

Books as Collections: Dieter Roth's Artists' Books as Case in Point.

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Collecting and exhibiting as artistic practices have come of age since their discrete emergence at the outset of the 20th Century in the works of Surrealist and Dada artists. However, it was only with the increasing awareness of cultural power mechanisms in the 1960s, and the resulting critical attitude towards traditional institutions, that artists addressed aspects of collecting and integrated them into their artistic practice on a regular basis. For some of them, collecting even became a *leitmotiv* within their work: a case in point is the oeuvre of the German-born artist and poet Dieter Roth, whose first comprehensive retrospective took place in Basel, Cologne and New York in 2003–4.¹ The exhibition leaflet stated:

Systematically, Roth put together collections of all sorts of things. Texts and sketches, so-called flat waste, or a complete visual inventory of all the buildings of a town are but a few of the many usual and unusual objects he thought interesting enough to be kept. A number of these collections reappeared later on in one of Roth's monumental works such as *Collected Works* 1969-91, *Flat Waste* 1975-76, 1992 and *Reykjavik Slides* 1973-75 and 1990-93.²

A second recurring theme in Roth's oeuvre is the book. Roth's first books, *Children's book* and *Picture book*, were self-published in 1956; by the time *Collected Works 20: books and graphics* was released in 1971, to accompany a travelling exhibition of his graphic oeuvre, Roth had already completed fifty-six books; many more were to follow until his death in 1998.³ This makes him a pioneer of the conceptual artist's book – together with Ed Ruscha, who published *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* in 1962 – and one of the most prolific book artists of his time.

Artists' books can be related to collections first and foremost by virtue of being books, but also with respect to their historical origins in the 1960s, which they share with the artistic practice of collecting, as discussed by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix.⁴ Roth shared with other artists of that time concerns for: the demystification of authorship, originality, and the work of art; the criticism of traditional institutions and the mechanisms of cultural power; and artists' increasing preoccupation with linguistic theories.⁵ The principal aim of this paper, however, is to discuss analogies between theories of collecting and artistic

practice in the field of artists' books, and it will only marginally address Roth's art-political concerns. In other words, this paper attempts to probe the possibility of transferring theories of collecting onto Roth as an artist-collector whose collections took the form of artists' books. First, the paper examines books and collections as structures, objects, and spaces. It subsequently discusses the reasons for, and implications of, interactions between individuals and collections or artists' books. By drawing attention to the inter-relation between the artist and his collection, this paper finally analyzes autobiographical and self-referential aspects of Roth's particular double role as artist-cum-collector.

Structure, object, and space

Books and collections share more than just one constitutional affinity. In terms of their external structure, the notion of a distinct entity and a cohesive force is intrinsic to both of them. A collection, on the one hand, is understood to be a unity of objects, systematically amassed and kept in a particular place, be it in a box, a cabinet, a room, or even in an entire building, whereby its parts display at least one common characteristic. A 'book', on the other hand, consists of a number of pages bound into a cover that together form a material and conceptual unity. Dieter Roth phrased it:

Books denote layers of groups or societies of similar things that are glued or stitched together; and which are standing around or standing squeezed in; or else lying around (not squeezed in).⁶

To a greater or lesser extent, books and containers of collections thus separate their content from the outside world. Characteristically, this state of self-containment creates an air of intimacy, suggesting that the material or immaterial content be contemplated in private. Krzysztof Pomian, for instance, notes that:

the enclosure ... not only protects against theft or wear and tear, but also confers to a plurality of objects a sense of unity that permits their perception as parts of the same set. The role fulfilled by the architecture and furniture with regard to collections namely to constitute an enclosure can be compared to that of the frame for a picture.⁷

More specifically, Gaston Bachelard suggests that:

wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests filled with false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life. They have a quality of intimacy.... A wardrobe's inner space is also ... a space that is not open to just anybody.⁸

By way of isolating cognitive or objectified information from the outside world, books and collections obtain the capacity to both de- and re-contextualize their content. In turn, separation and rearrangement facilitate the production and transformation of knowledge, value, and meaning, and allow individual items to take on new significance. As a result, books and collections function as that which Foucault generally termed ‘other space’ or ‘heterotopia’, in order to describe ‘places ... outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality’, or that which Kate Linker called ‘alternative space’ with regard to artists’ books.⁹

The internal structure of books equally resembles that of boxes, chests of drawers, or cabinets. Both their sequential nature and their organization into chapters are particularly apt to accommodate and arrange groups, series, or sequences of objects or information. The act of identification, organization, presentation and classification principally determines the place of cognitive or objectified items within a systematic overarching order, an aspect which will be discussed in more depth in the second part of this paper. Another analogy between books and serial collections in particular is found in the non-hierarchical ordering of pages as well as in the aspect of completeness. Whereas single pages or individual objects may be of little or no value at all in isolation, as indispensable parts of a larger entity they are of crucial importance. A reader expects a book to include each and every page, for only then will content become intelligible. Equally, a collector will only cease to look for the components of a particular series once he or she has completed the set. However, this is not to say that particular objects cannot be privileged above others for reasons such as intrinsic value or the history of their acquisition, creating hierarchies of a different order.

