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National College of Art and Design

FINE ART: PAINTING

A Dieter Roth Reader

by
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**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary
Studies in Candidacy for the Degree; Bachelor of Arts in Joint Honours
in the History of Art and Fine Art: Painting.**

1998

acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Sue Mc Nab, Candy Holten and Dieter Roth.



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introduction

things could be other than they seem

Although Dieter Roth now seems to be settled in Basel, Switzerland, his earlier years were spent moving between art centres and workshops in Europe and the United States, occasionally going into retreat in Reykjavik, Iceland. ¹ Through all of the travelling most of Roth's artwork has been produced in friends apartments, in bar restaurants, on aeroplanes, and in hotel rooms. The oeuvre, much of it done while in this itinerant mode, is diverse and includes not only drawings, paintings, objects, but also literary texts, newspapers, photography, short films and collections of daily rubbish. There is no single piece in all of this that is central to Roth's work, but he has always made it clear that for him writing is an activity that rests at the centre of his work.²

What is a lot more important for Roth than any single work, is the succession of the entire practice. He has likened this succession to the pages of a book, where word follows word, sentence follows sentence, page follows page. Because of this to follow the narrative sequence within his entire output would seem to be the most interesting, rewarding and useful way to proceed in any search after the elusive Dieter Roth.³ The discussion will focus on Roth's writings. Unlike most artists who have produced artist's books at some stage in their careers Roth has continued making books to the present day with more than 100 of these books published to date.

1. During my ten month correspondence with Dieter Roth he was based in Basel, Switzerland, and has been since the late eighties.

2. Roth and a number of his colleagues discuss his written work in some depth in the 1993 special edition of the German periodical *Du*.

3. Roth has a likeness for pseudonyms and has produced work under the names; Diter Rot, Dieter Rot, Karl-Dietrich Rot and CH Rotham, but for the purposes of this study the name Dieter Roth will be used throughout.



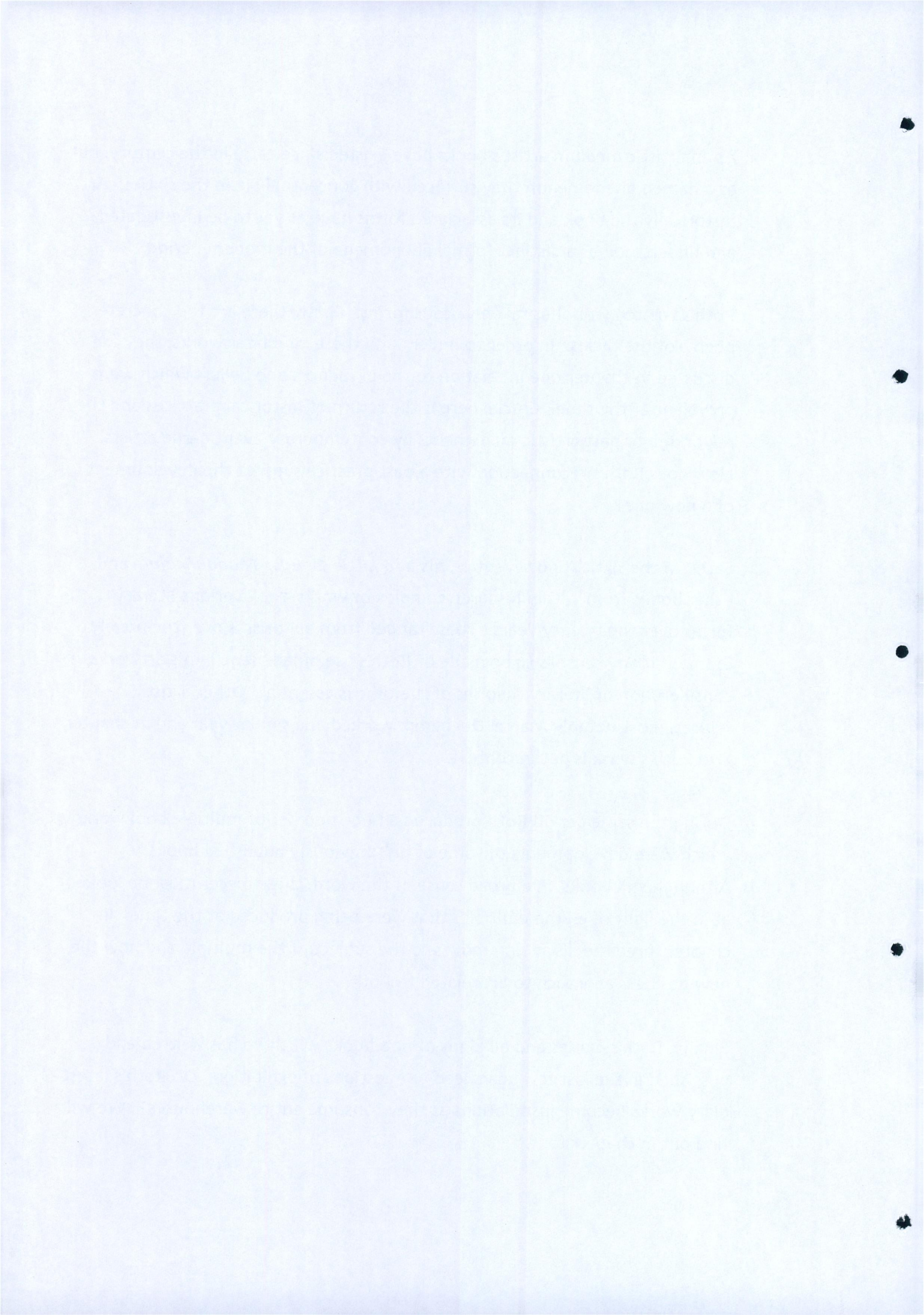
As an artistic medium artist's books have existed since early in the century, but as a named phenomenon they surfaced with conceptual art in the sixties. Art historically the book and its associated forms have as yet to be investigated and understood as a distinct formal phenomena of the modern period.

Roth's written work has taken various forms. Firstly there are the concrete poems of the fifties. In order to understand these, and later works, they are discussed in chapter one in relation to the influences and beliefs which were prevalent at the time. Crucial here is the return of historical practices and the reworking of past artistic movements by contemporary avant garde artists. How does Roth's reconnection with a past practice support the development of a new one?

Later, in the sixties and seventies, his *246 Little Clouds*, *Mundunculum* and other books from within his large complex of works, took various literary forms over the twenty years. These ranged from aphorisms over the novel to dramas. If any sense is to be made of Roth's use of language in his artworks, a consideration of literary theories of the time is essential. Other artistic figures, most notably Marcel Duchamp, worked in a similar vein and in chapter two Roth's work is put in context.

During the same period Roth produced a huge number of multiple bookworks which were developments of some of his previously published books. Although still books, in a broad sense of the word, these pieces must be looked at in the light of all the multiples that were being produced at the time. In chapter three the discussion moves to the subject of the multiple and how the new business approach to art related to Roth.

Finally, Roth's diaries and all kinds of notebooks which he has written and published in the last few years lead to questions of exhibition. Do Roth's latest diary works become installations as they consume entire warehouses? We will find out in chapter four.



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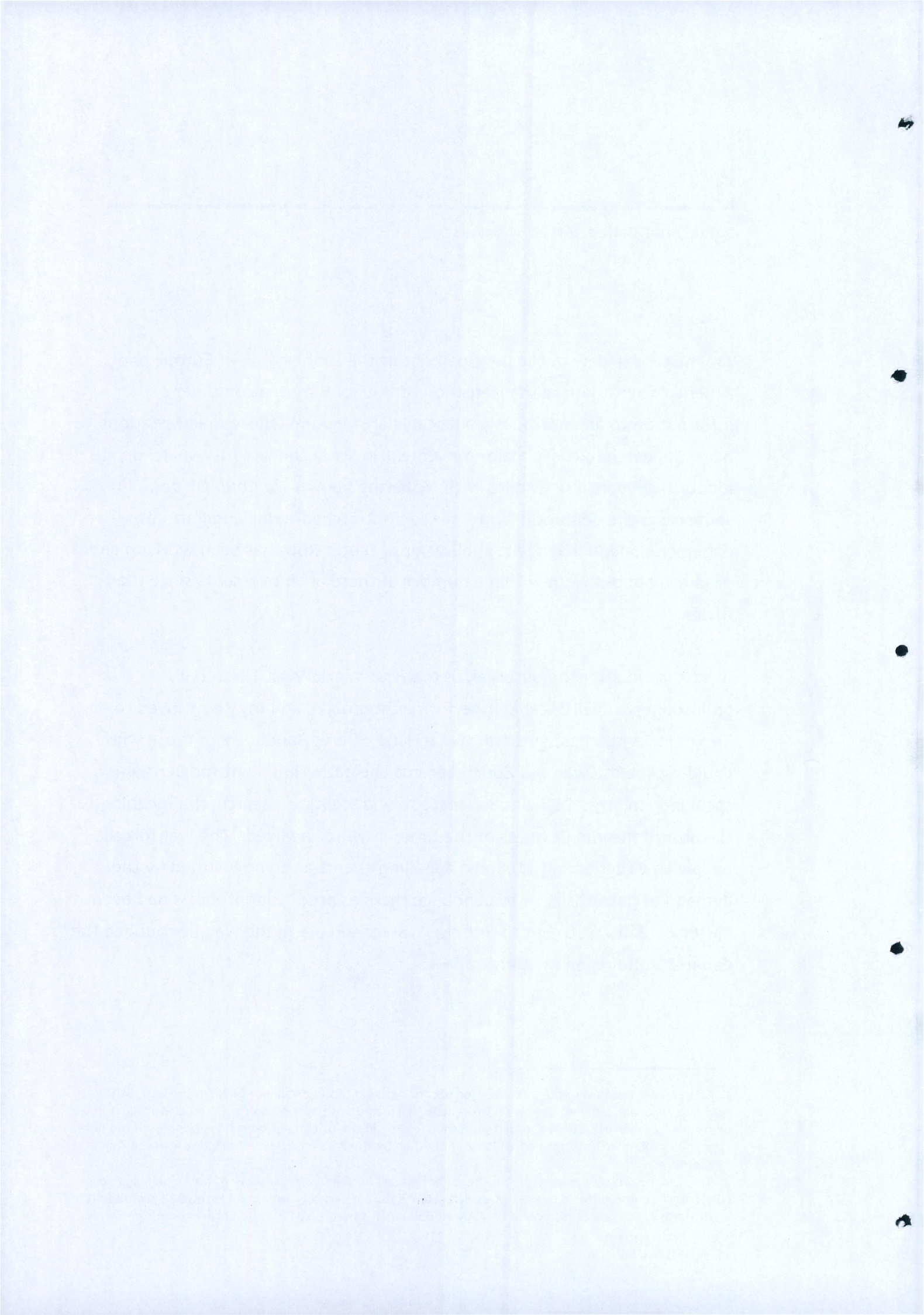
Something Called Artist's Books

Any historical view of the development of the avant-garde in Europe and America cannot ignore the transition of the book from a container of information to an enormously adaptable art medium whose manifestations have appeared in every major movement in art in the last fifty years, or ninety-five years if one starts with Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup De des*.¹ In some cases the definition 'book' has to be stretched to include journals, ephemera, and independent publications. Dieter Roth has been working and producing books from within a number of these art movements since the fifties.

In 1915, soon after the outbreak of the First World War, Hugo Ball, philosopher, novelist, cabaret performer, journalist and mystic, moved to Zurich in Switzerland. Neutral Switzerland offered sanctuary to those who could escape the war and Zurich became the gathering point for German-speaking emigrés. Ball was an idealist and a sceptic, in search of a meaning to the absurd meaninglessness of the times in which he lived. The war forced people to either accept the most appalling events as being justified by the demand of patriotism, or to denounce them as proof that progress had been illusory. Ball was trying to find the answer and along the way he founded the Cabaret Voltaire, and with it Dada.²

1. Artists have been using the book as a format for working in since William Blake in the late 18th century. Blake and William Morris set precedents for making use of the book as an artistic product in its own right. Mallarmé's poem was first published in 1897 in the British periodical *Cosmopolis*. It did not appear in book form until 1914 when it was published by the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* in an edition of one hundred.

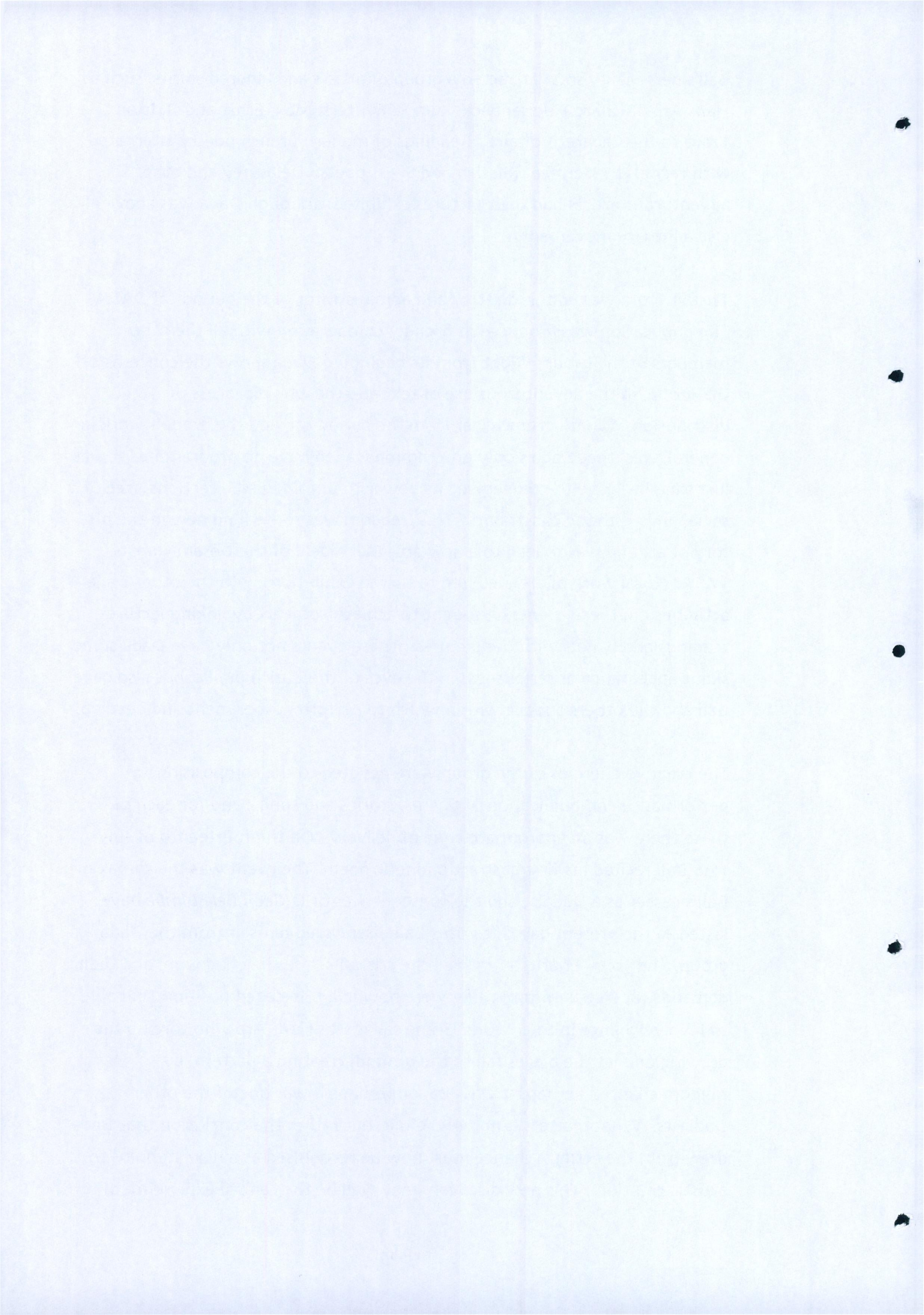
2. The Cabaret Voltaire was set up on the 1st of February 1916 in Meierei - a bar at no. 1 Spiegelgasse in Niederdorf - a disreputable quarter of Zurich. Herr Ephraim was the owner and Hugo Ball promised him an increase in the sale of his beer if he allowed Ball and his friends to hold the Cabaret on his premises.



Ball's personality soon attracted a group of artists and kindred spirits, such as Hans Arp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst and Tristan Tzara to the Cabaret Voltaire. Readings of modern French poetry alternated with recitals by German, Russian and Swiss poets. Delauney and other adventurous artists had their pictures exhibited, although Dada was above all else a literary movement.

Tristan Tzara was editor, director and administrator of the periodical *DADA*. The publication was produced in friendly co-operation with all the other members of the group. Right from its beginning *Dada* shows the concerns of the group, in the adventurous use of text and the whole process of distribution. What became clear from the periodical, and the group's work in general, was that Dada's only programme was to have no programme. It was just this that gave the movement its power to unfold in all directions, free of social and aesthetic constraints. This freedom was something new in the history of art and was to lead to a new art. Ball's ideal of the *GesamtKunst-Werke* (total work of art), led him to merge exhibitions with the other Dada activities. In these events he sought to achieve total art by linking lectures, readings and ballets with the pictures. These events not only gave Dada some slight appearance of seriousness in the eyes of the Zurich public, but also gave Ball and the others a space within which to perform, experiment and develop.

