

Herbert Hossmann's Dieter Roth Collection – Testimony to a Friendship

Tobias Premper

Herbert Hossmann (1942–2024) and Karl-Dietrich “Dieter” Roth (1930–1998) shared a special friendship. It began in 1974 and lasted until Roth's death in 1998. Hossmann produced Roth's late major and key work *Flacher Abfall* (Flat Waste) for and with Roth, released numerous artist records by Roth, collaborated on the *Stundenbilder* project, campaigned for the preservation of the now demolished *Schimmelmuseum* (Mould Museum) in Hamburg, and compiled an extensive collection of Dieter Roth's works between 1972 and 1996, which can be seen in this catalog. The two friends meet regularly in Hossmann's Hamburg apartment on Rutschbahn, sometimes with other artist friends such as Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener, or Hermann Nitsch. They drink, party, or make music together, always with an eye on the next artistic project. Roth is a generous guest; he often brings souvenirs for his host or gives him small works of art. When Roth lost his cap in winter, Hossmann's partner at the time helped him out with a cap she had knitted herself, and on his next visit, Roth gave her a drawing he had made of the cap.

There is something that connects the two beyond art and literature, an existential experience. Both lived through World War II: Hossmann as a child fleeing the Red Army, Roth as a teenager during the bombing of Hanover. Without having to talk about it much, they know about each other's abysses. For Roth, the trauma leads to a restless and turbulent life that brings him to the brink of exhaustion and beyond. He has a self-destructive streak that is evident in his incessant artistic and poetic work and, not least, in his excessive drinking. Hossmann understands him and remains loyal to him, even though his friend is often unreliable. He accepts and loves Roth just as he is. This unconditional support often has a stabilizing effect on Roth, both as a person and as an artist.

Herbert Hossmann spends his early years in Breslau in relative security within the bosom of his family. When the Soviet army advances during World War II in 1945, the family flees to the west. The flight, the constant uncertainty, and the feeling of uprootedness have a lasting impact on Hossmann. Via Gebesee and Wehrda, the family finally arrived in Celle in 1948, where they settled and his father built a new life as a lawyer and notary. After graduating from high school, Hossmann left Celle for Hamburg, where he began studying law and threw himself into student life.

Dieter Roth grew up in Hannover-Döhren as the son of a Swiss merchant. The bombs that fell on Hannover from 1940 onwards gave him nightmares for the rest of his life. In 1943, his father placed him with foster parents at the Fritz Wyss family hotel in Zurich, a place where Jewish and communist artists and actors also stayed during the war. In this environment, Roth wrote his first poems and produced drawings, pastels, and watercolors. In 1946, the family moved to Switzerland and lived together in Herisau, where Roth attended high school. A year later, he dropped out of school and began an apprenticeship as a commercial artist in Bern, where he learned all the important printing techniques. In 1949, Dieter Roth suffered a nervous breakdown and attempted to take his own life. In his diaries, he wrote that death was constantly on his mind. And in his poem *Wolken* "(Clouds)", Roth wrote: "another way to die: work." With his multifaceted and interdisciplinary work, Dieter Roth is now considered one of the most important artists of the 20th century.

After completing his studies, Herbert Hossmann worked as an administrative lawyer in a senior management position at the Hamburg Science Authority and enthusiastically devoted himself to a wide variety of activities in politics, art, science, and literature. Since 1973, the headquarters of his wild years has been a 110-square-meter apartment at Rutschbahn 37 in the Grindelviertel district. In the 1970s and 1980s, as a board member of the Hamburger Kunstverein, he was committed to bringing international and experimental art to Hamburg and collaborated on the conception and realization of important events and actions—such as the "International Performance Festival" at Kampnagel (1984), the exhibition "Hermit, Researcher, Social Worker – The Changing Self-Image of Artists" at the Kunstverein (1979), and the exhibition "Biennale of Peace – Giving Peace a Form" (1985),

