anthropologist Victor Turner emphasises the cultural importance of the rite of passage, the interstitial event in which everything is thrown into confusion, or at least the moment of maximum ambiguity; the journey into the wilderness in the passage from novice to mature member of the community. But as well as marking significant life passages the rite of passage is also a process writ into the finest detail of our experience. We cross thresholds repeatedly, and we don't only pass through and over to something new, but we return. Each encounter with the new is a re-encounter with the old, with variation. As an identifiable phenomenon the threshold is also illusive. It is after all an edge, a moment where we are poised. It is more a remembrance than a present reality, themes amply demonstrated in Signer's work.

Unless I'm mistaken, the moment when Signer's wet brush hits the canvas is missed in the filming. There's an editorial cut such that we don't see the mark being made. This is all pure profit for threshold theory: threshold as absence. The threshold is also the site of the trickster, the sleight of hand, the shadowy hinterland where the thief resides, and the parasite attaches.

The shape formed by Signer's startled paint brush is not so much a point, as an inflected dot, or a comma (inverted). The comma has an interesting character. A comma is a slight pause or gap. The Pythagorean or diatonic comma is the discrepancy between the half octave and octave tunings of musical instruments, about a quarter of a semitone. It is the comma that is removed by standardised contemporary musical tunings, the tempered musical scale. The musical scale is tempered, and the effects of the comma discrepancy rendered less extreme. The adoption of the well-tempered scale is one of the hallmarks of classical music. The naming of the comma, the discrepant, the remainder, is perhaps one of the earliest recognitions of the central role of deviancy, away from idealised aesthetical principles. Though it is also just a coincidence in shape, Signer's work points graphically to the comma, the gap and the threshold.

As architecture, Sosnowska's work is also redolent with the threshold function. The threshold is after all a spatial metaphor. Rooms have to be entered, doors opened, steps negotiated, curtains parted. In the rubber room it remains to be asked, where is the threshold: the room itself, its midway point, entering and exiting, pausing in anticipation, or in the stories about these? It is after all a dense space, filled with rubbery matter, a continuous grid of thresholds.

So this is my review. Causality gives way to the

ubiquity of three highly visceral and obvious phenomena: anticipation, repetition (with variation), and the passage across thresholds. I see the works on view as highly skilled demonstrators of these aspects of human indeterminacy. I also see differences between the works in these terms. Signer's is predicated on an amplification of the event, and everyday objects viewed in unusual circumstances and to which something is happening, has happened, will or might happen. Sosnowska's work is highly spatial

and architectonic, laying greater emphasis on the participation of the viewer, even if vicariously, as in the case of the models. As such, thresholds are there to be touched and negotiated, and not just viewed. The space has an obvious grain, a streaky, gridded, flexible, variable threshold structure, the exaggerated demonstration of which reveals something important about the lifeworld.

The Spatial Principle in the Art of Roman Signer and Monika Sosnowska

Angela Dimitrakaki

Lecturer, University of Edinburgh

Undeniably, the work of both exhibitions for which this seminar is held testifies to the importance of space in contemporary art. But also it reminds us of the diverse ways in which space features in the practice of contemporary artists.

'Space' is of course a rather vague term. There is hardly anything that cannot be designated by this term, from the space of the work of art as such, the space of the gallery or the museum or any other space where the work finds its often temporary identity, domestic space thanks to the advances of second-wave feminism and its legacy, urban space as either the frame or the subject matter of much recent work, nature (naturally!) and, increasingly today, global space. In addition to such literal manifestations of space, art has for a long time now been engaged with space in terms of the psychology of the individual or the group, setting out to explore the various permutations of what we might call 'inner space'. And to make matters more complex, it is rarely, if ever, the case that a work of art attends to the particularities of one space alone. We are always confronted with the interpenetration of spaces – indeed, with the interdependence of diverse *orders of space*.

