

ARTFORUM

“Dieter Roth. Björn Roth”

HAUSER & WIRTH | CHELSEA

511 West 18th Street

January 23, 2013–April 13, 2013

“Nonart,” wrote Allan Kaprow in a 1971 essay, “exists only fleetingly, like some subatomic particle, or perhaps only as a postulate.” Of any artist, Dieter Roth, whose 1969 US debut entailed staging suitcases of unwrapped cheese at Eugenia Butler’s LA gallery, only to have the show shut down (noxious stench, festering vermin) and the rancid dairy chucked in the desert several years later, seems to most literally illustrate Kaprow’s remark. Roth’s five-decade career turned on the provocation of admitting decomposing matter and other dross into sanctioned art spaces, then delighting in the aggressive unsalability of the art that ensued. As one moves through the works on view at Hauser & Wirth’s impressive new Chelsea outpost, it’s difficult to decide whether Roth’s collapse of art into life yielded a radical, dadaist dispersal or a heroization of the artist as a privileged figure whose every gesture qualifies as art. The answer, it seems, is that Roth achieved both—a position that makes his art by turns fascinating and fascinatingly vexed.

As his wall-bound assemblages (think Rauschenberg unhinged, with flies) and metastatic sprawl (*Grosse Tischruine* [Large Table Ruin], begun in 1978 and spreading further with each installation) affirm, Roth did best when he had least at his disposal. Fifty-two small-scale intaglio prints, *die Die DIE VERDAMMTE SCHEISSE* (the The THE DAMNED SHIT), 1974/75, arrayed sequentially in wooden frames, are the show’s quiet highlights. On each, a found copper plate pocked with spectral, corrosive stains furnishes the ground for a succession of formless marks and tense, frenetic scribbles. Kodak grayscales and scratched-out words join with bulbous, larval forms in scenes at once expressive and anxiously disarticulated. Nearby, a rotating cast of fabricators pours melted E. Guittard chocolate into molds of Roth’s bust and stacks the confections in a self-supporting column. Such acts of performative reconstruction, here orchestrated by Roth’s son Björn often precondition the artist’s work, inclined, as it is, to breakdown and blight. Left to decay in a spectrum of taupes and milky grays, the piece, a 2013 recasting of *Selbsturm* (Self Tower), 1994, thematizes its own impermanence. Absurd and antiheroic, it’s a fitting monument to an artist whose efforts to flout the art world now find themselves enshrined within it.



View of “Dieter Roth. Björn Roth,” 2013.
Center: *Selbsturm* (Self Tower), 1994/2013.

— Courtney Fiske

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