

## The Artist as Archivist, The Book as Body: Dieter Roth's *Gessamelte werke*

### **Buzz Spector**

An archive is a repository of texts and/or images organized around a given subject. The archive provides for a relation of general equivalence between its components, and for a means of sorting through their accumulation. Unlike dictionaries or encyclopedias, which define words or ideas in relation to general linguistic or cultural models, and whose cognitive “force” is directed centrifugally, toward the margins of a discursive terrain, the force of the archive is centripetal, drawing in traces of its concern that coalesce to form clearer—which is to say, denser, more focused—insights into the meaning of its subject. The archive shares this inward focus with the diary, whose text is a reiteration of experiences directed toward the future self of the diarist. But diaries turn every experience into a personal one, a matter of effect rather than intention, and it is the intentionality of the archive, its emergence after the fact, that redeems it from diaristic narcissism.

Since images, especially photographic ones, are more contingent than words, an archive of images is more subject to their circumstantial character. The photographic archive must privilege the typical qualities of its items over their specificity, and is better understood by a sampling of its contents than by the retrieval of particular images for inspection. The proliferating image bank in Dieter Roth's *Gessamelte werke* (*Collected Works*) is exemplary in this regard. This series of published volumes reproduces a fair amount of Roth's multiplicitous art, but also, and crucially, documents all forms of

Roth's cataloguing of his activities. The *Gesameltewerke* surrounds Roth's production, subsuming the material diversity of his studio work within a ring of printed pages that both document his art and double it. These books shift our attention from the variations in Roth's practice to its typicality, revealing themselves as a work in progress, and Roth as the preeminent artist-as-archivist of his own existence.

Roth's sudden death in 1998 ended an extraordinary artistic and personal odyssey. Born in Hannover, Germany, in 1930, he was sent by his parents to Switzerland in 1943. There he came of age as an artist, poet, and (at first) graphic designer. Beginning with a short stay in Copenhagen in 1955-56, he moved back and forth between studios in Basel, Switzerland and such far flung locales as Reykjavik, New York, Providence (Rhode Island), Paris, Düsseldorf, London, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Berlin. His relentless energy and experimentalism was joined with a deeply felt skepticism about human circumstance and the pretensions of the artworld. He frequently refused offers to exhibit, lecture, or teach when he doubted the motivations of those issuing the invitations, but the generosity and material abundance of his art inspired artists and lovers of art all over the world. The curator Harald Szeeman points out that Roth's "subversive, at times contrarian" interests led him always along the path (both creative and personal) of greatest resistance:

"Whether working in sculpture, poetry, music, or design, he was ever the intellectual, an existential furnace who let 'crap' be crap even as he transposed and transformed it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Szeeman, Harald. "All and Nothing." *Artforum*, Volume XXXVII, no, 2, October 1998: 100.

There are twenty six published volumes<sup>2</sup> of Roth's *Gesameltewerke* (out of more than 200 in manuscript form) including books 1-20 and 35-40. While the first twenty volumes are numbered consecutively, they were neither published, nor do they record the work they contain, in chronological order. The publication sequence of the last six volumes is as follows: 36, 40, 38, 39, 37, and 35. These interruptions in numerical sequence result from a deliberate decision by Roth to subvert any assumption that the books are merely chronicles of artistic activities taking place elsewhere. Even the volumes (20 and 40) that catalogue Roth's various studio activities show how the order of his production differs from that of its documentation. Roth intended for the *Gesamelte werke* to be understood as an artwork in its own right, and for its separate numbers to articulate the widest possible range of Roth's engagement with the form of the book.