initiated by Robert Filliou and curated by René Block. Together with artist friends, including Anna Oppermann, he founded the Galerie Vorsetzen in 1986, which organized successful exhibitions and other events for 10 years. At the same time, he and his colleagues were involved in Hamburg's cultural policy. The highlight was the development of a 14-point program calling for fundamental new structures for the visual arts. Much of this was actually implemented politically, e.g., the Hamburg scholarships, support programs for studios, and an increase in the acquisition budgets of Hamburg's museums. Throughout his life, Hossmann was a tireless promoter and decisive enabler. Together with his sister Irmelin and his brother-in-law Paul Lebeer, he founded Édition Lebeer Hossmann, Hamburg – Brussels in 1970, a publishing house dedicated to the promotion, publication, and distribution of artists' books and records. In the coming years, the publishing house's program included renowned artists such as Wolf Vorstell, René Magritte, Sarah Schumann, Jochen Gerz, Robert Filliou, Christian Boltanski, Marcel Broodthaers, Annette Messager, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Dieter Roth. Together, they produce artist records for the edition: in 1978, *Radiosonate, Thy Quatsch est min Castello* (a parody of a Schoenberg recording by Nam June Paik), in 1979 *Hart ins Gericht, zart ins Gesicht* (a dialogue between Roth and Arnulf Rainer) and in 1979 the concert recording *Abschöpfsymphonie. Selten gehörte Musik* (in full length, unedited and uncut), in which Hossmann and Roth, together with other guests, stand on stage at Munich's Lenbachhaus and indulge their silly side. When the concert still shows no signs of ending after more than six hours, the police arrive. This concert also reflects the friendship between Hossmann and Roth – two grown men who indulge their childlike enthusiasm for experimental music and share experiences together.

A conversation between Herbert Hossmann and Tobias Premper

I cycle parallel to the Aller River along the Dammschwiesen to the house at Am Tiergarten 28. Herbert Hossmann's wife, Cornelia Sollfrank, has invited me to view Herbert Hossmann's Dieter Roth collection and write about the friendship between Hossmann and Roth. Cornelia spends a lot of time in this building, which is so atypical for the half-timbered town of Celle: a bungalow designed in the New Building style by a student of Otto Haesler. Hossmann lived here during his childhood, left Celle for Hamburg in the early 1960s, and returned regularly to his parents' house. Cornelia told me that this place gave him a lifelong feeling of home, family, and security. He could retreat here to be undisturbed. It was his refuge. Cornelia is in Italy for two weeks and has left me the keys. This is not my first visit to the Tiergarten, but the beauty of the bungalow, the garden ensemble, and the large terrace are overwhelmingly impressive every time I visit. The skylight-flooded studio room resembles a small library, with Dieter Roth titles stacked on and next to a large wooden table, some of the original works in the collection already packed away. I am alone in the house, but at every opportunity I seek conversation with Herbert Hossmann, which is fed by his personal notes, Cornelia's stories, articles from the art and criticism platform THE THING Hamburg (including a conversation between Herbert Hossmann and Dirk Dobke, director of the Dieter Roth Foundation), Hossmann's catalog of the Dieter Roth collection, and my own curiosity and imagination. Herbert Hossmann died in October 2024, but the house is still filled with his presence.

TP

The catalog for your Dieter Roth collection turned out beautifully. I enjoyed leafing through it, pausing every now and then to look at the pictures. One can see both of you here on the cover of the book.

HH

When you open the book, you can also see the original back of the photo with a dedication from Dieter. That was in 1996 in Dieter's studio in Basel. We were sitting there together after visiting the "Stilleben" exhibition at the Helmhaus in Zurich, where Dieter had exhibited the collection *Flacher Abfall*.

TP

The catalog currently lists 189 works, some of which are still divided into bundles and folders containing hundreds of invitation cards, photos, color copies, letters, postcards, and books.



HH

Quite a lot has accumulated, yes.

TP

The work *Zerlaufende Käsepyramide* (Melting Cheese Pyramid) is already packed up. Did you have it here in your house before? It must have stunk quite a bit, or did the cheese smell eventually go away?



HH

It was actually in our apartment in Hamburg for a while, but then it became unbearable, so I packed it up well and put it in the attic so it could stink out in peace. It took forever, but now the form is stable and the decay process is complete.

TP

How did you actually become aware of Dieter Roth?