Beyond such general points however, what remains important is the historically specific interest in space witnessed in contemporary art – by which we often mean art since the 1960s. Despite the emergence of so-called time-based media, 'space' has been a privileged referent in the practice and theory of art and visual culture since the 1960s as well. Some theorists – most notably perhaps Rosalind Krauss – attempted to introduce discussions of space in their engagement with such media. In her well-

known paper on video and narcissism, for instance, from the 1970s Krauss calls attention to the screen, the monitor and how this mirror-like space offered by contemporary technology brings to the fore a narcissistic subject, an obsessive engagement with the self.

But the debates on space that have grown since then tend to include a far wider range of references: both urban space and image-space as sites of the 'spectacle', the 'disappearance/containment' of the object in conceptual art and the turbulent space this act produces, the great exodus of the work of art into the environment; the gendered, classed and racially marked body as the *site* of trauma and pleasure, public art; migration and the global space of capital, cyberspace; the spaces of everyday sociality according to Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', to name but a few. And significantly, in the 21st century there is no single medium or practice associated with a particular debate on space. Instead, the persistent re-significations of space through various media can be used to negotiate the contested passage from modernism to postmodernism and beyond, as well as the increasing complexity of a 'contemporary moment' in the arts and visual culture.

Coming then to the artists whose work provides the focus of today's seminar, how is their practice relevant to questions of space? Which questions would these be? When I was asked to participate in this seminar and I began therefore my quest for more detailed information on their projects to date, I came across two images.

The first was a photographic document of

Roman Signer's piece for the mother of major international group shows, namely Documenta, that takes place in Germany every 4 or 5 years. This piece is called 'Action with Sheets of Paper' and is from 20 years ago, from 1987. The arrested temporality of the photograph allows us to see and contemplate the perverse occupation of the sky by a man-made material – in this case, paper. Like in many other works of Signer, what produces this peculiar spatiality is an explosion. Those of you who have been to the exhibition at the Fruitmarket must have noticed Signer's obvious fascination with gunpowder, with fireballs, and, in general, with blowing up things. Signer uses the explosion to *disturb* space, to highlight perhaps the inclination of space towards the disorderly, its inherent capacity to re-arrange its particular components.

But what also strikes me about this image is the spectacle of destruction it stages. Given our current geo-political situation, this is of course a rather innocent destruction, if such a thing exists. We may think it is a mindless, playful, spectacular act that, at first sight, leads us to apprehend art as a field where a *harmless* experimentation with the absurd is allowed to occur. Indeed, this image implicitly suggests that art is a sphere of human activity where such unproductive acts, acts excluded from the spaces of everyday life, are given a licence to be. Where else would we come across this bizarre filling of the sky with a cloud made of paper if not in art?

Writing this sentence on Halloween night, when the sky in Edinburgh is temporarily illuminated by fireworks, make me think more intensely of art as that space where an aesthetics of the carnivalesque finds a home, where the aesthetics of the carnival, of the mindless disruption of everyday purposefulness, is protected like an endangered species. Originally theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin, author (among other things) of the incomplete essay *Toward A philosophy of the Act*, in this bastion of productivity that once was, the Soviet Union, the theory of the carnivalesque made a great comeback in the 1980s. The theory of the carnivalesque offered Western theorists and artists a framework for articulating their desire to break free from the regulatory practices of the free (sic) world, designed to turn us all into blue- or white-collar workers in the late 20th century. To quote from Wikipedia, Bakhtin, writing covertly against the Soviet state, saw Medieval carnivals as occasions in which the political, legal and ideological authority of both the church and state were inverted, albeit temporarily, during the anarchic and liberating period of the carnival. I can hardly think of a better description for what the photograph documenting the 1987 action shows. The act of destruction witnessed by participants was certainly anarchic and

liberating, and therefore possibly not as harmless as I originally suggested. For such acts, exiled in art, tend to make us –make me, at least- rather nostalgic of the freedom associated with childhood games, transgressions and discoveries and of the powerful mechanisms that have successfully turned me into a *subject* (in the proper sense of the word). Other documented actions in the Roman Signer exhibit, such as the video showing a 'do not cross' police tape flying about and cutting across the sky, demonstrate the same mentality. That Signer spent his childhood in the proximity of explosives should therefore not surprise us. The word 'nostalgia', already mentioned, is for these reasons a key element in these works, invoking a mental space (now lost to most of us) *where the destructive act was not yet clearly distinguished from the creative act*.