The individual numbers of the *Gesamelte werke* are mostly the same size (23 x 17 cm (9 x 6¾ inches) ), except for Volumes 1 and 8, boxed and slip cased respectively, which each contain dual folios of cut and/or printed sheets. These, like many others in the series, are re-publications of limited edition bookworks that Roth had made since the mid-1950s. In Volume 1 (1976), one folio (entitled *bilderbuch* (picture book) ) is contained in a three-ring binder filled with 23 sheets, 16 in different colors of transparent plastic that have been carefully cut through with square openings in a variety of sizes, and the rest in white paper, also cut through with little squares. The other folio (*kinderbuch* (childrens book) ) is a spiral bound sequence of 28 colorfully printed pages with squares, circles, and half-circles cut through them. The cutouts give readers a view into each folio

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<sup>2</sup> All except the last of the *Gesamelte werke* volumes were published by Hansjörg Mayer, whose family owned a large printing facility in Stuttgart. Mayer himself was a practicing poet, active until around 1968, whose linguistic experimentalism was connected to Concrete Poetry. He began publishing Roth's work in 1969, and produced the first of the *Gesamelte werke* volumes in 1971.

beyond the surface of the sheet before them, so that every turning of a page generates an ever shifting array of colors and shapes. Johanna Drucker describes the effect of the cutouts as “an emphatic recognition of the standardized features of construction and a thorough deconstruction of the conventional flat surface of the sheet.”<sup>3</sup> The holes cut into the sheets of the twin folios of Volume 8 (1976) become grids of parallel rectangles in alternating vertical and horizontal arrays, one folio is in black and white, the other in red and blue. It has been noted that these early works of Roth bear the look of his youthful training as a graphic designer in Switzerland, but the arduous labors of incision and penetration visible on every page of these works also point to the indefatigable engagement with process that characterizes the rest of Roth’s huge and diverse creative output.

Several of the *Gessamelt ewerke* books are composed of collated and bound blocks of found printed pages. Although they are identified as re-constructions of earlier self-published editions, the pages of these text blocks are equivalent, rather than identical, to the material Roth had previously employed. Volume 5 (1970) consists of approximately 700 portions of pages cropped from editions of a Reykjavik newspaper. For anyone who doesn’t know Icelandic these pages are unreadable, but recurring photographs and advertisements reveal that the artist used multiple copies of this found textual material. Among the recognizable images are those of American astronauts walking on the moon and portraits of various world leaders, but most of what Roth included here is the ordinary stuff of the daily newspaper; articles, letters, columns, and advertisements, which we are given to recognize rather than read. Since the size of the

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<sup>3</sup>Drucker, Johanna. *The Century of Artists' Books*, New York: Granary Books, 1995: 74.

newspaper sheet is far larger than the page size of Volume 5, Roth simply used separate portions of the newspaper to fill each book in the edition. Similar methods of cropping and insertion are employed in Volumes 6 (1971) and 7 (1974). Volume 6 is composed of some 500 cropped printer's run-up sheets. These are sheets of paper that are sent through the presses after a print run to clean the ink off the rollers before another printing plate is put to use. Pressmen save these sheets and often run them through the press several times before discarding them, creating random overlays of images and texts reminiscent of, say, the transfer drawings and prints of Robert Rauschenberg. Roth's cropping and binding of these sheets enhances their accidental estheticism, and Volume 6 assumes a nearly narrative aspect as readers pass through its saturated images made of found words and pictures. Volume 7 contains two sections, entitled "bok 3b" and "bok 3d" after Roth's original self-published versions of 1961, and is made up of selected pages from comic books followed by pages taken from children's coloring books. In both sections these blocks of cropped papers have been die-cut with multiple circular holes so that graphic and textual details "leak" through successive pages. The dynamic relationships between pages are further exaggerated by Roth's inverting of some of them before collating and binding the edition. As Drucker points out, "no element of structure remains neutral in Roth's production since the whole functions only because its parts have been brought into sharp focus in relation to the way they perform."<sup>4</sup>

Roth employs several documentary methods in the *Gesamelte werke*. The volumes discussed thus far could all be described as simulating earlier work, but Roth also produced several numbers consisting of sequences of photographs of his one-of-a-

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 74.