The creative energies of the group were devoted to the composition, performance and publication of poems, stories and songs, and for each of these there was an appropriate style of delivery. On the fourteenth of July 1916 Ball recited his first abstract phonetic poem. The event was the climax of Ball's career as a Dadaist and the consequences of *O Gadji Beri Bimba* have lasted to the present day. After this Ball disengaged himself from the Dada group. The younger artists, with all the critical praise they had won, and their demands for freedom from rules, were now in a privileged position, and able to involve chance in their work. Some say it was Hans Arp who tore up the drawing and let the pieces fall to the ground, creating a pattern by random chance. Perhaps it was Arp, or perhaps it was one of the other Dadaists. What matters is not who did it, but rather the conclusion that Dada drew from the action; chance must now be recognised as a new stimulus to artistic creation. This new discovery may well be the central experience of

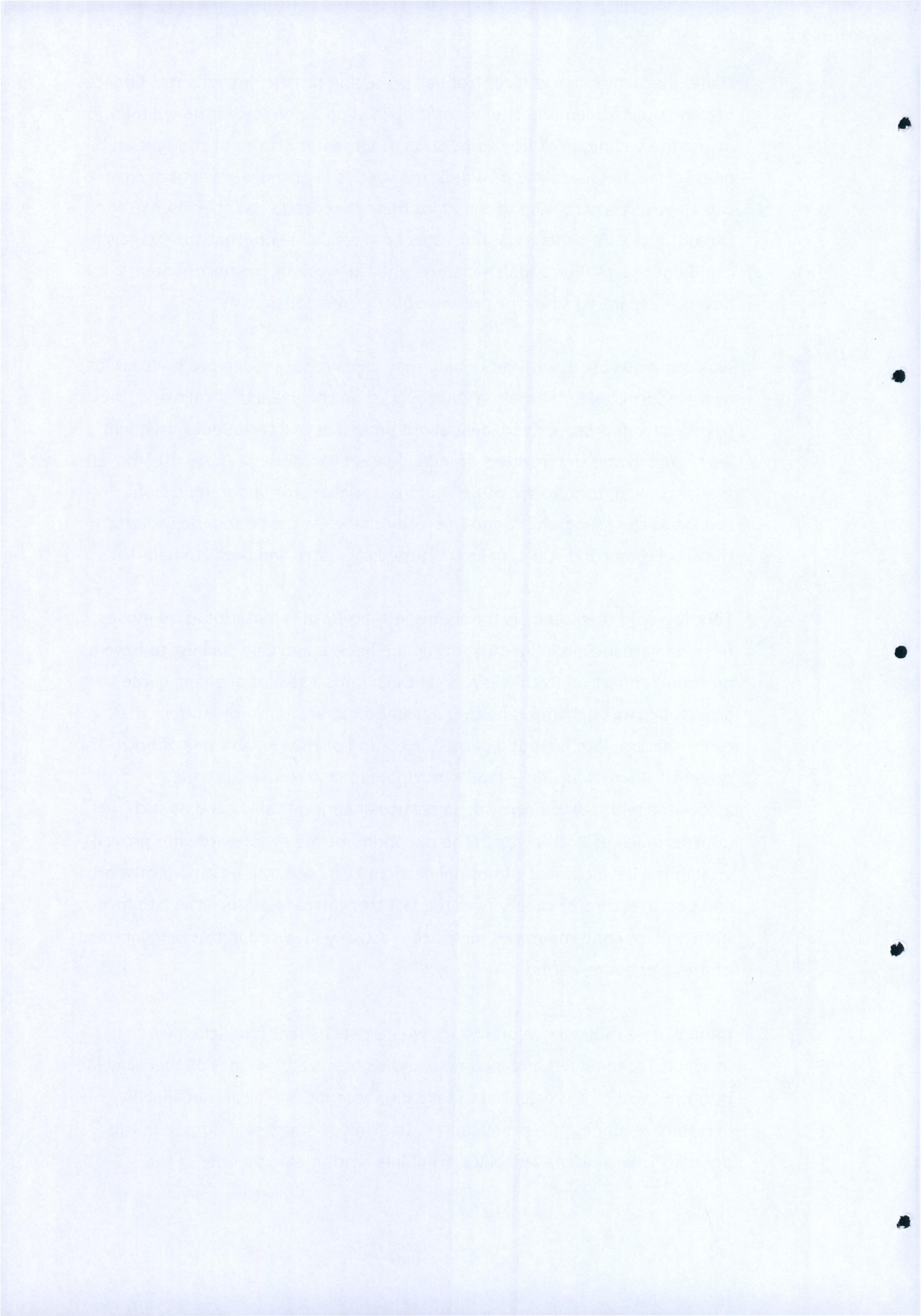


Dada; that which marks it off from all preceding artistic movements. Chance became their trademark. The use of it opened up an important new dimension in art; the technique of free association, fragmentary trains of thought and unexpected juxtapositions of words and sounds. For the Dada artists, chance was the expression of the unconscious mind that Freud had theorised in 1900 (Freud, 1953). But there was one aspect of Freud's theory that the Dadaists could not accept. For Dadaists chance, and the work of the unconscious, could never be separated from the presence of the conscious artist.

This conscious break with rationality may explain the sudden proliferation of new art forms and materials in Dada works. In the years that followed, their freedom from preconceived ideas about processes and techniques, frequently led them beyond the frontiers of individual art categories. The artists moved freely from painting to sculpture, from pictorial art to typography, from collage to the found object and the ready-made. As the boundaries between the arts became indistinct, painters turned to poetry and poets to painting.

This, it would then seem, is the tradition that Roth is a part of as he moves from one artistic discipline to another and back again. One Dadaist to have a profound impact on Roth was Marcel Duchamp. The aim of avant-garde artists such as Duchamp is neither a negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. The career of Duchamp (1887 - 1968) anticipated many of the strategies associated with postmodernism, in particular conceptual art and as such informs much of Roth's work. The reworking of the avant-garde has proved vital in the development of not only art criticism, but also postmodernist art and poststructuralist theory over the last three decades. Since the late forties Roth and his contemporaries have been actively involved in this development of previous avant-gardes.

Immediately following World War Two, artists began to use the new available technologies and incorporate the objects and images of everyday life into their work. It is essential to take into account the greater availability of inexpensive modes of reproduction in the United States and Europe in this period. This greater availability, combined with major changes in the



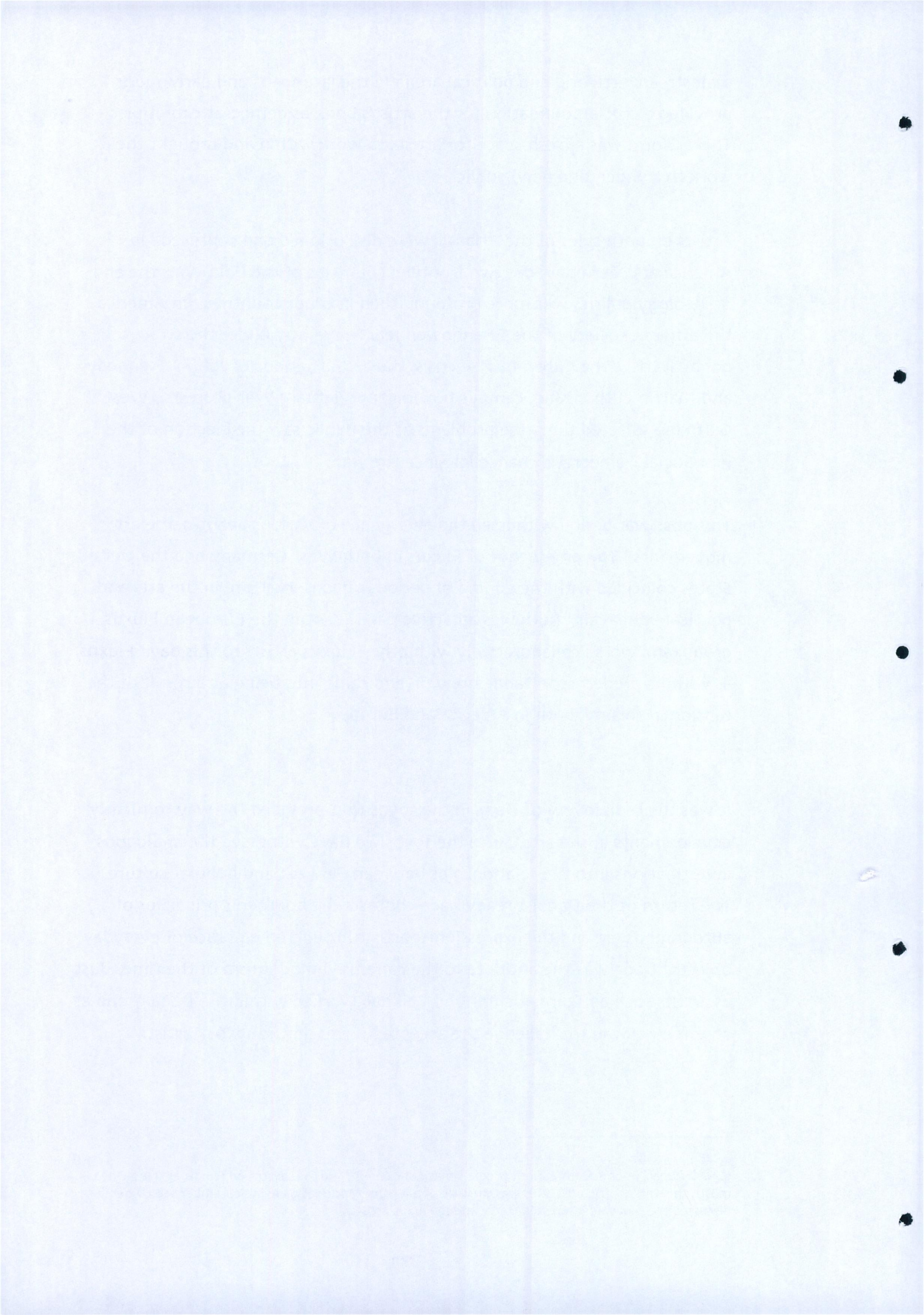
mainstream artworld and political arena in the late 1950s and early 1960s, provided a crucial foundation for the artist's book as democratic multiple. This artform was a fresh space for artists to work within and brought their work to a wider, and new, public.

Artists on both sides of the Atlantic were disillusioned and confused. In America and Germany, the two frontline countries of the Cold War, the end of ideology politics was more profound than in other countries. In America the affluent society of the Eisenhower years gave way under the strain of political crisis: the Cuban missile crisis, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, campus turmoil and Vietnam War protests. West Germany suffered the same problems as the public saw the election of the first Social Democratic chancellor since the war.

This post-war period witnessed the emergence of various avant-garde art movements. The emergence of Fluxus in both West Germany and the United States coincided with the ending of periods of conservatism in the arts and political upheavals. Roth was an active participant in the European Fluxus group, and works collaboratively with other Fluxus artists to this day. Fluxus, as with its predecessor Dada, grew up and came into being as a result of the tension in society, both in America and Europe.³

It was the rediscovery of Dada in the 1950s that provided the way to further developments in the arts. Since the 1950s we have witnessed the analogous investigations into the relationships between Fine Art and popular culture. The return of the Dadaist readymade contests the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and the expressionist artist through an embrace of everyday objects. Dada was the antidote to the canonised modernism of the time. Just as artists such as Tzara, Richter and Ball had worked within the Dada group as an effective way to challenge the accepted forms, in the 1950s, artists

3. Maciunas, in one of his earliest programmatic statements in 1962, described Fluxus as "Neo-Dada in music, theater, poetry, art". This was the title of a lecture Maciunas gave in September 1962 when he discussed the renewed interest in Dada among Fluxus artists.



interested in challenging such accepted norms as those expressed through the institutions of art orientated towards George Maciunas' Fluxus group. Fluxus developed out of the anxieties of a number of artists from Europe and America influenced by Dada, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage. Dada had questioned the status of art, genius, and art object as they had informed nineteenth century bourgeois culture. That critique was by no means obsolete after 1945. This major neo-Dada phenomenon, Fluxus, attempted to put something new in the place of the rejected old. The group set out to topple the privileged art elites and administered culture of the time.

During the sixties, Fluxus publications revived and updated Dadaist ideas. The historical and ideological antecedents of these multiple and mass produced artists' periodicals and books are found in Futurism and Dada. In the late fifties and early sixties, Dada and Futurism offered two historical alternatives to the modernist model which dominated at the time. Discontented artists were drawn to the two movements that sought to exceed the apparent autonomy of the art world. Daniel Spoerri has said that Dada inspired him and others that he knew well during this time in the late fifties, including Dieter Roth. It certainly was "the only movement that (they) really liked, that (they) were very much attracted to", (Spoerri, 1994, p.131).

For the most part these recoveries of earlier avant-garde tendencies were self-aware, as many artists in the early sixties studied pre-war avant-gardes. As Hal Foster has discussed in his essay entitled "Who's afraid of the neo-avant-garde?" this awareness resulted in artists in the sixties elaborating critically on earlier avant-gardes (Foster, 1996, page 64). These neo-avant-gardes since the sixties have worked to extend the pre-war critique of the institution of art. Foster claims that where the avant-garde focused on the aesthetic conventions of the traditional museums, the neo-avant-garde concentrated its investigation into the institution of art itself.

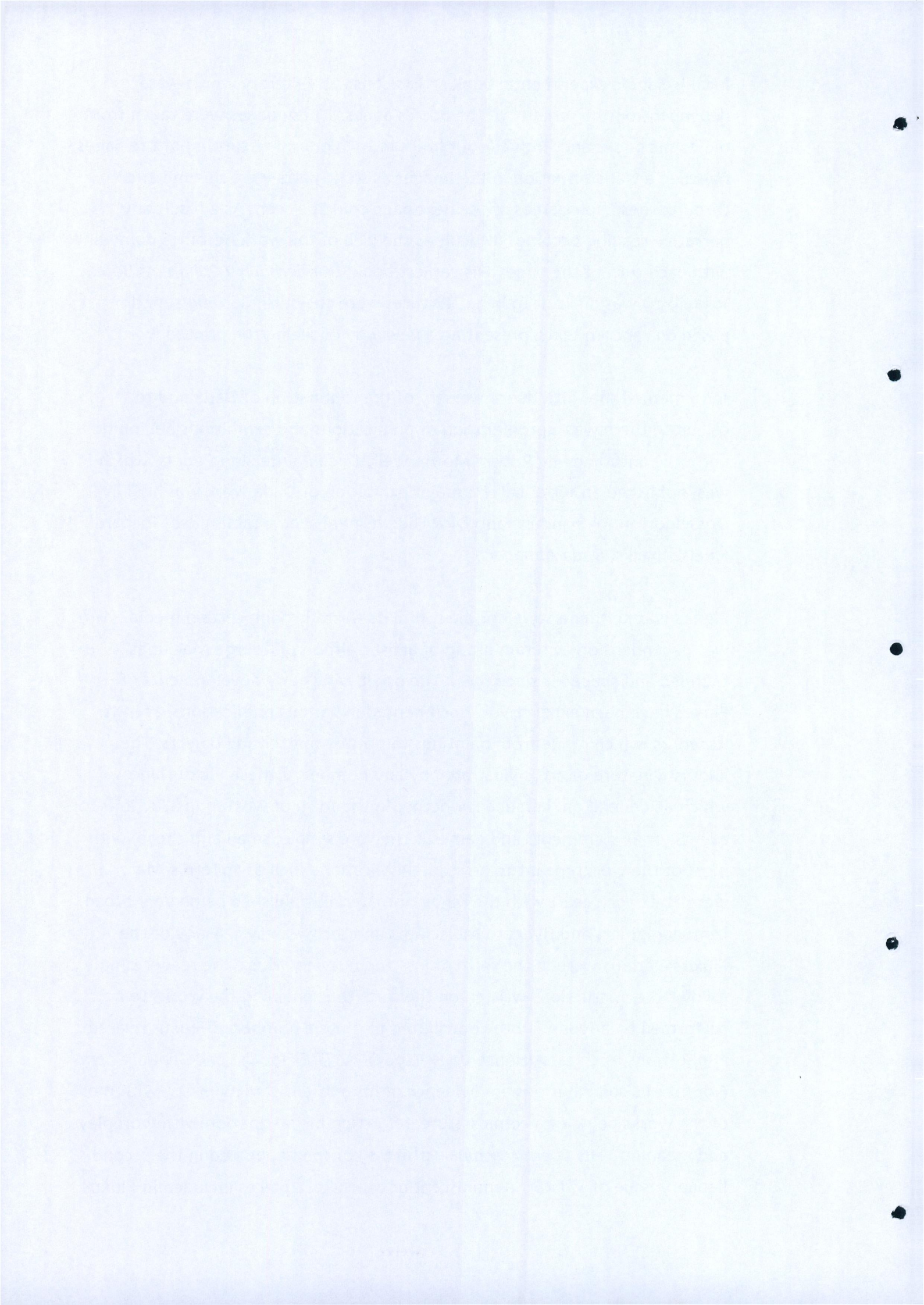
In 1957 Daniel Spoerri began the review *Material* (it was published in four issues between 1957 and 1959), which was devoted to concrete poetry. The first issue was an international anthology of concrete poetry and the second was devoted to Dieter Roth's 'ideograms'. Roth began to make books during this time in the late fifties while he was based in Iceland and in contact with



local Icelandic experimental book artists. His early literary works were dependent on the seriality of the book's pages. These pages were taken from old comic books and Roth cut out holes in each one. The turning of the pages revealed a transformation in the images as some parts were missing and through these holes areas of the next page could be seen. As a result any narrative reading becomes difficult as the idea of the work becomes dominant with each turn of the page. His earliest book - *Kinderbüch (Children's Book, 1954-1957)* was difficult to 'read'. Pictures were cut-out holes and superimposed on random texts, presenting a new way of seeing the printed word.

1966 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Dada and to celebrate there was a proliferation of publications and exhibitions beginning with the anthology by Robert Motherwell; *Dada Painters and Poets* which was published in 1957. Later a major exhibition of Dada work was held in Dusseldorf in 1958 and in 1960 Dick Higgins published a facsimile of Richard Huelsenbacks' *Dada Almanach*.

Fluxus was neither a style nor did it find its form through certain media. It was dependent on a certain group of artists, although George Maciunas founded and shaped it since 1961. The origins and early developments of Fluxus have been exhaustively documented in various publications, as have its works, which range from paintings to printed matter and objects. The linguistic nature of art is illustrated by any number of these Fluxus pieces, which all depend on language, whether in the form of written instructions for events, or as statements and games. They are simple, small and cheap, with most of the works meant to be read. Publications such as Spoerri's *Material* were at its very heart with the range of materials published being very broad, from pamphlets and flyers to tablecloths and throw-aways. Many of the Fluxus editions were in the form of kits and puzzles, where the reader simply follows the instructions written on the card, thus enabling the works to be performed by anyone. Roth contributed to quite a number of Fluxus related publications, such as; *An Anthology* (1963), *V TRE* (1964), and *Spatial Poem* (1965). His contributions are evidence of his anti-elitist view of art, with most of the works being of a comic nature, reflecting his fascination with wordplay and meaning. His *Poem Machine (plate 1)* of 1964 appeared in the second February issue of *V TRE*. Reminiscent of other Roth pieces included in Fluxus



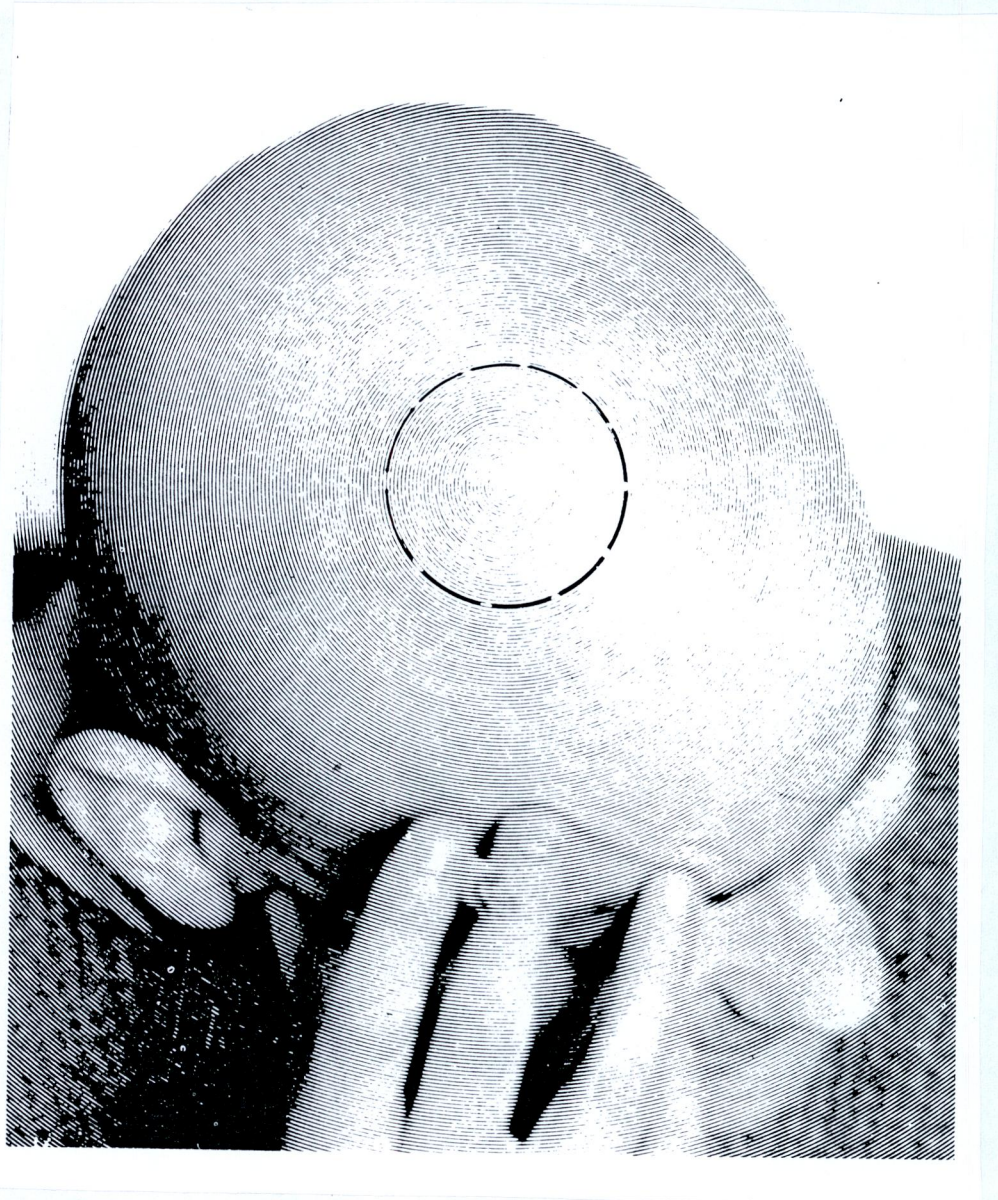


Plate 1; Dieter Roth, *Poem Machine*, 1964.

publications, this 'poem' requires the destruction of the issue to be 'read' properly. It necessitates cutting a hole in the center of a photograph of Roth's head. *Poem Machine* also indicates the functional, as opposed to aesthetic,



purpose of *V TRE* and much of Roth's work during this time. Although this piece is just one image on one page of a magazine, it reflects elements of Roth's book works. The reader is always required to do something in order to finish the artwork. In the books one must turn the pages, and in *Poem Machine* one is obliged to cut along the dotted line.