In his seminal essay of 1978, ‘The New Art of Making Books’, Mexican-born artists and writer Ulises Carrión emphasizes another structural property of books analogous to collections: their temporal or spatiotemporal dimension. By defining the pages of a book as ‘a sequence of spaces’, he calls attention to the fact that the act of reading and of turning the pages demands time and, consequently, that the book must be perceived as a ‘space-time sequence’.¹⁰ As we know from experience, moving through time and space – literally or metaphorically – is fundamental to any collection, be it in a gallery or museum, or the more intimate context of a collection of stamps or coins. Both the curator and the book designer have a wide range of strategies to slow down or speed up the narrative, and consequently to influence the beholder’s movements and spatiotemporal experiences.

Having established books as collections *par excellence* on the basis of their external, internal, and spatiotemporal similarities, this paper will apply these principles to with artists’ books – Dieter Roth’s books in particular.

Books by artists can be divided into two chief groups: on the one hand, artists' books to which the book form is of marginal or no relevance – in other words, books by artists that are barely more than containers for material or immaterial information; on the other hand, artists' books which represent that which Moeglin-Delcroix describes as 'formed form', whereby form and content are mutually reflexive.¹¹ Particularly since the end of the Second World War, books have provided artists with a unique form with which to create works concerned with the *objet trouvé*, with issues relating to space and time, biographical and diary-like endeavours and documentation, new and mass media, industrial materials and repetitive production, and serial accumulation.¹² Most of these aspects can be found in one way or another in Roth's books. However, some of them – such as the aspect of the series, the *objet trouvé*, or the diary – appear more prominently in his *oeuvre*.

Roth's exploration of seriality is best exemplified by looking at some of his earliest works such as *boks* numbers 3a – 3d, *Dablegt bul*, *Cologne divisions*, and the *Daily mirror book* of 1961, all of which are based on the principle of accumulating mass printed material such as newspapers or cheap children's colouring books. They are made in square format and held together by a glued back binding. *Bok 3a*, for instance, consists of approximately 300 pages of Icelandic newspaper, cut into twenty-centimetre squares; *3b* contains roughly 250 pages of coloured comic strips; *3c* is made of nearly 300 sheets of macula paper, and *3d* consists of about 200 sheets of a children's painting book. The minuscule *Daily mirror book* – it is only 2cm by 2cm in size – consists of approximately 150 sheets cut from the *Daily Mirror*.¹³ Both Roth's preoccupation with banal residues of daily life, which suggests a non-hierarchical approach to material, and the aspect of indiscriminate mass-accumulation are to some extent in contrast to the selectivity otherwise typical to collecting activities. Roth's comment on the *bok* series and general working motto confirm this: 'Instead of showing quality ... we show quantity'.¹⁴ The approach was pushed to an extreme in *Zeitschrift für Alles*, or *Review for everything*, published in seven issues between 1975 and 1982, each consisting of a thousand or more pages.¹⁵ In newspaper advertisements in various German newspapers, Roth invited readers to send in anything they wanted published in the *Review*. However, given the initial premise, according to which collections are groups of objects which share among each other at least one common characteristic – a criterion which is undoubtedly fulfilled in the case of the *Bok 3* series or the *Daily mirror book* – the *Review for everything* presents a borderline case. For even though these publications are based upon a systematic *modus operandi*, namely to collect everything, there are good reasons to believe that 'everything' is too vague a criterion to suffice as common denominator.

Having considered structural analogies between books and collections, we shall now consider the commonalities of their content. Objects contained in books and collections

can be described as ‘semiophores’, a term used by Krzysztof Pomina to describe items which are temporarily or permanently kept out of the economic circuit and subsequently enriched with meaning.¹⁶ As decommodified and sacralized items, semiophores transcend the profane commodity market. Consequently, they are no longer admired for their material or monetary value alone, but also for the kind of symbolic value with which they are infused by entering into a collection. Different from a social or economic worth, symbolic value derives its principal importance from the relationship between individuals and things, and may possess significance and meaning only for the person concerned. Durost writes that if

[an object’s] predominant value is representative or representational, i.e., if a said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, then it is the subject of a collection.¹⁷

And Russel Belk takes collecting to be the

selective, active and longitudinal acquisition, possession and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity that this set is perceived to constitute.¹⁸

The powerful capacity of de- and re-contextualization attributed to collections can be best exemplified by examining a collection of the most unappealing and worthless things: rubbish. ‘Don’t throw anything away’ was Roth’s motto for the *Collection of Flat Waste*, 1975-76, for which he kept the waste of several months’ activities – gums, tickets, paper tissues.¹⁹ Nevertheless, not everything in the bin would automatically enter his collection. Roth had clear ideas as to what did or didn’t qualify as ‘flat waste’. Concerning his criteria he wrote:

Flacher Abfall says, in English: flat garbage. Maybe I did not call this collection ‘flat garbage’ since it does not include plants nor animals or plants’ and animals’ products. I called it ‘Flat Waste’. The FLAT WASTE collection contains all the flat objects that went through my hands. (Objects not thicker than 1 cm).²⁰

The daily traces of his activities were kept in individual plastic sleeves, each of which worked, by virtue of its transparent nature, as a kind of showcase. At the end of each month, Roth would label the sleeves according to day and date and archive them in a file. These ‘time capsules’ were again labelled, according to month and year, and arranged on shelves, in order to consolidate not only their serial and diary character, but also their nature as a collection of collections.²¹ By signing *Flat Waste* in order to exhibit the work, Roth would suggest that a collection, or part of it, was completed. However, given that

the flow of time and the emergence of flat waste are unlikely ever to cease, this state might more aptly be described as interruption rather than completion. Moreover, Roth had a strong tendency to rework his collections. This is a well-known and often-described phenomenon in the literature on collecting and collectors: leaving open the possibility of resumption and expansion is said to be typical to collecting practice, in that satisfaction is derived not only from possessive having but also, and perhaps predominantly, from acquisitive doing. Walter Benjamin, for instance, writes in 'Unpacking my library' that 'the most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle, in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them'.²²

In sum, artists' books and collections thus take on the status of 'other spaces' or heterotopoi on various levels. First, they function as a separate place in which objects are integrated into a unity, protected against the exterior, and framed in a new context. Second, by adding a different type of value to the objects contained, they constitute an oppositional realm to that of the common marketplace. Finally, due to their innate aptitude as exhibition spaces, artists' books can potentially function as alternative spaces and as means of criticizing and circumventing traditional galleries and museums.

