



School: School of Art

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Project Title: *Roman Signer's Library of Marvels*

UOA: 32: Art and Design

Research Questions

Problem 1: Biographical criticism first came under attack from Marxist, feminist and deconstructionist theorists in the middle of the last century. Today, the dismissal of biographical criticism is an orthodoxy in much contemporary art theory, yet biographical-critical narratives importantly continue to underpin the contemporary art world's ways of working (the monographic show, catalogue or book; the operations of commercial galleries; the modelling and re-modelling of the canons of contemporary art). In some cases, the writing of the early critics of biographical criticism itself now exhibits a 'biocritical' bent.

Problem 2: In the work of Swiss artist Roman Signer, now 82, 'Signer' figures as a complex and subtle authorial identity. The work, based in principles of simplicity, transparency and the unfolding of natural processes, gives rise to a complex, profoundly affective poetics hinting at a diverse range of references – from the highly (sometimes ridiculously) specific, to pressing issues about our species being. The relationship of the artist to the authorial identity that emerges in the work is extraordinarily delicate, and its critical analysis constantly risks breaking a butterfly on a wheel.

This project set out to ask:

1. How might an art critical project with a clearly biographical element help loosen the grip of the idea of 'biographical criticism' as a monolithic entity (a celebration of individualist artistic 'genius' cut loose from its historical determinants)?
2. Given that Signer is an avid collector of books, might the development of a work that is based on the contents of his library, and that deliberately sits somewhere between art criticism, archival display, and art, offer a way of generating a critically aware reflection on the delicate relation between Signer, his work, and the specific intellectual and historical contexts in which they reside?
3. The project will exhibit a 'triangular' uncertainty about its significance: is it primarily

about Signer, his books, or its maker (Withers)? Will this support the objectives in questions 1 and 2?