

**wait,  
later this  
will be  
nothing**

**editions by  
dieter roth**

**MoMA**

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dieter roth**

sarah suzuki

with brenna campbell  
scott gerson  
and lynda zycherman

the museum of modern art  
new york

## contents

Published in conjunction with the exhibition *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth*, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 13–June 24, 2013, organized by Sarah Suzuki, Associate Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

The exhibition is made possible by Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann, in memory of Dr. Ira Wool.

This publication was made possible by the Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Publication Endowment Fund.

Produced by the Department of Publications, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Edited by Jane Bobko  
Designed by Project Projects  
Production by Marc Sapir  
Printed and bound by Nino Druck GmbH, Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, Germany

This book is typeset in Atlas Grotesk. The paper is 150 gsm Hello Fat Matt.

Published by The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019  
www.moma.org

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2012952079  
ISBN: 978-0-87070-850-3

Distributed in the United States and Canada by ARTBOOK | D.A.P.  
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd floor, New York, New York 10013  
www.artbook.com

Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson Ltd  
181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX  
www.thamesandhudson.com

Printed in Germany

Cover: *PO.TH.A.A.VFB* (Portrait of the artist as a *Vogelfutterbüste* [birdseed bust]) (detail). 1968. Multiple of chocolate and birdseed, overall 8¼ × 5½ × 4¾" (21 × 14 × 12 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Endowment Fund and through the generosity of Peter H. Friedland. See plate 57

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Sprengel Museum Hannover, photograph Michael Herling / Aline Gwose: plate 64

Lynda Zycherman: figs. 33, 34

6	<b>foreword</b>
7	<b>acknowledgments</b>
8	<b>wait, later this will be nothing editions by dieter roth</b> sarah suzuki
34	<b>plates</b>
82	<b>dieter roth and questions of conservation two case studies</b> brenna campbell, scott gerson, and lynda zycherman, with sarah suzuki
91	<b>list of plates</b>
94	<b>selected bibliography</b>
96	<b>trustees of the museum of modern art</b>

Dieter Roth was an endlessly inventive and thought-provoking artist whose substantial body of work, made over the course of nearly five decades, is both prodigious and idiosyncratic. In his experiments with forms, materials, and language, Roth challenged the boundaries not only between mediums but between art and everyday life. The Museum of Modern Art has long recognized the singularity of Roth's oeuvre and its profound impact on younger generations of artists, and we have demonstrated our interest through both our exhibitions and our collecting practices. We are now proud to present *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth*, a show organized by Sarah Suzuki, Associate Curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. This exhibition presents a comprehensive selection of prints, books, and multiples from the first half of the artist's career, offering a lens through which to examine not only his radical redefinition of these mediums but also his essential contributions to art in the twentieth century.

*Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth* draws substantially from the extensive collections of both the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books and The Museum of Modern Art Library. The exhibition proudly features several important new additions to the collection of the print department, including Roth's seminal *P.O.T.H.A.A.VFB*, from 1968. These acquisitions would not have been possible without the wholehearted support of the Committee on Prints and Illustrated Books, currently chaired by Edgar Wachenheim III, and the confidence and generosity of our Trustees. I also extend our appreciation to the Print Associates for their ongoing commitment to the department, and for their continuing encouragement of our efforts to strengthen our holdings of Roth's editions. The Museum's collection of prints and illustrated books has long been exemplary, and it maintains this position

thanks to the expansive vision of our curators and these key supporters.

On behalf of the Trustees and the staff of The Museum of Modern Art, I extend my sincere gratitude to the lenders—in particular, the Dieter Roth Foundation—who have graciously shared their works with us. We are immensely grateful to Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann, who have generously funded this exhibition in memory of Roth's longtime friend Dr. Ira Wool. Above all, my thanks go to Sarah Suzuki for her dynamic and insightful organization of this exhibition and catalogue.

Glenn D. Lowry  
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

This study of Dieter Roth's prints, books, and multiples would have been impossible without the support of a long roster of colleagues, scholars, and friends. My thanks go to the Committee on Prints and Illustrated Books and to the Print Associates, whose support of this often challenging material has been crucial in building The Museum of Modern Art's holdings of Roth's work. In the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, I thank Christophe Cherix, The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Chief Curator, for his encouragement and wise advice; Deborah Wye, Chief Curator Emerita, who first introduced me to the artist's oeuvre; and Katherine Alcauskas, Emily Edison, and Jeff White, who oversee the cataloguing and care of our collection. Lotte Johnson, former Louise Bourgeois Twelve-Month Intern, followed this project from its start, and was succeeded in that internship by Hanna Exel, who ably stepped into the position. Intern Lydia Korndörfer deserves special thanks for helping me to untangle Roth's complicated German wordplay.

My colleagues in two other departments deserve extraordinary thanks. In the Department of Conservation, Scott Gerson, Brenna Campbell, and Lynda Zycherman, who coauthored an essay in this volume, dove into the material with enthusiasm and offered invaluable insight. In the Library, Milan Hughston, Chief of Library and Museum Archives, and Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, share my passion for Roth's books, and have been generous with their time and collection at every turn.

This catalogue has been realized under the guidance of David Frankel, Editorial Director, and Marc Sapir, Production Director, in the Department of Publications. My thanks go to Jane Bobko for her thoughtful editorial oversight, and to Adam Michaels and Kim Sutherland of Project Projects for designing a volume that reflects Roth's artistic complexities. Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of

Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, commented on earlier drafts of the essays, and helped them take shape. The Museum of Modern Art's Imaging Services team, directed by Erik Landsberg, is responsible for the beautiful images that appear in these pages, with special thanks due to Robert Kastler, Peter Butler, Thomas Griesel, Jonathan Muzikar, John Wronn, Paul Abbey, and Roberto Rivera.

The exhibition itself is dependent on the logistical oversight of Assistant Coordinator Jessica Cash, Associate Coordinator Randolph Black, and Associate Registrars Allison Needle and Sydney Briggs, as well as on the keen eye and expertise of Betty Fisher in the Department of Exhibition Design and Production. Without the generosity of the lenders—in particular, the Dieter Roth Foundation—the exhibition would not have been possible, and I thank them for parting with their works for our benefit.

In my travels I have been fortunate to meet many others who care about Roth's work as much as I do. Among those who deserve my thanks for their time, tales, suggestions, and invaluable assistance are Erik Andersch, Johannes Becker, Melanie Bono, Philip Buse, Dirk Dobke, Jon Hendricks, Ina Jessen, Philipp Konzett, Hansjörg Mayer, Carina Plath, Barry Rosen, Björn Roth, Maria and Walter Schnepel, Gabriele Schroeter, Dieter Schwarz, Karin Seinsoth, Christoph Virchow, Jan Voss, and Matthew Zucker. Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann deserve special thanks; longstanding supporters of Roth, they have generously funded this exhibition in memory of his friend, collector, and champion, Dr. Ira Wool. Finally, I must thank my friends and family for their support and encouragement, ever reminding me in difficult moments that later, this would be something.

Sarah Suzuki  
Associate Curator, Department of Prints  
and Illustrated Books

## wait, later this will be nothing editions by dieter roth

sarah suzuki

The life and art of Dieter Roth ricochet across continents, approaches, strategies, and systems, in a restless and relentless torrent of creation. Engaged in all manner of artistic production, including painting, sculpture, music, drawing, books, graphics, multiples, video, and installation, he shifted direction constantly, never settling in one place or medium long enough to become mired in a signature style. Over time his work embraced and synthesized chance, the everyday, decay and transformation. He explored new interplays of poetry and image. He accumulated pages, ideas, materials, techniques, and even discards, challenging notions of beauty and offering a redefinition of art in the twentieth century. As one of Roth's friends realized, it is easier to describe what he is *not* than what he *is*: "Above all, he is not a propagandist, and he is not a prophet. He is neither a moralist nor an immoralist. And he is no joiner. . . . He is a member of no ism, group or movement, although many movements, groups, and isms would like to claim him as one of their own."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, although Roth had tangential relationships with Op art, the Zurich and Basel schools of Concrete art, Pop, Actionism, and Fluxus, among others, he was a proponent both of none and of all these things. In his complicated worldview, often colored by anxiety and self-doubt, he felt his peers were as much adversaries as they were allies, and admiration and jealousy could be inextricably intertwined. Possessed of a dual nature, he oscillated between optimism and pessimism, structure and chaos, saying, "I am, and have always been, at war with myself."<sup>2</sup>

One of few constants in Roth's output was his production of editioned work—books, graphics, and multiples—which he made from his student days until the end of his life. Taken together, they reveal a thorough reassessment of these formats, constituting an experimental

body of work that calls into question the standard definitions of these staid, established mediums. This essay examines his contribution in editioned work from the start of his career through 1971, when he organized a major traveling exhibition of his graphic oeuvre that signaled the close of his first chapter of production.

