

## Rachel Withers: *Beim Radiosender Beromünster*

As a child, I was both intimidated and fascinated by the bulky, dark-veneered, obsolete valve radio that brooded silently in the family sitting room. Turning its tuning knob, I'd watch its cursor travel across the fascia from one strange, resonant name to the next: *Riga, Lahti, Hilversum, Praha, Kalundborg, Lyons, Midland, Budapest, Droitwich, Allouis, Rabat, B.B.C Light, Lisboa, Gothenburg, Andorra, Eireann, Strasbourg II, Paris, Algiers, Ankara, Sundsvall...* In 2009, Roman and Aleksandra Signer presented me with DVD of a new video work by Roman, *Beim Radiosender Beromünster*, and the title alone set involuntary memories fizzing. "Beromünster" – distant, mysterious, and rendered particularly thrilling by two small, alien dots floating over its 'u' – was one of my favourite names on the dial.

*Beim Radiosender Beromünster* was filmed around nightfall underneath the Blosenbergturm, the transmission tower of Canton Lucerne's Beromünster radio station, and it can be read at one level as a wistful souvenir of the now-obsolete communication system, and indeed the wider 'old world', mapped by the names on that valve radio. At the time of shooting (2008) the transmitter's summit was still buzzing with high-voltage electricity and the ground around it was crusted with frosty snow, facts that are crucial to the mechanics and aesthetics of this short, exquisite video. It starts with a pan down the tower's elegant lattice, followed by a glimpse of Signer himself (trademark knitted cap on head, gig-lamp spectacles glinting) holding a neon lighting tube. Attached to one end of the tube is a copper wire; out of shot at the wire's end is a helium-filled balloon. The tower's high voltage is enough to ionise the gas in the tube; it glows brilliant white and casts Paris green reflections on the snow around it. In the background gleam the lights of the Canton's households; the sky and snow register in shades of ultramarine. Signer releases the tube and it skates away from him, scraping against the hard snow and emitting a stuttering, crystalline chime. It gathers speed, an emerald-fringed white diagonal dancing and singing against a backdrop of lapis lazuli, and then sinks to the ground in apparent exhaustion. End of film: a minute, give or take, of Signer perfection.

Later in 2008, the Beromünster transmitter was permanently shut down, so you might say the tube's musical performance is one of the tower's last broadcasts; a swan-song. By contrast, the work it inspired in Signer represents a stunning synthesis of the aesthetics and tactics of his Super-8 films (1975-1989) and his later uses of video. Like Super-8 films such as *Bogen* (1978) or *Brücke mit Feuer* (1981), the work documents a benign 'guerilla action': Signer and his accomplices packed their kit, drove to Beromünster, set up the camera and conducted the beautifully successful experiment without any prior announcement or institutional fuss. The resulting film has the brevity, simplicity, abstract wonder and sheer oddness of the most perfect of the Super-8s, whilst mobilising video's additional dimension of infra-diegetic sound (the Super-8s are all silent) in exact harmony with the Super-8s films' aesthetic.

However, *Beim Radiosender Beromünster* also represents Signer's later tactics with video, in that it (successfully) risks a much heavier metaphorical 'load' than we tend to find in the Super-8 films. Its imagery subtly but deliberately references obsolescence and redundancy, aging and disappearance. These themes, recurrent and clearly legible, haunt a number of Signer's more recent videos. In *Old Shatterhand* (2007) an antique, ludicrous, massage machine turns a wobbling Signer into the trope of the aging gunslinger whose pistol can no longer find its mark. In *Kajak mit Metronom* (2008) the artist paddles one of his beloved kajaks on dry land, struggling to keep up with an unforgiving metronome's ever-increasing tempo. And in *Two Umbrellas* (2016), two paired objects stand together but are assailed by the force of nature – an incoming tide. Inevitably, one is swept away before the other, leaving its companion to face its fate alone.

The readings above need a little tempering, however. In Signer's works, hints of tragedy are always inflected with a sense of the absurd; and in Western art, the ultimate absurd – or at least paradoxical – object is the autonomous work of art itself, the "redundant" object whose usefulness is premised on its very redundancy. Signer's whole oeuvre, early or more recent, fluently, persistently and reflexively explores the paradox of the usefulness of the useless object or exercise, establishing an essential tension between conceptual investigation and poetic potential. It's this that makes his work exceptional, and constantly compelling.