Interaction: subject – object

Books, like paintings and other forms of art, are strongly culturally-determined objects and, consequently, beholders tend to approach them in a particular manner. Unlike most works of art, for which the 'don't touch rule' applies, there seems to exist a fundamental conception that the spectator ought to become both visually and physically engaged with books. However, in most cases, certain restrictions apply as to the 'how' of handling them: books are expected to be either held in a particular way or to be looked through according to the prescribed sequence of pages. The spatiotemporal dimension of books as pointed out by Carrión is thus inextricably connected to some kind of performativity. The making of artists' book is equally subject to a set of rules of behaviour, insofar as material and procedures are partially predetermined by technological and cultural factors. The artist's book as a performative space will therefore be the object of investigation of the following section.

As was discussed earlier in this paper, artists' books tend to be introverted and are likely to have an intimizing rather than a publicizing effect upon the objects contained. Hence, they are better suited for small-scale settings than for large exhibitions. Indeed, many of Roth's books were not intended to be exhibited or put on display in the first place. The spiral-bound *Children's book* and *Picture book* (both 1956), for instance, were produced as toys for his children. They consisted, in the typical constructivist fashion of the time,

of paper or transparent colour foil pages, which had rectangular or other geometrically-shaped holes of various sizes in them. Although these titles embodied kinetic events dependent on the book form, it was only *bok AB*, the last book of this series, that was a deliberately interactive. In *bok AB* Roth abandoned the traditional codex form. Instead, he produced a series of cardboard jackets, containing between eighteen and twenty-four black and white, red and green, or red and blue square paper cards. In the middle of each card, a series of either horizontal, vertical, or diagonal stripes were punched out, forming a central window.²³ This system allowed for the cards to be stratified in different variations, resulting in ever changing images in the centre window – there was no ‘right’ order. Furthermore, the act of arranging was never meant to be performed by the artist himself, but instead by the viewer. As a result, the difference between the artist and the beholder became confused, for the latter was at once consumer and producer. Hence, like *Flat Waste*, *Bok AB* left Roth’s studio open-ended. From its conception, the book was intended to remain in a state of infinite transformation. There is neither a correct sequence nor a state of completion, implying that the artist gave deliberate preference to process rather than to producing a finished work of art.

Incompletion as an artistic strategy is partly rooted in a post-Fordian notion of work and objects, and provides yet another method of keeping an object outside the economic circuit. Incompletion also refers back to Benjamin’s notion of collecting as an activity as opposed to a stable state of possessing. Furthermore, Roth’s use of incompletion as an artistic strategy anticipates much of the poststructuralist writing which came to dominate the next decade. In ‘The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing’ of 1967, for instance, Jacques Derrida would call into question not only the finite nature to which the book pretends, but also its capacity to notate with finality. ‘By being in a constant state of becoming, the book may *be* the world, not as its representation or surrogate, but as itself, in all of its limited infinite entirety – never static and complete, not retrospective but always becoming’.²⁴

Roth addressed issues of semantic variability for the first time when he began *Mundunculum*²⁵ or *System for the world* in 1961, one of the many works in which he explored notions of language and meaning.²⁶ *Mundunculum* reflects the artist’s lifelong search for a personal pictorial language and an overarching systematic structure. It represents an attempt to temporally derive sense and meaning from a combination of visual stimulus and words.²⁷ This ‘manual’ was intended to provide him with self-contained system, a ‘book of structure’ to use Foucault’s words, from which he hoped to deduce a set of rules that would allow him to establish communication, to express *his* reality – as opposed to external realities – and to represent his world in a microcosm, not unlike an Early Modern cabinet of curiosities.²⁸

Page 299 of *Mundunculum* shows a table of twenty-three symbols and letters that Roth complemented with a series of twenty-three rubber stamps of the same symbols, which as an ensemble served him as practical templates with which to experiment. They reappear independently in a number of other works, predominantly in drawings and prints. In an interview, Roth explained:

I think I was fiddling around with something of the kind around 1960, when I was moving away from constructivism to a looser art. Then I found this image, what some people call a symbol, cropping up. I continued doing variations of this image until I saw what I was actually drawing. I continued doing this on and off for two years. Then I was sure that it had some symbolic value for me. It is comfortable having an image like this to fall back on. You can produce lot of things using it as a kind of prototype or formula. Then it disappeared, I don't use it anymore.²⁹

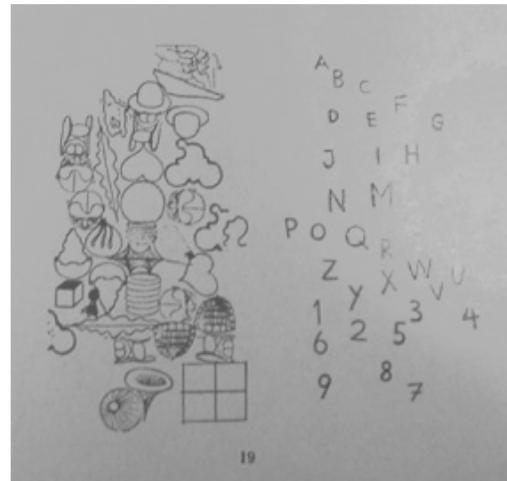


Figure 1: Dieter Roth, MUNDUCULUM (1975).