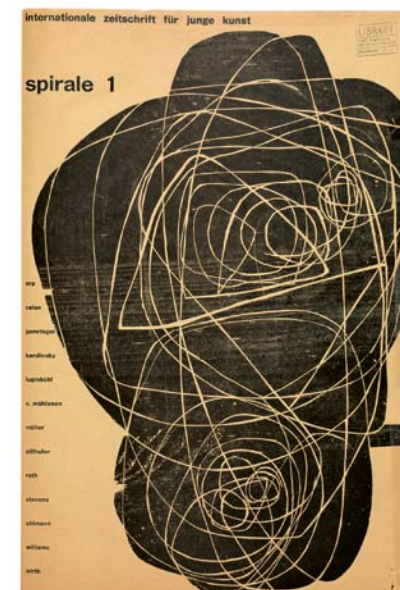
Karl-Dietrich Roth was born in Germany in the spring of 1930, and from the time of his childhood in Hannover showed an interest in art and literature. Thanks to his father's Swiss citizenship, he was able to gain asylum in Zurich during World War II. There, he stayed in a hotel whose refugee residents have been described as "a mélange of Jews, dissidents, and performing artists (some fit all three categories),"<sup>3</sup> surely an intoxicating mix to a young man, away from home, who had already begun to nurture his own artistic and literary leanings.

The effort to shield young Roth from the war perhaps came too late, however. Describing his wartime childhood, Roth later said (referring to himself in the third person): "Hell was loose, but Roth survived, beatings and scoldings he survived, shitting and pissing in his timid pants, poor shaking little turd, he even managed to live through that rainstorm of bombs and grenades, awful smashing horror, brought about on all, the living and the dead."<sup>4</sup> This overwhelming sense of fear and helplessness, his self-perception as pathetic and afraid, and the notion that nothing is certain, that not even home is a constant or a safe haven, are all recognizable sentiments in his work and his words throughout his life.

Roth's formal education didn't extend past secondary school. Having studied languages both living and dead, and the poetry of German literary giants including Goethe and Schiller, Roth abandoned the gymnasium in favor of a peripatetic life of self-education. He gradually mastered a full complement of graphic techniques: by sixteen he had made his first,

fig. 1  
Cover for the journal  
*spirale*, no. 1

1953. Woodcut, page  
19 1/16 x 13 3/4" (50 x 35 cm).  
The Museum of Modern  
Art Library, New York



rudimentary etchings by scratching into the metal of a flattened tin can, and was soon making wood and linoleum cuts; he learned commercial methods while apprenticing at an advertising agency in Bern; and he took typography and lithography classes on the side.

In Bern, Roth found himself amid an active literary and artistic scene, one heavily influenced by the Bauhaus-derived Concrete art propagated by Max Bill. At his art academy in Ulm, Bill endorsed an intellectually appealing nonfigurative art that followed systematic and geometric principles, with an emphasis on color, form, and typography. These concerns are evident in the artists' works reproduced in Roth's first publishing effort, in 1953, with the artist Marcel Wyss and the poet Eugen Gomringer: the journal *spirale*.<sup>5</sup> Although he was clearly influenced by the prevailing geometric abstraction, Roth resisted the expected in the prints he contributed to the journal (fig. 1), making rough-edged, gouged-out woodcuts that stood at a clear distance from the hard edges of Concrete art.

Although Roth's participation in *spirale* lasted only a brief time, his association with the journal had enduring implications, both positive and negative. Criticism of the poetry he published there—it was decried as sentimental kitsch—resulted in his impetuously setting his

artistic output adrift in a boat on the river Aare, and in a more lasting repercussion, in extended writer's block. (This was perhaps more accurately fear of criticism. Roth said later, "The great judges of European literature and art are located somewhere in my head and play the judge there and do me in. I have to keep watching out that I don't offend them.")<sup>6</sup> Roth's dry spell lasted until the publication of his *Scheisse* (Shit) poems in 1966.<sup>7</sup>

Exposure to the work of the Bolivian-born Gomringer proved to be an important factor in the next phase of Roth's artistic production. Gomringer is widely cited as the founder of Concrete poetry, a form that moves beyond traditional concerns of language, sound, and syncopation, and places equal weight on the space of a poem and its aesthetics. Dubbing his poem-pictures "constellations," Gomringer published his early efforts while working together with Roth, who shortly absorbed these ideas into his own work.

The success of the abstract compositions in *spirale* led to the potential for a career in textile design. Roth followed an opportunity to Copenhagen in 1955, and there met his first wife, Sigridur Björnsdóttir. The next year, they relocated to her home country of Iceland,<sup>8</sup> and thus began Roth's life-long love affair with the country's dramatic landscape of glaciers, volcanoes, mountains, and sky; over the rest of his life, it would become the closest place to "home." In Reykjavik he continued his nascent publishing activities, setting up forlag ed with the poet Einar Bragi.<sup>9</sup> The company's program was relatively circumscribed—Roth once described the venture as a hobby, saying he and Bragi never made any money—but the press did provide a means for him to publish some of his own early book projects.

From the mid-1950s onward, books remained a constant artistic outlet for Roth, who once said, "I make art only to support my habit which is to write and publish books."<sup>10</sup> His radical experimentation resulted in a complete reconsideration of what makes a book. By traditional definition, a book is a relatively stable object—a text on a sequence of pages bound together—but in Roth's hands it was freed from any constraints. In fact, Roth ushered in a new

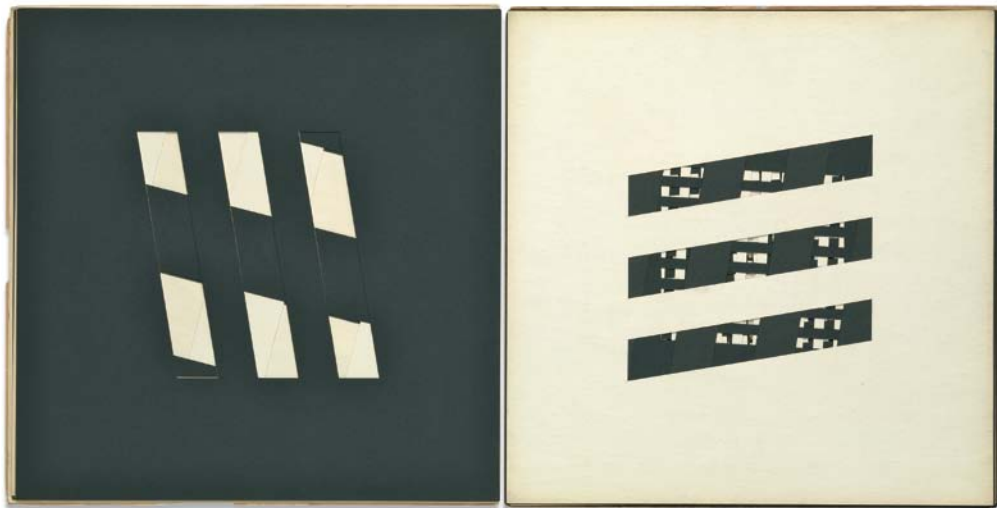


fig. 2  
book c6

1959. Artist's book of hand-cut cardstock, page 15 × 15" (38.1 × 38.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

format: the artist's book. Distinct from *livres d'artistes*, deluxe volumes for which Pablo Picasso or Henri Matisse might have contributed etchings or lithographs to accompany an author's text, artists' books don't reproduce artwork or describe artwork or illustrate artwork. Rather, the book *is* the artwork. Influenced by his work with Concrete poetry, design, and advertising, but unbound by traditional restrictions of the book form, Roth is the primogenitor of this medium.<sup>11</sup>

Of his earliest books, he said, "It may be that I wanted to do books, but was afraid to write them,"<sup>12</sup> betraying his anxiety about how they might be received. He instead presented wordless volumes; two of the earliest are free of even a title page. The first version of 1957's *kinderbuch* (children's book)<sup>13</sup> (plates 3, 4) was conceived in 1954 as a present for the infant son of Claus Bremer, a poet and theater director who was part of Roth's circle in Bern.<sup>14</sup> Roth said of this volume, "so easy, [since] children can not protest. You push it over to them and they say 'ahh, circles and squares.'" At least that's what I thought, but I think no children have almost seen this book. They would be fantastically bored.<sup>15</sup> In fact, however, it functions like a rigorous Concrete design exercise: what can be done with just two shapes and the primary colors? Even with these limitations, Roth creates a dynamic volume, one that shows his early interest in the accumulation of forms. Each spread comprises a solid color on the left,

facing a composition of shapes. As one moves through the book page by page, the number of shapes increases while the shapes simultaneously shrink in size, becoming more densely arranged. The restricted visual vocabulary expands exponentially as colors and shapes are layered on top of one another to create new variables. At the midpoint, the right-hand page is patterned with hundreds of overlapping circles and diamonds, so small and dense that they suggest lines of text on a page (and seem to presage the experiments with type that would soon follow). After this apex of visual cacophony, the shapes retreat in decrescendo, decreasing in number and increasing in size until only a single blue circle remains, giving the volume an overarching compositional symmetry that would prove to be one of Roth's hallmarks.

