DAZZLE GRADUALLY

Ayse Erkmen

Karin Sander

Roman Signer

Mikolaj Smoczynski

Ken Unsworth

curated by Gregory Volk

September 11-October 11, 1997

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cover:
Roman Signer
Black Cloth (Schwarzes Tuch) 1994
drape, explosives and pails

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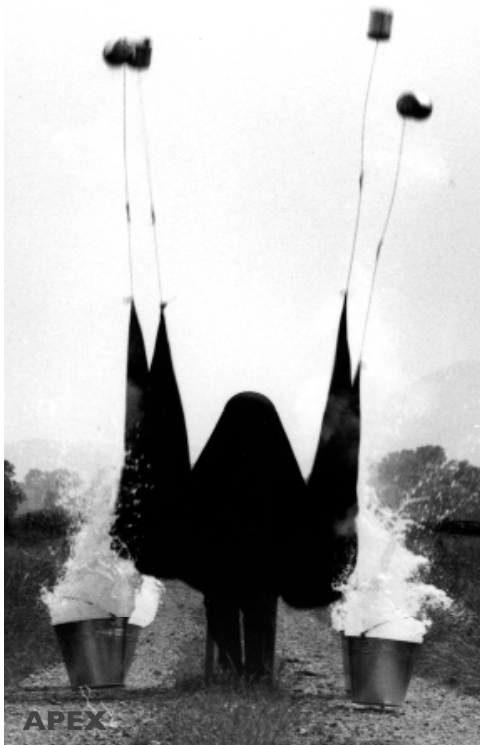

DAZZLE GRADUALLY

The five artists here come from widely diverse countries—Ayse Erkmen is from Turkey, Karin Sander from Germany, Roman Signer from Switzerland, Mikolaj Smoczynski from Poland, and Ken Unsworth from Australia. They also represent quite different generations, and their work itself, which traverses several media, is likewise considerably diverse. One thing they do share, however, is the way they work between genres, in flexible interstices between categories, for instance between painting, architecture and sculpture (Smoczynski); between video and sculpture (Erkmen), although others of her projects have been equally combinatory but in very different ways; between sculpture, architectural interventions and the conceptual (Sander); between performance and sculpture (Signer); and between sculpture and installation (Unsworth). Mixing genres self-consciously, as a theme in and of itself, is not what they're about. Instead, their combinations seem effortless and understated, lyrical and necessary, and the works that result have a patient ability to dazzle gradually (a term, by the way, shamelessly pilfered from Emily Dickinson.) In each cases, their work opens outward (and deepens and enlarges) to include all sorts of other things, like sensuality, suppleness, and humor; a palpable sense of beauty and, at times, a sharp, crisp note of near-absurdity; an acute, if pared down and austere, attention to materials and an ability to evoke a mesh of associations and metaphors.

Karin Sander is represented by a polished chicken egg set on a pedestal. Using sandpaper, she polished the egg by hand, turning its fragile surface into a highly reflective field that responds to everything in its vicinity. This piece is related to others of Sander's works, which in some manner reveal and clarify, alter and display, the site where they are located, for instance a semi-translucent room made of canvas installed in a museum's exhibition hall, or a red painted circle atop a concrete cylinder that marked the exact geographical center of Münster, Germany (this piece was for the recent Sculpture Projects in Münster exhibition, to which Ayse Erkmen and Roman Signer also contributed important pieces. It is especially related to her wall-polishings, in which she sands and polishes a section of a wall, to elicit fantastically smooth surfaces that also reflect their surroundings. Both wall-polishings and polished egg have a pronounced painterly aspect, but instead of an artist's subjective imagery and invented forms, what you see are the surroundings—the daily reality of the space, in other words—as a kind of shimmering and ephemeral projection.

Karin Sander *Chicken Egg, Polished, Raw, Size 0,* 1994

A polished egg, however, takes things in unusual and surprising directions. For one thing, there are all these connotations, to primal origins, for instance, and to primal femininity. For another, there's the way this humdrum object gets transformed into what seems like a rare, exotic thing— a 19th century Fabergé egg, perhaps, or a bejeweled, heirloom; even a devotional object with spiritual significance. At the same time this piece is an excessive, and in many ways hilarious, take on anti-monumental sculpture. While all sorts of "soft", temporary, or fragile materials have entered into sculpture during the past couple of decades, you just can't get more fragile than an egg. Then there's all that hands-on touching, rubbing, and preparing, which seems at once sensual and precarious—one false move, or the application of a bit too much pressure, and the piece would be, well, ruined. That's the kind of overlay with which Sander is dealing, and it's why her work, which can be austere and reductive, is also richly evocative and packed with multiple resonances.