HH

I had already noticed Roth as an artist during my student days in the mid-1960s. He was already well known as an artist, but it was difficult to see his work. My first book by him was the carefully designed and elaborately printed *Die gesamte Scheiße* (All the Shit) from the Berlin publisher Rainer Verlag, run by my former classmate Rainer Pretzell, which was a huge investment for me at the time. In 1970, I saw Dieter Roth at the Mikro gallery in Berlin. Together with Stefan Wewerka, he cheerfully signed a stack of newspaper clippings. Both had placed an advertisement in the newspaper FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung): a photo of the two artists in a bowed, humble posture, begging for alms. Underneath it read: "Half-baked guys want to cash in sneakily; even despite tremendous achievements, they are always undercut." The advertisement was promoted as a graphic in a print run of around 300,000 copies. For a fee of ten or twenty Deutschmarks, you could have the clipping signed by the two of them. We greeted each other warmly at the time, without striking up a conversation.

Collection *Flacher Abfall* (Flat Waste)

TP

Do you remember the first major exhibition you saw by Roth?

HH

It was the solo exhibition in 1974 at the Hamburger Kunstverein, where the first version of the work "Flat Waste" was on display: a large number of chronologically arranged black Leitz folders containing various objects no thicker than a few millimeters that Roth didn't want to throw away, filed in transparent sleeves. This mountain of binders lay more or less in disarray at the Kunstverein. From the very beginning, I was very impressed by the flat waste as a radical and subversive sculpture.

TP

How did you come to work with Dieter Roth on the continuation of the project after this exhibition?

HH

Towards the end of 1974, I took a stack of posters in behalf of for the publisher Rainer Pretzell to Dr. Philipp Rainer Buse to his house on Abteistraße in Hamburg, and Dieter Roth met me at the door. A nice coincidence. Buse had set up a small apartment and a work space for him in his law office. He asked me to come in. We talked about the exhibition at the Hamburger Kunstverein, and Roth ranted about the director of the Kunstverein, Uwe M. Schneede.

TP

There is a published letter from Roth to Schneede in which he writes that a crazy work deserves a crazy amount of money. Schneede did not want to finance a color catalog for Roth, and Roth described the Kunstverein as a feeble place.

HH

Roth not only railed against Schneede's stinginess, but also his inability to curate an exhibition properly. At Buse's office, we then talked about the flat waste, which in my opinion was the central and most important work in the exhibition, but which, according to Roth, had not met with Schneede's approval: a pile of office binders spread out on the floor and pushed tightly together, filled to the brim with various objects. Part of a pair of underpants peeked out of one of the folders. In 1973, Dieter Roth had put all objects that were no thicker than three to four millimeters and that he would otherwise have thrown in the trash or household waste into transparent plastic sleeves and filed them in Leitz binders. When a folder was full, he dated and signed it.

TP

That was, so to speak, the first version of flat waste. It sounds spontaneous and still a bit chaotic overall that the folders were lying on the floor like trash.

HH

Roth critically remarked that his own work was not systematic enough. It would have been better to create a folder for each day of the year. I boldly suggested that he publish the flat waste as an edition and do the whole thing systematically correctly this time. Each folder should contain Roth's flat waste from one day within a year, i.e., 365 copies, and the daily folders could be sold as a limited edition. Roth was obviously impressed and immediately said "yes." We quickly reached an agreement, and he urged us to start right away.

TP

It was definitely a bold move on your part. You were in your early thirties and Roth was already in his mid-forties.

HH

It must have been strange for him that such a young guy like me was offering to take on such a complex project. And I was pretty overwhelmed that he trusted me without knowing me and wanted to carry out a project with me that required constant attention for a whole year. That's how the flat waste collection came about in 1975/1976.

TP

Logistically, that must have been an incredible effort. You were in Hamburg and Roth was probably here and there. How did you handle the waste in detail?



HH

From November 1, 1975, to October 31, 1976, Roth sent me several parcels every week from all over the world to the Rutschbahn. They contained plastic bags with the contents of his emptied trash can, personal trash, all the items he had used himself, and everything that was lying around that was supposed to be thrown away, such as notes, tickets, receipts, letters, or discarded drawings, as well as cigarette butts, burnt matches, and used toilet paper. I carefully took the bags apart and put the individual items in plastic sleeves and filed them in daily collection folders. On the back of the folders was the date of the day, the place where the trash had been

collected, and the name of the edition. Each folder was later signed by Dieter Roth. The pile of flat waste grew to about 800 binders with around 60,000 plastic sleeves. This high number can be explained by the fact that Roth was sometimes very productive, so I needed six or more binders a day to accommodate everything.