*Bilderbuch* (picture book) is a pendant to *kinderbuch*, and among several later variants of it is *book t2* (plates 1, 2),<sup>16</sup> an unbound square volume consisting of six leaves of white board, and sixteen of colored acetate with geometric cutouts. *Bilderbuch* offers complex interplays of transparency and opacity. The compositions are formed by the accumulation of the layers of colored plastic, with multiple "spreads" visible at one time. *Bilderbuch* contains neither a word of text nor, despite Roth's title, a single conventional picture. Rather, he plays with expectations, suggesting that pictures are contained within, but leaving it to us to conjure them up from the framework he has provided.

In a further upending of the traditional idea of a book, the pages are not only wordless but also loose, with no indication as to sequence or orientation. In this regard, *bilderbuch* presages *Book*, a project that was to follow the next year.

A volume of twenty-four loose pages in two colors (black and white, blue and red, and so on), *Book* was produced in three editions, in 1958, 1959, and 1964,<sup>17</sup> and comprised over thirty lettered variations, including *Book AC* (plate 5) and *book c6* (fig. 2). Each page features a series of cut slots: thick and thin, single and many, at right and other angles. The experience of turning the pages is a distinctly kinetic one, as one cut page piles on top of another, creating new compositions, with the patterned grids shifting and flickering to great optical effect. Like *book t2*, *Book* lacks text of any kind and its pages can be arranged in any orientation and in any order that the reader desires.

Even some of Roth's most esteemed peers struggled with how open his iconoclastic definition of a book could be. In 1959 Roth had completed a short stint as a visiting critic at Yale University, where he met Joseph Albers, an artist whose own mature work was dominated by geometry as a means of exploring color theory. Roth described Albers's interest in his work, writing in his distinctive phonetic orthography, "i met him too tyms and we had an intenss diskushun he is grayt and carm i had a copi ov my buk bownd . . . and showd it to hym he is not exactly thair wair i woz but mi best enkownta in amerika til now."<sup>18</sup> Roth was likely

referring to the slotted *Book*, for which Albers had proposed trading one of his own works. However, when he went to make the exchange, and discovered that the book was not, and would not be, bound, he was so perturbed by Roth's abrogation of his responsibility to fix the order and direct the viewer's experience that he canceled the swap.<sup>19</sup>

Although making wordless volumes, Roth was still engaged with language, and following Gomringer's lead, was thinking about ways to break down and reassemble it. A range of approaches can be seen in *bok 1956-1959* (fig. 3): repeated punctuation marks arranged to form corner-spanning vectors; the dissection and reconstruction of a fixed group of letters to make actual (*tomato*) or nonsense (*otatom*) words; the use of typographic elements to emulate a landscape; a page sprinkled with seemingly randomly placed os. Monotype lettersets allowed him to orient single typographic elements in any direction, and to exercise an interest in mirroring and symmetry by using the characters *d*, *b*, *p*, and *q* to make inverse and reverse versions of themselves. In *bok 1956-1959*, language becomes divorced from meaning, and its parts become abstract compositional elements, selected for aesthetic rather than linguistic value and then subjected to many layers of transformation that confound our attempts to "read" them.

Similar strategies are visible in the monographic second issue of *material* (1959) (plate 8), a journal published in Darmstadt by

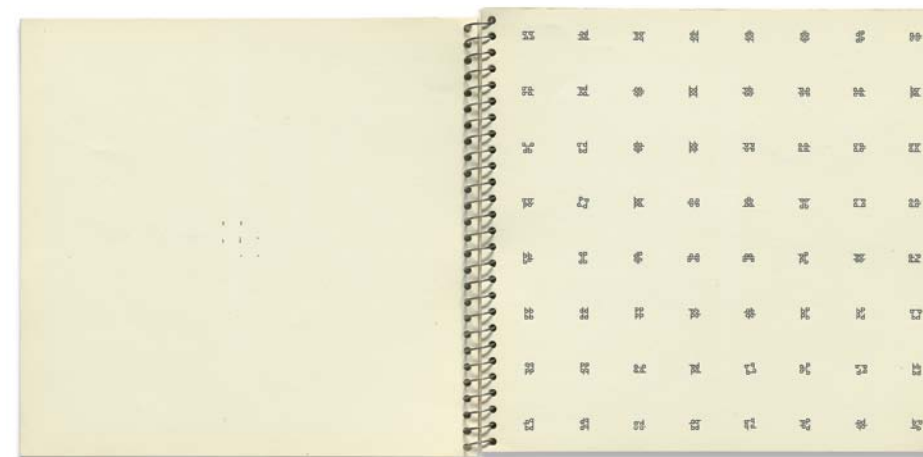


fig. 3  
bok 1956-1959

1959. Artist's book, letterpress printed, page 8 1/16 × 9 1/16" (22 × 23 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

Bremer and the artist Daniel Spoerri.<sup>20</sup> Roth terms the compositions reproduced there “ideograms,” in which language is freed from any relationship between signified and signifier. From the materials Roth, in Reykjavík, sent to him, Spoerri opted to compose an amalgamation that illustrates many of Roth’s interests at the time:<sup>21</sup> the layering, transparency, and densities of forms; monochromes; manipulated sheets (here folded rather than cut); and the transformation of punctuation marks into design elements.<sup>22</sup> As his longtime friend and collaborator Richard Hamilton marveled, “He can write an essay with 2304 full points and a poem with a single i.”<sup>23</sup> Circulated more broadly and internationally than Roth’s foraged volumes were, *material* likely introduced Roth’s work to many artists and poets, and was considered an important example in the nascent world of Concrete poetry.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the creative foment of these early years, Roth found himself in despair. His marriage was failing, and he struggled to support his young family. Denied a work permit by Iceland’s graphic artists’ association,<sup>25</sup> he tried other means of earning money—opening a short-lived furniture store selling his own products, making children’s toys, designing inventive jewelry (fig. 4)—without measurable success. Visiting Reykjavík, the American architect Newcomb Montgomery was impressed by Roth’s rings, and suggested that he might be able to help him obtain a teaching post in Philadelphia. In 1958, with a one-way ticket, his portfolio, and the possibility of a job, Roth made his first trip to the United States. The position, at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, didn’t materialize, and Roth found himself stranded. Frustrated, he strung together several jobs—the stint as a visiting critic at Yale mentioned earlier, some advertising work in New York—until he earned enough money to buy a ticket back to Iceland.

With his trip a failure, and with the geometry of the Concrete books and the rigor of the ideograms wearing on him, Roth found release in a visually related but philosophically distinct activity, the *Stupidogramme* (stupidograms) (plate 9).<sup>26</sup> Working from a grid of printed commas—a punctuation mark that



fig. 4  
Hutring (Hat ring)

1971. Multiple of gold ring with five interchangeable hats of iron, copper, brass, silver, and gold, in brass box, overall 3<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 5<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 1<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub>” (10 × 15 × 5 cm). Courtesy Hauser and Wirth and the Dieter Roth Foundation

Roth claimed to find boring, and rarely used in his own writing—he coaxed out looping chains, blobs, teacups, ink bottles, and toothbrushes, in a kind of automatic doodling. The stupidograms mimic word-search games, in which one tries to find words hidden diagonally and backward in a printed grid. Roth increasingly played with the idea of a verbal-visual equivalency and interchangeability, and here, rather than circling letters to form words, one circles punctuation to form pictures. The stupidograms also suggest a modified use of Gomringer’s “constellations,” with pictures here mapped out of commas rather than from stars.

The stupidograms demonstrate the looser, more playful side of Roth’s nature, which welcomed the intrusion of chance and the intervention of everyday life as important factors in artistic creation. As early as *bok 1956–1959*, Roth used a device that he eventually called a “poetry machine,” a sheet of black paper punched with holes that could be overlaid on a printed text to reveal chance poetry. He sent a version of this idea to George Maciunas, the driving force behind the Fluxus movement, who included it as a loose white sheet in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1961, published 1963), an important volume designed by Maciunas, and edited by La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low.<sup>27</sup>

Roth’s poetry machine could be put to visual as well as verbal use. In 1961, at the invitation of Spoerri,<sup>28</sup> Roth participated in *Bewogen Bewegung* (Moving movement), a

major international exhibition of kinetic art that traveled to several cities.<sup>29</sup> He made a die-cut poster for the show in his poetry-machine style (fig. 5), intended to be pasted over whatever was already plastered on the wall, giving a glimpse of what laid underneath. *Bok 3b* and *bok 3d* (plates 11, 12), produced in very small editions, use a similar approach, but with comics and coloring books rather than street posters. Roth gathered hundreds of pages of material, with no regard to whether they were turned upside down or right side up, and riddled them with circular die-cuts, so that the pages resemble Swiss cheese or worm tunnels. The result offers many surprises—the head of the American Mickey Mouse might appear upside down in a German cartoon about knights and crusades—all conceived, but not controlled, by the artist. As with *material* and *Book*, Roth prepares and presents the work, but allows the final result to be out of his hands.