Source: Dirk Dobke and Thomas Kellein, eds., *Dieter Roth: Books and Multiples, Catalogue Raisonné* (London: hansjörg mayer, 2004), p. 19.

Courtesy Dieter Roth Foundation, Hamburg.

On the one hand, then, these symbols were conceptually only imperfectly formed, but they had enough temporary stability and relative coherence to fulfil their task for Roth. On the other hand, because their stability was only ever temporary and their coherence only ever relative, they were always subject to dispute and they always changed sooner or later, being replaced by Roth with new symbols and objectifications.

Roth's accounts of his associative methods of developing the visual structure of images implicitly refer to Derrida's theories of language as a 'semiotic play' wherein one can never reach true meaning but only a new set of signifiers. The belief that comprehension is a transcendental illusion or a regulative fiction led Roth to term his way of working 'blurring' or 'smearing' in order to avoid any sense of closure or fixed, atemporal meanings.³⁰ This might to some degree explain why it took him five years to bring *Mundunculum* to a state which he considered worthy of publishing, and also why he kept

reworking it until his death in 1998; Schwarz therefore proposed the term *Roth's kleine Probewelt* to describe this work.³¹

Roth's questioning and overriding of central attributes associated with the book in occidental culture, such as finiteness, completion and truth, by producing a book that was at once rampant, open-ended, and emblematic of the world, was not only ahead of his time, but also very provocative. Unsurprisingly, Roth's deconstruction of both the book as a validated cultural instrument and of writing as an approved system of notation was perceived by many as unacceptable, for it fundamentally challenged a series of established historical and ideological concepts. Yet Roth went further: in 1968, he reproduced twelve of *Mundunculum's* rubber stamps, added two ink pads, flasks of black and red ink and wrote an instruction sheet. This *Rubber stamp box* was published in an edition of 111, as a 'tentative little recipe' for others who wished to experiment with his 'tentative logico-poeticum'.³²

Here it might be interesting to turn to an extract from the introduction, an exhibition called 'Collected Works', which took place in Groningen in 1991. The show focused on the various artists' recording and registering activities, both in book form and in other media, and the way in which they achieve meaning, structure, and coherence:

[Collecting] is a form of distinction aiming at bringing nearer or perhaps explaining in concrete terms 'something' fundamental, a thought, attitude or characteristic, derived from or attributed to the (imaginary) collection.³³

Such observations not only echo much of what has been examined in the case of *Bok AB* and *Mundunculum*, but also coincide to a high degree with recent evaluations of the nature of early modern forms of collecting. Bredekamp and Pomian argue, for example, that cabinets of curiosity can be understood as chambers of transformation or laboratories for the 'amalgamation of meaning and form' and 'the visible and the invisible' in their aim both to explain and to represent the world in a microcosm, as well as to provide overarching general theories through which objective realities could be defined and expressed.³⁴ However, according to Neil Kenny, on close inspection such systems turn out to not have been as distinct, stable, or coherent as they may appear in the first place. He argues that – as with *Mundunculum* – 'each and every configuration could only ever be provisional'.³⁵

Nevertheless, there seems to be a general agreement that interactive aspects of collecting, i.e. the handling, arranging and rearranging of material, may be understood as activities intrinsically bound to the construction of (temporary) knowledge and meaning.³⁶ As has been demonstrated in the case of *Bok AB* and from a more abstract visual and linguistic perspective in the case of *Mundunculum*, artists' books function as receptacles of material

and immaterial information such as images, texts, and objects, upon which a certain ordering, structuring, or layering is imposed, as a result of which meaning can be derived. For the artist/collector and the spectator, then, collections or books-as-collections represent devices which have the capacity to help make sense of the world. Therefore, they are often utilized in attempts to deal with dilemmas and unintelligibility, or in efforts to grapple with and tame those phenomena that puzzle, scare, or horrify us. Despite, or precisely because of, their role as surrogates and regulative fictions, collections or books-as-collections can function – if only ever temporarily – as metaphors for the readability of the world.

Collectors and collections: autobiography and self-reference

Autobiographical and self-referential aspects have likewise attracted much attention in more recent theories of collecting. Elsner and Cardinal take it that ‘as one becomes conscious of one’s self, one becomes a conscious collector of identity projecting one’s being onto the objects one chooses to live with’.³⁷ Baudrillard and Winsor point out that ‘one collects always oneself’, and that ‘collecting has to do with our need to make visible our own reality’; Belk hypothesizes that a collection is a form of ‘the extended self’.³⁸ With regard to artists’ books as collections, Moeglin-Delcroix stresses the fact that although most books may initially seem to be concerned with managerial functions such as documentation or conservation, aspects of knowledge and of control over oneself are equally important.³⁹

Although Roth’s active merging of art and life and of collecting and artistic practice were subliminally manifested in each of his artist’s books discussed so far, their particular self-referential dimension has not yet been taken into account. Drawing mostly on linguistic and psychoanalytic approaches to collecting and artistic strategies, the last section of this article will thus explicitly be concerned with autobiographical aspects of his activity as a collector and maker of artist’s books.