But of course nowadays the aesthetics of the destructive act appear, and indeed are, far more sinister. To connect destruction with creativity, let alone anti-state acts with an aesthetics of liberation, has an altogether different meaning. What counts as destruction nowadays is given through works such as Johan Grimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, where the aesthetics of the spectacle is associated with blowing up airplanes, with non-state terrorism and its representation through the media. In other words, it is firmly located in the collapse of a profoundly social global space into media space. Interestingly, Grimonprez's elaborate moving-image essay, shown at Documenta X in 1997, uses footage covering the period from the 1950s to the 1980s to construct an interrupted and yet comprehensible narrative of mediated, spectacularised disaster. As an essay written on Grimonprez's work by a lecturer on Diplomatic American History at Columbia University suggests (yes, contemporary art attracts voices from many disciplines), *Dial HISTORY* informs the viewers that in 1986 (a year, that is, before Signer's spectacular action at Documenta), terrorism killed 25 Americans when 12,000 died in bathtub accidents. In any event, nothing of the carnivalesque remains in this work that, for our purposes, revisits the period when Signer's childhood was over and his career as an artist in full bloom. What are we to think then? That Signer's presumably innocent and rather jolly act has a much darker side when delivered back to the moment that saw its genesis? That the occupation of the sky by the fragments of a destroyed object provides a controversial excitement linked to the sublime rather than the beautiful? And that the fascination with explosions does not only, and against all odds, constitute a prioritisation of the material over the conceptual but that it is also a historically specific fascination? The word 'nostalgia' becomes then even more relevant than before, and art emerges as this

space where a politics of nostalgia acquires its strange function: to remind us of the possibility of reclaiming social space in a way that is no longer possible.

Coming to Sosnowska's work, the approach to space is, in the first instance markedly different. There is certainly no evident interest in the explosion as a means of reconstructing space. The image that first confronted me on the web presented a rather serene, immobile space, a form of architecture about the inside rather than the outside. This work, exhibited recently at the Serpentine, takes the form of an inverted minimalist aesthetic, and by this I mean that we are no longer invited to walk *around* the object, to see the object as an interlocutor in a democratic encounter, as another body in the gallery, but instead we are clearly invited to *enter* the object, to trust and explore its interior. We are familiar with such explorations since we all inhabit interiors: come to think of it, since it is impossible to think of a human being that has not at some point in her life experienced the feeling of being inside an enclosed space, this work seems to appeal to a universal spectator. Except that this work does away with the figure of the *spectator* as such, expecting us to sustain a more multi-sensory engagement with its spatial poetics.

There are two elements that interest me here. First, the extent to which the spaces proposed by Sosnowska are fundamentally anti-spectacular, in that there is no *distance* left between the human subject and the work of art – no distance from which to be fascinated with what we see. Secondly, the extent to which such work expresses a historically dictated *fear* of space. There is little doubt that in this work Sosnowska wanted to present the unpredictability of the interior, its capacity to puzzle and disorient. And this particular reflection on space becomes more evident in the peculiar construction (or should I say contraption?) exhibited in this gallery. Resembling the lower part of a giant octopus, where the visitor sees and indeed crosses the space through its 'tentacles', this is not the friendliest of sculptures. Yesterday a post-graduate student described to me how the rubber 'tendrils' of this piece clung to his jacket as he entered the work, obviously making him feel that the space around him was somehow 'alive'. Significantly, such approaches to space do not just occur in art. They are also to be found in contemporary fiction of a certain postmodern persuasion, such as Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005). Leaving the traditional space of the horror novel, the idea of interior space coming *alive*, being haunted with life of its own, has entered the territory of fiction and art proper.