Roth often likened his studio to a kitchen, in which he followed “recipes”<sup>30</sup> to make artistic rather than culinary delights. He described himself as a “sugarbomb maker,”<sup>31</sup> whose confections tended toward accumulation: “When you’ve got a nicely set pudding like that, a cake, and pour chocolate over it. And then cream on top of that. The more you put on it the sweeter and nicer it gets.”<sup>32</sup> He often gathered his ingredients from the floor of a printshop, repurposing discarded or waste materials, and in the case of *bok 3c* (plate 13), making what he called a “salad”—a mélange of disparate materials. Here, he amassed makeready sheets, used by commercial printers to prepare and align colors before printing, which he then trimmed and bound into volumes of uniform size and shape. But the contents of each are unique, dependent on what was on the printer’s floor: pages overprinted with the triangular rubber stamp that is the sole element used in Roth’s *bok 4a*; ads for Royal culinary products, including baking powder and gelatin, instant puddings and cake recipes; scenes of Iceland’s volcanoes, ski slopes, and lakes; picture postcards.

In addition to culling material from the printshop floor, Roth used mass media in his books, beginning with 1961’s *daily mirror book* (plate 28).<sup>33</sup> Measuring only 2 × 2

centimeters (1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.), the book is comprised of seemingly random, square clippings from the British sensationalist tabloid of the title, in a simple tape binding. At such a miniature scale, the book is clearly not intended to be read, nor could it be, as it contains just snippets, cropped sections of images, articles, and advertisements that divorce words from their meaning and turn them into visual noise.

Several years later, Roth converted this microproject to a macro one, selecting pages from the *daily mirror book* to be inflated to 25 × 25 centimeters (9<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 9<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.) for *Quadratblatt* (Quadrat print) (plates 24–27). Blown up well beyond their true size, the pages become fields of abstract pattern and truncated forms, turning the news into a meaningless, orderless jumble and deadening its original function. Drawing on his advertising background, he recognized the ultimate goal of the *Daily Mirror* was to sell papers, and writes in his introduction:

INSTEAD OF SHOWING QUALITY  
(surprising quality) WE SHOW QUANTITY  
(surprising quantity). I got this idea  
(Quantity instead of Quality) in this way:  
‘QUALITY’ in BUSINESS (f.i. advertising)  
is just a subtle way of being Quantity-  
minded: Quality in advertising wants  
expansion and (in the end)  
**power=Quantity.**  
**So, let us produce Quantities for once!**

Later, Roth took up his own brand of journalism. In 1965’s *Schneewittchen* (Snow White) (plate 29), he cut weekend editions of four different Cologne newspapers into *daily mirror book*-style cubes, then pieced them together to make his own front page, in an act of simultaneous destruction and creation. And beginning in the spring of 1971, he was an advertiser in the weekly pennysaver *Anzeiger Stadt Luzern und Umgebung*. There, among the muddle of ads for carpet cleaning and personals, one might (or might not) find Roth’s pithy contributions, many of which touched on his favorite themes: duality (“Evil and good words”); wordplay (“Tears are a ship on the sea of tears”); the absurdity of morality (“You are free



not to believe in Santa Claus only if you never gnaw on an Easter rabbit's haunch"); and food ("Someone who serves me a fillet steak, gets one served back from me").<sup>34</sup> With the advertising project, Roth fed back into the artistic lifecycle, putting material into circulation for potential reuse. Indeed, the ads became fodder even for his own work, as he published them in 1973 in a printed collection, *Das Tränenmeer*

(The sea of tears), and as the voluminous *Der Tränensee* (The lake of tears) (plate 30), in which over a thousand pages of the original newspaper sections were bound together.

Although Roth's trip to the United States in 1958 had not resulted in a job, it did allow him to make some important connections including Albers, Norman Ives, and Eugene Feldman, a professor at the Philadelphia

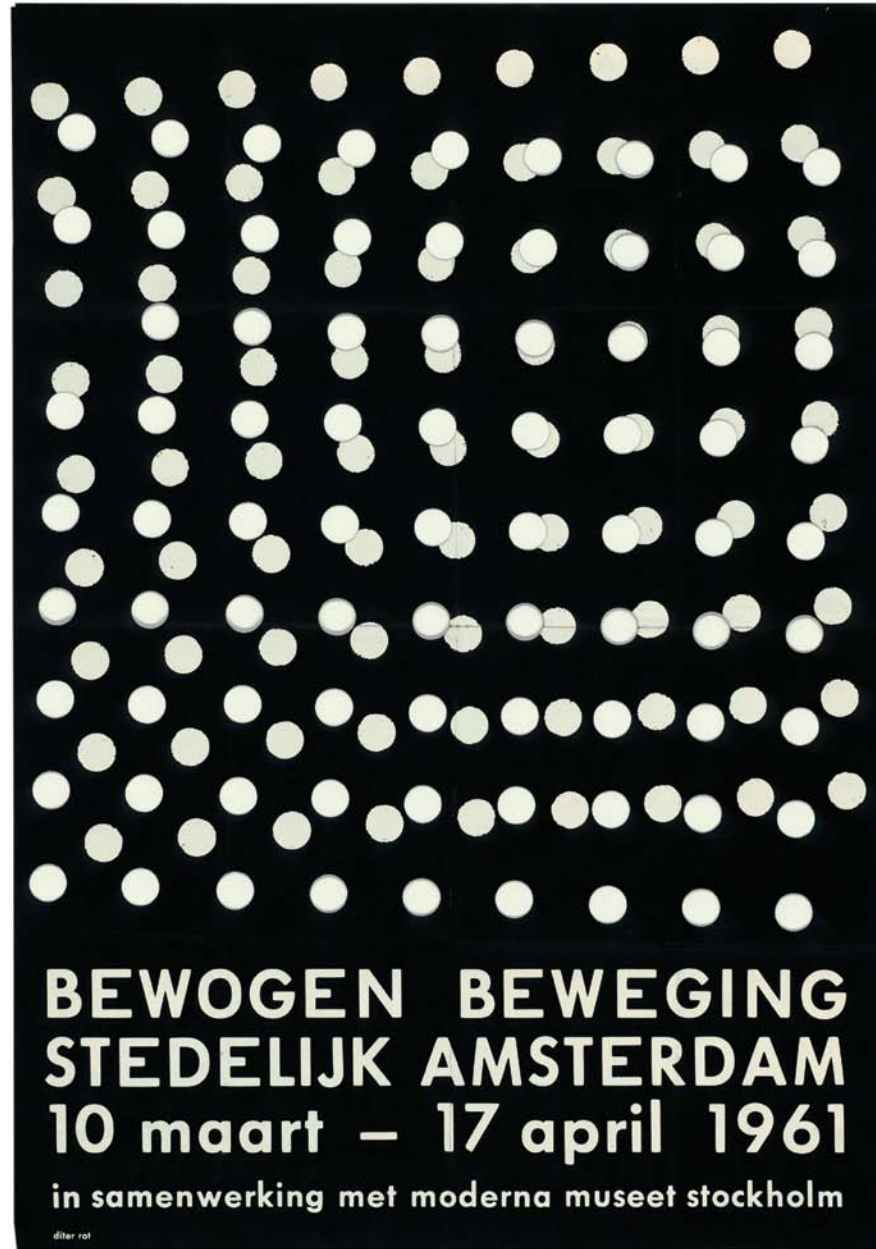


fig. 5  
Exhibition poster for *Bewogen Beweging* (Moving movement)

1961. Screenprint with die-cut holes, sheet 39 3/4 × 28" (100.9 × 71.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

fig. 6  
Detail of *Snow*

1964/1969. Felt-tip pen on cardboard and wax in plastic, 2 1/16 × 2 × 1 1/16" (7.5 × 5.1 × 2.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds (see plate 35)



Museum College of Art. Also the proprietor of Falcon Press, Feldman invited Roth to Philadelphia to make a new book in 1963 on the basis of the Op experiments with primary colors and basic shapes that he had seen when Roth applied for a job in 1958. In the intervening years, however, Roth had begun the radical shift in his practice that has been traced above, one in which the rigors of color and form had given way to an open-armed embrace of chance and accumulation, the world's mess and everyday objects—and Feldman and Roth's intended collaboration stalled.<sup>35</sup> Another professor at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art stepped in and arranged for Roth to continue work on the book under the aegis of the college, rather than of Feldman's press.