The book as medium fits very well into the sensibility of the sixties alternative scene and the ephemeral nature of Fluxus publications was characteristic, not only of the artists' sensibilities, but of the art world in general in which Happenings and Performance art were replacing painting and sculpture as modes of expression. By being relatively cheap and ephemeral the publications exemplified the Fluxus belief that art was in everything and was accessible in a way that art in a gallery was not. The artists used publications not only as a way of bypassing the gallery system, but also as an effective way of infiltrating the art world.⁴ In this way we can see how books are used successfully to allow the group to enter the museums through the back door.

In contrast to the noise experimentation of Dada (for example the phonetic poetry in the Cabaret Voltaire), artists began to use the silent image in their publications, demanding the reader to supply the text. Roth's *Kinderbüch* and other early works such as *The Daily Mirror Book* (1961, **plate 2**) are essentially 'textless'. *The Daily Mirror Book*, which measures only 2 x 2 cm, is a spine-glued chunk of 150-odd pages of seven-eighths of a square inch cut from the Daily Mirror newspaper.

Directly related to *kinderbüch* the *Daily Mirror Book* also uses found printed material as its pages. Roth prefers to employ pages from comic books and newspapers rather than his own drawings. In a similar way to his ideograms these books contain no handwritten mark by the artist, no drawing, painting or sketch. There is also no narrative in any of these works, only pages with abstract images and blown-up areas of newspaper.

4. The publications, editions and objects were intended to be distributed by mail, thereby circumventing the art gallery circuit and reaching a world-wide audience.

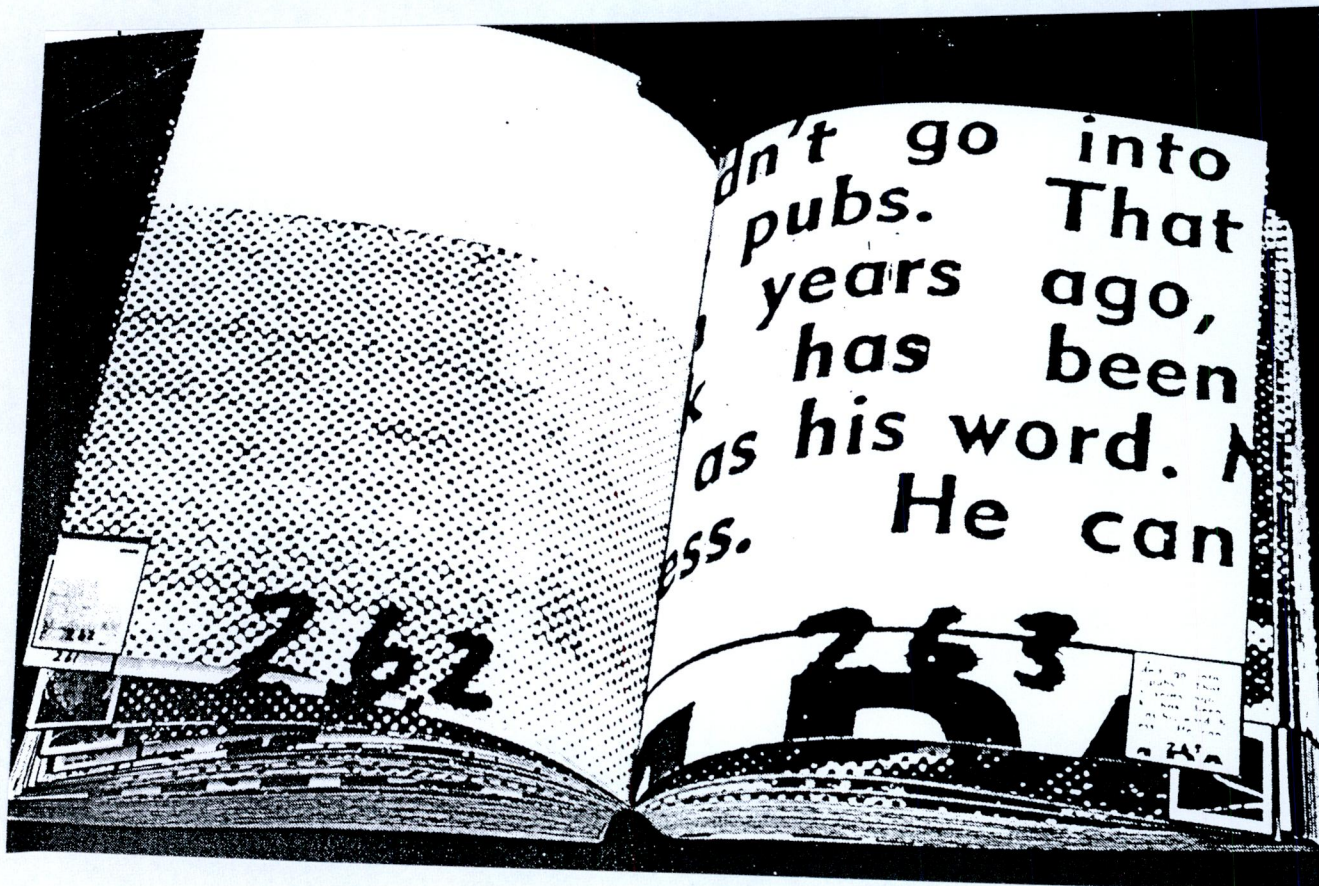


Plate 2; Dieter Roth, *Daily Mirror Book*, 1961.

The blow-ups are so large that reading becomes impossible as the disparate letters lose all meaning and context. The sense of the original newspaper becomes non-sense in the reconstituted book as the white space takes over from the letters and words.

The absence of text reaches its height in the blank. John Cage's use of silence as non-noise proved influential in Minimalist and Conceptual art and the circles within which Roth moved during this time. Cage's composition *4'33'* (1952), in which the pianist comes to the piano and just sits for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, epitomises this lack of text. Not only this fascination in the blank, but also Cage's interest in notation was taken up by Roth and other Fluxus artists, such as Ben Vautier, for whom text provided the recipe for performance events.

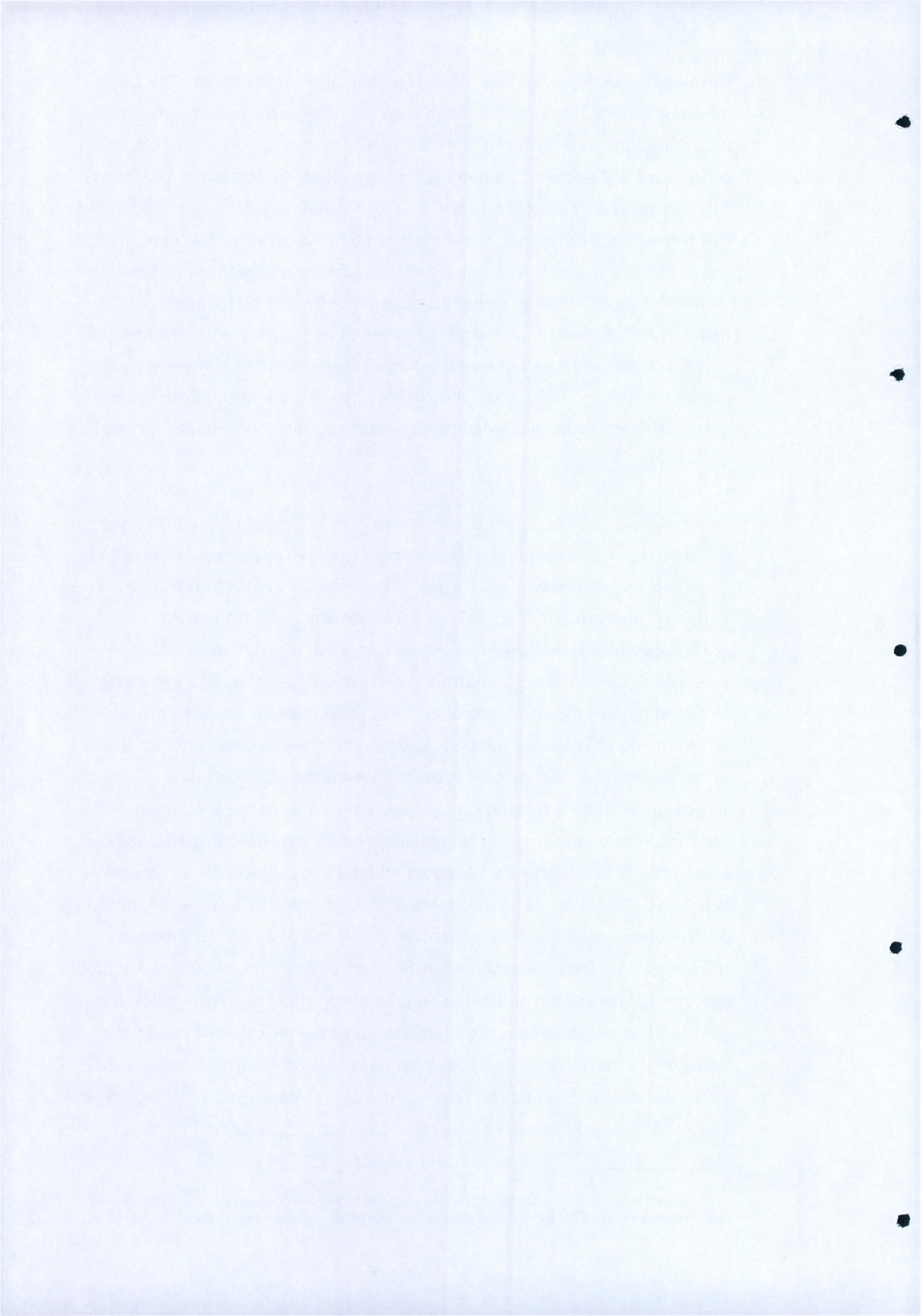




through the pages, aware that there is no beginning and no end. The earlier books showed Roth's preoccupation with the book as a structure with fixed pages, and this seriality forms the basis of any reading of the works. With other loose leaf books contained within a box, Roth questions the very structure of the book. As author he presents his work to the viewer, or reader, but this format enables them to make decisions and take part in the creation of the work. The use of the loose pages in a folder serves another function. When one 'reads' through these photocopied notes and sketches one can't help but feel that this is an intimate process to be involved with. The single sheets feel more like genuine works than do pages glued to a spine in a more conventional book. Although photocopied, there is a sense of Roth's presence - as if he has just discarded these notes in a folder to be pulled out and used later.

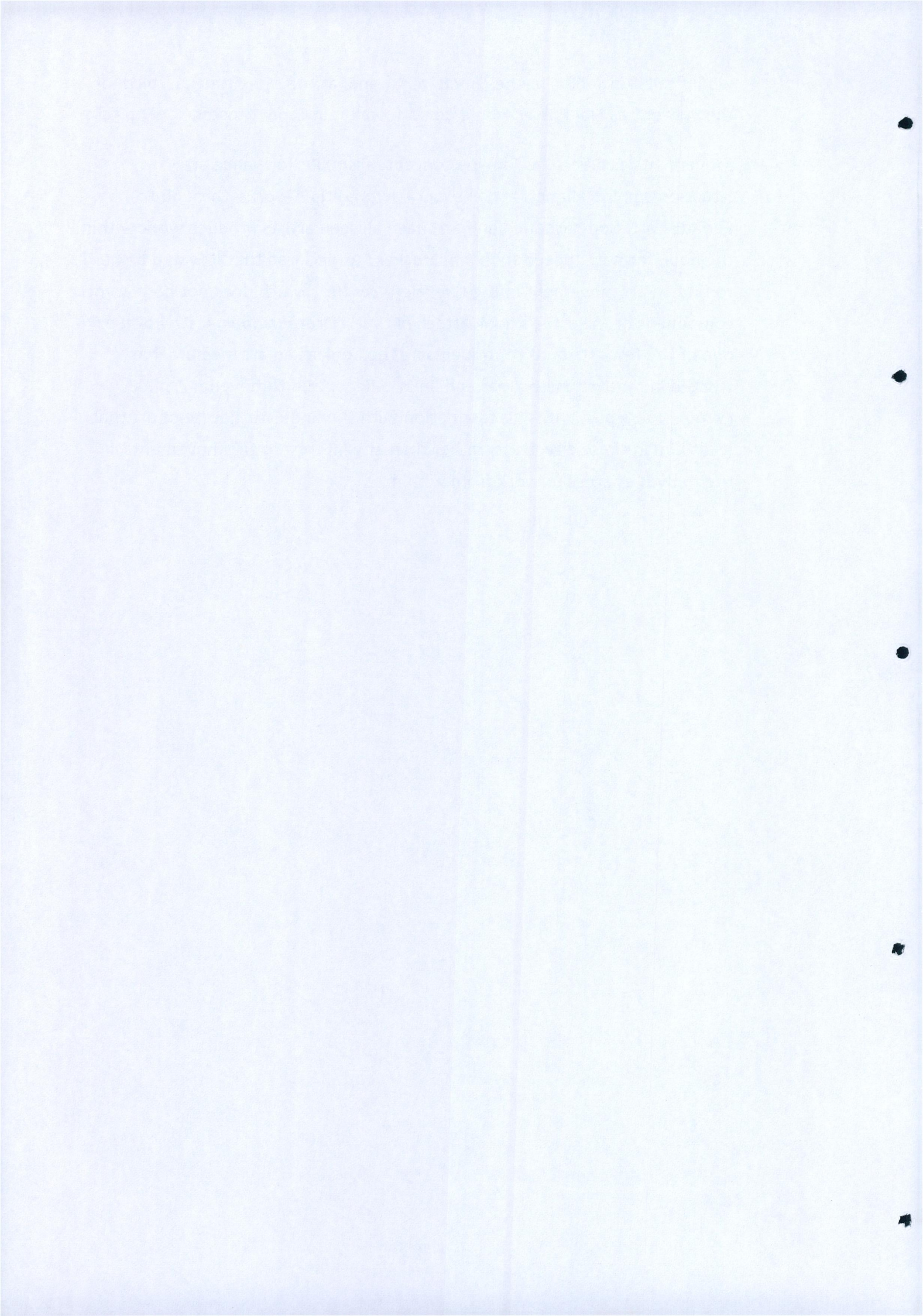
What followed directly upon the provocative avant-garde of the fifties was the emergence of two tendencies that were to prove important in the decades that followed: Minimalism in the mid-sixties and Conceptualism from the late sixties.⁶ Conceptualism's arrival recovered key concepts of the early academics which established Fine Art as a learned, self-conscious activity in Western culture. One of these concepts was a mistrust of optical experience as providing an adequate basis for art. In the seventies conceptual artists seized the book as an alternative to the commercial gallery system and ethos of the precious art object. Conceptualists were looking to occupy a space outside of the dominant cultural conventions which govern the production and the consumption of art. Both Minimalists and Conceptualists questioned the assumption that a work of art is self-contained and subject only to an optical beholding. The book, as the residence of the idea, became a favourite medium of the conceptual artist. In the seventies these artists shifted attention away from the visual experience of modernism's art objects and towards the actual processes of conceiving and/or making them. Working somewhere between painting and sculpture they attempted to make the viewer self conscious of perceptual assumptions. Conceptual art has made us more aware that we ourselves are establishing the relationships as we apprehend the object. The conceptualists brought about a "death of the author", as Roland Barthes

6. The main movement of Conceptual art can be located between 1967 and 1972. During this period many artists were engaged with, and challenged, the shared language and conventions of modernism.



would call it in 1968 (Barthes, 1968, p.4), and, at the same time, a "birth of the viewer", as Hal Foster would go on to call it in 1996 (Foster, 1996, p.50).

Movements as diverse as Fluxus, Conceptualism, Performance art, Situationism, Installation art, Photography, multiple works, through to Feminist art, Body art and Land art, have all seen artists produce work within the book format. Indeed Johanna Drucker has declared that it would be hard to find an art movement in the twentieth century which does not have some component of the artist's book attached to it (Drucker, 1995, p.1). Roth, as one of the few artists to continue using the book as an art medium, has worked in most of these areas and been called a "multi-movement man" (Wool, 1989, p.4). It is his fascination with the linguistic nature of art that leads him in these directions, rather than any interest in the movements themselves as areas to work from within.



