

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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## Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth

by Becky Brown

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Dieter Roth's interests span a range of themes between which it may seem difficult to connect the dots. In the visual realm, he was consistently preoccupied with optics, symmetry, language, and the spectrum of abstraction. On the level of ideas: accumulation, language, time- and record-keeping, processes of growth and decay, and uses of series. He has worked in almost every medium as yet conceived within and on the fringes of contemporary art, in bodies of work that often proliferate beyond a viewer's capacity to digest them. Yet *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth*, in far less square footage than its recent counterpart at Hauser & Wirth (January 23 – April 13), offers a trajectory that brings a kind of logic to this sprawling oeuvre, often by emphasizing Roth's own rigorous efforts to document, orchestrate, collect, and contain his own output.

The show begins in the late 1950s with books (containers in their essence) and ends in the early 1970s with the *Containers* print portfolio and related drawers, boxes, and cylinders. In the rooms (and years) between, we encounter *The Lake of Tears (Der Tränensee)* (1973), which assembles his mini-poem classified ads in a single volume; the "suitcase" portfolio cover that acts as container and frame for "6 Piccadillies" (1970); and the viewing table, chairs, and storage drawer built for "Snow" (1964/9). Roth constantly packaged his work in the interest of controlling its reception, which may seem paradoxical because chance and natural evolution—release of the artist's control—were at



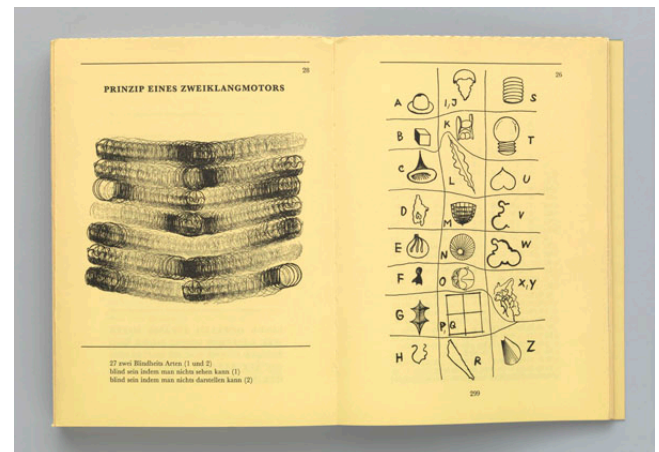
Dieter Roth, "P.O.TH.A.A.VFB (Portrait of the artist as a Vogelfutterbüste [birdseed bust])," 1968. Multiple of chocolate and birdseed. Publisher: Hake Verlag, Cologne. Fabricator: Rudolf Rieser, Cologne. Edition: 30. The

the heart of his conceptual mission. The ultimate act of self-administration is *Collected Works Volumes 1–20* (*Gesammelte Werk Bande 1–20*) (1969–79), the reproduction cum remix of all of his books to date, which delights in its constant amendments to the originals. Roth may be the artist who famously opened a path for nature to run its course, but he was extremely specific about the terms and limits of that path.

This specificity extends to the beginnings, endings, and dimensions of defiantly un-specific content. In 1961 Roth made a series of books that simply collect and bind random groupings of found printed paper: newspapers, comic books, scraps off the print-shop floor. These works follow a Cagean model of filling a prescribed time or space with chance content. In a contemporary art world where painstaking, fetishistic specificity is made possible by the Internet, it's refreshing to look back on work in which arcane information is not the point. Instead Roth calls our attention to the complex and saturated world *around* the object through a systemized collection of specimens. There is both celebration and critique in this gesture, but as we travel through the artist's rampant mind, the scale tips toward the former. Roth was more inspired than outraged by the world at large—an inspiration, of course, heavily infused with anxiety, obsession, and (usually dark) humor.