The project Roth envisioned was a leap forward, an ultimate accumulation, but one in which all the material was created by the artist himself rather than culled from printed sources or mass media. He said:

I photographed everything, people and objects that were all knobbly and letter boxes and . . . the stuff that caught my attention. . . . each evening I took everything I had touched that day, absolutely everything I had touched in the way of paper, regardless of whether they were drawings, sketches, photos, or simply the paper I'd used to wipe the printing

plates, I spread it all out and tacked it to large boards covered with stretch fabric. And after three months work, I had about 2,000 things. . . . And then at the end of these three months I stapled about, I don't know . . . about 200 or 300 of these things together to make a big book.<sup>36</sup>

That big book was *Snow*, a massive and unwieldy unique volume that Roth planned to donate to the college in exchange for the school's production of a paperback version of it (plate 33).<sup>37</sup>

More than a visual diary, *Snow* (1964/1969) offers an encyclopedia of Roth's artistic knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Represented within its pages are a multitude of print techniques, often layered and accumulated in a single example. A work might be lithographed, reworked and annotated by hand, photographed, and lithographed again. Roth explored methods, like diazotypes, whose results could be unstable and might disintegrate or disappear. He used nonarchival cardboards and cellophane tape. *Snow* is a physical embodiment of his burgeoning interest in entropy and decay. An inscription by Roth inside—"wait, later this will be nothing" (see fig. 32)—predicts the eventual outcome of not only this tome but also himself and his oeuvre.

The content of the volume is cryptic and personal, giving a glimpse inside the overflowing mind of the artist. Verbal formulas are presented like mathematical equations without solutions (plate 37); references are made to his new experiments with "faints," or exhausted prints (plate 44); doodles and sketches are taped to printed sheets with cellophane tape, creating multilayered, hide-and-seek flaps (plate 46); there are notes and schematics for his stamp alphabet (plate 41), and a tiny still life made of wax and encased in a plastic box (fig. 6, plate 35) that presages his later multiple *Taschenszimmer* (see fig. 20). The motif of the lightbulb is visible throughout. It appears in multiple collages (plate 32), in sketches that purport to unravel the "bulb mystery" (fig. 7), and in compositional arrangements that suggest a heart and a phallus (plate 38).

Roth was reticent in acknowledging artists he admired, as jealousy, envy, and dislike were often entangled with esteem.<sup>39</sup> He said of himself:

Roth fears the comparison with others. Whoever knows the efforts of certain predecessors or contemporaries or even friends of Roth will see open or hidden forms and traces of the ideas of others in his paintings and drawings. These facts hint and perhaps proved that Roth always started his work with something traditional (for clearness sake *this* word has been used) be it old tradition or new, something long in use or invented shortly before by people close to him.<sup>40</sup>

With *Snow*, Roth reveals his artistic debt to Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), a preeminent avant-gardist of the twentieth century, who aligned himself with Dada and Surrealism, introduced the Readymade, and offered a formidable challenge to traditional thinking about art and art making, before devoting himself to the game of chess. An iconoclast and towering artistic giant, Duchamp was a presence in Roth's life not only abstractly but also concretely. In 1960 Roth was awarded his first significant international prize, from

the William and Noma Copley Foundation. Duchamp was a close friend of the painter, gallerist, and patron William Copley from the late 1940s to the end of his life. When Copley established his foundation in the early 1950s to help support artists and musicians, Duchamp sat on the board, as well as on the prize's jury, and thus he had a direct hand in the financially struggling Roth's receiving two thousand dollars to fund a monograph devoted to his work. Roth asked to use the monograph money to publish a new artist's book instead, and over the next several years he worked via correspondence, sending the project piecemeal from Iceland to Richard Hamilton, who oversaw its production in London.

This was the start of a lifelong friendship between Roth and Hamilton. Hamilton had in fact nominated Roth for the prize after seeing his slotted *Book* in a 1960 exhibition, at London's Gallery One, of works from Spoerri's Edition MAT.<sup>41</sup> The two had shared interests, both literary and artistic, including the work of Duchamp,<sup>42</sup> and Hamilton's first letter to Roth, in 1961, initiated a long-term correspondence and numerous collaborations, of which the Copley project was the first.

Eventually published in 1965 as the *Copley Book*, Roth's project employed myriad techniques, unusual formats, and essentially

no binding—all the pages were stapled together inside a folder. The pages document the entire process of making the book; they include Roth's doodles and notes to himself, as well as Roth-speak instructions on printing ("black, glossy on top of neonpink [fine grain-faintly-print]"), production ("PLEASE print these two pages like they are pasted up: cheapo way"), and scale. Prints in different orientations of the same image reclaimed from an Icelandic children's textbook manifest Roth's persistent interest in symmetry and mirroring. The *Copley Book* also evinces yet again his openness to chance and outside influence, notably by the inclusion of a letter from a printer, who apologizes for having misplaced two pages intended for the book, which he attempts to identify in his note, but flounders, saying, "You know how difficult these things are to describe."

Echoes of Duchamp can be seen in the *Copley Book*. Duchamp, too, embraced accident. *WrongWrong* was the intended title of the journal Duchamp started in 1917; a printer's error transformed it into *Rongwrong*, which Duchamp retained.<sup>43</sup> The *Copley Book's* torn, folded, lined, translucent vellum sheets and manuscript text clearly recall the contents of Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934) (fig. 8), a book that collected printed facsimile reproductions of manuscript notes pertaining to his complex masterpiece *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, known as *The Large Glass*), a large standing sculpture comprising two panes of glass, oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust that is considered one of the landmark artworks of the twentieth century. Attempts at dissecting the meaning of *The Large Glass* have filled many volumes, but

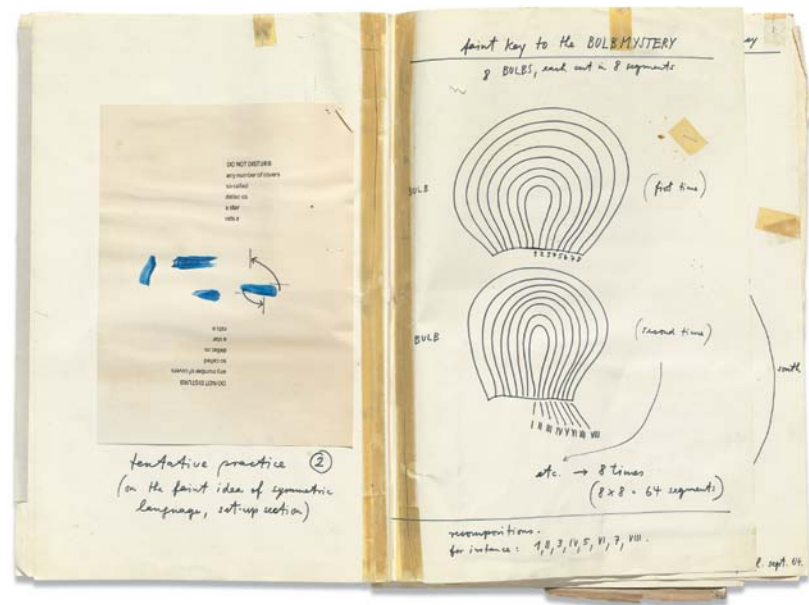


fig. 7  
Spread from *Snow*  
1964/1969. Offset, acrylic, felt-tip pen, and tape on paper, page 19½ × 12½" (49.5 × 31.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds (see plate 33)



fig. 8  
Marcel Duchamp. *The Green Box (La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même [The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even])*

1934. Illustrated book with ninety-four collotypes, in paperboard box, page varies, box 13¼ × 11 × 1" (33.2 × 27.9 × 2.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

fig. 9  
*Gesammelte Werke, Band 12: Copley Buch* (Collected works, volume 12: *Copley Book*)

1974. Artist's book, letterpress and offset printed, on various papers and mounts, in paperboard box, page varies, box 9¼ × 6¼ × 1¼" (23 × 17 × 4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



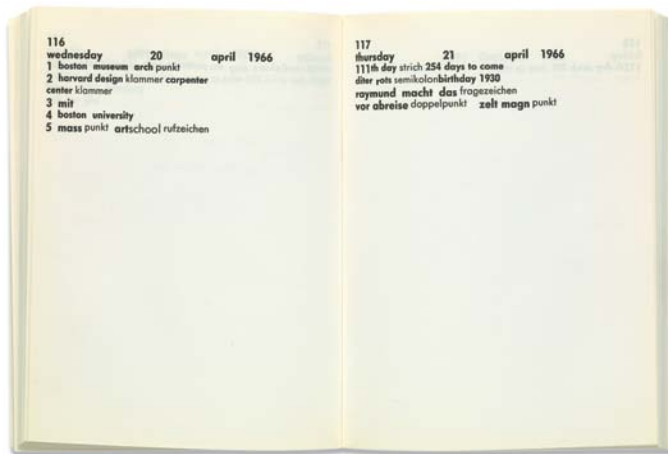


fig. 10  
die blaue flut (the blue tide)

1967. Artist's book, letterpress printed, page 6 5/16 × 4 5/8" (16 × 11.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

Duchamp's own inscrutable notes suggest the depiction of an erotic encounter between an abstract bride and her bachelors, as subject to enigmatic systems of physics, mathematics, mechanics, and myths as dreamed up by the artist. The similarity between the collected notes of *The Green Box* and those of Roth is made even plainer when Roth republishes the *Copley Book* as *Gesammelte Werke, Band 12* in 1974, issuing it in a clamshell box that mimics Duchamp's presentation (fig. 9).