TP

It really was a mammoth project that took shape there. I also saw in photos from your apartment that the folders were no longer just lying around, but that you had systematically organized them. How much interest was there in the art market at that time?

HH

At the 6th documenta in 1977, one week of the flat waste collection was included in the artist's books section. At the time, we tried to sell the folders individually, but no one wanted them. So, we agreed to keep the collection together and show it as an object in exhibitions and offer it for sale to collectors and museums. At the time, people didn't understand what the flat waste collection was all about. After more than 20 years, a gallery showed interest, and two years before Roth's death, in 1996, the flat waste ended up at the Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin via the Hauser & Wirth gallery and the Flick Collection. As one of Dieter Roth's major works from his late period, it has subsequently been shown in numerous international exhibitions, including at the Schaulager Basel, Museum Ludwig Cologne, MoMA New York City, Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh, and Camden Arts Centre London.



I remember the exhibition "Roth Time," a comprehensive retrospective that I saw at MoMA QNS and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York in April 2004, on several consecutive days. I went there again and again. It was a magically compelling exhibition. For some time, MoMA NYC was undergoing renovation and was temporarily located in Queens, where I lived for a few months with two jazz musicians. At the time, I was only familiar with Roth's shit books and works related to books, such as Literaturwurst (Literature Sausage): Roth shredded books he didn't particularly like, Martin Walser and stuff like that, and stuffed them into a sausage casing together with herbs and fat according to a sausage recipe. As an author, I found that hilarious, of course. In addition to these book works, I also remember Roth's solo scenes, which ran on 128 monitors and in front of which I spent several hours. And I also remember the collection of flat trash, also because it reminded me of a man in Hanover who always picked up the trash lying around on his street.

TP

Incidentally, I also found a text in which Dieter Roth himself talks about your collaboration on flat waste.

HH

Of course, I know it, but read it again, please.

TP

"I met Herbert Hossmann (...) in Hamburg, and after I had described the collection of 'flat waste' to him at some point—I think that's what I called it then—and shown him some of it, he suggested collecting for another year, during which he wanted to take over the sorting and filing. So, I started again, this time organizing the objects from the beginning, by day. I sent him the yield of about a week in shopping bags labeled with dates. He financed the storage materials, folders, sleeves, had labels printed, etc. This co-operation could also be called a co-edition."

HH

Cooperation and co-edition sum it up, yes.

TP

Dirk Dobke, director of the Dieter Roth Foundation, has described the flat waste as Dieter Roth's extremely autobiographical tribute to all kinds of design forms. Someone sat down at every single thing, drew, developed, and designed the object.

And of course, all the trash was more than just material. I imagine it was always quite a personal surprise package.

HH

The flat waste was, of course, not just pure material for me. I became very close to Dieter Roth during the year of sorting. And I also saw it as a kind of honor that he allowed me to entrust everything that passed through his hands to a third party, me, every day for a year. To grant insight into all the embarrassing, stupid, unpleasant, unjust, evil, hurtful, but also beautiful, touching, melancholic, sad things hidden or manifested in the individual objects requires a high degree of self-confidence on his part. But even more trust in me, to whom he revealed himself naked and defenseless. Perhaps he was touched by the fact that I did the work with him without any vanity, without putting myself in the foreground, and without ever interfering in the process. But he also put notes that I was not supposed to read in envelopes and wrote "Please do not open" on them. Perhaps the content was simply too private for him. This special closeness gave me the opportunity to understand Roth perhaps better than many others. And he certainly rewarded my commitment until the end of his life, even though there were years in our relationship when we lived and worked at a distance from each other.

TP

Do you perceive the material more as auratic or also as humorous?

HH

I once showed one of the binders to a collector who had come to the Rutschbahn to look at my edition of artist books. He reverently leafed through the display sleeves, which were stuffed with cigarette butts and burnt matches, then gave me back the binder and thanked me for allowing him to hold this reliquary in his hands. Absurd: he was holding a folder full of trash. And when I encountered the collection of flat trash again in 2004 at the Roth retrospective at the Museum Ludwig and in 2006 at the presentation of the Flick Collection at the Hamburger Bahnhof, and saw visitors walking past the large shelves that Dieter had had built for the presentation, I even thought I heard Dieter laughing. He had magnificently achieved his goal of turning proudly presented trash into gold.