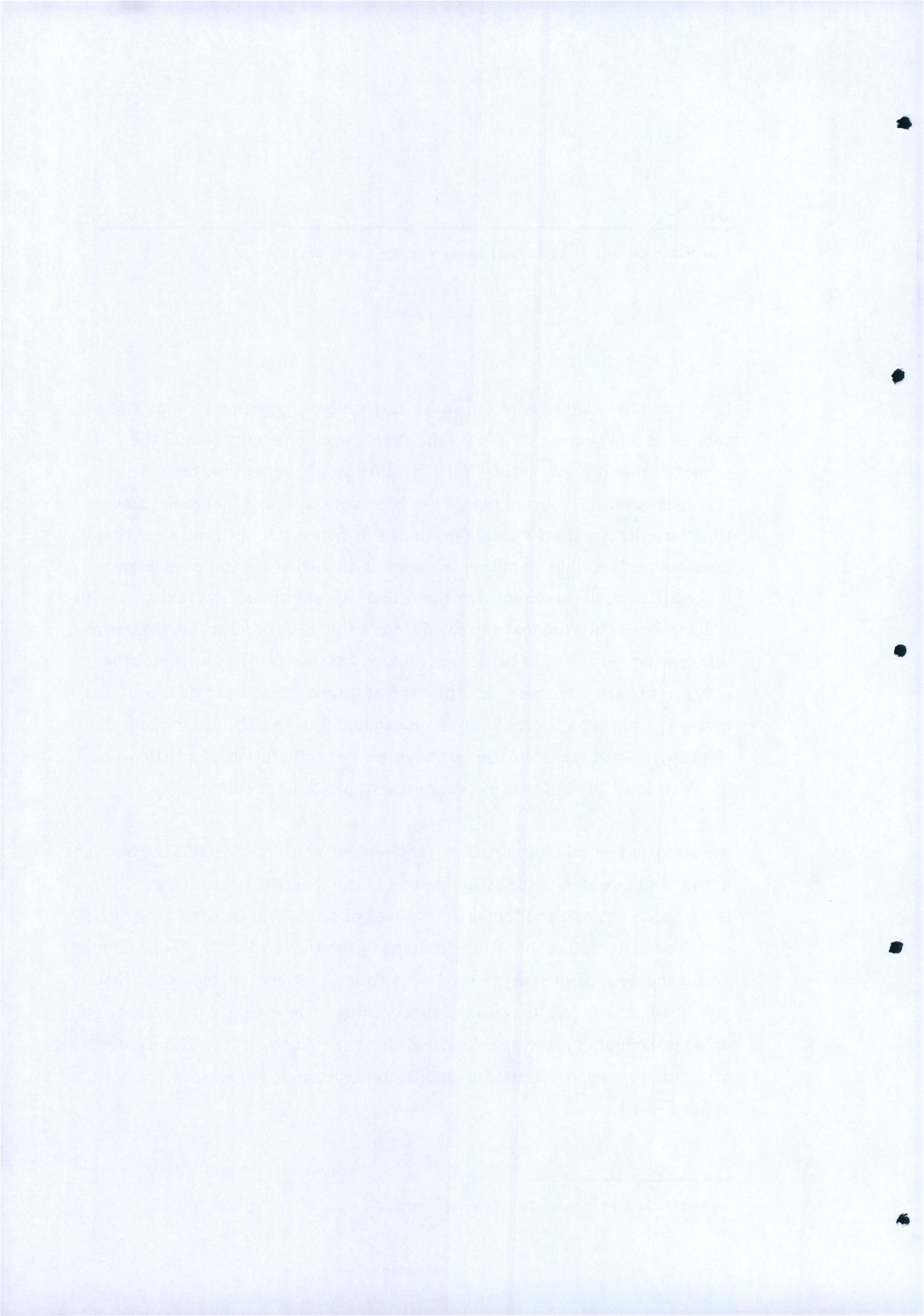
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246 little clouds or the art of never writing about anything

It is logical to judge artworks in which text appears according to linguistic categories and in order to understand Roth's work one must discuss the semiotics that it grew out of. In the last fifty years the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant has been criticised, first by intellectuals, then by writers and artists. As a result of this criticism it becomes clear that it does not matter what an author means, but only what his text says. However, it becomes equally apparent that the task of finding out what a text says is an arduous one, since the text can say different things to different readers, with one reading becoming as valid, or invalid, as another. Writers were not the only ones to criticise these ideas that the author is the sole provider of meaning and that a text has but one meaning, visual artists also took up the challenge. Since the late fifties we have seen a proliferation of artistic work, in which artist's books that incorporate text, play a large role.

Meaning, in textual interpretation, requires the active participation of both an author and a reader, while assuming that cultural experiences such as language, art, music and film are composed of signs. Sign theories are not new and their systematic application developed from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913). His *Course on General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, put forward the theory of the existence of a general science of signs. Semiotics is the application of this science of signs which includes Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, all of which have been applied to art.¹

1. Semiotics comes from the Greek *sema* meaning 'sign'.



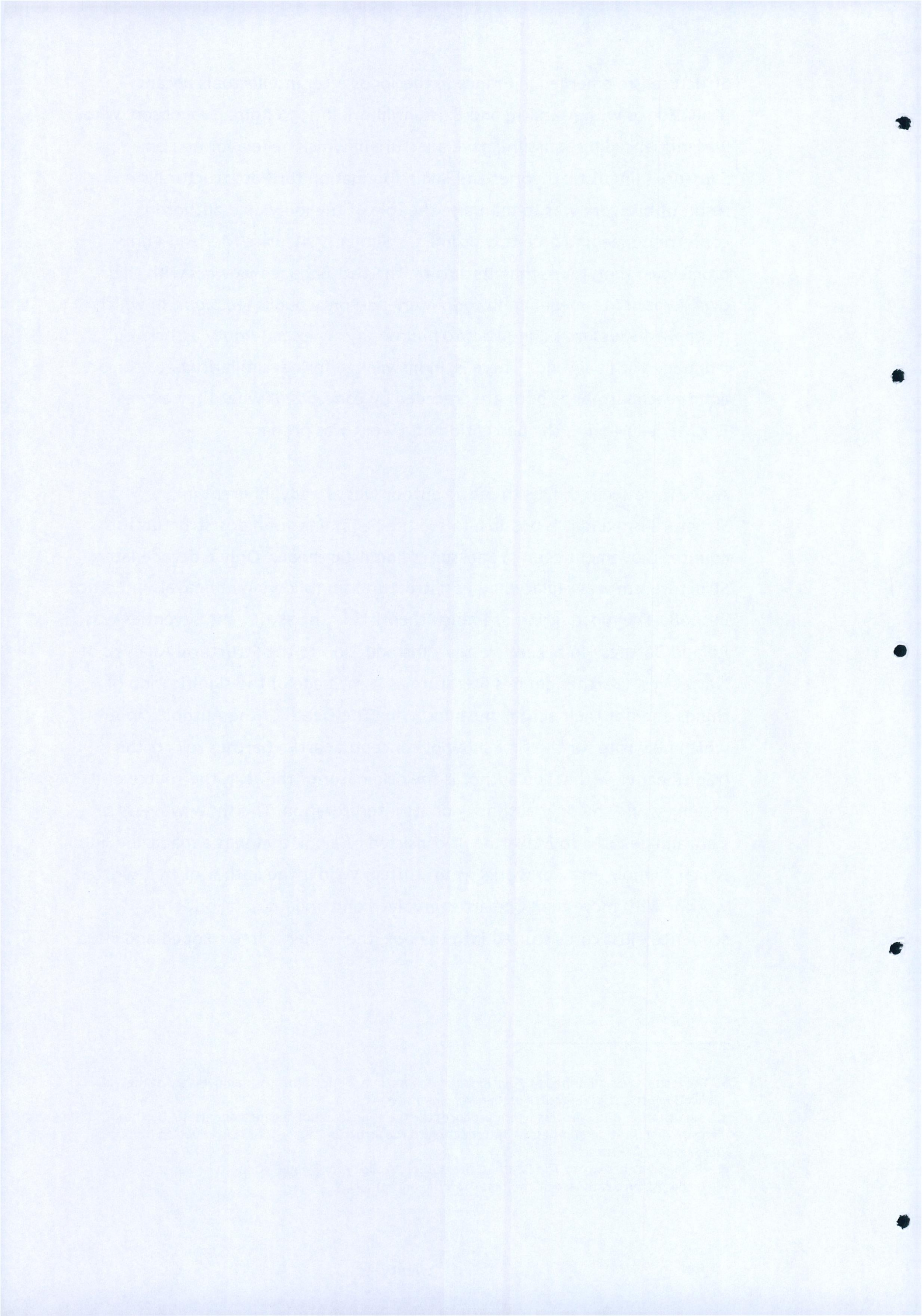
Structuralism emerged in France in the 1950s after intellectuals became disillusioned with Marxism and Existentialism. In 1956 Roman Jakobson, who was influenced by Saussure, gave a lecture in which he elaborated on Saussure's linguistic theories and laid a foundation for Poststructuralism.² A result of his work was to minimise the role of the individual author in conferring meaning on a text or image. Similarly Maurice Merleau-Ponty proclaimed that, more than its author, the text engaged viewers with their own response to meaning. In 1960 Merleau-Ponty published *Signs*, in which he applied Saussure's linguistics to philosophy. Merleau-Ponty associated language with painting. There is, in his view, a formal similarity between art and speech insofar as both are preceded by concepts of what they express. For Merleau-Ponty, the perception of a work was primary.

As we have seen, the death of the author was already inherent in Structuralism and it is possible to see the beginnings of a poststructuralist counter-movement even in Saussure's linguistic theory. Only a decade later Structuralism was replaced by Poststructuralism following upheavals in France in 1968. The most daring of French theorists in the sixties and seventies was Roland Barthes. In his early essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" Barthes defines literature as a message of the signification of things and not their actual meaning.³ In "The Death of the Author" (1968), which he wrote for the first show of conceptual art⁴, Barthes rejects the traditional view that the author is the originator of the text, the source of its meaning, and the only authority on its interpretation. The show was *Aspen 5+6* and devoted to Mallarmé. It consisted of a box that was a magazine, into which a whole array of works were stuffed. Who is the author of this 'written' work? With more than one artist involved and no logical layout and sequence - just cards stuffed into the box, the reader is free to open and close

2. The lecture was published as *Four Kinds of Aphasia* in honour of the 40th anniversary of the publication of Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics*.

3. Signification is the process which produces the meaning, and not the meaning itself. Barthes discusses Signification in his essay "Introduction to the Structural analysis of Narratives" in his book *The Semiotic Challenge*.

4. Roland Barthes wrote *The Death of the Author* explicitly for Brian O' Doherty's 'Aspen 5 + 6'. Alexander Alberro calls 'Aspen' the first show of conceptual art.



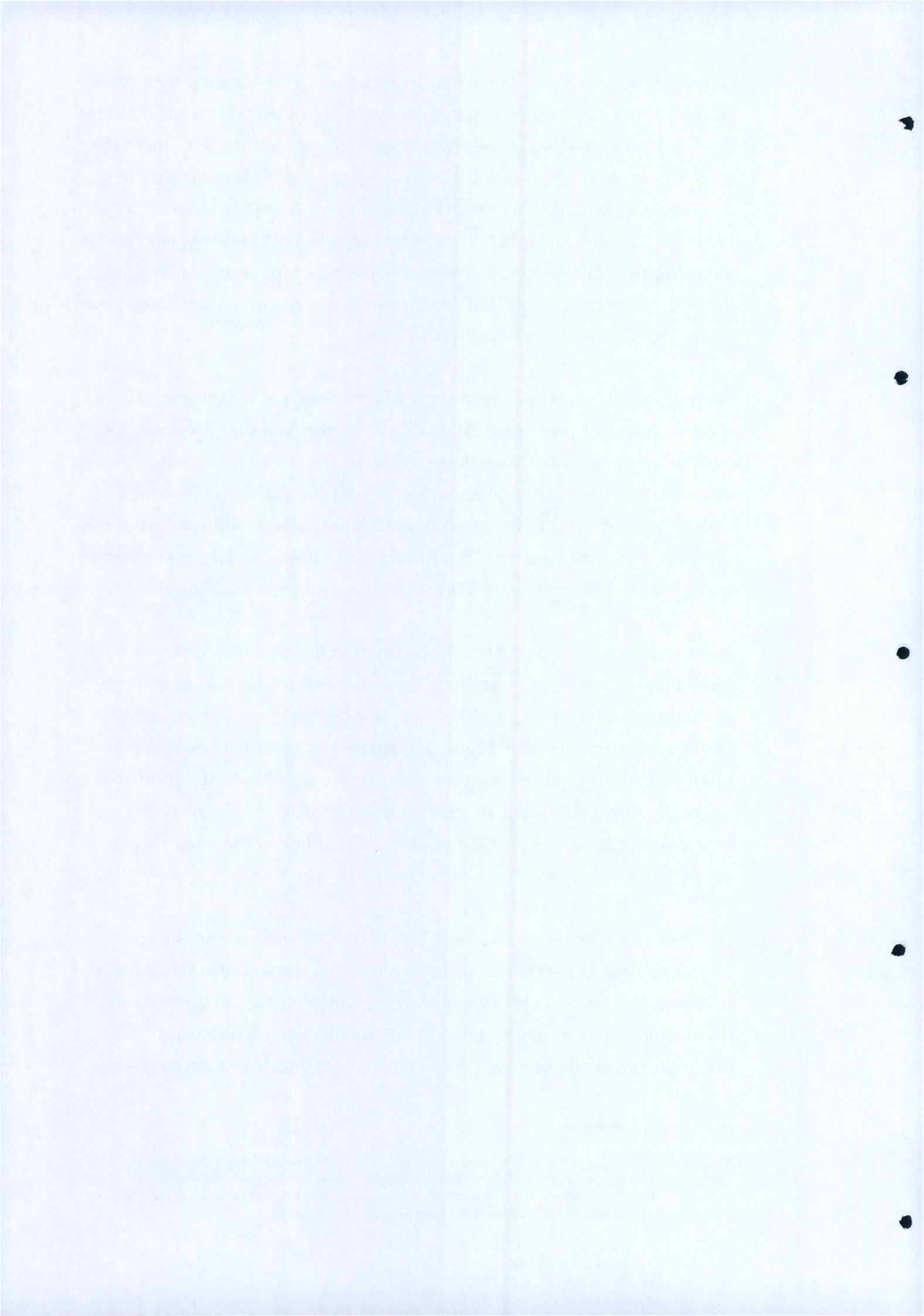
(literally) the texts signifying process without respect for the signified. The reader becomes a producer. What is new in Barthes theory is the idea that the readers are free to connect the text with systems of meaning and ignore the author's intention. Although Barthes also wrote about painting, it is his discussions on photography which best exemplify his shift from Structuralist to Poststructuralist thought. Structuralists attacked the idea that language is an instrument for reflecting a pre-existing reality, or for expressing a human intention. One might say that Poststructuralism is simply a fuller working-out of the implications of Structuralism.

Several genealogies of the sign have been contrived, but for the purposes of this discussion the poststructuralist texts of Barthes and Derrida prove the most interesting.⁵ The change from structuralism to poststructuralism proved influential, providing an intellectual base for artists who began working in a textual way. In *S/Z* (1970) Barthes projects a poststructuralist concept of the sign onto a past moment, the Parisian world of Honore de Balzac, in order to relate the semiotic order of market capitalism with early modernism.

Like Barthes, Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), another French philosopher, recognises the indexical, metaphorical and connotative qualities of the sign. For Derrida meanings are not fixed, but vary according to contexts, which themselves are continually in flux. The meaning of a word in one context is often different in another and because we define words in terms of other words, Derrida would say that meaning is always deferred. On this basis Derrida argues that there can be no definitive 'author' in the sense that the author confers definitive meaning on the text.

Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", given at a symposium at Johns Hospital University in 1966, virtually inaugurated a new critical movement in the United States. In it he argues that the notion of structure, inherent in Structuralist theory, always presupposes a centre of meaning of some sort. Derrida's text also suggests a

5. Jean Baudrillard's and Frederic Jameson's texts on the passage from structural linguistics to poststructuralist semiotics display another approach to study how the signified is loosened and redefined as another signifier. A more in depth discussion of genealogies of the sign is provided in Hal Foster's essay "The Passion of the Sign" in *Return of the Real*, 1996.

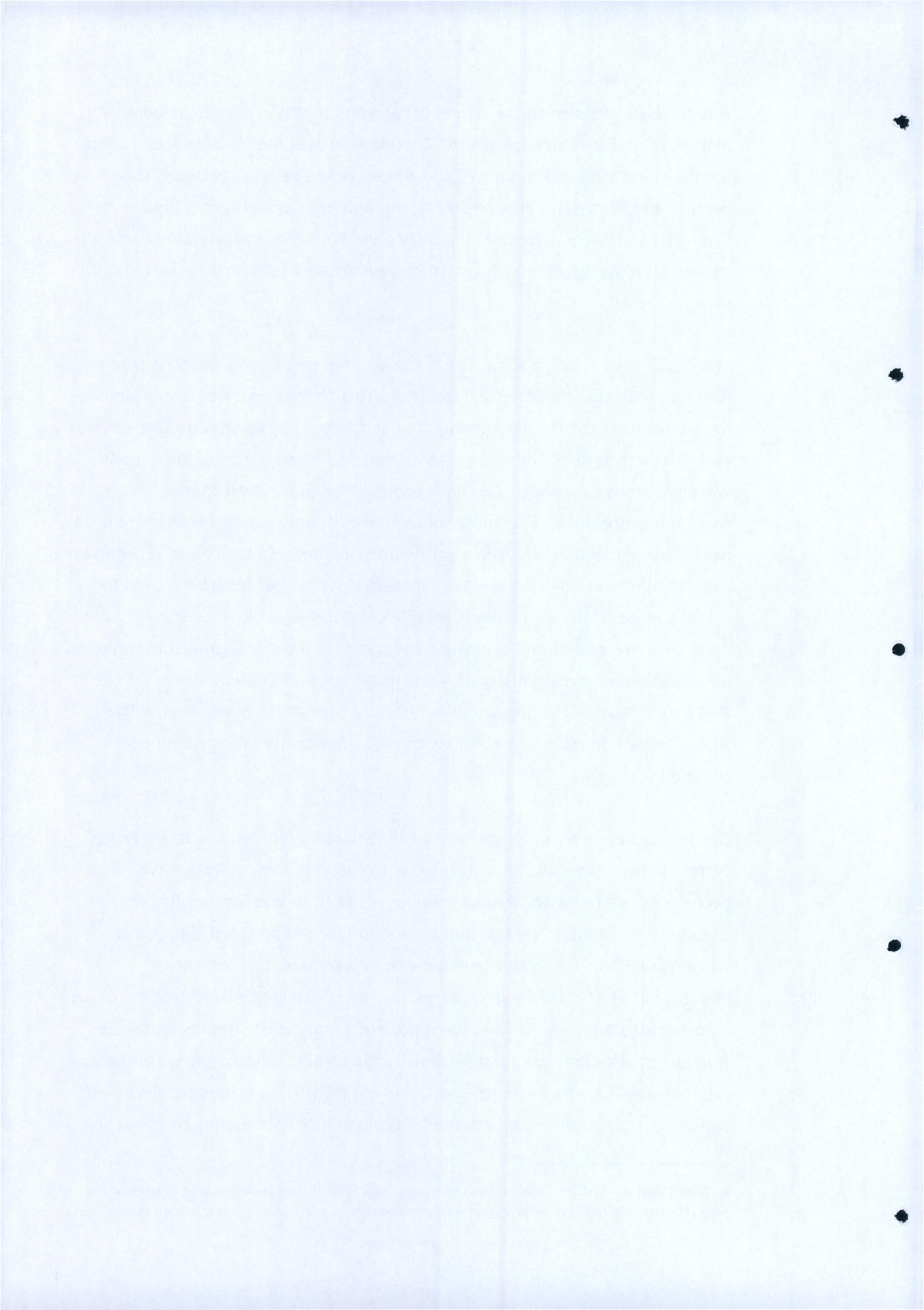


way to relate the sign to the two epochal shifts that Barthes discussed, that is market capitalism and modernism. Derrida discusses the philosophical rupture produced in structural linguistics and alludes to the relation between this rupture and the artistic rupture inaugurated in high modernism. This connection between structural linguistics and high modernism has become all too clear today, as we relate poststructuralist theory to a further shift in our own period.

What now becomes apparent is that the attempt to uncover the structure is futile, as each text possesses a difference. This difference is not one of uniqueness, but rather the result of textuality itself, which, by its very nature, causes each text to refer back differently to all that is already written. Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning. It now appears that there is no necessary connection between signifier and signified. Saussure had recognised that signifier and signified are two separate systems, but he always tried to retain a sense of the signs coherence. He did not see just how unstable meaning can be when the systems come together. Poststructuralist thought has discovered this essentially unstable nature of signification, while Poststructuralists have, in various ways, prised apart the two halves of the sign. The signifiers, chameleon-like, change their colours with each new context.

Deconstruction is possibly the most conscientiously self-conscious, analytical system in literature, and as such the one that artists such as Roth have become associated with. Whilst it is likely that Roth was aware of new theories we cannot be certain that he was influenced by specific linguistic writings.⁶ The term Deconstruction was first used by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and became associated with Derrida. Derrida, as a Poststructuralist who studies the nature of signification, has deconstructed some of the leading structural systems. Structuralists and Poststructuralists reject the notion of an essential copy derived from Plato's mimetic view of art. Similarly, Derrida deconstructs assumptions that texts are mimetic or second

6. Since the early seventies Roth has been working closely with Richard Hamilton who typotranslated Marcel Duchamp's *The Green Box* and would have been well versed in all the latest literary theories.