Tensions between and processes related to the polarities of creation and destruction on the one hand, and order and chaos on the other, are central to Roth’s biography and work. They are visible not only in his propensity to create a complex and comprehensive *oeuvre* and simultaneously to observe it collapse, but also in his inclination *vice versa* to hoard everything and anything in an immense chaos in order subsequently to organize and document it. ‘For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?’ Benjamin asks in ‘Unpacking my Library’, and goes on to suggest that a collection’s pattern is expressive of the tensions – ‘dialectic tensions’ – in the creator’s mind.⁴⁰ In accordance with Benjamin and Moeglin-Delcroix’ pragmatic observations, all of Roth’s books previously

referred to were structured along patterns of functionality in that they principally provided a means to canalize, ration, arrange, and organize the rampant and uncontrolled growth of both his 'official' artistic oeuvre, and the other, not that dissimilar, accumulation of multifarious objects. Confirming Moeglin-Delcroix' second claim, Roth's texts and interviews also imply a deep intimacy between the organization of his artists books/collections and that of his mind. With regard to Benjamin's second point, Wurgaft suggests in 'The Boredom of Order: Connoisseurs of the Difficult' that the arrangement and rearrangement of collections present a 'constant poetic motion', which he defines as a closed system that first creates tension and then resolves itself. He concludes that for Benjamin, who was influenced by Hegel's and Marx's thought, according to which such tensions are potentially expressive and productive, collections function as hermeneutic circles.⁴¹ Wurgaft's concept seems equally pertinent with regard to Roth's works.

Further support for the inter-relatedness of collections and collectors as well as for Wurgaft's argument, according to which collections are expressing a state of crisis, comes from a psychoanalytical reading of contemporary artistic practice. In an interview given in the context of the 1995 exhibition 'Rites of passage' at the Tate Gallery, Julia Kristeva referred to her essay 'Powers of Horror', in particular to the concept of 'abjection', representing a state of crisis, degradation, self-disgust, and disgust towards others. She states that:

when one is in a state of abjection, the borders between the subject and the object cannot be maintained. In other words, the autonomy or substance of the subject is called into question, endangered. I am solicited by the other in such a way that I collapse. This solicitation can be the result of fascination, but also suffering: the other disgusts me, I abhor it, it is – we are – waste, excrements, a corpse: it threatens me. What is interesting is that this crisis of the person, which I call abjection and which is a state of dissolution, can be experienced as suffering or as rapture.⁴²

According to Thomas Kellein, *Mundunculum, Flat Waste, Scheisse/Shit*, and the various types of decaying self-portraits are principally expressions of Roth's 'gigantic problems resulting from disorder and the battlefield of art trade ... as well as fear, anger and manic depression, resulting from excessive consumption of alcohol'.⁴³ At a recent symposium on Dieter Roth's legacy, Gabrielle Brandstetter aptly suggested the term *Sui-zitat* or 'sui-cite' to describe the proximity of self-eradication and survival strategy evident in all of Roth's tangible and verbal forms of self-reference.⁴⁴ Baudrillard calls the tension between creation and destruction within a collection 'the recycling of birth and death within an object-system'.⁴⁵ In doing so, he introduces the dimension of time to both the collector and the collection.

One of Roth's strategies to address processes of becoming and decaying was that of using organic materials, such as chocolate, cheese, milk, sugar, and grease, a mode of working he termed *Verfallsästhetik* or 'aesthetics of decay'. This category included books, for instance in *poeterei*, as well as sculptures such as *Selbstturm/self-tower* or *Portrait of the artist as Vogelfutterbüste*. The most poignant example, however, is Roth's *Schimmelmuseum* in Hamburg, an entire building set up to decay gradually. These four works are similar insofar as the artist's engagement was strictly limited to the initial creation of the piece. Conversely, when creating living organisms such as mould and mildew sculptures, Roth would keep intervening by supplying his creations with milk and sugar solutions until they had reached the end of their lifetime. On an even more complex level, Roth tried to permanently manipulate the effects of time upon things, a goal which he achieved most successfully by way of conservation. The approximately fifty *Literaturwürste* or *Literary sausages*, produced between 1961 and 1970, are paradigmatic examples of his endeavours.

Like most of Roth books, the *Literary sausages* are based on some kind of a recipe, in this case literally adapting the method and the ingredients used by butchers to preserve meat. The filling material, made from fragmented books, magazines, or newspapers, was mixed with gelatine, grease and spices and then stuffed into sausage skin. After a period of drying, they were provided with a label indicating their literary content. Ingredients included issues of the *Daily Mirror*, Robert Walser's *Halbzeit*, and Hegel's *Werke in 20 Bänden*, among them his famous treatise on aesthetics, *The Critique of Judgement*. The choice of what would go into a sausage was not incidental; on the contrary, Roth would pick works which he expressly despised. As for the *Daily mirror sausage*, he stated that this was 'some kind of defence. I wanted to show my contempt for English tabloids, my disdain, or perhaps even disrespect'.⁴⁶



Figure 2: Dieter Roth, Literaturwurst: Martin Walser *Halbzeit* (1961).
Source: Dobke and Kellein, eds., *Dieter Roth: Books and Multiples, Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 135.
Courtesy Dieter Roth Foundation, Hamburg.