kind books of collage and drawing. These books offer readers a view, once removed, into the luscious squalor of Roth's paginated layerings of drawn, painted, and collaged debris. Volume 11, entitled *Snow* (1970), is a page-by-page photographic tour of the collection of handmade books Roth made with the help of students of the Philadelphia College of Art during his visiting artist residency there in 1964. The distance between the original and the copy stand is greater than the distance between the reader and the page that bears its reproduction, which means that such fine details as Roth's texts, both typeset and handwritten, are often rendered illegible. The photographs also edit out the materiality of the layers of stuff that coat so many of his pages, but Roth sometimes uses multiple images of particular pages to show the differences in appearance caused by detachable pictorial elements. The reproductions run to the top and bottom edges of each printed page, but Roth has numbered them in the narrow strip of white that runs along the left side of every page. What's being counted, though, are the photographs themselves rather than the pages of either the originals or of *Snow*. The subversive importance of this might be epitomized by the two photographs (numbered 51 and 52) of a spread from one handmade original, identical except for the stray piece of paper that has flopped in front of the opened bookwork in the second image. The paper strip isn't an effect located within the object but, rather, something that happened to it while it was being photographed on the copy stand. What's recorded in *Snow* is as much the method of documentation as its ostensible components, and the inevitable changes, of scale, materiality, and detail, which impede our regard of the absent original, are alluded to in Roth's punning title that refers, in part, to the obliterating static on a television screen.

Pages and the conditions of their documentation are also a significant aspect of Volume 17 (1976), which reproduces the work Roth had previously published as *246 Little Clouds* for Dick Higgins's Something Else Press, New York, in 1968. Starting with a 180 page manuscript of his own words, phrases, and questions, Roth loosely tacked small drawings to each page with tape. The 246 pieces of paper curled up from the sheets to which they were attached, and the resulting shadows were captured in the process of photo documentation. Roth identifies Volume 17 as a "reconstruction" of the Something Else Press edition, but while the two books reproduce the same drawings and attachments, the reproductions are of vastly different quality. The black ink images in *246 Little Clouds* are dark and slightly fuzzy, while those in Volume 17 have a wider range of tones and clarity. The difference might be accounted for by problems with the printing press used for the first publication, excessive ink absorption of the paper it was printed on, or poor quality of the printing negatives used to make its plates. Whatever the circumstances involved, the excellent printing quality of Volume 17 allows readers to see the subtle movement of the light source employed in photographing its pages. Clive Phillpot describes the process of documentation thusly:

"When these 'little clouds' were photographed, they were illuminated first from the right, as if by the rising sun. The light source was then moved one degree at a time until it lit them from above, as if at noon. Finally they were lit from the left, as if at sunset. The taped scraps of paper therefore cast shadows much as clouds might do."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Phillpot, Clive. "Some Contemporary Artists and Their Books," essay in Lyons, Joan, ed., *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Layton, Utah: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books, in association with Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985: 106.

The meandering quality of Roth's pages of collages and text is counterpointed by the steady shift in the direction of the shadows, a shift whose sequential and durational aspects are intrinsic to *246 Little Clouds*' status as a work in book form.

There are significant differences in printing quality among the books of the *Gessamelte werke*. This is not an accidental result of varying production standards. Roth's extensive knowledge of offset lithography— among many other forms of printing and printmaking—and the state of the art printing equipment to which he had access gave him control over every aspect of the publication process. He decided upon the most appropriate level of production quality for each of the *Gessamelte werke* books, and made brilliant use of the means for their realization, even when the demands of a particular publication meant doing deliberately bad prep- or presswork. Such programmed technical failings served the larger vision of Roth's art in much the same way as the estheticized corruption and decay in his sculpture, installations, and drawings made with organic substances.

The ways in which Roth offered readers a biographical record also changed over the course of publishing the *Gessamelte werke*. Most of the earlier numbers are engaged with phenomenological aspects of the book form or relatively straightforward documentation of his studio production, but Roth's writing always has a certain confessional aspect to it, however, and there are passages in many of the books disclosing his temper and skepticism. Even in the large body of concrete poems he published during the 1960s the elegant formal arrangements of letterforms often spelled out scatological words. Roth's fascination (some would say obsession) with the relationship between the excremental, sacramental, and language led to his publication of several volumes of

incantatory poetry and drawings, including *Scheisse (Shit, 1966)*, *Noch Mehr Scheisse (Still More Shit, 1968)*, and *Die Gesamte Scheisse (The Complete Shit, 1968)*. These were all republished in Volume 13 (1972), but Roth continued to write and publish poems, essays, plays, and a variety of musical compositions even as he continued to compile the *Gessamelte werke*.

