

At the beginning of his artistic career, Dieter Roth – the German-born Swiss art titan and radical individualist whose wide-ranging practice included artist’s books, prints, drawings, sculpture, assemblages, sound recordings, film, music, poetry and sprawling environments that mirrored the frantic and contradictory impulses of both a man and an epoch – made tidy Constructivist works modeled after those of Max Bill. As a young concrete artist in the 1950s and 1960s, Roth produced what was then in fashion: organized, controlled works that others would like. ‘In my shame about my smears – which no one wanted to see and no one actually looked at – I started to make constructions,’ he later recalled. ‘Today I leave such crap the way it is. When I have the courage.’

On October 6, Hauser & Wirth New York will mark the 80th anniversary of the birth of Dieter Roth, one of the most important and influential artists of the second half of the 20th century, with an exhibition spotlighting a body of work that poignantly describes the complex ways in which the artist’s ‘courage’ took form. Titled ‘Dieter Roth, Björn Roth: Work Tables and Tischmatten,’ the exhibition will bring together for the first time a representative selection of the large gray sheets of cardboard the artist used to cover the work surfaces of his various studios and living quarters in Iceland and Switzerland in the 1970s.

These table mats (Tischmatten in German), which Roth produced until his death in 1998, became cumulative diaries of his innovative, inspired, chaotic and ultimately lucid process, an approach that favored collaboration and the seamless melding of art and life. With his son Björn, who joined his father in daily artmaking at age 15, Dieter fearlessly recorded a world of creation and wayward ideas through these working documents-cum-paintings.

Roth came to regard the Tischmatten as analogous to pressed flower pictures to be hung on a wall: portable tokens of a far larger abundance. Today these objects have the authority of confrontations with the ephemeral nature of existence, testaments to the inherent pleasures and ironies of life-defining work. At Hauser & Wirth, these objects will be exhibited along with several work tables from the Roth studios, complete with their lamps, desk objects, working materials, and other elements.

‘Dieter Roth, Björn Roth: Work Tables and Tischmatten’ will remain on view through October 30th. The exhibition will be accompanied by a new book, including texts by Björn Roth and the critic and art historian Andrea Büttner.

Roth’s Tischmatten were designed to capture the build-up of scraps, stains, notes, and bits of material that came from his ‘departments of cooking and eating and painting and pasting,’ so that

work surfaces would remain clean. The cardboard meant to protect the tables supported canvases as well as the dirt and notes on painting that automatically accumulated. However, these used boards gradually became essential works in their own right for Roth and his son Björn. In form, the Tischmatten resemble Roth's famous diaries; there is a juxtaposition of text and images, including tacked-on Polaroids, handwritten notes, telephone numbers, traces of adhesive and food. As in the diaries and the reels of film that Roth made in his later years (which for the most part picture writing, reading and eating at these very same tables), there are pieces of everyday experience, the professional and physical quotidian. Thus the Tischmatten are virtually objectivized diaries, carefully edited and structured by the artist.

Dieter Roth is known to have referred to his work as *dinge* or 'stuff,' deploying an all-encompassing word to convey his discovery that even the most seemingly banal act of covering things up or leaving them alone, produced something more beautiful and entertaining than the pieces over which he had labored in younger years.

His son Björn recalls: 'In the last two decades of Dieter's life, I worked closely with him on art. The studio was at once a workplace and an apartment. There, things flowed together or became isolated. It was a kind of laboratory to search for beauty in nothing, and a workshop for assembling findings. Our studios were like safehouses. We could always find shelter there from various kinds of intrusion. In Mosfellsbær, Seydisfjörður, Hamburg, Basel, Unterterzen and Vienna. Different places and different ambiences, but with one common element: the work tables and Tischmatten.'

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