Thus, the *Literary sausages* unite creation and destruction not only on a material level by way of actual conservation, but also in a more metaphorical manner. For it was only through the deconstruction of established norms and concepts such as the book form, the notion of the finiteness of writing, Hegel's aesthetic theories or other canonized works, that Roth managed to resolve his personal dialectic tensions or states of abjection.

Roth's organic works of art have generally been interpreted as reactions to notions of eternity and timelessness traditionally associated with art. Moreover, *Verfallsästhetik* has been interpreted as a counter-statement – an almost sacrificial ritual of the aesthetic collapse – to Formalist aesthetics; for to Roth, Formalism represented an inability to come to terms with or even a rejection of the apocalyptic atmosphere emanating from a world in transformation after the Second World War. However, in contrast to the Formalist response, Roth could not but face up to and deal with the disastrous world he had been confronted with since his early childhood. Indeed, it is against this backdrop that I have analyzed Roth's collections as tangible forms of hermeneutical circles or as materializations of states of abjection. As externalized manifestations of inner conflicts, then, Roth's books such as *Literaturwürste* represent not merely an extension of the self, as Belk suggested, but in fact a form of self replication, 'subject object', or reification of the self.

The introduction of time also leads us back to collections' status as 'other spaces'. In 'Des espace autres', Foucault not only applies this concept to the spatial but also to the temporal dimension. He writes that:

heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time ... The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time ... There are heterotopias of infinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries ... where time never stops building up and topping its own summit. The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organising in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time.⁴⁷

Foucault's different facets of 'heterochronies' are relevant insofar as collectors in general, and Roth in particular, are concerned with issues of death and (im)mortality both in terms of their own person and the destiny and destination of their collections. This combination requires the introduction of two different orders of time, namely that of the life of a collection and that of its master respectively: one finite the other infinite. It also diverges from the notion of 'real time'. Many of Roth's works reflect this time/space

compression, and this duality will be illustrated with Roth's *Collected Works*, which is best described as a form of *catalogue raisonné*.

Usually, *catalogues raisonnés* are compiled by a third person and are published after an artist's death. Not so in the case of Roth, who was suspicious of critics, curators, and art historians throughout his lifetime. On its inception in 1969, *Collected Works* was conceptualized as a forty-volume edition, organized according to medium, which meant that Roth could not proceed consecutively from number one to number forty. *Collected Works 20* and *40*, for instance, appeared in 1971 and 1979 and are catalogues listing his entire graphic oeuvre. The degree of seriousness and comprehensiveness with which these compilations were carried out is reflected in the introduction to the recently published *catalogue raisonné* of Roth's graphics. There, the author admits that the new version represented little more than an assemblage of *Collected Works 20* and *40*, as well as Roth's hitherto unpublished inventory of his work produced during the last twenty years of his life.⁴⁸

Roth's intense artistic preoccupations with collecting the traces of his work and life on the one hand, and with their documentation, commenting, and publication on the other, are, according to Arthur Danto, an increasingly common phenomenon in Western society. In an analysis of contemporary notions of the future, he points out that in contrast to previous generations, we are very conscious of the image future generations will retrospectively construct of us. As a result, there is an increasing tendency to preemptively influence and prearrange desired impressions.⁴⁹ In the case of artists/collectors, such active forward planning and preoccupation with the fate of one's collection is largely concerned with the threshold of real time, in other words, the moment of the respective collector's death. At this transitional point or 'liminal' state, to use Van Gennep's anthropological term, collections take the position of an intermediary and facilitator of the anticipated change of status, 'like a strong boat, which will bear the collector through the centuries after the body has gone to earth again'.⁵⁰ Indeed, collections have been considered rites of passage in the literature on both collecting and contemporary artistic practice. Susan Pearce, for instance, attributes to collections the capacity to give meaning to the passage of time, not only by serving as rites of passage which help us through periods in our lives, but also by creating distinctions between one period and the next. Manfred Sommer understands collections as a form of recapitulation or cohesive force, linking together the fragments of one's life history as well as being a possible means for keeping one's identity during times of transitions.⁵¹ Concerning late-20th-century art, Stephen Greenblatt argues in the catalogue for the aforementioned exhibition, 'Rites of passage', that:

[artists] are not interested in either the original or the new position; they are interested in the *limen*, the threshold or margin, the place that is no-place, in

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which the subject is rendered invisible – a shadow, a negative, a mutilated fragment ... and that no-place – *utopia* – is the place at once of art and dying.⁵²

The general assumption underlying both the perception of collecting as a poetic, psychological or temporal circle and the definition of the place of a collection as *heterotopia*, threshold or *limen* is that collections are expressive of some form of crisis. By extension, *Collected Works*, and indeed a large number of Roth's artist's books, must be understood not only as factual biographies or practical memories, but also as rites of passage and moments of recapitulation.

This paper has attempted to place Roth's artist's books in the context of collecting theories in order to illustrate parallels between collecting and contemporary artistic practice. Drawing on their intrinsic formal qualities, Roth used books as a means to impose temporary structure on disorder and to rescue what had been discarded both in literal and metaphorical terms. Herein, Roth not only facilitated a resurrection and a sanctification of the trashed and shattered, but initiated a veritable transfiguration – mechanisms equally characteristic of collectors' activities. On the one hand, Roth's books-cum-collections must be understood as the product of his life-long artistic activity; on the other hand, they are visualisation of his ceaseless attempts to come to terms with his life and the world surrounding him, and to give tangible form to a paramount sense of crisis, aptly summarised by Peter Winter as a 'trail of life as work-in-progress, as a documentary infinite loop'.⁵³

NOTES:

¹ The retrospective was curated by Schaulager Basel and MoMA New York and was shown in Basel (Schaulager, May 25 – September 14 2003), in Cologne (Museum Ludwig, October 17, 2003 – January 2004), and New York (MoMA, March – June 2004); Schaulager Basel, “Roth-Zeit. Eine Dieter Roth Retrospektive,” (Schaulager Basel, 2003).