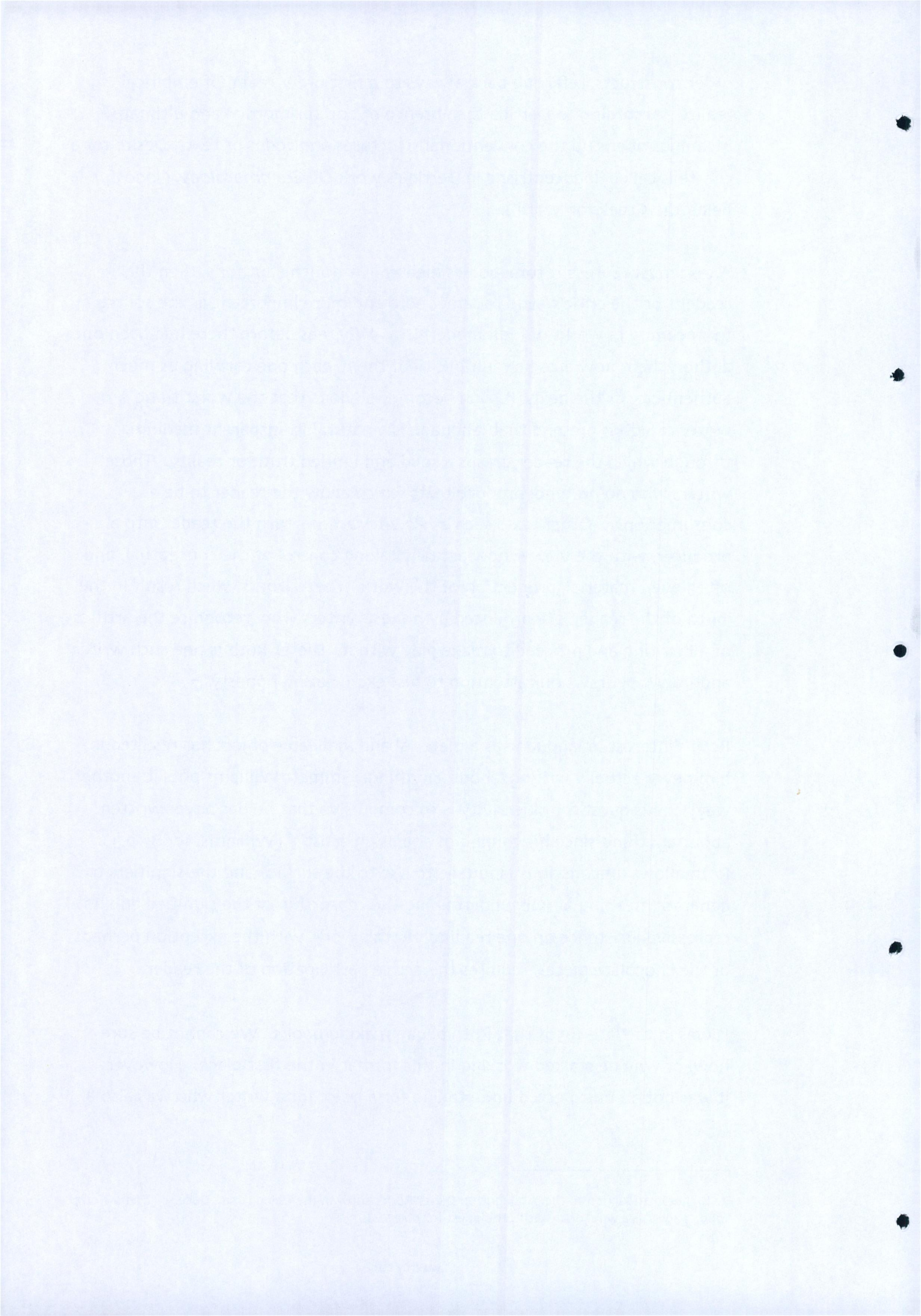
order constructs, referring back always to a first order realm of empirical reality. According to Derrida the absence of both primordial and ultimate meanings opens up the conventional structures and codes of texts. Desire for a centre is called 'logocentrism' in Derrida's work *Of Grammatology*, (*logos* being the Greek for 'word').

A text must represent somebody's meaning, if not the author's, then the reader's or the critic's, who became more and more important as the source for meaning in works of high modernism. Whereas before there had been one author, there now arose a multiplicity of them, each one carrying as much authenticity as the next. It soon becomes obvious that the worst thing a writer can do is pretend that language is a natural, transparent medium, through which the reader grasps a solid and unified truth or reality. Those writers who do pretend, produce texts which allow the reader to be a consumer only. Other texts such as *Poem Machine* turn the reader into a producer, with the viewer now actually taking control of the conceptual, and often even material, production of the work. These works which result in the 'birth of the reader' are produced by honest writers who recognise the artifice of all writing and proceed to make play with it. Dieter Roth is one such writer and Ira Wool draws our attention to his "excruciating honesty".⁷

Roth's interest in language as a material and malleable object has resulted in him never actually writing 'about' anything. Emmett Williams puts it another way; "...his quest for objectivity is so compulsive that he has never written about anything since his coming of age as an artist" (Williams, 1968, p.4). Roth allows unconscious language to rise to the surface and the signifiers to generate meaning at will, undermining the censorship of the signified and its repressive insistence on one reading. Roth's work, with the exception perhaps of the chocolate pieces, requires the active participation of the reader.

It was in the late 1950s that Roth began making books. We cannot be sure how, or why he started working in this format in the first place. However it was not an unexpected undertaking for a poet, for a writer who was also a

7. In her introduction to the catalogue on Dieter Roth's show in the David Nolan Gallery. (*Dieter Roth*, 1989, page 1) Ira wool discusses Roth's quest for objectivism.



visual artist, for a man who loved books, and for someone already unhappy about the preciousness of art and its ostentatious display. It is likely that his interest in both art and poetry grew from frequent childhood visits to galleries and from reading Goethe and Schiller. The large majority of Roth's books have been self-published, first through Forlag Ed, in Iceland and from the late sixties via his partnership with Hansjörg Mayer.⁸

At the same time Roth used presses throughout Europe and was having editions produced by Lund Humphries in England, Ives Sillman in New Haven, Steedrukkerij de Jong in Hilversum, Holland, Edition Hundertmark, Köln, Rainer Verlag, Berlin and others in Copenhagen and elsewhere. By the end of the fifties the variety and quantity of artists' books was steadily increasing, and the trend towards publishing one's own work was becoming world-wide. There was now a subtle shift from the derogatory concept of self-publishing-as-vanity-press to the possibilities inherent in an artist controlling his or her work.

Concrete poetry was one of the art forms with which Roth had an intimate working relationship. All art is concrete which uses its material functionally and not symbolically. Sentences are not the aim of concrete texts. What concrete poets create are not ensembles of words which, as unities, represent a verbal, vocal and visual sphere of communication. Roth, along with his contemporaries working in this area saw literature as representation of a linguistic world which is independent of the object, or indeed of a world of events. For these artists and writers text became a three dimensional language object. While Dadaists and Futurists used a variety of typefaces and formats to liberate poetic language from the constraints of literary conventions, concrete poets take the concept of materiality of language further than these earlier experiments. These poets were intent on forging a unity between the visual and verbal aspects of a work and emphasising the fragmentation of language inherent in Poststructuralist theory. Their works are united by their desire to literally concretise meaning, to embed language's complexities in material form. The first major step in bringing this irrationalism into literature was taken by poets such as Hugo Ball, who

⁸. In 1957 Roth founded his own press Forlag Ed with Einar Bragil in Iceland and published books with this press up to 1975.



worked in phonetic poetry. Roth was only twenty-three and already skilled at graphic experimentation when he published his work in the first issue of *Spirale* which he co-edited with Eugen Gomringer.⁹

In 1968, as Barthes published *The Death of the Author*, Roth began his partnership with Hansjörg Mayer, the publisher in Stuttgart. This partnership was to continue until 1981. Both Hansjörg Mayer's father and grandfather were publishers, and he studied under Max Benser at the University of Stuttgart. It was through Benser that Roth and Hansjörg Mayer met. That these two men should have come together was no surprise as Hansjörg Mayer, although a printer, was also a typographic artist in the 1960s when concrete and visual poetry reigned. His own experiments in typography mingling with the printing of concrete poetry made his reputation inviting to Dieter Roth. During this phase of his career the visual manifestation of a letter and its possible consequence were at the centre of Roth's work (**plate 4**). Creating concrete poems that are not made from words, but single letters, Roth inadvertently led concrete poetry to a point where it was no

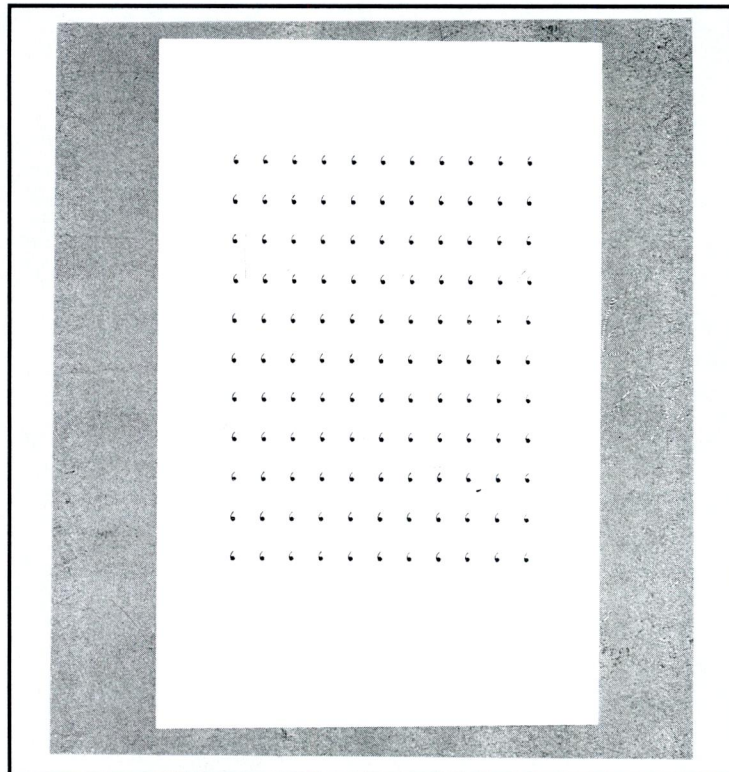


Plate 4; Dieter Roth, *ideogram*, 1959.

⁹ *Spirale* was a journal of concrete poetry and edited by Dieter Roth, Marcel Wyss and Eugen Gomringer, who has been called the father of concrete poetry, having written his first poems in that style in 1951.



longer only literature, but a constructive, painterly work.

The first book that Roth published with Hansjörg Mayer was *Little Tentative Recipe* (**plate 5**), which was one of the projects which he set his students at the Watford School of Art in London. It was published in 1969 in an edition of 100, all numbered copies, with each *Little Tentative Recipe* contained in its own miniature wooden packing case. *Little Tentative Recipe* reminds us that the book is an object whose very form requires the reader's active participation. The book is spine-glued, small, chunky and resembles Roth's *Daily Mirror Book*. It forms a cube when closed - as deep as it is wide. The reader must follow the text if he is to make sense of the recipe, but when reading it he realises that there is nothing to be made from the recipe. What can be deceptively childlike, and often witty, is his penchant for wordplay, in which he deconstructs words and opens up meaning within meaning. Roth knows that it is futile to attempt to master the text and to open its secret, as there are unconscious, linguistic or historical forces which cannot be mastered.

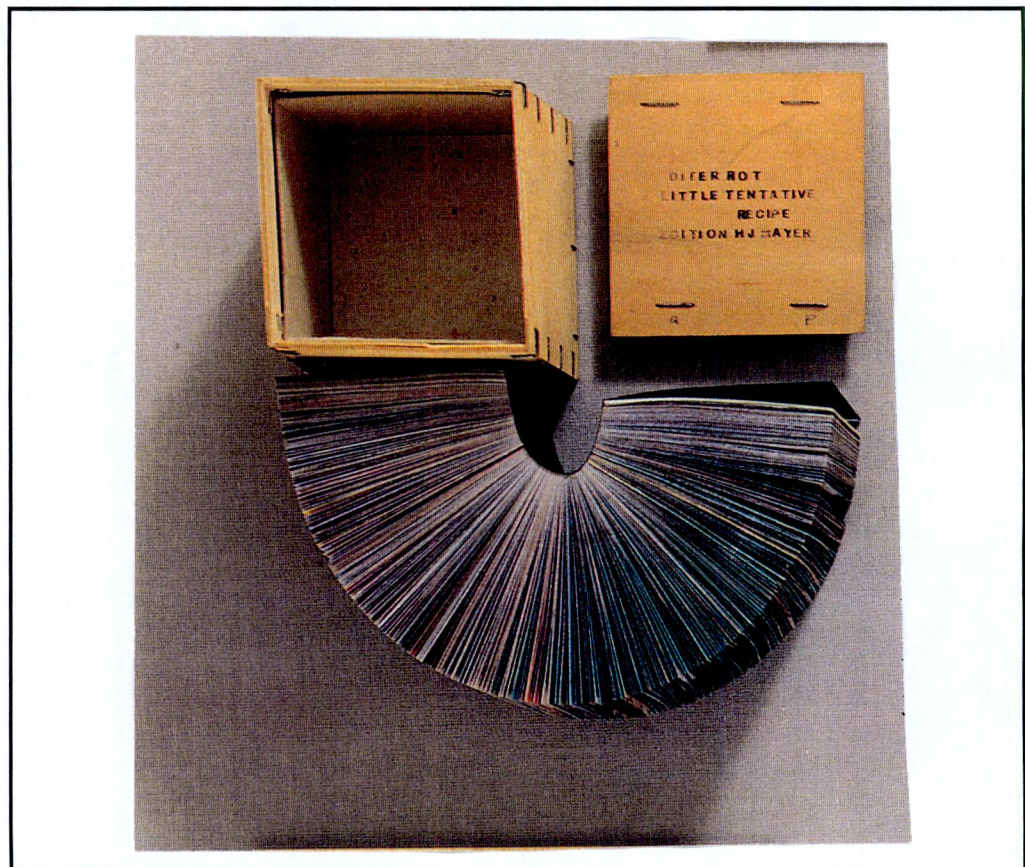


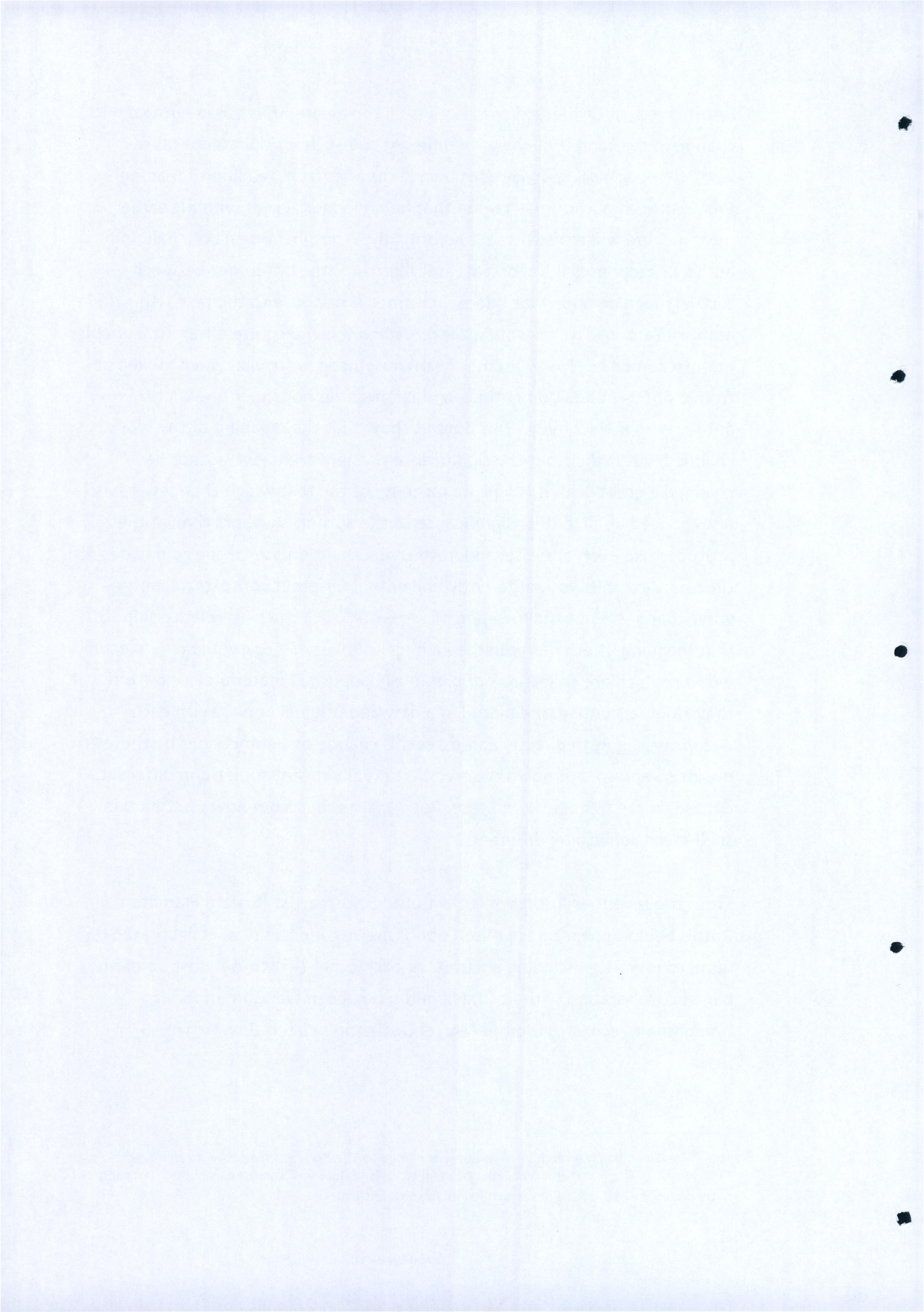
Plate 5; Dieter Roth, *Little Tentative Recipe*, 1967.



Another aspect of the text that Roth is all too aware of, is the inevitable change in meaning brought with time. As the author's opinion of his own work changes his response to his own text varies from reading to reading. Frequently an author may realise that he no longer agrees with his earlier meaning and will revise his text accordingly. This phenomena of changing authorial responses is important, as it illustrates the difference between textual meaning and what is loosely termed a response to the text. An author's response to his work after rereading it can be quite different from his original response. The work may seem misguided, or trivial, when looked at from a different position in time, and its meaning no longer one that the author wishes to convey. This doesn't show that the meaning of the work has changed, but rather that the significance of the work to the author has changed a great deal. It is not the meaning of the text which changes, it has not changed at all, but its significance to the author. Authors change their attitudes like everyone else, and Roth is no exception. With the course of time he views his work differently and within different contexts. Clearly, what changes is not the meaning of the work, but rather his relationship to that meaning. Roth has published a huge number of *Gesamtwerke* (collected works), which are collections of previously published materials taken from their original context and placed in a new and original book. With each *Gesamtwerke* Roth directly addresses this change of signification; by these I meant so and so, but now I observe that I really meant something different. Or, as is more frequently the case, Roth insists that from now on the texts shall mean something different.

From the seventies Roth worked with the British artist Richard Hamilton. Roth's books appear on Hamilton's bookshelves and the two collaborated on numerous works, including portraits of each other (**Plate 6**). Just before he began collaborating with Roth, Hamilton had been working on the typographic reconstruction of Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934).¹⁰

¹⁰. The *Green Box* is an archive of documents related to *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Batchelors, Even*, (1960). The *Box* is an expanded codex and consists of unbound sheets reproducing Duchamp's notes which are housed in a box which stores and groups them.