I'm allowed to see such a Leitz folder from the collection, carefully packaged and lying in a large cardboard box. When I open the first page, I notice the pair of white gloves that I had overlooked at first. Everything must be in order. Nevertheless, I think, my fingerprints are already on the folder and the first transparent sleeve, and at that moment I wonder whose hands the folder has passed through since it was created in 1976. I see Herbert Hossmann sitting in his apartment in Hamburg, sorting the matches, cigarette butts, and pieces of paper; I see him accepting the package with the flat waste from the mailman at the front door; I see the package lying in a van; I see Dieter Roth taking it to the post office, I see Dieter Roth emptying his trash can into a plastic bag, I see him striking a match and smoking a cigarette, I see the cigarette factory where the cigarette was made, and I see a tobacco plant in Brazil with a butterfly landing on it...

TP

Your apartment in the Rutschbahn was the headquarters of the flat waste. The packages arrived there, you sorted the trash into clear plastic bags and filed them in binders. Then it must have gotten pretty full pretty quickly, right?

HH

Actually, the situation surrounding the flat waste became increasingly precarious. The file folders were stored in a large, almost unfurnished living room, exhibition space, and studio, occupying almost a third of the area. I had just fallen in love with the artist Anna Oppermann, and sometime in 1977 she moved in with me in the Rutschbahn. She had to share the large, bright front room with Roth's flat waste. Over time, this became increasingly difficult for her, partly because she feared that vermin could be carried into the apartment via the waste. And Anna's son Alex, who sometimes brought his friends along, enjoyed secretly hiding his own trash in the files. What annoyed Anna was that she didn't have a corner in the large room to set up her own ensemble. I could understand her, but I didn't dare take away the flat trash because I suspected it would hit Dieter hard. And Dieter Roth never missed to visit my flat during any of his stays in Hamburg.

TP

It must have been an unpleasant and difficult situation for you, because you couldn't or didn't want to take sides, and you were also caught between the demands of the two artists and wanted to please both of them.

HH

It wasn't easy at all. The situation came to a head at the end of 1980, when Anna created new ensembles for three exhibitions and wanted to arrange installation situations in our apartment. A friend, Dagmar von Gottberg, resolute, combative, the first real cultural manager I ever met, heard about Anna's dilemma and was speechless that Anna put up with this "occupation" in our shared apartment. Immediately and without asking me, she hired a moving company to pack up the flat waste and store it in our storage. A few days later, Roth's work was no longer in the Rutschbahn, and Anna was able to set up a large ensemble for the "Continuous Creation" exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery in January 1981.

TP

Oppermann and Roth had shared a room in your shared apartment for about four years. And what happened during Roth's next visit to the Rutschbahn? Did it go off?

HH

Once or twice, I turned him down and arranged to meet him at our regular hangout, the steakhouse on Grindelhof. But I soon realized that he had smelled a rat. I confessed to him that the flat waste should go to my storage because Anna needed the corner for her work. He said I could store the waste on shelves in the hallway of the Rutschbahn, and I replied that the waste was already gone.

TP

A heavy blow. Roth was surely jealous to the nth degree; he had to share you with another artist.

HH

The next meeting at the Rutschbahn took place in a tense atmosphere. Dieter went straight to the room where the waste had been stored for several years and where Anna's work *Der ökonomische Aspekt* (The Economic Aspect) with the large photo canvases of the gesticulating Peter Schönherr was now on display. At his request, Anna briefly explained the theme and keywords of the ensemble, and Dieter seemed to listen politely. And since it was about selling, Anna asked him to pose for a photo

with a sales gesture behind the table. A short time later, Anna disappeared into the kitchen with the phone.

TP

And what did Roth say to you then?

