

Dieter Roth  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 139

University Art Museum  
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*Schokolade-objekt*  
(Chocolate Object), 1969



"Dieter Roth was born among the butchering Germans, at that horrible stretch of time, when that cannibal, awful Hitler, Adolph, was just getting the German's going at their best hit, butchering war. Hell was loose, but Roth survived, beatings and scoldings he survived, shitting and pissing in his timid pants, poor shaking little turd, he even managed to live through that rainstorm of bombs and grenades awful smashing horror brought about on all, the living and the dead, by the horribly cruel cool English and the United States of Northamerica, horrible mankillers. Roth got out of that place by chance of being one of the citizens of his horrible home country, namely, selfrighteously, murderously Christian Switzerland."<sup>1</sup>

So, in his own words, began the life of Dieter Roth. Both in Hanover in 1930, he was allowed to escape the nightmare of war in 1943 by virtue of his father's Swiss nationality. In Zurich, Roth lived with foster parents who ran a small hotel that served as a haven for artists, musicians, political dissidents, and Jews. For the first time, Roth encountered there ideas and forms of expression, such as jazz music, which were to inspire his lifelong reaction to the bourgeois culture whose insane war had so traumatized his youth. Like the Zurich Dadaists of Europe's previous conflagration, Roth was to develop a kind of artmaking that challenged superficial decorum while exposing naked and often embarrassing truths about himself and mankind.

The sadness and cynicism derived from Roth's wartime experience has been channeled into an

extraordinarily prolific body of work that is touched with a distinct--albeit ironic--sense of humor. Roth's artistic production has included artist's books--a medium that he pioneered in the mid-1950s--poetry, graphic design, jewelry, printmaking, drawing, painting, sculpture, film, video, music, installation, performance, and photography. Constructivist influences, which dominated much of his early graphic design work, gave way around 1964 to a more irreverent, even anti-aesthetic approach reflecting Roth's contacts with Daniel Spoerri, Joseph Beuys, and other members of the Fluxus movement.

Roth's seemingly arbitrary and often spontaneous creations refuse to be judged by conventional standards of beauty or interest. In what was certainly his most controversial exhibition, and one of only a handful to date in the United States, Roth filled the Eugenia Butler Gallery in Los Angeles with stacks of suitcases stuffed with cheese. As the exhibition progressed, the cheese began to putrify, attracting hordes of flies to the gallery and, no doubt, driving away hordes of human visitors. The concept of the show derived from a German slang expression, "Who's left his suitcase here?", a comment made when someone has broken wind.

Roth's clownish display of the unseemly presents an implicit challenge to the "good taste" of the bourgeois art world and, more specifically, to the market mechanisms that underlie it. Like his Belgian contemporary, the late Marcel Broodthaers, Roth's art and persona is consciously positioned in ironic capitulation to the forces of historicism and

commodification. He agrees to display art in galleries, only to undermine the gallery's historical/social function; he sells art, but, he cautions, "I have to admit that I'm not giving people anything but impressive objects that they can sell in an emergency, unimpressively."<sup>2</sup>

Roth's work is strongly characterized by a sense of the contingency and mutability of all things. He has expressed these concerns formally through his use of organic materials such as sour milk, cheese, chocolate, birdseed, and rabbit shit. More than one Dieter Roth sculpture simply no longer exists due to infestations or other natural processes of decay. Given that Roth's favorite subject for art is himself, the transient nature of his materials takes on a poignantly mortal aspect. One senses, for example, both nobility and vulnerability in his *P.O.T.A.A. VFB (Portrait of the Artist as a Bird Food Bust)*, 1969, whose chocolate substance is worn and pitted by time.

It would be unwise to dismiss too easily the work of this rare curmudgeon; in fact, we desperately need to heed his call to honesty, to emotion, and to the will to carry on--no matter if it has to be as "steamer of the dampsteamingwet, shitpissing pants, stumbling around the corners of the all encompassing butcher's shop. Turdknicker awfully bastard of fear, complaining."<sup>3</sup>

Dieter Roth has led an extremely peripatetic existence, traveling frequently between homes and studios in Iceland, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, the United States, and England. He has taught at The

Philadelphia Museum College of Art (1964), Yale University (1964-65), the Rhode Island School of Design (1965-67, 1986), and the Staatlichen Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (1968-70). He now lives in Switzerland and Iceland.