In 1964 the universe of Duchamp could not have been closer or more concrete, as the world's best collection of the artist's work, including *The Large Glass*, was held and displayed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art,

which was associated with, and right around the block from, the college printshop where Roth was working on *Snow*. He would surely have known Duchamp's work: a copy of *The Large Glass* (executed by Ulf Linde and Per Olof Ultvedt under Duchamp's aegis, after the original was deemed too fragile for travel) had been included in *Bewogen Bewegung*, and Spoerri had published an edition of Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (Optical disks) for his publishing venture Edition MAT in 1959, pointing to them as the precursor of the multiple. Roth's proximity to the collection in Philadelphia perhaps gave him an opportunity to appreciate the extent to which his interests coincided with those of the revered Duchamp: he, too, had

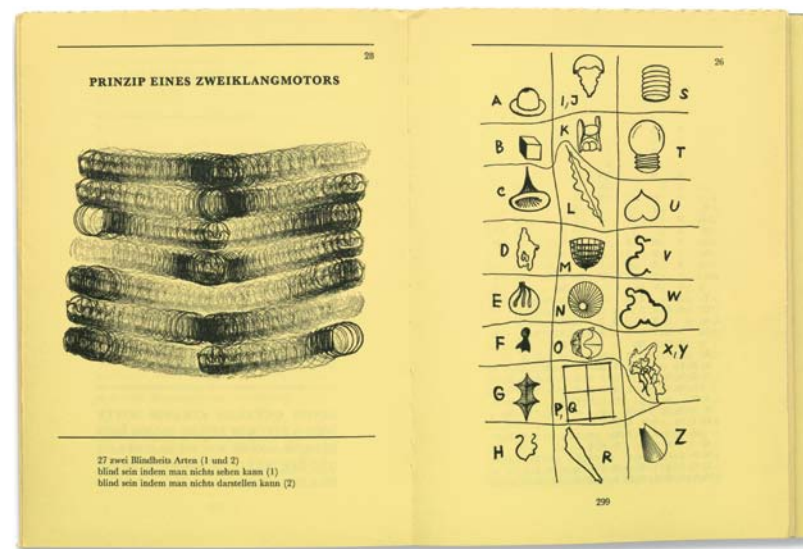
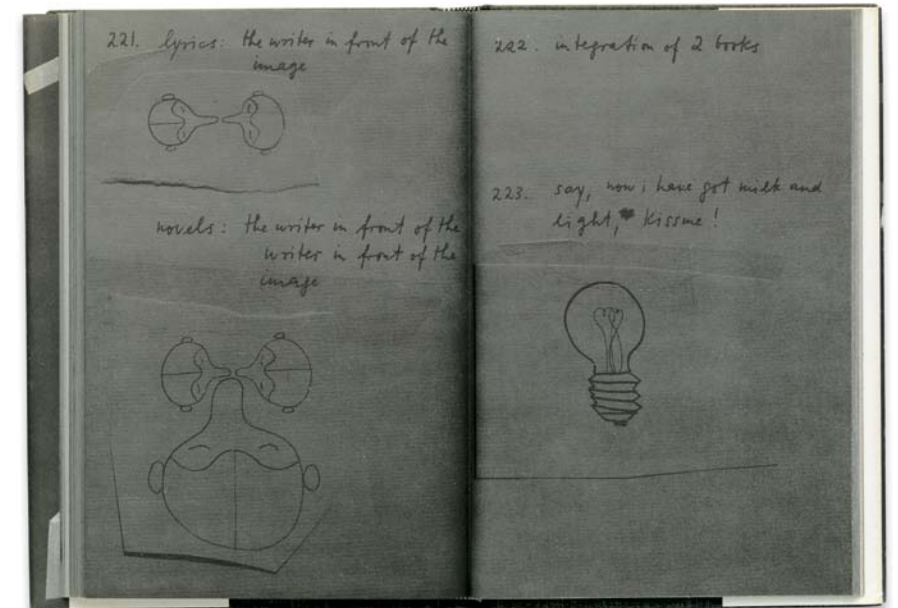


fig. 11  
Codex from  
*MUNDUNCULUM: Ein tentatives Logico-Poeticum*

1967. Artist's book, offset printed, page 8 5/16 × 6" (21.1 × 15.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift (see plates 47, 48)

fig. 12  
246 little clouds

1968. Artist's book, offset printed, page 9 1/4 × 6 1/4" (23.5 × 15.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



experimented with kinetic art; he, too, was an inventive, nontraditional bookmaker and a consummate artist-poet. Duchamp took as his alter ego the female Rrose Sélavy (a play on "éros, c'est la vie"); the aliases under which Roth presented himself included Dieter Roth, dieter roth, DITERROT, diter rot, Dietrich Roth, and Karl-Dietrich Roth.

Duchamp was well known for his verbal play, which included poetry, puns, sexually charged homonyms, and anagrams. Roth's experimentation with language was equally wide-ranging, suggesting an inherently unstable system to be subverted and metamorphosed and transposed. He mined language's mundane qualities in the 1967 publication *die blaue flut* (the blue tide) (fig. 10), transcribing his diary from the year 1966, down to spelling out the punctuation, presenting text as a flattened abstraction in which the preprinted days and dates are equal in weight to the artist's thoughts. Roth had explored notions of a verbal-visual fluidity in his ideograms and stupidograms, and now began to codify a picture "alphabet" of icons—a motorcycle rider, a heart, a hat, *Snow's* lightbulb, and a head seen from above, drawn in a spindly, linear, human-mechanical manner—that bear an obvious resemblance to the forms (such as the conical cylinders) and stylized hand evident

in Duchamp's *Large Glass*, and serve as the cornerstone for a number of projects to follow.

Roth began assigning linguistic equivalents to his pictograms, made rubber stamps out of them, and used them in the writing of visual poetry. The pictograms had enduring value for Roth, and multiple meanings. He describes the evolution and transformation of one of these symbols, the motorcycle: "I continued doing variations on this image until I saw that I was actually drawing a scrotum. . . . Then gradually this image began to recede and another took over. That's where the motorcycle comes in, it's the same basic form, d'you see? . . . Look, like a limp penis. If you turn it around it looks like a heart."<sup>44</sup> A single icon could continuously evolve to represent, one after the other, freedom, sexual failure, and love.

A collected volume of the stamp poems appeared in 1967, with the title *MUNDUNCULUM: Ein tentatives Logico-Poeticum*,<sup>45</sup> and although Roth offers codices for converting the images into words (fig. 11), the poems resist all efforts at definitive translation. The same icons can represent the female groom and the male groom, the female bride and the male bride (in another reference to the title of and characters in Duchamp's *Large Glass*). *Stempelkasten* (Rubber-stamp box) (plate 49), a multiple of 1968, proposes another variety of



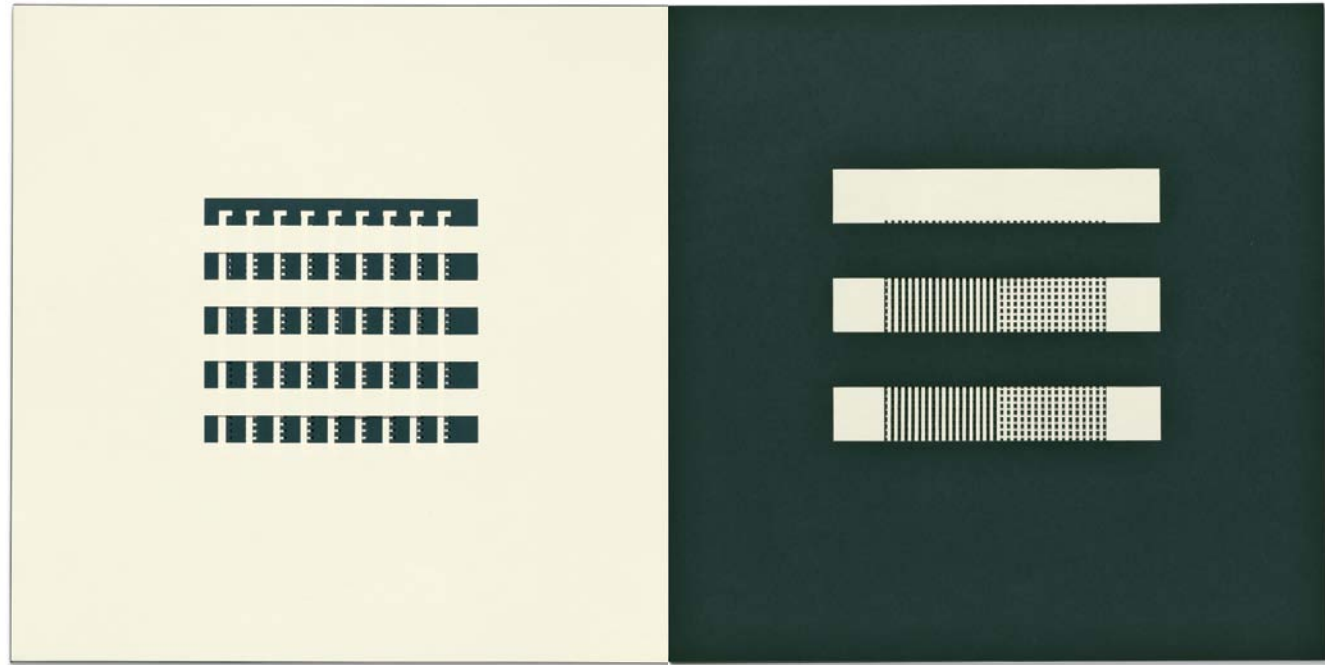
1, 2  
book t2

1960. Artist's book of  
hand-cut acetate and  
cardstock, 9 3/8 x 9 3/8"  
(23.8 x 23.8 cm)

3, 4  
*kinderbuch*  
(children's book)