HH

Now he turned on me and Anna. "You have to kick Anna out immediately," he said, "she's eating you alive, she's destroying you, women destroy men. What do you want with her anyway? She doesn't love you!" Before I could counterattack, Anna came back. Dieter immediately approached her, saying he wanted to buy a canvas from the ensemble she had set up: "How much does it cost? I have my checkbook here, you can name any price, I'll take it with me right away." Anna refused, saying she couldn't give away the canvas from the ensemble for the London exhibition. She would be happy to talk to him about selling another canvas, but Dieter wouldn't accept that. To prevent the situation from escalating, I urged everyone to finally go to the steakhouse around the corner. On the way down, Dieter hissed that it was a shame Anna hadn't burned to death in the fire that had broken out in the house a few weeks earlier. That was the last straw. We went along to dinner, but I never forgave myself for it later. Dieter Roth behaved incredibly rudely and insultingly toward the wait staff, and Anna and I were glad when we were back at the Rutschbahn. Our relationship with him was thoroughly disturbed. Dieter Roth was pathologically jealous of my living arrangement with Anna and could only tolerate it as long as he was still present at the Rutschbahn with his work.

TP

When and where did you see Roth next?

HH

Usually, when I met him in Hamburg, it was at one of his openings, at the Kunsthalle or at Dr. Buse's in Abteistrasse. A few months before Anna's death, he surprisingly came by taxi from Hamburg to Celle, where we had moved to my parents' house because of Anna's illness and the better medical care. Anna and I were very happy to see him. It was a beautiful summer afternoon. We sat on the terrace eating raspberry cake, a wasp circling his large, pale, bald head. When Anna went into the house to make fresh coffee, he asked me to drive him to the train station immediately. He couldn't stay a minute longer; it was unbearable for him to see us

living together so happily. Without saying goodbye to Anna, he got into the car and I drove him to the station. I can still see him waving out of the open train window.

TP

Was that your last encounter with Roth?

HH

No, no. A few weeks after Anna's death in 1993, I had returned to Hamburg and the Rutschebahn, we met there and looked at the corner where the flat waste had once stood. He talked about Anna and how he had always greatly admired her as an artist. "I'm glad I bought a canvas from her. It's with my paintings in Basel." I let him believe it.

TP

And that's when you decided to tackle a new version of the flat trash?

HH

That came later. During his last visit to the Rutschebahn in April 1998, Dieter suggested that I make an improved collection of flat waste, this time even more elaborate than in 1973 and 1975/76. I found the idea exciting and agreed in principle to organize it, but on a more professional basis than before. I asked for time to think about it and clarify the scope of what would be possible. When I asked art historian Ute Vorkoeper to participate in the project and she expressed great interest in doing so, I wrote to Dieter at Easter 1998 that we could make it happen. He replied immediately, saying he was very happy and had already started collecting items, and that we would discuss everything else in Hamburg. A few days later, I received the news of his death on June 5, 1998.

Stundenbilder (Hourly Images)

TP

A follow-up project to the Flacher Abfall collection is the one-year lasting work of the Stundenbilder collection, which was to be published by Édition Lebeer Hossmann.

HH

Another ambitious, autobiographical documentation project: in 1977, Dieter planned to take a photo every hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year – one shot of whatever was in front of him at that moment. These photos were to be published in

the form of small books in a limited edition of three copies by Édition Lebeer Hossmann. I took on the task of printing the photos and arranging them chronologically. After 16 albums with 320 photos had been created, Dieter discontinued this unique book project for health reasons and complete exhaustion. Of the three copies of the collection produced, Dieter gave one to the Wool Collection in the US, a second copy is believed to be in Dieter's estate, and the third copy is part of my Roth collection. Even though the book remained unfinished, it is one of the key works of conceptual artist books of its time, influencing subsequent generations of photographers.



The so-called “BeReal” photos come to mind, images taken with a photo-sharing app launched in 2020. All users simultaneously share live impressions from their everyday lives, unposed and unedited. Another example of Roth's visionary nature is his countless “selves” photos, some of which he then edited further. Today, we know this as “selfies.” The difference is that Roth does not simply show off himself blatantly with his photos, but uses them to radically question the individual.

TP

What fascinated you about the hour pictures?

HH

With their casual aesthetic, the hour pictures seemed like a cross-section of Dieter's life and its random and intentionally trivial parts, which he used to mock high culture and bourgeois artistic taste. The conventionally reproduced photographs show

seemingly random excerpts from the artist's actual field of vision: guests, friends, details in the room, the dishes, the messy desk, a television screen, or even the contents of the toilet bowl. Roth arranged the prints in small, prefabricated photo albums. If hours were skipped, a blank page was inserted in place of a photo so that the rhythm of (imperfect) life and the formal concept could be maintained. By signing each individual photograph in the books, each photo became a certified, individual work of art. It is speculated that Dieter was inspired in his work on the hourly pictures by the medieval tradition of the book of hours, a regular, structuring devotion to God. An influence from Rainer Maria Rilke's "Book of Hours" is also conceivable.