² The original text reads: Systematisch legt Roth über viele Jahre hinweg Sammlungen an, z.B. von Texten und Skizzen, von flachem Abfall oder von dokumentarischen Aufnahmen sämtlicher Häuser einer Stadt, um diese dann jeweils in einem monumentalen Werken zu vereinigen. (*Gesammelte Werke* 1969-91, *Flacher Abfall* 1975-76, 1992 und *Reykjavik Slides* 1973-75, 1990-93). Schaulager Basel, exhibition leaflet, unpaginated

³ Dieter Roth, *Bücher und Grafik (I. Teil)*, *Gesammelte Werke Band 20* (Stuttgart, London, Reykjavik: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1973).

⁴ Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, “*Livres d’artiste et collection*,” *Nouvelles de l’Estampe* 118-19 (1991).

⁵ Whereas Roth’s oeuvre of the 1950s and early 1960s can be related to the constructivist movement and concrete poetry, the next two decades were strongly influenced by both the American avant-garde and the Fluxus movement and can be described as individualistic, experimental and narrative. After 1980, a radically formulated documentary aspect became Roth’s *leitmotiv*.

⁶ **bücher** soll darunter bzw dabei das heissen was gruppenweise bzw als gesellschaft seinesgleichen aufgeschichtet mit seinesgleichen verklebt oder vernäht herumsteht oder umhersteht bzw eingeklemmt dasteht oder herumliegt (nicht eingeklemmt). Preface to Roth, *Bücher und Grafik (I. Teil)*, *Gesammelte Werke Band 20*, p. 8.

⁷ ‘La clôture ... non seulement protège contre le vol et l’action corrosive du milieu mais encore confère à une pluralité d’objets l’unité permettant de les percevoir comme inclus dans un même ensemble. D’où l’importance de l’architecture et du mobilier, qui matérialisent la clôture et jouent par rapport à une collection le même rôle que celui d’un cadre par rapport à un tableau.’ In Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 296.

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 78.

⁹ Kate Linker, “The Artists’ Book as an Alternative Space,” *Studio International* 195, no. 990 (1980). pp 75-79., and Michel Foucault, “Des espace autres,” *Architecture/Movement/Continuite*, no. 5 (1984 (original paper presented in 1967, authorised for publication fourteen years later). His fourth principal lists museums and libraries, hence collections of collections, as heterotopic spaces (page 48).

¹⁰ Ulises Carrion, “The New Art of Making Books,” in *Quant aux livres/On Books*, ed. Juan J. Agius (Geneva: Héros-Limite, 1997), p. 129.

¹¹ The definition of artists’ books and their French equivalent, the *livres d’artiste*, has remained highly debated to date. For an more in depth treatment of the subject see Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artist’s Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995). Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d’artiste 1960-1980* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1997)., and Stefan Klima, *Artist’s Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (New York: Granary Books, 2001).

¹² Unsurprisingly, artists' books are most popular among Pop, Minimal and Conceptual artists, female artists as well as male, who tend to work with time-based media such as video or the internet.

¹³ Roth, *Bücher und Grafik (1. Teil), Gesammelte Werke Band 20.*, cat. nos. 11-15.

¹⁴ Introduction to Dieter Roth, *Quadratblatt* (Hilversum: De Jong, 1965). unpaginated, and Samuel Herzog, "Alles auf die Spitze treiben: Theodora Vischer und Bernadette Walter über Dieter Roth," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung NZZ*, 9. August 2003.

¹⁵ Barbara Wien, "Working with Dieter Roth" (paper presented at the Dieter Roth Symposium, Schaulager Basel, 2003).

¹⁶ It is important to note that the term *semiophore* was initially created to discuss early modern collections and not to describe 20th century phenomena. However, because it encapsulates better than any other term the distinct economic state of collected objects, I believe that its application is nonetheless justifiable in a contemporary context. Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*, 9.

¹⁷ W. Durost, *Children's Collecting Activity Related to Social Factors* (New York: Columbia University, 1932), p. 10.

¹⁸ It is important to note that an 'inter-related set of differentiated objects' can denote not only material objects but also ideas, beings, or experiences. Russel W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, *The Collecting Cultures Series* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 8.

¹⁹ Roth's fascination with the relationship between the excremental and sacramental led to the emergence of another large body of work exclusively concerned with *Scheisse/Shit*. It consists of a countless number of incantatory poems, drawings, and prints which he published again and again in reworked versions between 1966 and 1975. *Collected Works 13* (1972) is entirely dedicated to *shit*. See also Marilyn Gelfman Karp, "Loving the Unloved; A Passion for Collecting," *things*, no. 10 (1999), pp. 55-62.

²⁰ Dieter Roth and Björn Roth, *Dieter und Björn Roth : exposition à Marseille, Mac galeries contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, 1997* (Marseille: MAC Marseille, 1997), p. 32.

