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Roth, Dieter, *Karnickelköttelkarnickel*, 1972, In Hasenform gepresstes Kaninchenstroh, Kaninchenköttel; Auflage 250, 21 x 10 x 19 cm (Objektmass), Privatbesitz

Documentation level



Name

Roth, Dieter

Other version/s of name

Rot, Diter

Roth, Karl Dietrich

Dates of birth and death

* 21.4.1930 Hannover, † 5.6.1998 Basel

Municipality of origin (CH)

Fahrni (BE)

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Maler und Zeichner. Installation, Skulptur, Film, Texte

Fields of activity

Malerei, Installation, Druckgrafik, Zeichnung, Objektkunst, Book Art, Konzeptkunst, Collage, Fotografie, Schmuck, Keramik, Video, Film, Textilkunst, Multiple, Plastik, Multi Media, Assemblage, Mixed Media, Literatur

Lexicon article

Dieter Roth grew up as the son of a German mother and Swiss father in Hanover. As a 13-year-old, he was evacuated from the city, which had been devastated by the allied bombardments, to Switzerland. The family joined him in 1947, settling in Bellach and moving to Gerlafingen in 1949. 1947–1951, apprenticeship as a graphic designer with [Friedrich Wüthrich](#) in Bern. Friendship with [Franz Eggenschwiler](#). Having completed his apprenticeship, Roth took private tuition with [Eugen Jordi](#), earning his living with casual employment. Formative acquaintances in the active

young Bern art scene with [Paul Talman](#), [Bernhard Luginbühl](#) and [Daniel Spoerri](#). Metal sculptures and the first films. 1953, editor of *Spirale* magazine together with [Marcel Wyss](#) and [Eugen Gomringer](#). In 1954, Roth established Galerie 33 in Bern together with [Rolf Iseli](#), Peter Meier and [Walter Vögeli](#).

In 1955, Roth moved to Copenhagen, where he worked as a textile designer. In 1957, he emigrated to Iceland. Married Sigríður Björnsdóttir. Together with Einar Bragi, established the Forlag ed publishing house in Reykjavík. Published his first books. Birth of son Karl. Worked as a jewellery and furniture designer, model-maker and commercial graphic designer. Began a lively correspondence with Daniel Spoerri. First typographical books. 1959, stayed for several months in the United States (mostly in New York, several days as visiting critic at Yale University, where he met Josef Albers). Explored Op Art, photograms, kinetic pictures and objects. 1960, sojourns in Copenhagen, Basel (GGK advertising agency), and Paris, with Daniel Spoerri: participated in the *Festival d'avant-garde* in Paris. Met Robert Filliou, Jean Tinguely and Emmet Williams. 1960, William and Noma Copley Foundation Award. 1961, birth of son Björn. Participated in the *Bewogen beweging* exhibition in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Stockholm. 1963, birth of daughter Vera. Created first works from perishable organic materials. 1964, separated from his wife. 1964–1965, lectureship at Yale University and the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. Met the Fluxus artists Dick Higgins, La Monte Young, Nam June Paik and George Brecht. Created prints using chocolate. Translated and extended the *Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls* (Anecdotes on the Topography of Coincidence) by Daniel Spoerri. From 1966, collaboration with the publisher Hansjörg Mayer (until 1980). Alteration and transfer of texts by others. Between 1967 and 1974, Roth lived with the artist Dorothy Iannone. 1968, exhibitions at the Galerie Zwirner, Cologne (*Vergrößerte Kleinigkeiten*) and the Galerie Felix Handschin, Basel (*Haufen*). Taught at the Watford School of Art and (as a colleague of Joseph Beuys) at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. In 1969, the first of 40 volumes of the *Gesammelte Werke* (Collected Works) to date was published by Edition Hansjörg Mayer, Stuttgart. 1969, exhibition, *Fründ, Friends, Freunde und Freunde* at the Kunsthalle Bern, together with [Karl Gerstner](#), [André Thomkins](#) and Daniel Spoerri. Exhibition of 40 cheese suitcases at the Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles. 1972, participation at the *1. Berliner Dichterworkshop* (1st Berlin Poets' Workshop) together with Friedrich Achleitner, Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener, and others. 1973, exhibition, *Books and Graphics* at the Hayward Gallery, London; 1975, *Boeken* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1977, participation in *documenta 6*, Kassel; 1980, exhibition, *Graphik, Bücher u.a.m.* at the Kunstmuseum Luzern; 1982,

film installation [A Diary](#) in the Swiss Pavilion at the *Biennale di Venezia*. From 1984, permanently domiciled in Basel. 1986, exhibition, *Tränenmeer*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel. Lectureship at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. 1987, *Bilder & Teppichausstellung*, Holderbank Management & Beratung; 1988, *Dieter Roth. Zeichnungen*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and Kunstmuseum Solothurn; 1992–1993, *Gartenskulptur*, Lagerhalle Holderbank; 1995, *Dieter Roth. Werke 1951–1961 und das Solothurner Wandbild*, Kunstmuseum Solothurn; 1997, *Dieter Roth*, Musée Rath, Geneva; 1998, *Gedrucktes, Gebundenes, Gepresstes*, Graphische Sammlung, Albertina, Vienna; 2000 *Die Haut der Welt*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (thereafter at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona); 2002, *documenta 11*, Kassel; 2003, *Roth Zeit. Eine Dieter Roth Retrospektive* at Schaulager, Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, Basel (thereafter at the Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig, Cologne, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York); 2009, *Dieter Roth Souvenirs*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

Dieter Roth's earliest works include studies of nature and self-portraits as well as a series of sensitive watercolour landscapes. Encouraged by his teacher Eugen Jordi, Roth acquired a broad repertoire of different graphic techniques (such as dry point, woodcut, linocut and lithograph). He preferred to use cheap materials, such as old planks for woodcuts or the tin from tea caddies for etchings.