Das *Schimmelmuseum* (The Mould Museum)

TP

Another particularly spectacular and radical work is the so-called Mould Museum in Hamburg, whose creation and decline you observed at close quarters and ultimately participated in the resistance against its demolition.

HH

Dirk Dobke told me about the creation of the *Schimmelmuseum*, that Dr. Buse and Dieter began completing at the Buse Collection in the early 1980s. Some key works from the late 1960s were repurchased, i.e., works using perishable materials, while other important works were recreated by Dieter in a similar manner. When Dieter saw the old house at Harvestehuder Weg 23, where Dr. Buse wanted to build the Dieter Roth Museum, he found the old building ideal for precisely this phase of the ephemeral works, in order to make them accessible in a museum setting. And Dr. Buse gave Dieter free rein in the staging. This is how the *Schimmelmuseum* came into being between 1990 and 2004.

TP

On the one hand, the *Schimmelmuseum* has been recognized worldwide and described as unique, as a kind of legacy of Roth. On the other hand, there were constant arguments and quarrels at the site. How did you come into contact with the *Schimmelmuseum*?

HH

In the fall of 1993, Dieter visited me at the Rutschbahn. He brought an excellent bottle of French red wine with him and said he wanted to show me a new work and afterwards drink the wine with me. He took me to the *Schimmelmuseum*, which he had set up with his son Björn and a group of young Icelanders in an inconspicuous house on Alsterchaussee. Work was still being done on it, but my impression was that it was essentially finished. Rarely has anything touched me so deeply, because for me it was a complete reversal of everything I had previously associated with museums and museum preservation. The objects in the museum were supposed to destroy themselves, the stacked towers were supposed to collapse and decay, and the fast-growing, aggressive climbing plants planted around the building were supposed to entwine the building and cover it after its collapse. It seemed almost unbelievable to me. For me, the Mold Museum summed up all of Dieter's ideas and artistic visions. This also included his contempt for critics, art managers, and collectors. Since then, I have been preoccupied with the question of what such a rejection could mean for art and my attitude toward it. Isn't it necessary to accept that art objects can also perish irretrievably, that they can die?

TP

I once heard an anecdote about a collector who was upset that a work made of chocolate and birdseed, which he had purchased from Roth for a low five-figure sum, *P.O.T.H.A.A.VFB* (Portrait of the Artist as a Birdseed Bust), had disintegrated and he demanded a replacement. But transience was part of the concept of the artwork, which many people didn't consider. Unfortunately, I've never been to the *Schimmelmuseum* myself and have only seen it in pictures.

HH

I asked Dieter at the time who would be able to visit the Mould Museum in the future, and he told me about a list with three categories. The first lists people who can visit the museum at any time, the second contains the names of people who are only allowed to enter the building with the express permission of the artist and the collector, and the third names the people, including many prominent exhibition organizers, art critics, and artists, who are not allowed to visit the museum at all.

TP

Sounds like a typical Roth concept, original and a little bit wicked. What happened when the museum was left to rot in Hamburg's chic Harvestehude district?

HH

At some point, there was a falling out with Dr. Buse. Dieter stopped working on the *Schimmelmuseum* and returned the key to Dr. Buse. In mid-1997, on my daily walk to the office, which took me past the Mould Museum, I noticed that the front yard had been tidied up and the objects on display had disappeared. The façade had been painted clinically white, and I feared that the museum had been cleared out.

TP

That happened quickly. What had happened?

HH

Dobke told me that the neighbors had been outraged by the neglected house and that the district office had sent an official complaint to Dr. Buse. The authorities referred to the so-called "Außenalsterverordnung" (Outer Alster Ordinance), which prescribes exactly how the facades in this part of the city should look. Dr. Buse then had the plants removed, the front garden cleaned up, and the objects taken away.

TP

I wonder how Roth reacted to this and whether he even knew about it.