²¹ Two analogies spring to mind here. The first is the fact that the term 'time capsule' was almost simultaneously employed by Andy Warhol to describe the monthly cardboard boxes of photos, newspapers, and fan letters, which he started compiling regularly in 1974. The second is the quasi-scientific accuracy with which Roth selected, assembled and documented the residues of everyday life, an approach which resembles Surrealist art practices.

²² Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk on Book Collecting," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 60. Accordingly, Belk emphasizes that collecting entails both 'possessive having' and 'acquisitive doing'. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, p. 140.

²³ Roth, *Bücher und Grafik (1. Teil), Gesammelte Werke Band 20.*

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," in *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

²⁵ Latin: little world

²⁶ Roth was familiar with the work of Barthes, Derrida, and Wittgenstein and the related ideas of deconstruction and intertextuality, which are very likely to have served as references in the process of making *Mundunculum*. Dieter Roth, "MUNDUCULUM," in *Gesammelte Werke Band 16* (Stuttgart, London, Reykjavik: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1975).

²⁷ The conflation of word and image was the central focus of a great many of Roth's works, for instance: *ideograms* (1959), *poesy 1 & 2* (1966-7), *why wittgenstein has to be an ascetic and why rot cannot be a philosopher* (1966), and *my eye is a mouth* (1966).

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- ²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge; Les mots et les choses*, trans. Ulrich Köppen, Erstauflage ed., *Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 130.
- ²⁹ Aolasteinn Ingolfsson, "Transcript of Interviews with Dieter Roth 1986," in *Dieter Roth* (Reykjavik: The Living Art Museum, 1994), p. 17.
- ³⁰ Felicitas Thun and Graphische Sammlung Albertina, *Dieter Roth: Druckgrafik und Bücher; prints and books, 1949-1979* (Köln: Graphische Sammlung Albertina, 1998), p. 8.
- ³¹ Dieter Schwarz, "Prologue d'un livre dont il ne paraîtra que les extraits ci-après," in *Dieter Roth; Die Bibliothek*, ed. Johannes Gachnang, Peter Erismann, and Janine Perret Sgualdo (Neuchâtel: Centre Dürrenmatt, 2003), p. 21.
- ³² Roth, *Bücher und Grafik (1. Teil), Gesammelte Werke Band 20*, cat. no. 34.
- ³³ Introduction to Centrum Beeldende Kunst, Johan Deumens, and Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, *Verzamelde Werken: een Hommage aan Ulises Carrion* (Groningen: Centrum Beeldende Kunst, 1991).
- ³⁴ Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben; Die Geschichte der Kustkammern und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2000), p. 100; and Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums; Vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1988), p. 43.
- ³⁵ Neil Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories*, ed. Herzog August Bibliothek, vol. Band 1, *Wolfenbütteler Forschungen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), p. 190.
- ³⁶ This notion rests upon the crucial premise of a supreme significance of the material world through which alone correct deductions about the nature of the world may be achieved, whereas the rational mind achieves true understanding of objective natural knowledge by the physical process of observing and arranging material evidence, a notion shaped in the maturing modernity towards the end of the 17th century. See Susan M. Pearce, "Early Modernist Collectors," in *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, *The Collecting Cultures Series* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 110.
- ³⁷ John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 3.
- ³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "Le système des objets," in *Méditations*, ed. Jean Baudrillard (Paris: Deneoël-Gonthier, 1975), p. 109; John Winsor, "Identity parades," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. Roger Cardinal and John Elsner (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 51; and Russel W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (1988).
- ³⁹ Moeglin-Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste 1960-1980*, p. 203.
- ⁴⁰ Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk on Book Collecting."
- ⁴¹ See Benjamin Wurgaft, "The Boredom of Order; Connoisseurs of the Difficult," *things*, no. 16 (2002), pp. 50-9. See also Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, pp. 92, 151.
- ⁴² Julia Kristeva and Charles Penwarden, "Of Word and Flesh: An Interview with Julia Kristeva," in *rites of passage: art for the end of the century*, ed. Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), p. 22.
- ⁴³ Thomas Kellein, *Fröhliche Wissenschaft: Das Archiv Sohm* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1987), p. 77.
- ⁴⁴ Gabriele Brandstetter, "'Fast alles' - Dieter Roth: Sui-Zitat und Inter/Views" (paper presented at the Dieter Roth Symposium, Schaulager Basel, 2003).
- ⁴⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *Critical Views* (London: Reaktion Books, 1968; reprint, 1997), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Barbara Wien and Dieter Roth, "Ein bisschen Müll schieben," in *Gesammelte Interviews/Collected Interviews*, ed. Barbara Wien (London: 2002), p. 366.

⁴⁷ Foucault, "Des espace autres," p. 48.

⁴⁸ Dirk Dobke, *Dieter Roth: Graphic Works, Catalogue Raisonné 1947-1998* (London und Hamburg: edition hansjörg mayer, 2003), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Arthur Danto, "Looking at the Future Looking at the Present as Past," in *Mortality - Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999).

⁵⁰ D. Rigby and E. Rigby, *Lock, Stock, and Barrel: The Story of Collecting* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1944).

⁵¹ Susan M. Pearce, "On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition," in *The Collecting Culture Series* ed. Susan M. Pearce, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 237; and Manfred Sommer, *Sammeln: Ein philosophischer Versuch*, 1. Edition ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), p. 126.

⁵² Stephen Greenblatt, "Liminal States and Transformation," in *rites of passage: art for the end of the century*, ed. Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), p. 20.

⁵³ Peter Winter, *Hommage à Dieter Roth* (Köln: Galerie Heinz Holtmann, 1998), p. 11.