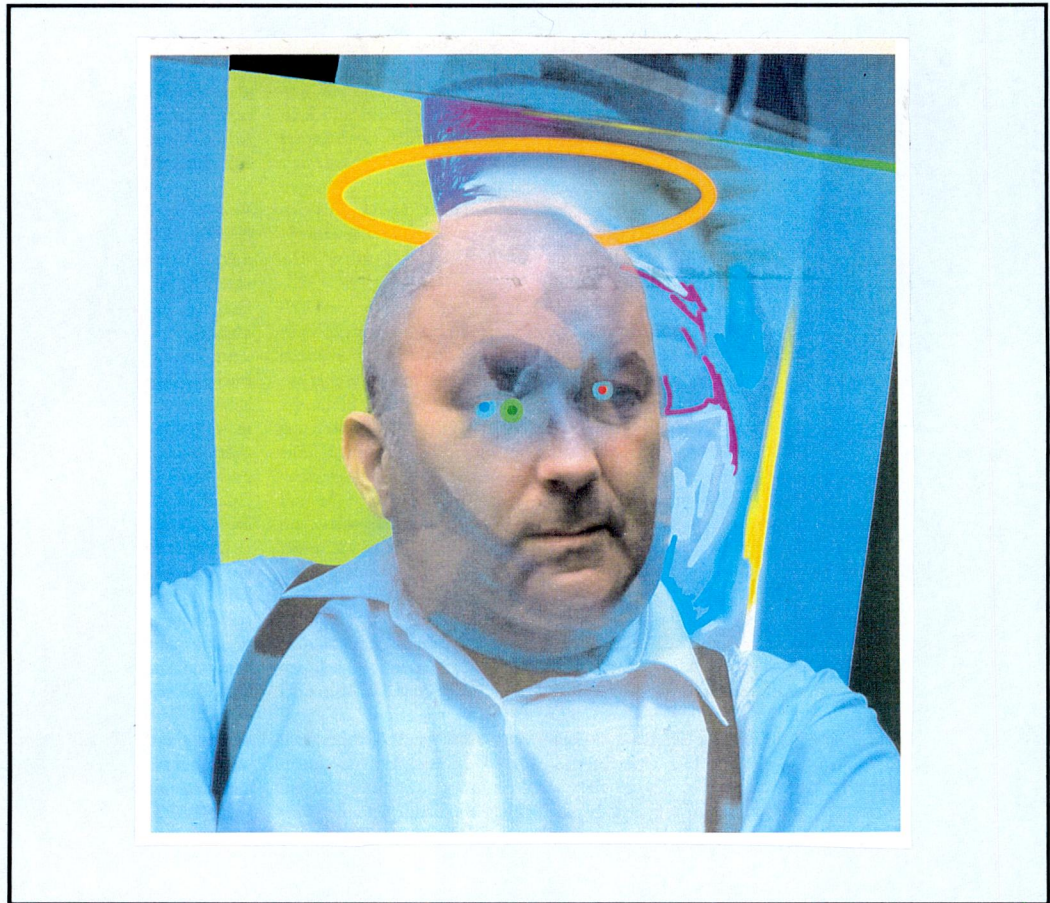


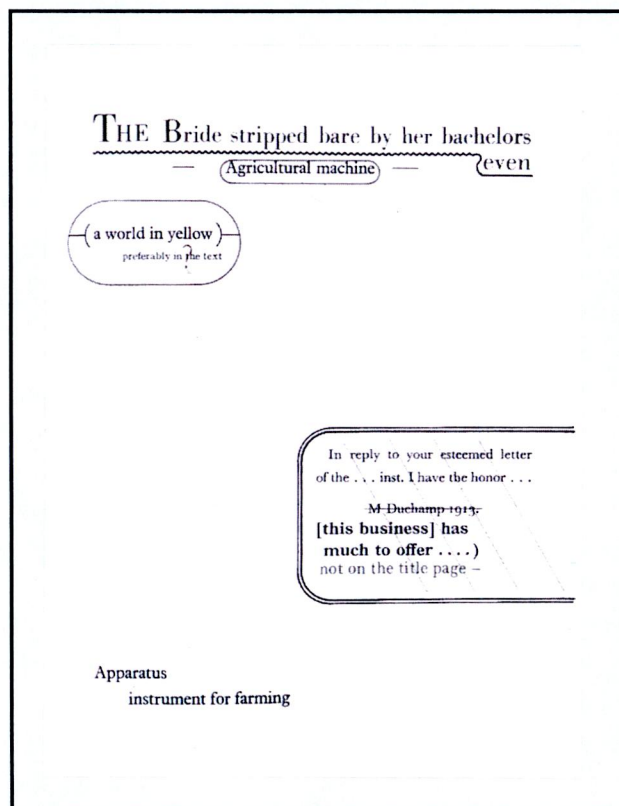
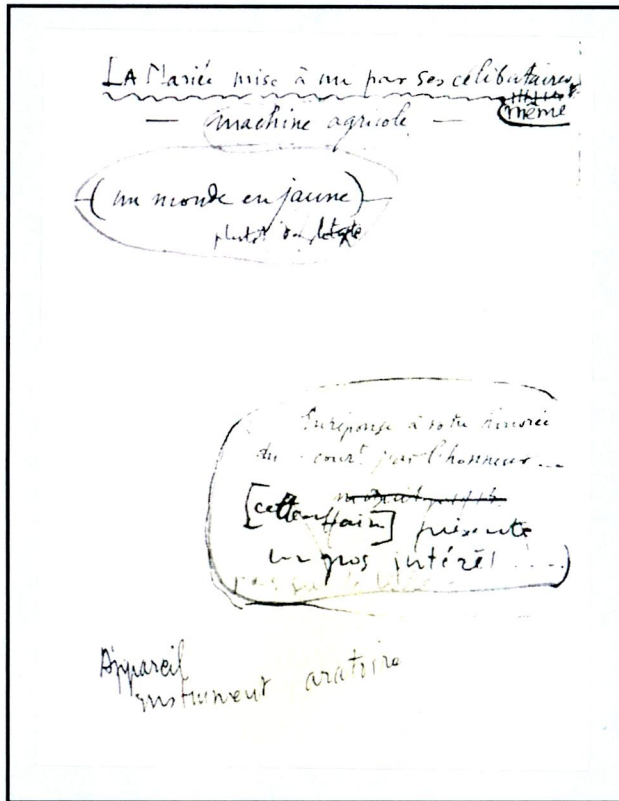
Plate 6; Richard Hamilton, *Portrait of Dieter Roth*, 1978.

Duchamp, after arriving in New York in 1914 became fascinated with the English language. Naturally in America the matter of language had to concern him more than when he was living in his native France, and Duchamp became interested to pull the word away from physical reference. Duchamp sought to break with the intimacies of the handmade mark and its aura. The notes for the *Green Box* are handwritten and the problem of how to turn them into typed form was solved in 1957 when Richard Hamilton began to work with Duchamp on typotranslating the *Green Box* notes (**Plates 7, 8**). Hamilton translated the qualities of the handwritten notes into print, using James Joyce's texts as an aid to comb through Duchamp's knotted texts.¹¹

Duchamp's work and the impact of the *Green Box* inevitably had a profound influence on Roth. Hamilton's involvement with its production must have been the subject of many conversations between the two friends. It was

11. By 1946 Hamilton had studied *Ulysses* with his two volume Odyssey Press paperback edition.





above: **Plate 7;** Marcel Duchamp, notes for *The Green Box*, 1934.

below: **Plate 8;** Richard Hamilton, Typotranslation of Duchamp's notes, 1960.



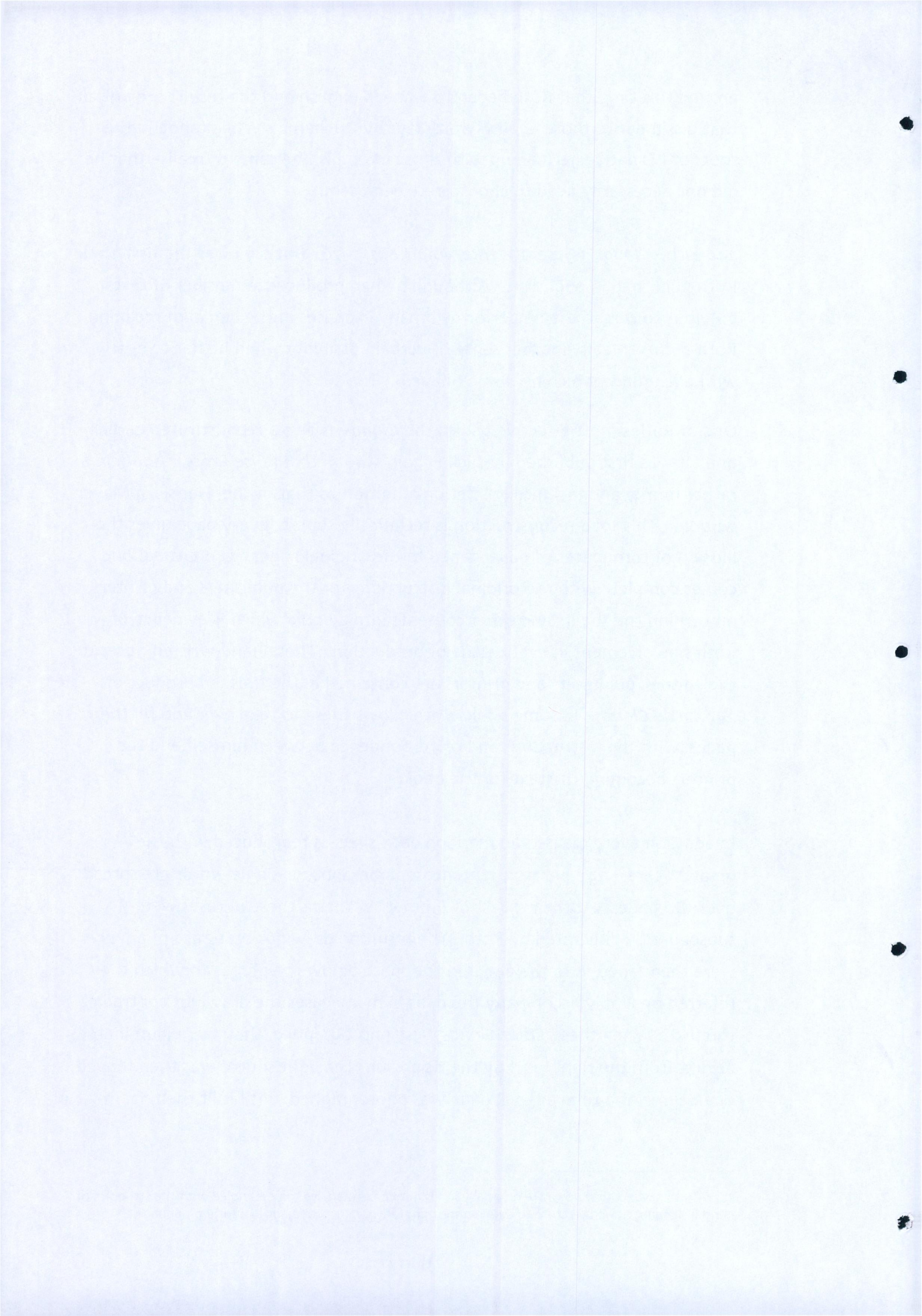
around this time that Roth began to write in English and the results are not all that dissimilar to those English wordplays by Duchamp. While tangling the roots of his native German up with those of English he came to realise that he did not necessarily need to choose between them.

246 Little Clouds (*Gesamtwerte*, volume 17, 1976, **plate 9**) was the first book Roth published in English.¹² Although he had produced a number of texts previous to this where he performed many exercises in the denial of meaning, Roth seems to gain another sense of verbal possibility when he has to deal with a language which he doesn't have.

One of Roth's most effective books, the *Clouds* is also a reconstituted earlier one. It was first published by Dick Higgin's *Something Else Press* in 1968, in a rather murky and technically inferior condition to that of the Hansjörg Mayer edition. This 1976 reconstruction is technically superb, every page gives the illusion of torn pieces of paper taped to the original pages. *246 Little Clouds* comes complete with the original instructions for the publishers and printers on turning the sheets and other contents into a book, which is evidence of Roth's involvement in every stage of production. These hand-written notes to the editors, publishers and printers are contained in the finished product of *246 Little Clouds*. In some books Roth allows these to take over and fill the pages, with the instructions and correspondence between himself and the printers becoming the text for the book.

In addition every crease and mark on each sheet is reproduced with the greatest care. 246 phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or single words are spread over 180 pages. At the request of Emmett Williams these phrases were subsequently illustrated by Roth. The resulting drawings on scraps of paper were then taped onto the pages in the space below the phrase to which they referred or simply accompany them, as in many cases the drawings contradict the text. When these *Little Clouds* were photographed, they were illuminated at first from the right, as if by the rising sun. The light source was then moved one degree at a time as each page was photographed, until it lit them from

12. Roth's works that he wrote originally in his native German are too entangled with the struggles of German language and literature to ever get meaningfully straightened out in another language.



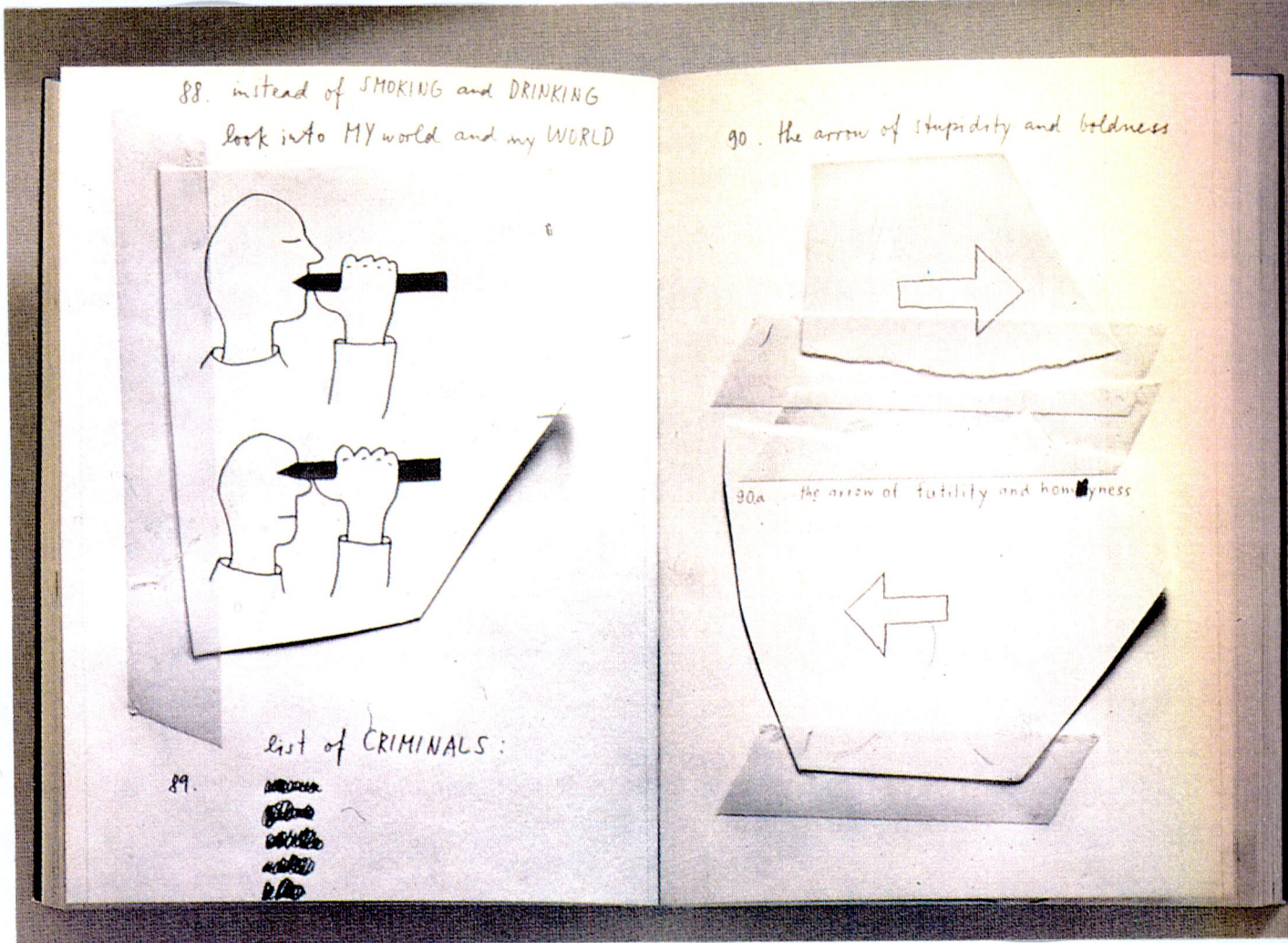
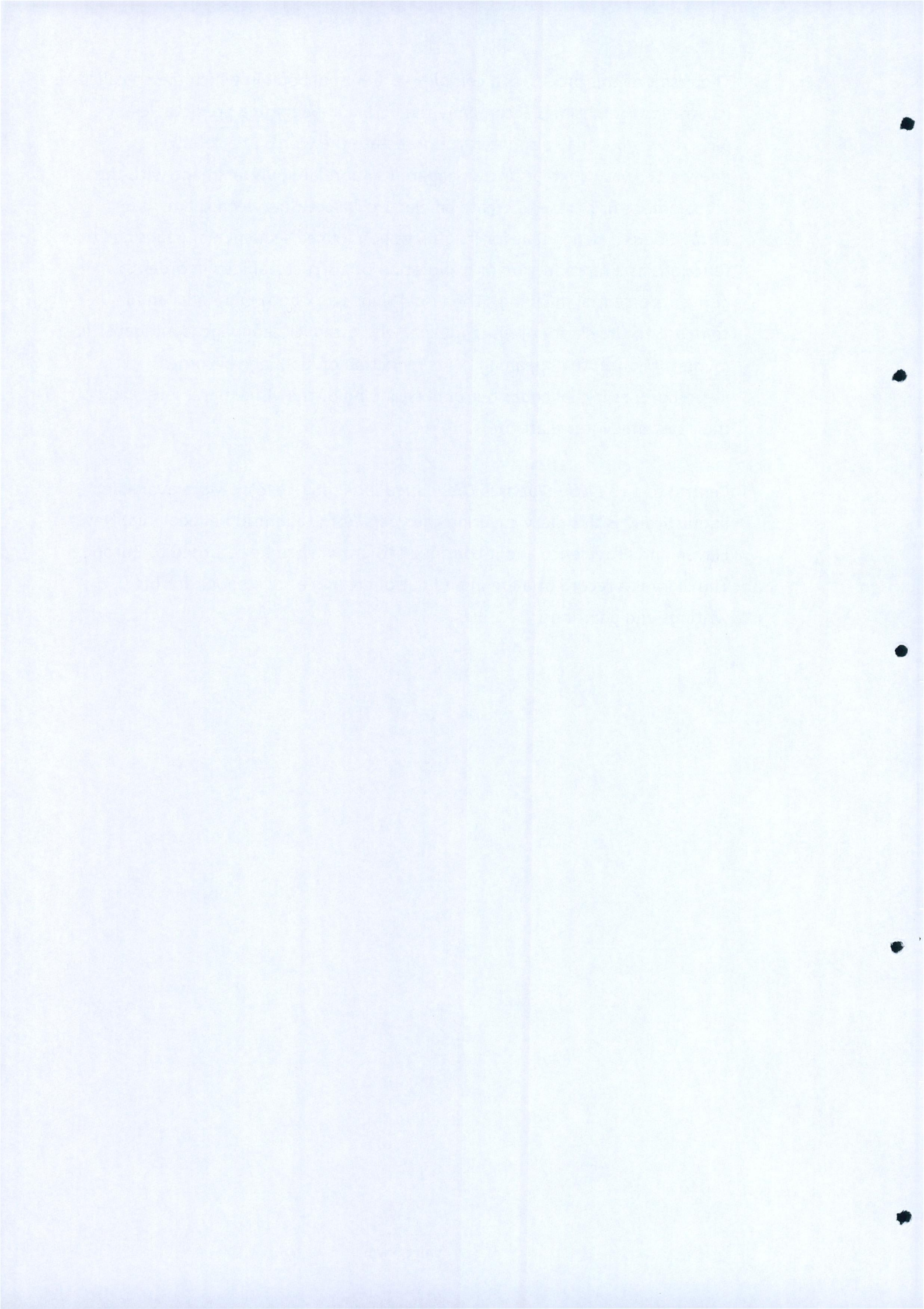


Plate 9; Dieter Roth, double page spread from 246 *Little Clouds*, 1976.

above, as if at noon. Finally, they were lit from the left, as if at sunset. The taped scraps of paper therefore cast shadows much as clouds might do.