HH

Six months before Dieter's death, I spent New Year's Eve 1997 in Konstanz and received a call from Dieter in Basel asking if I wanted to come over. I did so the next day and met him on New Year's Day 1998. We talked about the Mould Museum, and I asked him what would happen to it now. He said he didn't know, he had no contact with Dr. Buse. I asked him if he could imagine reinstalling the museum in another location in case it was destroyed. He replied that he felt too exhausted and worn out for that. The Mould Museum was his artistic legacy. When I asked him if he didn't think Dr. Buse was waiting for his call, he simply replied, "Do you think so?"

TP

So, did Roth contact Dr. Buse?

HH

I returned to Hamburg and was surprised to receive a call from Dieter in mid-January 1998, informing me that he had contacted Dr. Buse. The Mould Museum was now

to be made accessible to the public. According to Dobke, there was also an idea to reinstall the *Schimmelmuseum* in the planned Dieter Roth Museum, but this was never realized due to Dieter's sudden death in June 1998. And so, the *Schimmelmuseum* became a kind of museum and untouchable, and demolition became taboo. Nothing happened for five years. Eventually, when it came to lending a large part of the works for the Roth retrospective, Dr. Buse decided to demolish the *Schimmelmuseum*. And after all the works had been removed and the wall pieces and murals secured, it was demolished.

TP

But not without resistance, as I have read. Even if this resistance was ultimately futile.

HH

The artists Cornelia Sollfrank and Nana Petzet launched a public campaign at the time to prevent the demolition of the Schimmel Museum and to start a discussion about it. The aim of the campaign was to fulfill Dieter's intention of not hindering the decay process in the *Schimmelmuseum* and leaving it to decay. Incidentally, this was not intended as an attack on the collector Dr. Buse. After all, he had purchased the work and given it a temporary home. Even if Björn and Dieter had not formally agreed, as the owner he had acquired the right to destroy the work.

The action was directed primarily against the city of Hamburg, which had failed to campaign for the preservation of an exceptional, unique work of art of international standing and had shown no interest in finding ways and means to preserve the *Schimmelmuseum* in the form created by the artist. By the city, I mean the people who had a special responsibility in the city in terms of (cultural) politics, art history, and art. Many of them knew about the house and had visited it. They were also aware that the house was in danger. They all looked the other way. That is the real scandal. They deliberately failed to find possible solutions and approach Dr. Buse. Sollfrank and Petzet then succeeded in getting UNESCO (ICOMOS) interested, which added the *Schimmelmuseum* to its list of particularly endangered objects of high cultural value. This caused quite a stir in the media. However, they were no longer able to influence the decision to demolish the building. Finally, a demolition excavator began its work of destruction, and it was clear that all we could do was

inform the art community. We issued a press release, which was distributed via the dpa (German Press Agency). Hundreds of newspapers worldwide reported on the event. And Hamburg was once again perceived as a city hostile to art. And when the *Schimmelmuseum* was gone, there were plenty of crocodile tears.

TP

Even though the *Schimmelmuseum* no longer exists, Hamburg still has the Dieter Roth Foundation at Dr. Buse's in Abteistraße, which provides a comprehensive overview of Roth's work. After all these years and Roth's death, what remains for you personally?

HH

Lots of memories, especially friendly and loving ones. When I heard about Dieter's death, I took the sleeper train from Hamburg to Basel to the cemetery at Hörnli, where he was laid out in the chapel. I bought a large bouquet of red roses at the flower market in front of Basel City Hall and visited him at the cemetery to say goodbye. He lay surrounded by white funeral flowers, dressed in a white shroud with ruffles at the neck, and seemed to be dreaming. I was the only visitor and stayed with him for perhaps half an hour. Then I called his son Björn. We met in Hegenheimerstraße, in the studio where he had fallen to his death from the wooden staircase, and where I had visited him only six months earlier. It was a nice conversation with Björn, and I had the impression that he was happy about my visit. In the background of the winding and cluttered studio apartment, the "corpse scavengers" were already rustling about. I did not go to his funeral in Basel. It no longer seemed necessary to me, and I would hardly have been able to bear many of his supposedly close friends on that day. Twenty years later, in 2018, I traveled to Iceland with my wife Cornelia to visit Dieter's grave. My sister Irmelin once told me that Dieter Roth had described me as one of his best friends in an interview. I haven't read it, but it's true. We were very close for many years.

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