Event Sculpture 3
Roman Signer, ‘Chair’ (2014)
8 December 2014, 5.30pm

Response by Agnieszka Gratza, 10 December 2014

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The sky above the Henry Moore Institute looks menacing, almost glowering, as it is reflected in the polished black granite façade. In this bright winter light, the joints between the granite slabs are visible when standing in front of the Institute, yet the imposing façade appears almost monolithic. ‘It’s like a blank slate,’ a woman next to me remarks, as we await the start of Roman Signer’s sculptural event – the third in *The Event Sculpture* series.

It is nearing midday and the mood outside the Institute is one of anticipation. The entrance area has been cordoned off to keep the steadily growing number of spectators at a safe distance. Something is about to happen, though few people know the exact nature of Signer’s ‘Chair’ (2014). The title itself does not give much away. Rumour has it that the event had been tested out first thing on the previous Saturday morning so as not to reveal the secret. That is the way the Swiss artist likes to keep it; knowing the script of his ‘action sculptures’ would blunt their edge. At last three men appear and busy themselves around the eponymous sculpture – a wooden chair of no particular distinction that, as I later find out, has been made in a furniture factory in Appenzell, the Swiss canton Signer hails from. This mundane object, however, has been destined for higher things. Stripped of its utilitarian function, the chair is fitted out with a remote-controlled model jet engine, fuelled by blue-green-tinged kerosene that is visible in an opaque container strapped to the bottom of the seat amid a tangle of multi-coloured wires.

Once the men succeed in securely fastening the chair to a pair of metal cables hanging down from twin poles affixed to the top of the asymmetrical building façade at both ends, the contraption hangs in mid-air a little above the ground, as if poised for action. It is tilted downwards by the sheer weight of the jet engine. Its position seems to have been carefully calibrated to be dead in the centre of the Institute’s entrance, whose elegant glass entrance doors have been left wide open. After the event Signer, who appears keen to impress on me the potential danger of the operation, explains that this position was chosen to allow the chair to swing inside and not risk damaging the granite façade, in case something went wrong.
Dressed in black, the sprightly-looking septuagenarian artist is assisted by a technician and his long-time collaborator Armin Caspari – the ‘pilot’ manning the remote control. It falls to him to ignite the engine. The chair is poised for take off – as the acrid smell of kerosene and the jet engine’s noisy whirring sound attest. It takes a while to warm up and for seconds, which feel like minutes, nothing happens. Signer once confided, in an interview with the curator Massimiliano Gioni, that his greatest fear was that one of his experiments would fail to work. I wondered: was this fear about to be realised?

No sooner had I formulated the thought, the chair starts rocking back and forth. It reminds me of a seat in the back of a row of wooden chairs in the 2010 work ‘Cinema’ by Signer that was shown at the Swiss Institute in New York. The chair then starts to rise against the backdrop of the crenelated façade, higher and higher, until it is turned upside down like a giddy child on a playground swing with nothing above it but sky. It hovers in the air, briefly, to then rise again, gently swaying, lingering awhile, until it seems time to descend – which it does in stages. The person besides me gasps and laughs uncomfortably, watching the chair puff out smoke in its final convulsions. The disconcerting, yet strangely elating, spectacle lasted at most four minutes, but the smell of kerosene lingers on, making all of us standing together on Victoria Gardens outside the Institute feel light-headed.