In the early 1950s, Dieter Roth was one of the protagonists of Bern's young art scene. After exploring the work of [Paul Klee](#), he initially oriented himself towards [Jean Arp](#) and his arrangement of organic forms. 1953, with the foundation of the *Spirale* magazine, he turned to Concrete Art, whereby he was primarily concerned with sequences and permutation processes. Early in his career, he was already interested in the representation of virtual motion sequences and optical interferences; he thus became, largely independently of the pioneers of this genre such as Victor Vasarely or Yaacov Agam, an Op Art artist *avant la lettre*.

Dieter Roth created his first books in Bern – the *Kinderbuch* (Children's Book, with geometrically shaped holes cut into the pages), and the *Bilderbuch* (Picture Book, with transparent, coloured sheets). During his stay in Copenhagen, the artist started working on his first typographic book, *Bok* (1956–1959), which made an original contribution to concrete poetry in its use of typographic letters as an ideogrammatical artistic device. After moving to Iceland, Roth produced his so-called *Schlitzbücher* (Slit Books), sheets of cardboard featuring louvered incisions with which moiré effects could be created by laying the sheets over one another. In 1959, the Slit Books were published by *Edition MAT*, established by Daniel Spoerri. In the early 1960s, the artist privately published several books in which he perfected his graphic techniques.

The last examples of Roth's exploration of visual effects are his kinetic *Drehbilder* (Rotating Pictures), but at the same time he also created books by stapling together the pages of daily newspapers or comics that indicate new points of reference: exposed to the ideas of the Nouveaux Réalistes around Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth's artistic interest now focused on the trivial in everyday life, the phenomenon of the transformation of quality into quantity, order into

disorder. This new orientation found its true expression in *Snow* (1964) and *Copley book* (1965), which are book objects and actual collections of collages, graphics, photographs and real fragments in one.

Extending his interest in motion sequences into the area of the organic, as of the mid-1960s Roth explored the processes of transformation and decay in materials alien to art such as meat, cheese, bread or chocolate; as the result of organic metamorphoses, these works went mouldy or were eaten by maggots, weathered or disintegrated. To this group of works belong the *Hackfleischbild* (Mincemeat Picture – remains of rotting mincemeat between sheets of glass in a wooden frame, soil, wire), the various versions of the [Sonnenuntergang](#) (Sunset – slices of salami laid onto cardboard under plastic film), or box-like books in printed tin foil filled with mutton chops (*Poemetrie*).

As of the 1960s, his literary production attains an important position in Roth's oeuvre: using a pictorial alphabet consisting of 23 stamps, in *Mundunculum*, his *Tentativen logico-poeticum* or *Mytherbarium für Visionspflanzen* (1967), the artist created a sprawling symbolic cosmos consisting of images and texts. Dieter Roth's poetry, published in volumes such as *Scheisse* (Shit, 1966) or *80 Wolken* (80 Clouds, 1967) oscillates between resorting to romantic, sentimental topoi and ironically breaking them. As of the 1960s, Roth's notebooks and diaries, some of which were published, became collections of ideas and self-observations. The artist also explored the possibilities of remodelling and transformation in his books, by changing the sequence of the materials initially used in extensive *Buchverzweigungen* (Book Ramifications), constantly processing them by printing over, smudging and copying them, and exchanging positive and negative. Roth also applied this procedure in his sheets of graphic designs, at the same time perfecting up-to-date photographic reproduction and screen-printing techniques.

Exchanges with artist friends became a central concern during the 1970s. It was not unusual for collaboration to take place in settings similar to performances or happenings and involving the widest variety of media. These projects and performances, with artists such as Richard Hamilton, Hermann Nitsch, Arnulf Rainer, Oswald Wiener, Emmet Williams, and Roth's son Björn Roth, were documented in books, films and videos, as well as on records. From the 1970s, the artist started to keep things that would otherwise be thrown away: over the years, this resulted in an extensive and constantly growing *Sammlung flachen Abfalls* (Collection of Flat Refuse), which ultimately became a body of several hundred folders in which the artist kept fragments of everyday life.

Dieter Roth's drawings and paintings of the 1970s and 1980s are gestural and impulsive: in groups of works such as the *Telefonzeichnungen* (Telephone Drawings) or the *zweihändigen Schnellzeichnungen* (Quick Two-Handed Drawings), he gave the pen free rein and worked on the picture support in circular, expansive movements. He extended his painting to assemblages in which he incorporated everyday objects, technical appliances and refuse, painting or smearing them over with energetic movements.

After his video installation at the *Biennale di Venezia* in 1982, Roth used the new visual documentary media of video and Polaroid to capture fragments of the world in which he lived. Together with a plethora of collected or recycled materials, musical apparatus and instruments, in the 1990s these form the basis for elaborate multimedia exhibition projects on factory floors or in museums, on which the artist would work for months together with his son Björn and numerous assistants. These installations became walk-in environments whose process-driven genesis was documented and made comprehensible for visitors.

Institutional collections (selection): Kunstmuseum Bern; Kunstmuseum Solothurn; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Archiv Sohm; Vienna, Museum moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig; Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich.

Michael Baumgartner, 1998, updated 2010
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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