The result of this process is a complex verbi-visual book in which the so-called illustrations sometimes accompany the verbal imagery in a predictable and passive way but may also interpret or restate the words in a totally unexpected way, juxtaposing an apparently unrelated visual image with the verbal image or phrase to create an electric dialectic between them. *246 Little Clouds* is dependent for its effect upon a fixed sequence of pages and functions as a reproduction or exploration of a structural idea in order to derive its essential meaning. The visual signs work both in parallel and in contrast, to the clarity of his language, where explicit language is mitigated in favour of conceptual meaning. This reduction of language becomes meaningful as it challenges our understanding of the visual parameters and their systemic interrelatedness.

Central to *246 Little Clouds* is *Die Blaue Flut* (1964-1976). More available linguistically is this diary covering the years Roth taught in Philadelphia, New Haven and Providence and it continued to grow when he returned to Europe. The diary is a record of a life in and out of art and a sourcebook for his writings and paintings.



3

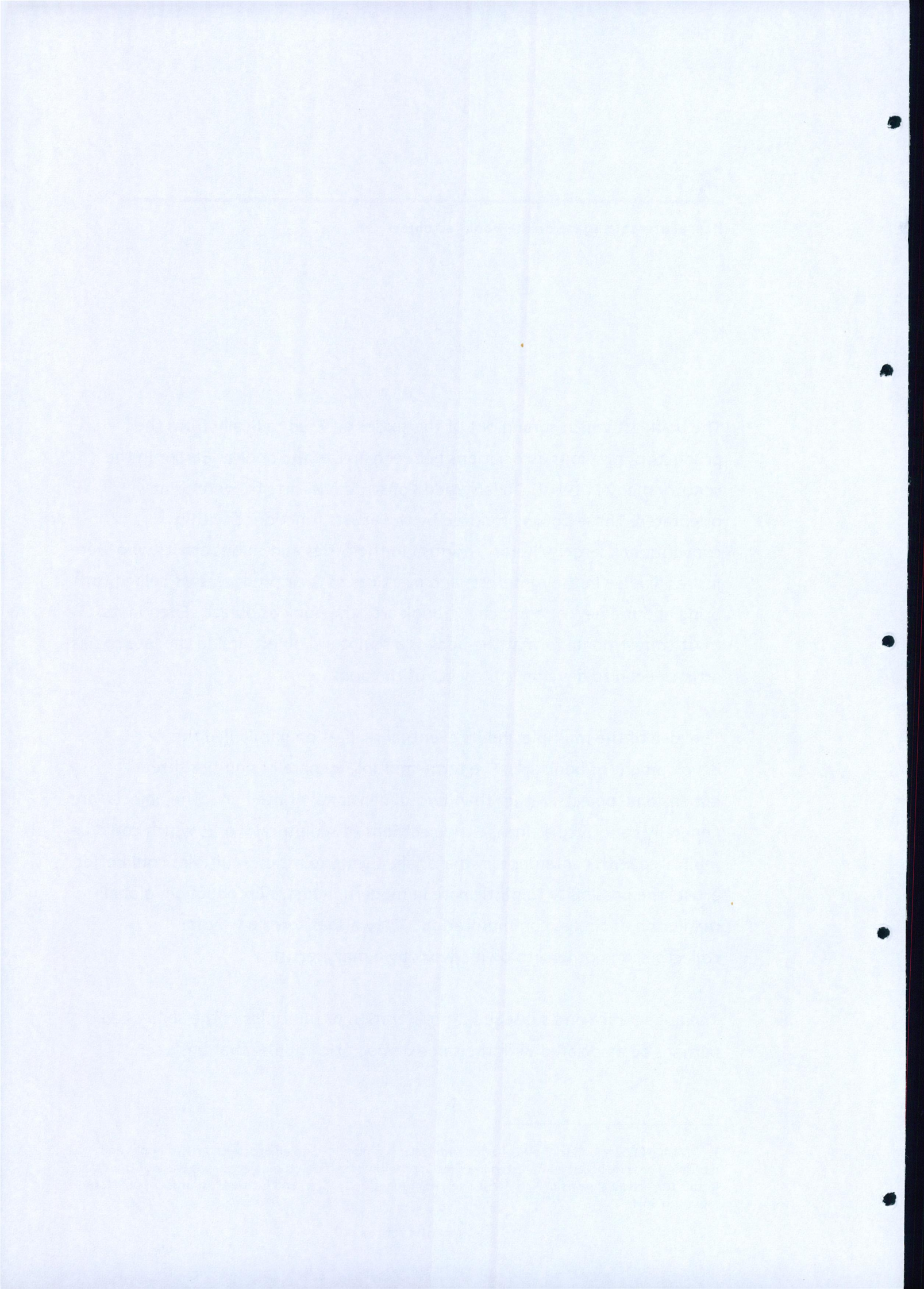
literature sausages, or the book as object

The book art which sprang out of the sixties differed radically from the products of previous associations between artists and books. Earlier in the century many Futurist, Dadaist, and Constructivist artists, were print orientated. Those books produced by the artists functioned within conventional, largely literary, norms. In the fifties and sixties artists who were just as diverse in their interests and practices as their predecessors helped to bring about a new phenomena in book art; the book as object. Even in its most conventional format the book is a sculptural object and in the late sixties artists began to develop this aspect of the book.

The idea of the multiple and its eventual realisation paralleled the development of book art. The term 'multiple' generally signifies three-dimensional objects, rather than two-dimensional printed art. The objects are generally conceived as inexpensive editions of sculptural works which could be replicated with contemporary materials, such as plastics. Multiples could offer artists the possibility to participate in modern industrial production, global marketing and mass communication. They also offered a way for collectors, and others, to own a work by a major artist. ¹

The appearance and subsequent proliferation of multiples in the sixties can perhaps be associated with the same democratic impulse that has been

1. Michael Lowe, a Cincinnati collector and dealer has discussed, in an article on artists' books and multiples, how he became interested in collecting multiples through the object-based work of Dieter Roth. The article appears in *Arts Magazine* (Alan Jones, 1989, p.13) and is titled "An artist's bookstore moves to SoHo".



identified in connection with book art, but their appearance may also be related to the wave of conspicuous consumption evident at that time. Multiples deny original artistic intention by being mass-produced, while offering a connection between art and industry. The radical revolution in the manufacture of goods that led away from the manual crafting process and towards industrial-scale factory mass-production resulted in a shift in consumption patterns that replaced individual commissions by craftsmen with a process of selection from a range of mass-produced industrial goods. The work of art, like merchandise, cannot live unless it is consumed.

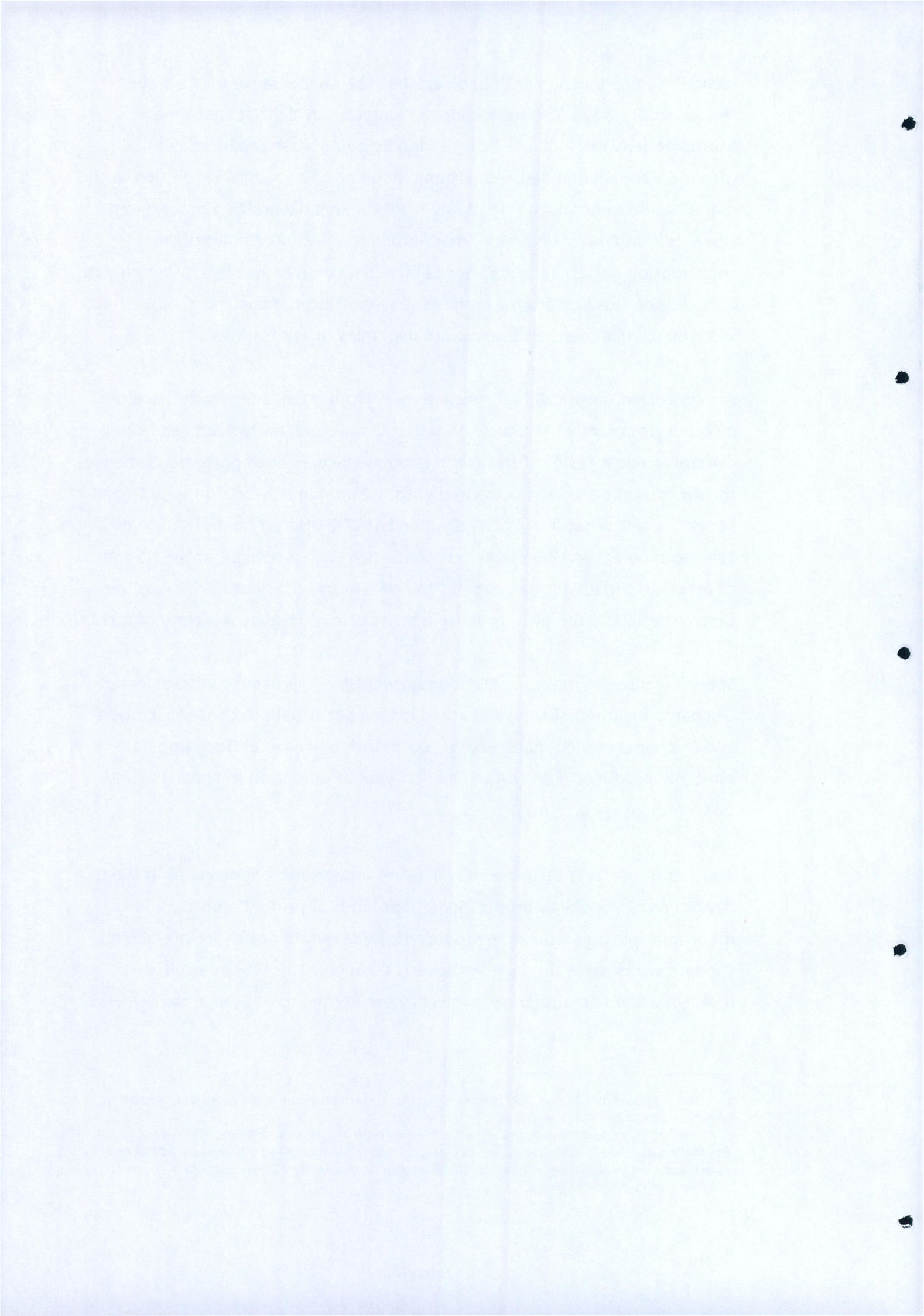
Art conceived specifically for mechanical reproduction, and which therefore incorporates exactly repeatable, visual or verbi-visual narratives, can be widely disseminated. A result of this is the enormously expanded potential audience for the multiple artwork, compared with the unique artwork. In 1959 Daniel Spoerri, a collaborator of Roth's, founded MAT Editions (Multiplication d'Art Transformable). MAT Editions was concerned with a critique of the notion of artists as the unique authors of their own work. This enterprise was the first systematic attempt to produce a series of multiples by a variety of artists.

Spoerri wanted to make multiples so he went to Paris in 1959 where he met Duchamp for the first time and asked him to participate in the MAT Edition and Duchamp replied "naturally".² Both Roth and Marcel Duchamp had multiples produced with MAT in its first year of operation in Spoerri's show *Collection 59*, (Plate 10).

Another interesting early business venture organised by Spoerri was the *Eat Art Gallery*.³ As well as producing various kinds of printed multiples, Roth made multiple objects and he produced a huge number of chocolate pieces, some of which were displayed in Spoerri's gallery. This was no ordinary gallery. As the name suggests, viewers were invited to eat the art which was

2. Daniel Spoerri met Marcel Duchamp in Max Ernst's apartment on the rue Mathurin. After that Spoerri and Duchamp met every year.

3. In 1963 Spoerri temporarily converted the Parisian Galerie J into a restaurant where he not only personally prepared the exclusive dishes, but also, on request, immortalised all remnants of the meal in an art work. A smaller room off the main dining room in the *Eat Art Gallery* contained a large number of Dieter Roth's chocolate pieces.



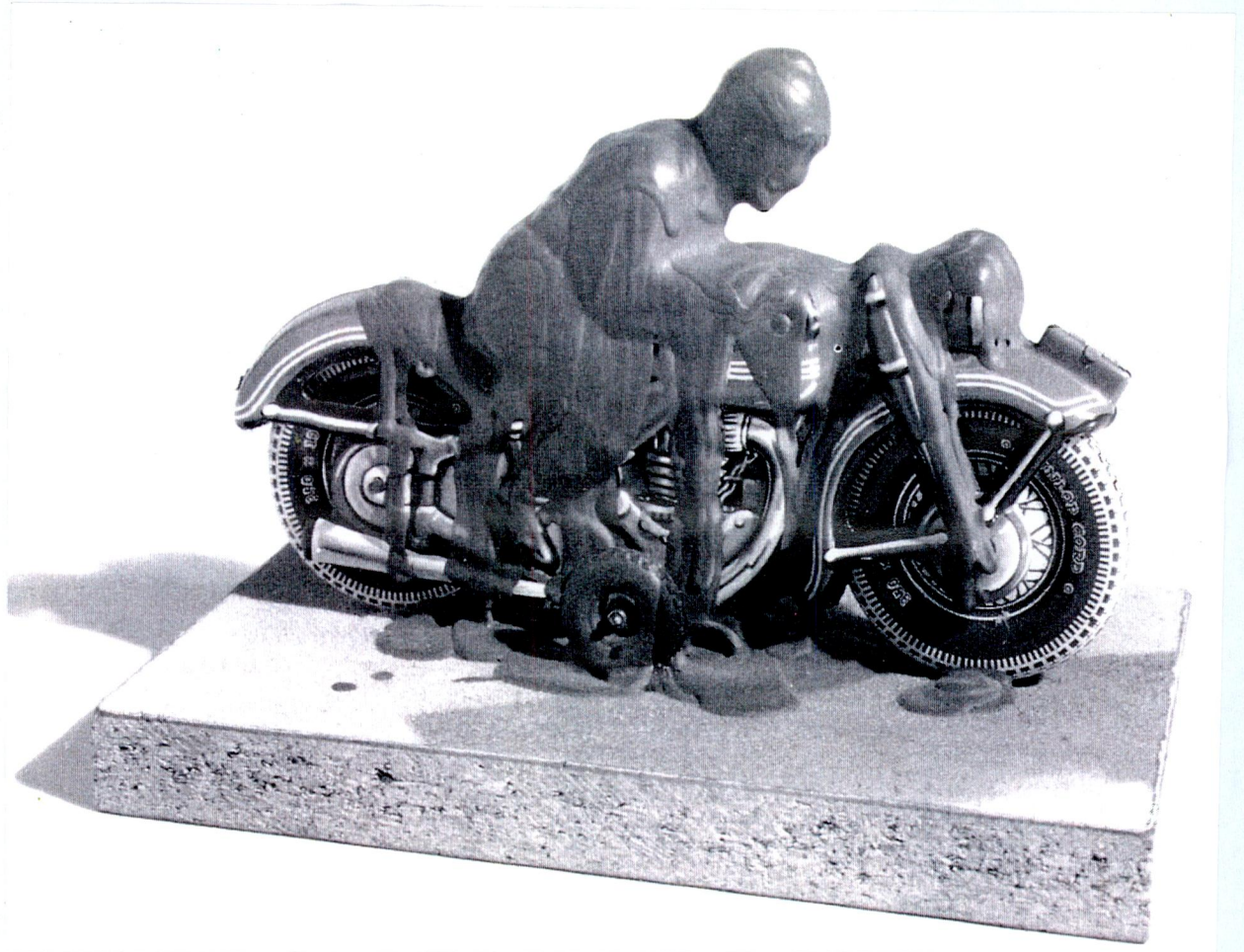


Plate 10; Dieter Roth, *Motorbike*, 1959. Produced by Daniel Spoerri's MAT Editions.

cooked by Spoerri himself. The meals were served to the 'customers' in the dining room, off which was a smaller room where Roth's chocolate pieces were displayed on plinths, (**Plate 11**). Roth's use of chocolate is more troubling than a simple reference to biography. Having been born and grown up in Germany and Switzerland, countries that produce and consume a large



amount of chocolate, there is an irony in Roth's use of chocolate. The theme which runs through most of his chocolate pieces is that of "death by drowning in chocolate". *Schokoladen-Objekt* (chocolate object, 1969), presents a little girl doll cast in chocolate. She has drowned in the fate of her own indulgence.

In the same year Roth produced an edition of 200 *SchokoladenZwerg* (chocolate gnome, 1969, **plate 12**). Each piece preserves a toy gnome, which has been drowned in chocolate, in a large glass specimen jar, of a kind in which one would find a foetus in formaldehyde. The *Schokoladen- Zwerg* are

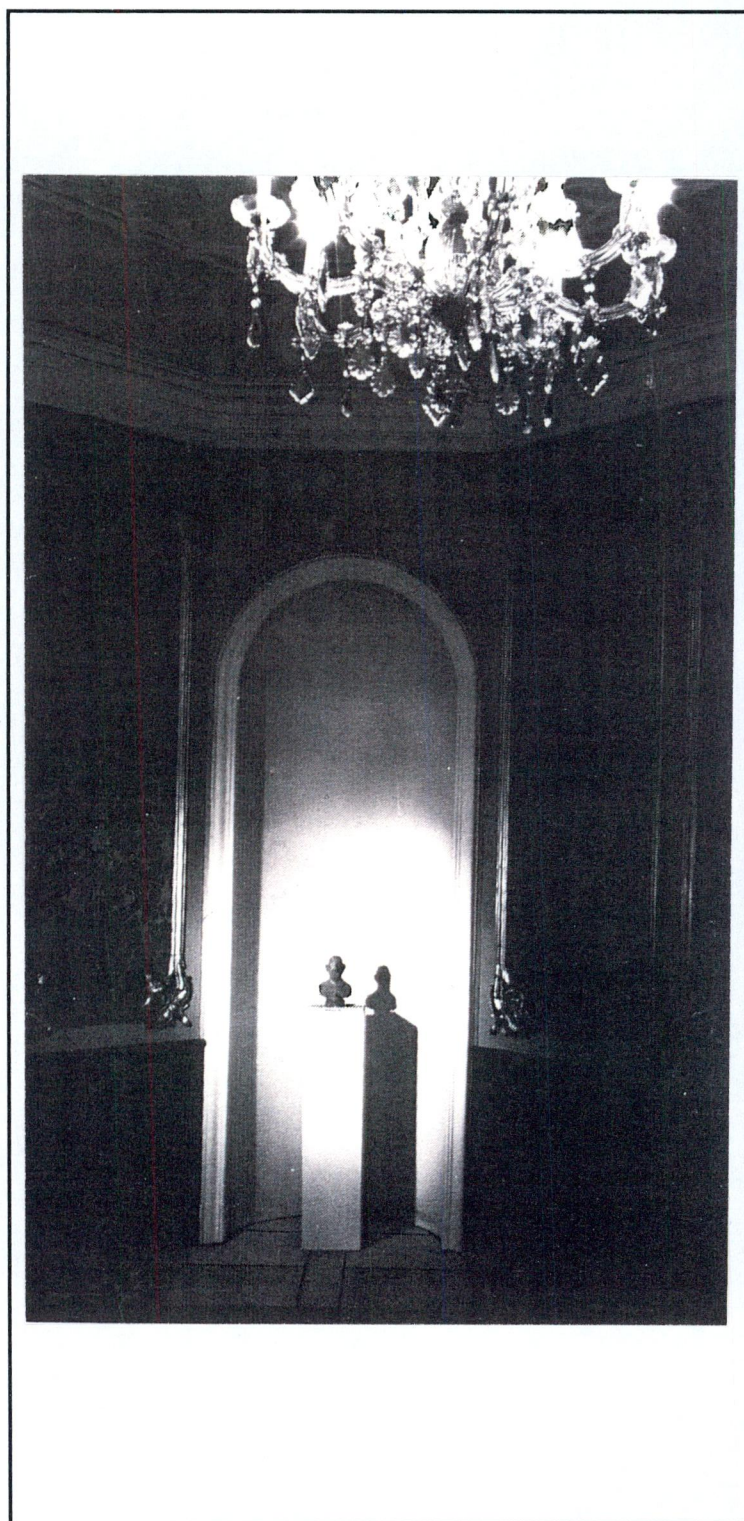


Plate 11; Dieter Roth, *Self Portrait* in chocolate, 1960. Made for Spoerri's *Eat Art Gallery*, but seen here in the University at Kiel.



neither non-art nor anti-art, but objects to be enjoyed and anticipate Damian Hirst's animals in formaldehyde and glass cases of the nineties. The feelings these gnomes evoke in the beholder's mind belong on the artistic level of a garden dwarf, but the fine coating of mould on the chocolate gives these gnomes an undertone of horror. *Portrait of the Artist as Bird Food Bust* (P.O.T.A.A.fvb, 1969, **Plate 13**), is a chocolate piece which parodies the status of the work of art in a mass consumption society, as well as the self portrait. Roth also made a large edition of these portraits, some of which were presented in the *Eat Art Gallery*.