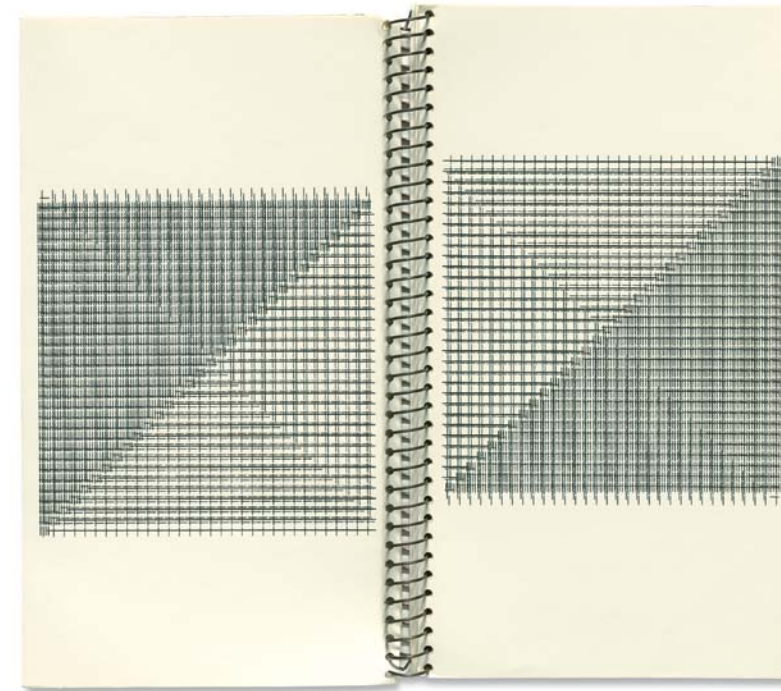
1957. Artist's book,  
letterpress printed,  
12 5/8 x 12 1/16"  
(32 x 32.3 cm)





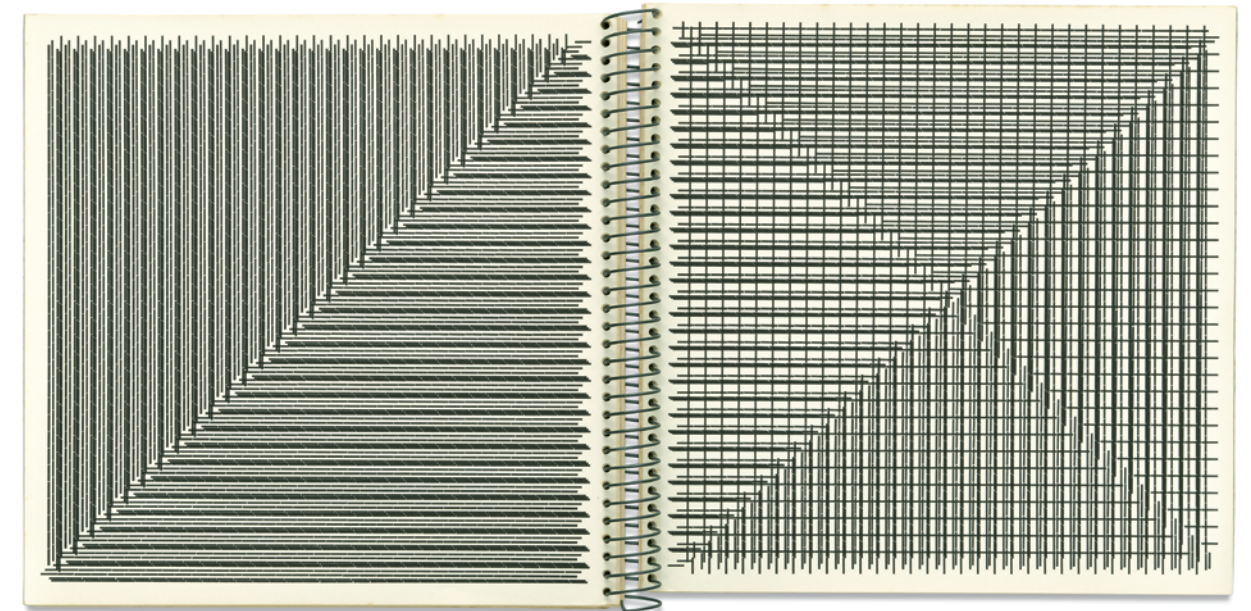
5  
*Book AC*

1958-64, published 1964.  
Artist's book of die-cut  
cardstock, 16 × 16" (40.7 ×  
40.7 cm)



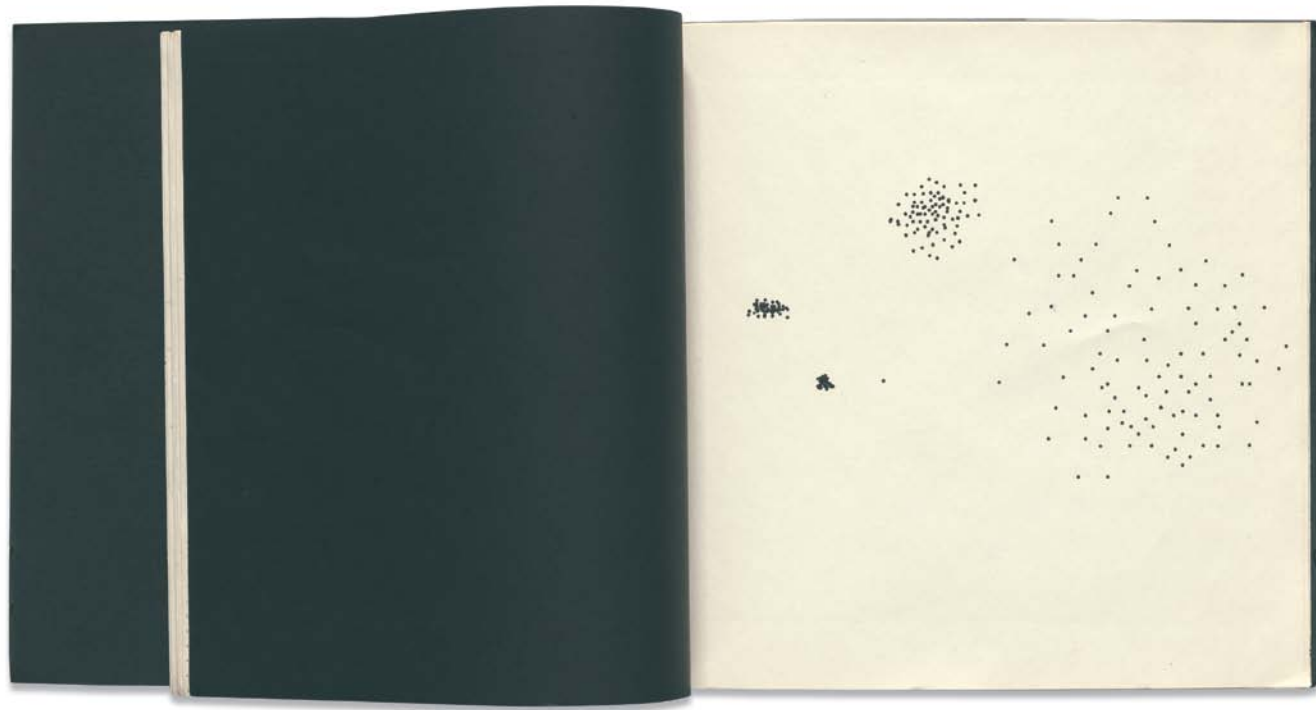
6  
*bok 2*

1960. Artist's book,  
letterpress printed,  
11 $\frac{7}{16}$  × 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ "  
(29 × 16.2 cm)



