



February 28, 2003

## **Roth-Time. A Dieter Roth Retrospective**

25 May to 14 September 2003

### **The Exhibition**

"Roth-Time. A Dieter Roth Retrospective" is the first major overview since the death of the artist in 1998. With well over 500 loans from 55 collections, the exhibition displays his creative work over a period of 50 years in the form of drawings, graphic designs and books, pictures, objets d'art and installations, as well as audio and video works. Thus, Schaulager will make it possible for the first time to experience the incredible variety of this work as a magnificent and exciting overall design.

The retrospective starts with the Dieter Roth's earliest drawings and graphic designs in the second half of the forties. The climax of this early period is the *Solothurner Wandbild* (Solothurn Mural) dating from 1952, a competition piece of an unusual size (300 x 240 cm) for Roth who had worked on a small scale up to that time.

The following years saw the creation of works on paper, paintings and books, showing how he tackled the questions of concrete art that were a subject of much debate in Switzerland at the time. This phase of his work, which reveals a less well-known Roth, will be wonderfully well represented, thanks to a number of rarely shown loans. Even at this early stage, a basic feature of Roth's creativity can be traced. The joy of experimentation and the intensity with which he realizes an artistic idea, simultaneously exploring it in various media, and advancing this exploration to such an extent that the original starting point is hardly recognizable any more at the end. A second characteristic is the importance attached to language and books in Roth's work, even so early in his career.

A specific area is devoted to the objets d'art, particularly jewellery and furniture, that Dieter Roth began designing and producing towards the end of the fifties. Although they were made in the hope of earning money from their sale, these objects should also be seen as an extension of Roth's artistic exploration of the field of design.

The sixties represent a total release from formal conventions and a spectacular expansion into the realm of inferior-quality, transitory materials: specifically designed books and objects made of scrap newspaper, pictures painted with cheese, graphic designs from squashed bananas, portrait busts made of chocolate, island like heaps of various transitory materials, and glass cases filled with layers of spices. But it is not the provocative nature of the materials as such that is the determinant here but the language and the world of imagery that Roth opened up for himself in taking such a step. The exhibition shows how Roth in uses this vocabulary starts developing his own, highly topical discourse on the subject of existence and transience, of explosion and decomposition, of triumph and despair. For instance, in the transformation of his newly selected materials, Roth created an entirely new form of representation for landscapes and nature, to name but one example.

Even before the seventies, Roth had allowed some works to develop over a period of years but, during that decade, long-term projects of this type became a strategy in themselves. Systematically, over many years, Roth started collections, of texts and sketches, for example, of flat waste or of

pictorial documentations of all the houses in a town, thereby enabling him subsequently to combine them into one of a number of monumental works. (*Gesammelte Werke* (Collected Works) 1969-91, *Flacher Abfall* (Flat Waste) 1975-76, 1992 and *Reykjavik Slides* 1973-75, 1990-93). Works of this kind allow the viewer to experience not only the passing of time, but also sharply defined periods of time impressed with the stamp of an individual or a collectivity. In these works, a form begins to take shape in Roth's creations, a form that is unusual in art but that is characteristic of Roth in its reference to language: the diary.

This period also saw enormous productivity in graphic design and drawing, turning Roth into a highly sought-after artist. The virtuosity and ingenuity with which Roth worked in both these media will be presented in the exhibition by selected grouping of his works.

In his final, long creative phase (from about 1982 onwards), Roth brought to a series of brilliant climaxes his previously developed approaches to the subjects of self-portrait and transience. They are expressed both in monumental installations and in introspective small-scale works. A large area of the retrospective is devoted to these works, staged by Roth together with his son, Björn, and friends from Iceland in memorable exhibitions in Holderbank, Switzerland, Vienna and Marseilles during the nineties. Here, we also find the 'collaborations', his joint creations with fellow artists, particularly with Richard Hamilton, Arnulf Rainer and Ingrid Wiener. But the focal points are the legendary *Gartenskulptur* (Garden Sculpture) (1968-1996) and *Soloszenen* (Solo Scenes) (1997-1998), a continuation of the film project, *Diary*, created by Roth for the 1982 Venice Biennale and consisting of 128 video monitors.