I see this take on space as melancholy precisely because it does not leave room for grant acts of transgression. This possibly claustrophobic space is the exact opposite from the liberating space proposed by Signer. Signer was born in 1938 in Switzerland and Sosnowska was born in 1972 in Poland. We can infer that the difference we encounter is not only generational but is also attributable to the two different social realities that the places of the artists' origins signify. One article I read describes Sosnowska's work as follows: In constructing her "buildings" inside other buildings, she pushes the imagination toward shut-in situations of intimacy or personal solitude. Her environments, seemingly without exit, reveal the impasse of a blocked reality, where one enters and sinks into oneself, as in the corridor she constructed at the 2003 Venice Biennale or in her labyrinthine sequence of rooms at Manifesta in 2002. And yet, what puzzles me is the affinity I see between space in her work and space in contemporary fiction – contemporary fiction from the United States, of all places. Or to return to visual art (never exclusively visual these days), the affinity I see between her work and that of Rachel Whiteread where the closed-off, haunted space of an inverted interior speaks in effect of the same melancholy principle.

I wonder therefore if the aesthetics of space proposed by Sosnowska reveals a more generalised attitude to space in contemporary art, not in transcending the historical moment and social context that generated it but, on the contrary, in examining their more general relevance. Has space turned into a principle of fear in this contemporary moment when the political theory of the global is convincingly arguing (to quote from Hardt and Negri's magnum opus *Empire*) that there is no space outside capital – *that there is no outside space, period?* I will not attempt to answer this question but – and here is where the work of these two artists appears to represent the two sides of the proverbial coin – if Signer's transgressive animation of space expresses indeed an aesthetics of nostalgia for the impossible, the question previously posed becomes a rhetorical gesture that requires no answer at all.

Roman Signer: Work Functions

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Roman Signer's art objects tend to be characterised by an unusual display of transparency.

To describe them as 'works' is also to describe the very character of the success of the objects themselves. Certainly, the Swiss artist noted in an interview that his greatest fear is that his 'inventions' do not work at all¹. But there is something about this idea of 'work' and its relatedness to 'function' that really interests me and I want to explore in this paper.

To start off with less ambiguity, I'm uncomfortable with the frequent, popular even, invocation of the magical properties professed in Signer's work – the idea that he is 'a magician of elementary physics'² as one critic put, or else he's described as a kind of alchemist of disaster - wrong. Now this is not to say that a theory of magic, or magic as an act of transformation has no relevance to Signer, and I'm sure and I hope that this issue of magic in relation to Marcel Mauss will come up in discussion later. But nonetheless, this artist is not a man playing opaque tricks upon an unsuspecting audience. On the contrary his process, although carefully staged, is frankly displayed throughout.

In one of his recent videos, 'Office Chair', we see the seated artist lightly touch the paper of two rockets that propel him round on the swivel chair. Elsewhere we find Signer attach balloons to a table, allow it to float some distance and then, as the balloons are shot down one by one, the table returns to the ground.

So, through both the record of his transient events in photographs, films and videos, as well as the traces of them left in the objects he displays in his exhibitions, Signer's processes is clear: here is a cause, and here is its effect. Indeed, the effect of such an endeavour is displayed within the very walls of the Fruitmarket gallery. We see very well how Signer's works work. But despite his transparent manner of working, it is the idea of the functioning of the objects he employs which is perhaps less clear and consequently for me far more interesting.

One of many contemporary artists to revisit the significance of the readymade, Signer calls upon his highly selective though simple vocabulary of objects: umbrellas, buckets, tables and chairs. These, while banal, are usually objects of a certain function associated with work in the form of labour. I believe it is by no coincidence that we find him utilising an 'office' chair in the video of the same title. Similarly we see the artist reappropriating the dreary businessman connotations of a suitcase and umbrella into a surreal artwork. The unremarkable titles of his work, such as 'Suitcase', 'Blue

Barrel' or 'Ladder', belie the absurd ways in which Signer frames their function.