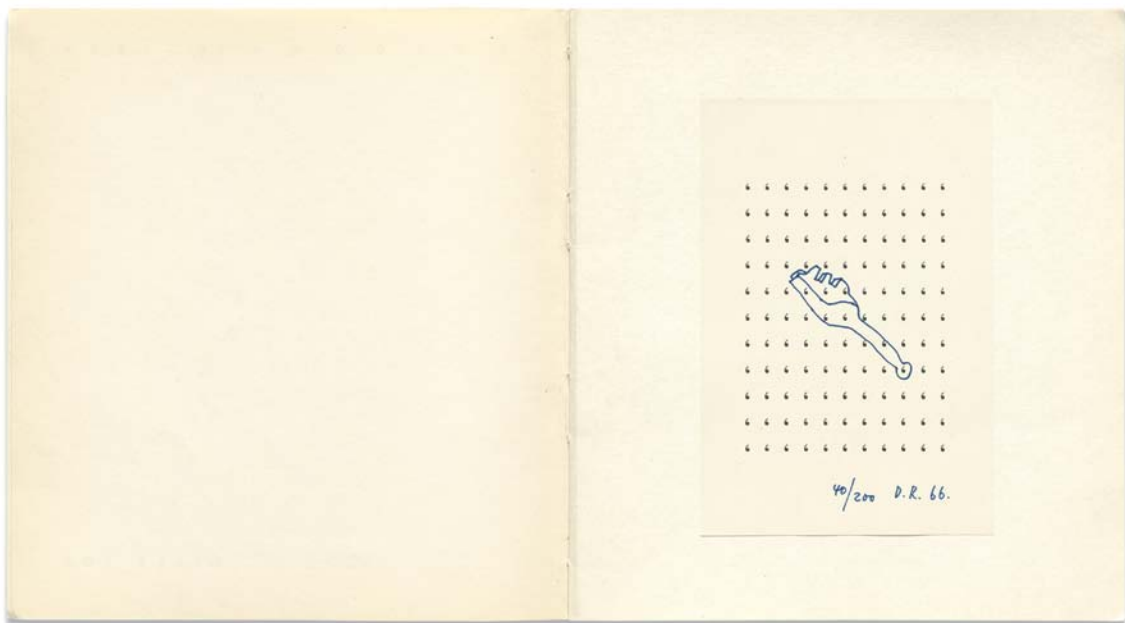
7  
*bok 2b*

1961. Artist's book,  
letterpress printed,  
12 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (32 ×  
32 cm)



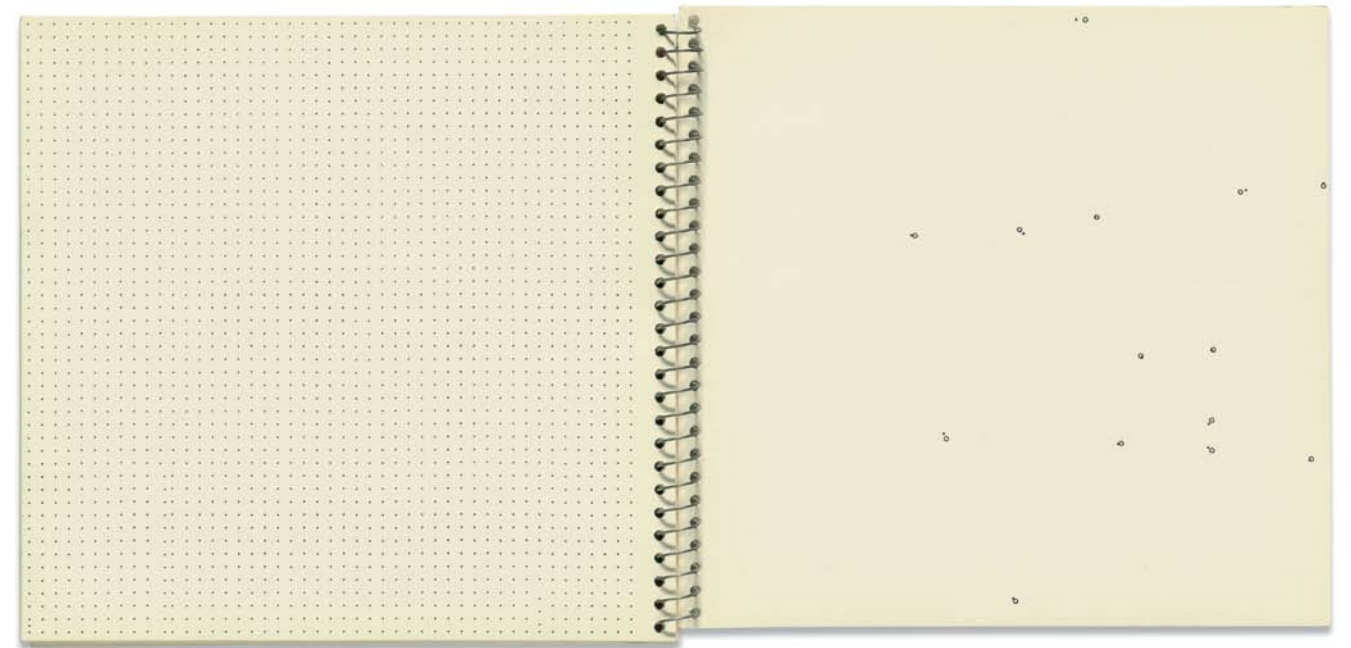
8  
Ideogram from the journal  
*material*, no. 2

1959. Lithograph,  
offset printed, 8¼ × 8¼"  
(21 × 21 cm)



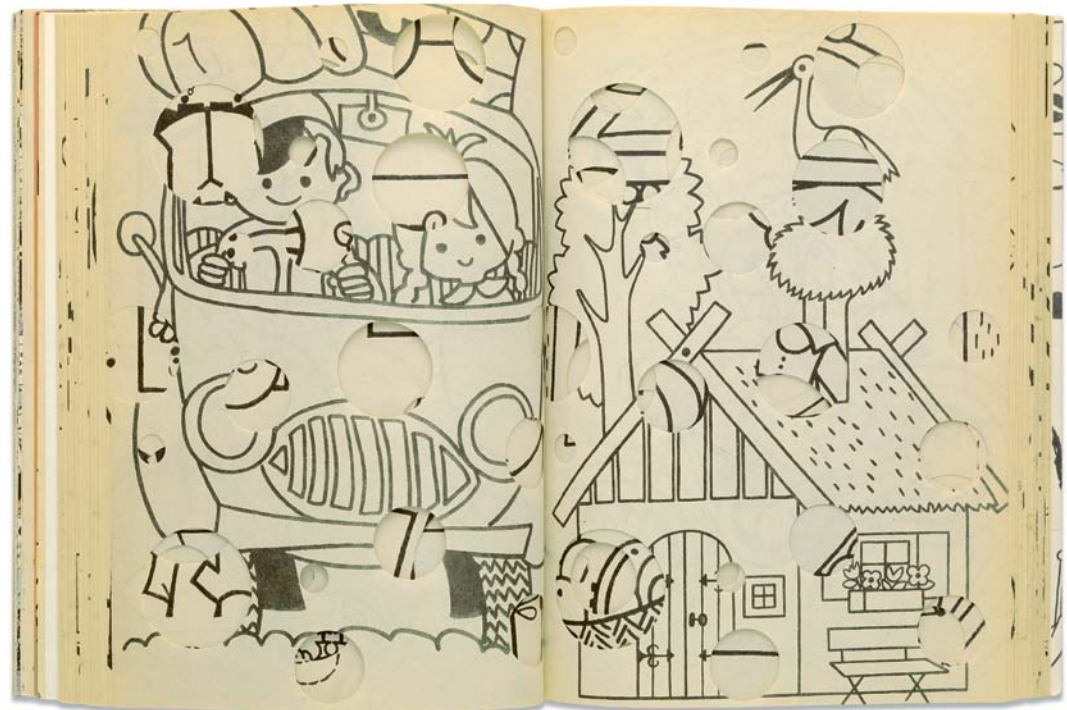
9  
Untitled for the journal  
*Gorgona*, no. 9

1966. Letterpress with  
felt-tip pen additions,  
5½ × 4" (15 × 10.1 cm)



10  
*bok* 1956-1959

1959. Artist's book,  
letterpress printed,  
8¼ × 9¼"  
(22 × 23 cm)



11, 12  
Gesammelte Werke,  
Band 7: bok 3b und bok 3d  
(Collected works, volume 7:  
bok 3b and bok 3d)

1974. Artist's book of  
die-cut comic-book pages  
and die-cut coloring-book  
pages, 9 × 6 1/2" (22.8 ×  
16.8 cm)



13  
bok 3c

1961. Artist's book of  
makeready sheets,  
7 15/16 × 7 1/16"  
(20.1 × 19.5 cm)

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