Curator Sarah Suzuki crafts a masterful journey, but there are still elements of Roth's work that a viewer cannot wholly access in a given time and space. The pressings, squashings, and other experiments with organic matter and natural decay of the late 1960s and early 1970s ("Big Sunset(Grosser Sonnenuntergang)" (1968), "Big Landscape(Grosse Landschaft)" (1969), "Basel on the Rhine" (1969), "Root Treatment(Wurzelbehandlung)" (1971)) are seen as framed pictures frozen in time. We cannot observe the progress of grease stains spreading, mold growing, or iron, oxygen, and water reacting to form rust. These works are infinite collections of moments in the time a process takes to unfold, gathering every infinitesimal change (chemical and visual) that occurs along the way. If "nature looks like an abstract painting," as Roth said, we only see the abstract painting—but we know that unlike most, it will never be finished, and that Roth is not exactly the painter. Even works in more traditional formats have this effect: we see the original "6 Piccadillies," but we do not see all the postcards later issued as *96 Piccadillies*, or the yet additional images that constitute *120 Piccadilly Postcards*. The volume of poetry *Shit (Scheisse)*(1966) is republished 15 times, emphasizing its own playful self-correction with pile-ups of extraneous grammar.

Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Endowment Fund and acquired through the generosity of Peter H. Friedland. Photograph: John Wronn. © 2013. Estate of Dieter Roth.



Dieter Roth, "Codex from MUNDUNCULUM: A tentative logico-poeticum, represented as plan and program or dream for a provisional mythebarium for visionary plants.VOLUME 1: Rot's VIDEUM (MUNDUNCULUM: Ein tentatives Logico-Poeticum, dargestellt wie Plan und Programm oder Traum zu einem provisorischen Mythebarium für Visionspflanzen. BAND 1: Das rot'sche VIDEUM)," 1967. Artist's book, offset printed, with letterpress cover. Publisher: Verlag M. Dumont Schauberg, Cologne. Printer: BossDruck, Kleve, Germany. Edition: 1,000. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Sullivan Fluxus Collection Gift. Photograph: Jonathan Muzikar. © 2013 Estate of Dieter Roth.

Roth's work is constantly multiplying, and thus constantly eluding the viewer who wishes to see (and consume) it all. But this is part of the thrill: there is always more to discover, rediscover, imagine and reimagine, and more work to be done.

“P.O.TH.A.A.VFB (Portrait of the artist as a vogelfutterbüste[birdseed bust])” was made in 1968 when Roth was 38 years old. In contrast to its namesake, Roth proclaims to show himself as an old man. James Joyce wrote his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916, at the age of 34, reflecting on a period of his life that was coming to a close. Roth looks forward to a period of *his* life still far in the future, offering a tongue-in-cheek vision intended to be as fleeting as any of our myriad barely conscious, half-formed future plans. We read that this work was meant to be mounted on a post outdoors, eaten away into nothing—but we see a sculpture on a pedestal behind glass.

“P.O.TH.A.A.VFB” was made in an edition of 30. While I am grateful that this one will forever be preserved at MoMA (so that I am able to encounter it), I'm glad that at least one of the other 29—as we see in a photograph—had the life and death that Roth envisioned.

Roth titled another work in reference to Joyce: the epic book-in-the-expanded-field “Snow.” Five years and many setbacks in the making, this project addresses its referent in a very different way. Instead making a playful pun, Roth appropriates an otherwise generic bit of weather that takes on particular meaning in Joyce's 1914 short story “The Dead.” Snow becomes one among a group of characters we briefly encounter, and as our protagonist endures bad news through a sleepless night, his attention turns to the snow that falls over all of Ireland, “upon all the living, and all the dead.” Forces of nature as the great equalizer, even between life and death, provide a focus for what can feel like a proudly unfocused project. This choice casts “Snow” as a sincerely existential investigation, nearly opposite in tone from the witty, absurd irreverence that might form one's first impression of Roth's art. The magic is in his ability to move so effortlessly between these poles that the spectrum is condensed into a bulging nucleus where all levels of experience converge, and we begin to forget the differences.



Dieter Roth, “Snow,” 1964/69. Artist's book of mixed mediums, with wood table and two wood chairs. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. Photograph: John Wronn. © 2013 Estate of Dieter Roth.

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