Roth published two late numbers documenting individual studio projects. Volume 36 (1977) records the *96 Piccadillies*, his epic series of works on paper that each start with an enlarged photo reproduction of a postcard view of London's Piccadilly Square. The images in the book are themselves printed postcard size and could in fact be cut out and sent through the mail since Roth has designed a standardized postcard format for the verso of every sheet, including those bearing the rambling (ranting) text, in English and German, of his Foreword. The fantastic variety of mediums Roth used in producing these works are recorded as captions on these postcard backs. The largest of the *Gessamelte werke*, Volume 37 (1987), is entitled *1234 Schnellst-Zeichnungen (1234 Most Speedy Drawings)*, and simply reproduces that number of pencil drawings, which indeed look like they were drawn in haste. This is not a casual observation. Roth was extraordinarily fluent with pen, pencil, or any other marking implement and made enormous quantities of elegant drawings, both figurative and abstract, showing great stylistic coherence. The scrawlings he employed in several of his books were deliberate exercises in that category of image-making, and the swirling forms and darting lines on the pages of his *Most Speedy Drawings* bear little resemblance to the distracted and repetitive markings of a doodler.

The ordinariness of Roth's life is writ large in his late work. His videos, photographs, installations, and, preeminently, his collections of various stuff, allow us (indeed, insist upon) access to the usually private goings-on of his daily activities. Likewise, in the later numbers of the *Gesammelte werke*, Roth publishes piles of documentary material connected to his career as an artist. The archival aspect of this self-representational project is clearly seen in Volumes 38 (1980) and 39 (1985), each subtitled "Smaller Works," and containing many clipped and reprinted pages from published interviews, letters, reviews, and artist's statements. Much of these texts are written by others, with Roth's handwritten corrections, commentaries, and drawings, as well as his drafts of his own writings subsequently published elsewhere, and hundreds of pages reproducing crumpled receipts, inventories of his work, stained cocktail napkins, photocopied photographs, musical scores, calendar pages, and assorted scraps of paper, often covered with scribbled notations. This mass of personal detritus is counterpointed by material excesses in the printing process. Roth's "palette" here includes magenta, greenish blue, sepia, yellow and black, often mixed together in the ink reservoir of the printing press. The occasionally noxious color combinations resulting from this method evoke the organic tinting Roth employed in his work with molds, mildews, and rots. The presswork, especially in Volume 39, includes entire signatures so coated with ink that their pages are barely legible. There is something poignant and sad about this inundation which can be understood as a kind of washing away of the personal record the book was apparently published to preserve.

On pages 303-307 of Volume 39 are ten photographs of a smiling, bearded man,<sup>6</sup> facing the camera while seated at a dinner table in what seems to be a public gathering. It takes careful scrutiny to see that Roth was seated next to him, since he has covered over his own visage with ink and paint. All the while the other man leans, speaks, and gestures toward his (almost) obliterated companion. The oddly affected absence in this sequence captures, in miniature, a melancholy which pervades the entire book. Dieter Schwartz's characterization of Roth's accounting of himself, "the reporting is always a sort of staging"<sup>7</sup> aptly describes Roth's capacity for obscuring himself in the midst of an apparent disclosure, but Schwartz also knows the existential crisis of Roth's life, the tormenting self-doubt and "fear of being falsely categorized" which led him "to shun dealers and museum officials,"<sup>8</sup> and often complicated his relationships with friends and colleagues. The remarkable achievement of the artist is there for anyone who peruses these books. Still, for all that Roth divulges about himself in the *Gesammelte werke*, there remains a certain shadowy reserve about it, a slight but profound distance between the inner self of the man and its pages.

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<sup>6</sup>Arnulf Rainer, a German artist with whom Roth collaborated on several projects in the 1970s.

<sup>7</sup>Schwartz, Dieter. "Irony Tower," *Artforum*, Volume XXXVII, no, 2, October 1998: 99.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 142.