Of course, these gestures and titles can be interpreted as a visual gag or a pun on the idea of labour-related materials and accessories recast as 'works' of art – works that are the subject of the artist's own sense of 'play'. However, it is perhaps more interesting to note that Signer appears to unlock what I am tempted to call a certain 'velocity' latent within them, a velocity that completely exhausts the functionality of that object. It's clear to see, for instance, that the umbrella shot through the middle of a briefcase exhausts the functionality of both objects. This is not to say that the artist abuses function. Rather, his reconfiguring of function consequently reconfigures the object, and the remnants of his orchestrated event reveal a complicated redundancy of the objects recast as art.

Thus, as items of cultural value displayed in a contemporary art space, these objects begin to exhibit a very strange uncommon and new state, not quite ruin nor is it failure, but a state of process, of an attempt at working outside their set function, but equally succeeding at working within another. Succeeding because of course we have an exhibition of the work.

Now, it is helpful here to elucidate this term of 'function' more exactly, if only briefly. I think this is particularly important because the word seems so relevant to an artist whose materials are almost exclusively readymade objects. When I say 'function' there is the assumption we are talking about 'use', something for which the object is suited or developed. We are also talking about the performance of the object, or an action by which the object fulfils its purpose. If we follow a dictionary definition of the word this is the sort of thing that we'd find.

In terms of a theoretical backdrop, it's worth noting that late sociologist Jean Baudrillard picks up on Karl Marx's idea of 'use value', but actually ends up finding a new term, 'functional value', in his doctoral thesis *The System of Objects*³ from 1968 – a period where he still considered himself a Marxist, and thus writes from a very different point of view from his later works. Baudrillard he describes function as instrumental purpose, as well as the utility of an object within a system of values. In terms of this idea of function, however, what is particularly interesting is how Signer takes simple objects and bestows upon them experiments whereby objects transcend their proscribed function. This functional transcendence, to borrow Baudrillard's phrase, is, I would argue, what makes the works operate as strange markers of process, of art work functioning.

Working within the very limited parameters of their original design, Signer recasts these objects within a world in which their intended functional value, their instrumental purpose and performance are of little or no value once exhibited. Instead, he puts them within specific and contrived situations, and reconstructs them within the context of a cultural space (the gallery or museum) that aspires to be less defined by those conditions of functional value out in the space that lies beyond its very door. To clarify then, Signer is able to remap the co-ordinates of functional value because he is working within a cultural space that invites such a move.

Quickly returning to Baudrillard's *System of Objects*, we find the author stating that: "space is the object's true freedom, whereas function is merely the object's formal freedom". While this notion of 'true freedom' should perhaps be viewed with some caution, this interplay between an object's space and an object's function is, I think integral to opening up Signer's art works to different critical perspectives, even if to underline the tension between both space and function in sculptural terms, and incidentally, I think this might also

find a very different kind of resonance in terms of the post-soviet context of Monika Sosnowska's work.

But within the terms of such an argument of Signer's objects, one begins to wonder if, despite that the artist's process-as-a-whole being conceived of as an integral part of the finished art work (that the video of an experiment is its own work, as much as the sculptural object displayed after is), it is this very process that pushes the functional objects into a radical state of redundancy, of functional transcendence, whereby they become objects of art. We may see how Signer's works work, but what I hope to have begun to question, and not necessarily with any concrete conclusions, is how these exhausted objects function within their specific cultural space.

1. Artist interview with Massimiliano Gioni.
2. Gerhard Mack, 'Crashes and Bangs. On Suddenness as a Strategy in Roman Signer's Work', in Michaela Unterdorfer (ed.), *Roman Signer: Sammlung Hauser & Wirth* (Zurich: Hatje Cantz, 2004). 17
3. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (2005 edn., *Radical Thinkers*, London: Verso, 1968).

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