Lawrence Rinder

<sup>1</sup> Dieter Roth in *Dieter Roth* (New York: David Nolan Gallery, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> "Conversation between Dieter Roth and Josef Helfenstein," *Berner Kunstmitteilungen*, trans. by Tom Traynor (Bern: Kunstmuseum Bern, January/March 1989), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Roth, p. 8.

Works in MATRIX:

*Schokolade-objekt (Chocolate Object)*, 1969, toy doll with chocolate, 10 1/2 x 5 x 4 1/2". Courtesy of Arthur and Carol Goldberg Collection.

*Löwenselbst (Lion-self)*, 1969, chocolate on wood base, 10 x 8 x 5 1/2". Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.

*P.O.T.A.A. VFB (Portrait of the Artist as a Bird Food Bust)*, 1969, chocolate on wood base, 8 1/2 x 6 x 4". Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.

*Schokoladenzwerg (Chocolate Gnome)*, 1969, chocolate, glass, plastic gnome, 14 1/2 x 5 1/8" (cylinder). Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.

*Chocolate Wafer Picture*, 1969, filled chocolate wafers and curdled milk in plastic cover, ed. 50, 19 5/8

x 27 1/2". *Lent by Steven Leiber, San Francisco.*

*Motorcycle*, 1969, metal, paint, wood, ed. 100, 5 x 8 x 4 1/2". Private collection.

*At Home*, 1970, screenprint, 15 colors on gray card, ed. 120, 25 1/2 x 36 1/4". *Lent by Steven Leiber, San Francisco.*

*Im Meer (In the Sea)*, 1970, metal, sugar, cardboard, ed. 100, 4 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 5". Private collection.

*Spice Picture*, 1971, wood, glass, metal, spice, ed. 30, 30 1/2 x 61 1/2 x 2 3/4". *Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.*

*Entenjagd (Duck Hunt)*, 1971-72, chocolate, plastic, wooden box, 21 1/4 x 25 1/4 x 2 3/4". *Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

*Self-Portrait as Pariser*, 1973, etching, aquatint, ed. 50, 18 3/4 x 14 1/2". *Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

*Two Shits with the Eyes*, 1974, graphite and tape on paper, 25 5/8 x 30 1/8". *Lent by David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

*Self-Portrait, Ei, Selbst für Selbst (Egg, Self for Self)*, 1978, oil crayon on paper, 19 x 13 5/8". Private collection, San Francisco.

*Stuttgarter Selbsthase (Stuttgart Hare Portrait)*, 1978, oil crayon on paper, 19 x 13 5/8". Private collection, San Francisco.

*Tapete (Tapestry)*, 1987, spray paint and gouache on transparent paper, 24 1/2 x 34 1/2". Private collection, courtesy David Nolan Gallery, New York.

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

Mokka Kaffi, Reykjavik, Iceland '58; Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles '69; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '75; Swiss Pavilion, Venice Biennial '82; Galerie Toni Gerber, Bern '82; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago '84 (catalog); Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I. '86; Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain Midi-Pyrénées, France '87 (catalog); David Nolan Gallery, New York '89 (catalog).

#### Group exhibitions:

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, *Between Poetry and Painting* '65; Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, W. Germany, *Documenta 4* '68; Guggenheim Museum, NY, *Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf* '72; University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, *Artists' Books* '74; Orangerie, Kassel, W. Germany, *Documenta 6* '77; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London '77; Carl Solway Gallery, New York '78.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Weatherson, Alexander.

"Dieter Rot in 1972: Feeling the Bones," *Studio International*, vol. 183, no. 941 (Feb. '72), pp. 60-64.

Schwartz, Dieter. *Auf der Bogen Bahn* (catalogue raisonné) (Zurich: Seedorf Verlag '81).

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