Mikolaj Smoczynski *Comtemplate no. 1, La Napoule, South France 1995, September 10, between 4:15 and 4:17 p.m.* photograph

Mikolaj Smoczynski is known for his architectural interventions and transformations. He typically works at and on specific architectural sites, with the kind of non-art materials (like walls, floors, and plaster) that already belong to the site in question. In various works, he has torn up floor tiles to form a pyramidal sculpture, made an entire installation out of stacked up building materials, and excised sections of the outer surface of wall to uncover its underlying structures and its hidden visual forms. There can be something very rough about Smoczynski's work, with all that cutting and that scraping, gouging and excavating, which in part responds to the distressed urban architecture (and the rickety history it represents) that you find pretty much everywhere in Poland. But this roughness hardly occurs in a way that's muscular, brawny, or heroic. On the contrary, Smoczynski's deconstructions, or partial demolitions, of a site can be supremely delicate, with a great deal of subtle beauty that is also painterly. Moreover, how the slowly changing forms of sunlight in a space interact with his interventions is as much part of the project as anything else. What emerges are potent juxtapositions: destruction and entropy side by side with regeneration and renewal.

Photographs have long figured prominently in Smoczynski's oeuvre, although he does not conceive of himself as a photographer per se. Instead, he uses photographs to explore various of his sculptural ideas, and at times as trace evidence of sculptures that were meant to be temporary. Here, his photo installation on the wall consists of two related clusters. One is of a rock in ocean water—hour-long exposures that wind up looking very sculptural and in many ways artificial. While taken outside, these photographs seem like interior shots of made or invented objects. The other photographs are the reverse. They're really of a made thing, of a mass of tar and paper arranged in his studio, but they nevertheless assume a burgeoning organicism, as well as elements of geology and landscape—a fictive or alien landscape that you can't exactly place.

This exhibition is the first time that Ayse Erkmen's work has been shown in New York. Six video monitors reveal green, digitally rendered land mines—animated, rubbery, vaguely anthropomorphic shapes endlessly proceeding in their own weird pageant. There is something at once stately and comical about the way they hop, gyrate, and then spring off into the distance. In the process, a lethal thing, and one of the fiercest symbols of the 20th century, becomes hilarious, becomes whimsical, becomes frisky and exuberant. Please note: you'll find the same shape repeated, non-digitally, on floor tiles in an off-the-beaten-track section of the gallery's office floor (as I wrote at the beginning, these artists are very interested in conflating genres.) One part of the work is meant to be seen, and the other to be used—it's absorbed into the daily life of the gallery.

While this is her first appearance in New York, Erkmen has of late been exhibiting a great deal in Europe. For the recent Sculpture Projects in Münster exhibition (a very good exhibition, to which Karin Sander and Roman Signer also contributed important pieces) a work by Erkmen featured a helicopter that appeared in the sky lugging a dangling figurative sculpture in a harness, 15th and 16th century sculptures taken from storage in Münster's main museum, the Westfälisches Landesmuseum. Coming into view, it circled several times above the steeple of a neighboring cathedral and eventually set the sculpture down on top of the museum's roof, all the while blasting hats off the heads of onlookers, shaking the trees, and causing a windy commotion. Reminders of flying angels and miraculous ascensions combined with references to the famous helicopter scene at the beginning of Fellini's La Dolce Vita, in this piece which was at once absurdist and poetic.

Roman Signer is represented by videos of selected actions/performances accomplished during the past couple of years. Signer's actions are typically staged before small audiences, or at times before no audiences at all. He works with elemental things, like fires and explosions, smoke and water, and with everyday objects like hats, bicycles, and canes. Signer's deadpan, willfully non-theatrical actions are events occurring in time, but they also result in sculptures—just exceedingly provisional ones which sometimes only last for a few seconds. I recall one very well, from the first time I encountered Signer's actions (also in videos) at Galerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris. A helium balloon ascended near the vertical torrent of a waterfall. As it rose and fluttered, it drifted toward the water—an inquisitive, tentative, and much-desiring thing. Finally, the balloon touched the water (and you really feared for its survival) only to be blasted back into the air, where it hovered for awhile, as if shaken and bewil-

Ayse Erkmen *Mines* 1997 video installation

Ken Unsworth *Rapture* 1992 mixed media

dered. This spare combination of a balloon and rushing water—and all the inhuman physics that it dramatized—nevertheless evoked deeply human things, like need and longing, fear and curiosity, eroticism and hesitation. This happens throughout Signer's actions/sculptures, as well as his with his more durable sculptures in which inanimate objects often leap into spasmodic life.

Ken Unsworth has long been acclaimed as one of Australia's foremost artists. I first encountered his work several years ago at an exhibition in Poland, a mixed-media piece involving haystacks, dollhouses, a large mirror, and in an adjacent room more hay piled atop a piano. This piece was inspired, in part, by Unsworth's encounter with the music of the Polish composer Gracyna Bacewicz. Barely visible on the piano was a charred composition by her, and a constructed female figure (presumably referring to Bacewicz) blasted upwards, taking with it the top of the piano. Both elements—the installational and the sculptural—were exceptionally pronounced in this quirky meditation on music and home, safety and mortality. For this exhibition, Unsworth will be showing a reprise of a 1992 piece, appropriately titled Rapture. Aerial figures with imperturbable expressions are headlocked in steel vises. They're simultaneously caught and ecstatic. They're in the grip of a dazzle that just won't let go.

Gregory Volk