

***Some cars are “works of art”. Some works of art are cars.***

When it comes to car-culture and the classic car scene, the “smash ’em up” crowd is generally frowned upon. We aim to preserve the cars we love. Many car marques, however, have built their history on the back of motorsport which inevitably comes part-and-parcel with the occasional collisions or mass pile-ups that, let’s face it, are hard not to look at without a certain awe. When it comes to historical marques like Rover though, one could safely say the picture is a little different.

Rovers have traditionally been about sound, sober engineering, refined build quality, and any innovations are usually put to the service of safety, economy and driver/passenger comfort rather than performance at the racetrack. The exceptions to this have been a few moments here and there in Rover’s history that seem to be more about proving the worth of an idea rather than winning titles.

With the above in mind, it was with surprise I discovered that a contemporary artist, whose work I already knew and admired, had made a sculpture using a smashed Rover SD1. Swiss artist Roman Signer is known internationally for his “time-sculptures”. His work usually involves the action of destroying an object, often a machine, and video-taping the process. Commonly the video recording itself becomes the artwork, displayed on a monitor, or projected. Instead, in the case of *Engpass*, the result is left as a tactile, static display, like a sculpture or an installation.

The work I’m referring to, titled *Engpass*, is basically two walls arranged in an off-parallel, or inclined formation, ie one open end is narrower than the other. The car has been driven into the wider end, between the walls, and is forced into, and out of, the narrower end, which is dimensionally less than the width of the car. The first incarnation of *Engpass* happened in Hamburg, 2000. The most recent happened in Hobart, 2011. The car was sourced with assistance of the Rover Car Club of Australia. In January of that year I climbed into my 1985 Rover Vanden Plas and drove from the Blue Mountains, New South Wales to Hobart, Tasmania to witness the crashing of the Rover.

The following is an interview I conducted with Roman Signer via email.

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DA: Why was the SD1 chosen over other cars?

RS: When I was making the piece *Engpass* in Hamburg in the year 2000, I asked for a strong and wide car. The stunt company from Berlin that was engaged to carry out the stunt brought the Rover from Berlin. The stunt specialists said: “You need a car that can’t easily be pressed together from the side, for safety reasons.” It wouldn’t have been possible to drive into the enclosure with a Deux Chevaux!

David Walsh, the owner of MONA – Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania – wished to acquire the piece for his new museum. The piece in Hamburg unfortunately had been dismantled. The stunt company from Melbourne wanted to use

the same car as in Hamburg. They would also use the same intended speed of 35-40 km/h. The result was almost the same.

DA: I notice that the Hamburg car emerged from the concrete structure about 70cm further than the Hobart car has. In fact the Hamburg car looks to have suffered substantially more than the Hobart car. Why do you think the two versions are so different? Are these sorts of variations important to the work?

RS: In Hamburg the driver had driven too fast. I had told him to drive 30km/h when driving into the concrete structure, but he drove at least 40 km/h. There was almost an accident.

It is coincidence exactly how it looks in the end. It depends on the driver. In Hamburg I was afraid – through the other side, where the car was emerging from the concrete structure, there was a scarp. The car would have fallen into the sea if it went straight through. And we didn't have a public safety diver with us. The team in Hobart was working much more carefully, more professionally.

DA: The title of the work fascinates me. “Engpass” means “bottleneck”. In its day, the SD1, or “The New Rover 3500” as it was known somewhat drove itself into the bottleneck of the 70s automobile market, and it didn't emerge unscathed. There were global fuel shortages at the time. Also bad quality control and cost cutting by Rover's parent company, the government owned British Leyland, resulted in a car that struggled to live up to its promise. This observation can be applied to many other cars of the era. Does the title have such a layered meaning, or did you intend a more a simple, descriptive title?

RS: The title refers to physical qualities of the piece. It's a very simple title. It refers to the sculptural characteristics of the work. I didn't think about the economics and history you mention.

Sometimes in villages with narrow streets there are these signs that mean “Bottleneck”. Do you have them in Australia as well?

DA: We have two different signs that mean similar things. One is a “road narrows” sign, and the other is a “divided road ends ahead” sign. Both have a graphic that looks like a bottle.

DA: In the 1983 John Carpenter film *Christine* (originally a Stephen King novel) the “possessed” car forces itself down an alleyway that is too narrow for it. The car essentially crushes itself in at the sides in order to drive down the alley in pursuit of its hapless victim. Have you seen this film? Are you influenced at all by Hollywood-style portrayals of destruction?

RS: No, I haven't seen this film. I'm not influenced by Hollywood portrayals of destruction. I think they are exaggerated. In Stromboli, a small Volcanic island off the coast of Sicily, they only have Piaggio Apes. They have Piaggio taxis where you can sit in the back. When I rode in one I was holding on to the side of the car and I had to pay

attention to my fingers. The road was so narrow in certain places that I had to retract my fingers.

DA: The relationship between a performed action, video, and the human body makes for a rich terrain of possibility. This is something that television shows like Myth Busters and Top Gear have exploited, becoming hugely popular and financially lucrative in the process. Your work pre-dates the *modus operandi* of these shows. What is the essential difference between your work and these other mass-media productions?

RS: My work is sculpture. I'm not interested in the sensational, as the mass-media is. In my work the static result is very important, not only the action.

DA: What do you drive now, and what have you owned in the past?

RS: I drive a Piaggio Ape. When I was young I drove a 1939 Oldtimer Renault Juvaquatre Cabriolet. Unfortunately I couldn't keep it because the repairs were getting too expensive and I didn't have a space to store it.

DA: You have done two other works with the Piaggio Ape. Both involve it traversing a ramp. In *Piaggio auf Schanze* (2003) it becomes airborne. In *Unfall als Skulptur* (2008) the Piaggio flips over backwards, after ascending a much steeper ramp, spilling the four 44 gallon drums of water it's carrying. The cars are propelled by gravity only, it would seem, and initially guided by a track. The idea of a Piaggio becoming airborne is quite funny. Is humour an important aspect in your work?

RS: Yes. Humour can be an aspect of my work. It happens that some works turn out funny, although it mostly isn't my intention.

DA: The car in the Hobart *Engpass* will deteriorate in different ways over time. The body will rust, the rubber will perish and the interior will crack and break down too. For me this is very interesting. How do you feel about this? Will the car remain where it is for a long time, or will the work have to be re-done with a "fresh" car at some point?

RS: The car will remain there for a long time. The work won't be redone. I would like to go back to Hobart in about ten years to see how the car will have changed.

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Daniel Argyle

Many thanks to Barbara Signer, who assisted with the interview process.

More on Roman Signer can be found here:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Signer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Signer)  
<http://www.romansigner.ch/>

Interview originally published in 2012, in issue 116 of *Rover*, the magazine of the Rover SD1 Club (UK).