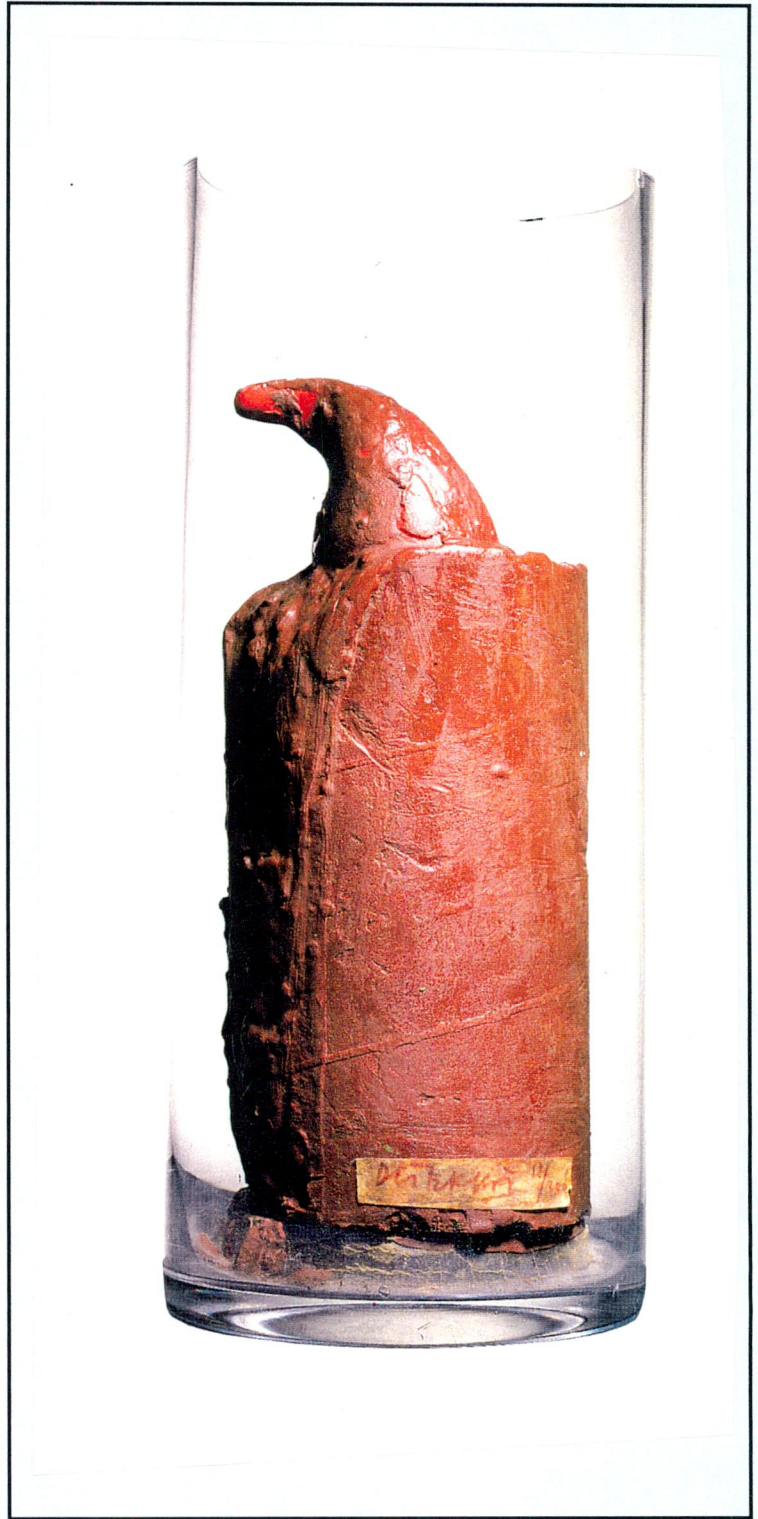


Plate 12; Dieter Roth, *SchokoladenZwerg*, 1969.



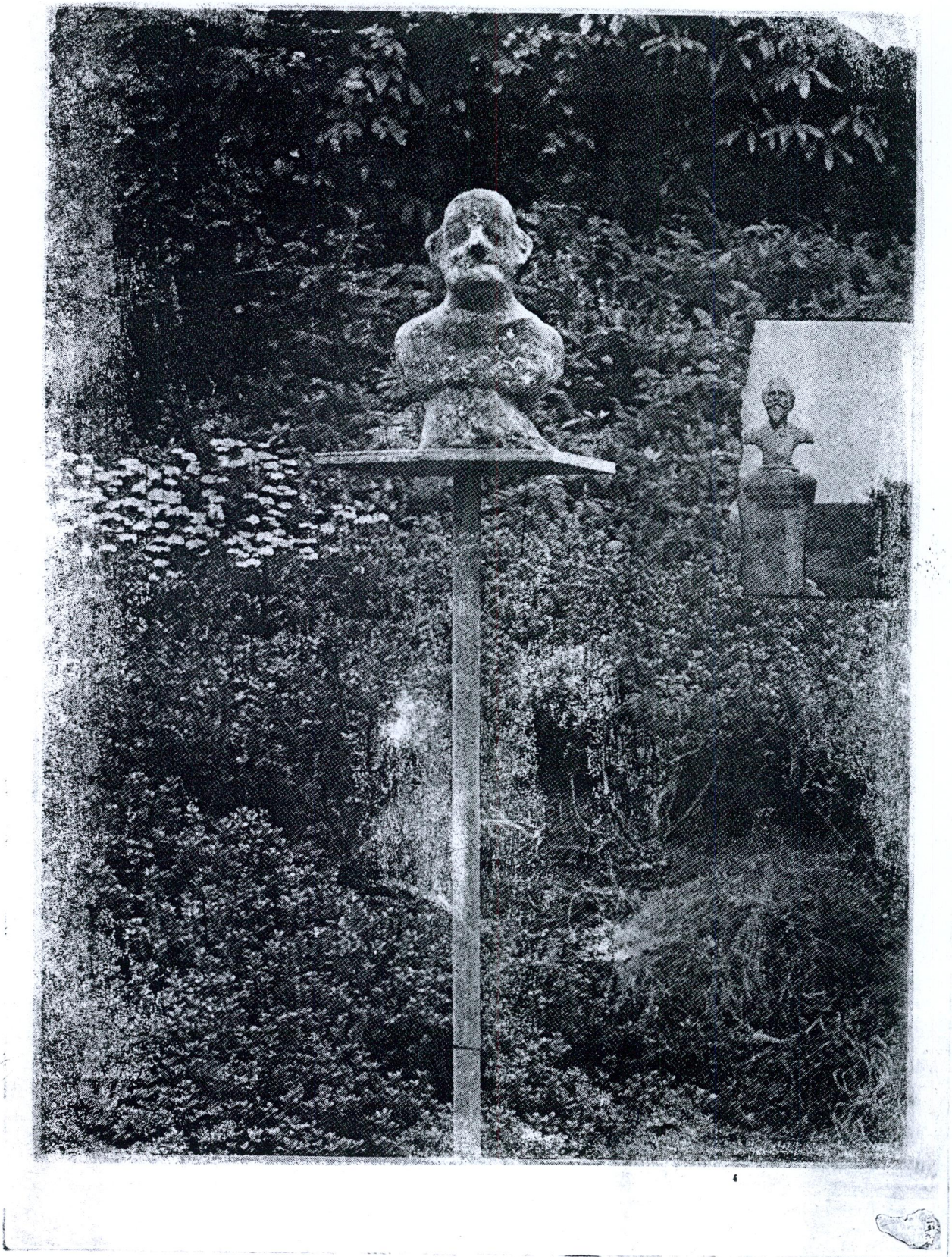


Plate 13; Dieter Roth, *P.O.T.A.A.vfb*, 1969.



Others were left outside in gardens as bird food, while others were shelved in a large tower structure and left to rot. Unlike Janine Antoni's self portraits in her piece *Lick and Lather* (1993) in brown and white chocolate, Roth's objects are not appealing and one would never lick them as Antonio does hers.⁴ Roth's portraits don't even resemble himself, one could imagine that they have been melted, licked or bitten into already to achieve this lack of representation.

Roth has exhibited other organic materials; faeces, milk, cheese, that change colour and odour, over the course of the exhibition. All of the found materials that Roth employs are transformed through decomposition, chance and process. This reflects a fascination with time which he shares with other conceptualist artists. Not only has Roth exhibited these organic materials in galleries, but he has also incorporated these materials into books. Sealed plastic bags are filled with cheese, urine, toilet roll, used cigarette boxes, scraps of paper and other excretions of daily life. In such things, Roth has said one finds so many "Menschengeist" - the essence of a person, (Roth, 1993, p. 7). The transient is, for Roth, his immediate experience of life. The stored material changes slowly with time and is suggestive of the book as archival domain which changes over time. The interesting tonal effects of various milk fats, oils and fluids in states of decay cannot be controlled, but the rhetoric of such a displacement of intention certainly can. As with much of Roth's work the aesthetic programme comes from a strong element of chance, and his mild steering of it. As with Beuys' fat sculptures, such as *Chair with Fat* (1963), the work is intended to rot. The decay and eventual disappearance of the artwork is intrinsic to the piece. Voluminous manuals prepared for scrupulous museum workers concerned with the upkeep of the works are not required.

4. Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather* (1993) is a piece consisting of 14 classical self-portrait busts cast directly from her body.



Since Spoerri's business ventures there has been a proliferation of business oriented art organisations. Another important precursor to business oriented art is Andy Warhol and in 1963 Warhol called his studio *The Factory*. Joseph Beuys founded the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in 1974. Walter Benjamin's discussion on the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1955) noted that the work of art itself began to be conceived, in essence, as designed for reproducibility. Few works are as inscribed to the core with this notion as those by Duchamp. *The Green Box* contains reflections on serial reproduction, ready-mades, originals, multiples, while his *Boite en Valise* went even further.⁵

The seemingly mundane objects Roth employs are not fine art oriented, or even intended especially for use as art. In a similar way to Beuys his material is always common place, easily found in everyday life. The unprivileged character of the material gains significance through Roth's talent for presentation. Like Beuys he had problems accepting the status of the precious art object. Although Roth produced a large number of multiples and objects he never produced such works under the banner of Fluxus. The book format had other attractions for both artists. It was an effective weapon against the uniqueness of the art object. The book, in relatively large editions, and with its factory-fabricated look, attracted notions of reproductibility and repetition.

Most of Roth's early multiples were books made in signed and numbered limited editions, a reflection of their printmaking origins. Roth has often demonstrated affinities with printmaking and objectmaking, whereas artists such as Ed Ruscha have generally produced books which have affinities with photography and documentation. Roth's works eventually came to embrace quantity over quality. The reproductions were exactly the way he wanted them - not very good. Roth achieved this 'lack' of quality by arranging variants in the press run, (**Plate 14**). The different versions were then numbered, as if they were gallery prints. With this process Roth is acknowledging, rather than denying, offset photographic accuracy by

5. *Boite en Valise* comprises of all of Duchamp's pieces made in miniature (one third of the actual size) and presented in a suitcase. Each case contained a box of sixty-nine items and copies were designed in a standard series of 300 and a deluxe series of 20.



Plate 14; Dieter Roth, *Schnellprezen*, 1974.



retaining all of its defects in the final product.

Similarly, Roth's work in the book format is reliant on the printing process, with each work dependent on some form of mechanical reproduction. A large number of his books are made in, and based on, the printing process, existing in no other form. Collaborating with Hansjörg Mayer in the late sixties Roth began to republish his earlier work in a standard format and in editions of at least 1,000 copies, thus bringing them out of the limited edition framework and into the multiple book art arena. Some of the volumes in the *Gesammelte Werke Band* (Collected Works), recreated unique bookworks as multiples. Others effectively transmuted earlier works into new bookworks. Others functioned as documentation. In some cases the subject matter went through several metamorphoses before publication in the *Collected Works*.

Gesammelte Werke Band 3 (1960) is one such book that is the record of its own production since each page is produced through over printing the negative. Between 1971 and 1979 Roth produced forty books in the *Gesammelte Werke Band* (**Plate 15, 16**). Each of the editions was given its own special binding designed by Roth. These special bindings made each volume into a book object, as the cover is the frame for the enclosed work of art, while also being the label that identifies it.

Multiple bookworks, as opposed to the unique book work, are more expressive of the nature, and indeed the purpose of the book. Another activity that was concurrent with the media explosion of the sixties was the production of systemic book multiples. These became most visible during the conceptual movement in North America and Europe. The term systematic refers to those books that take as their subject matter the very format and system of the book. Some conceptual artists who produced books in the late sixties used the paginal format as a readily available means to present their ideas, often to disseminate information in a re-contextualised manner. There were others, such as Hanne Darboven, Sol leWitt, Laurence Wiener and Bernd and Hilda Becher who saw the book more in terms of a structure. They used the format as a means for presenting original work, emphasising systems designed specifically to be viewed through the turning of pages. Roth's use of systems is explicit. In other words, the focus of his books is upon how the language paradigm works in relation to the visual system, the latter being either

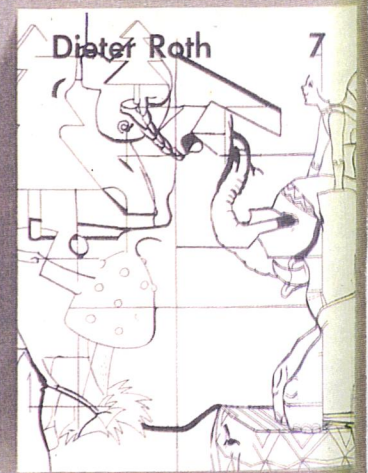
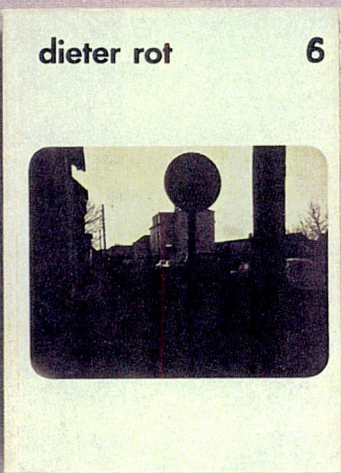
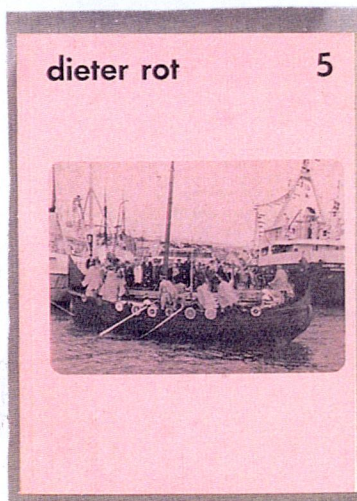
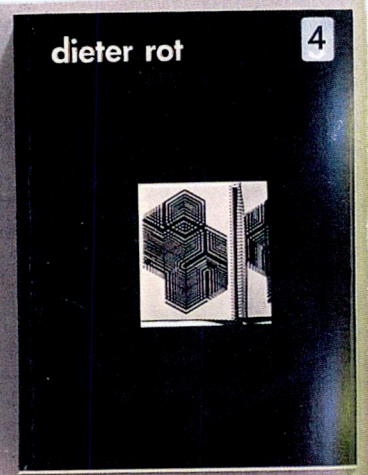
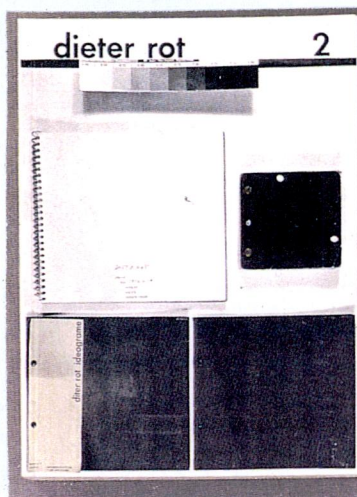
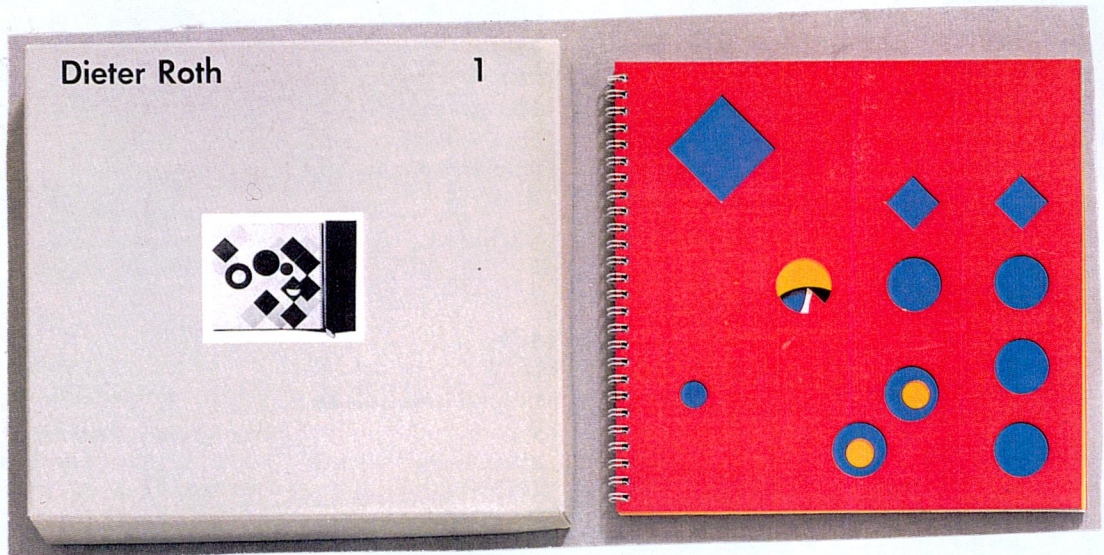
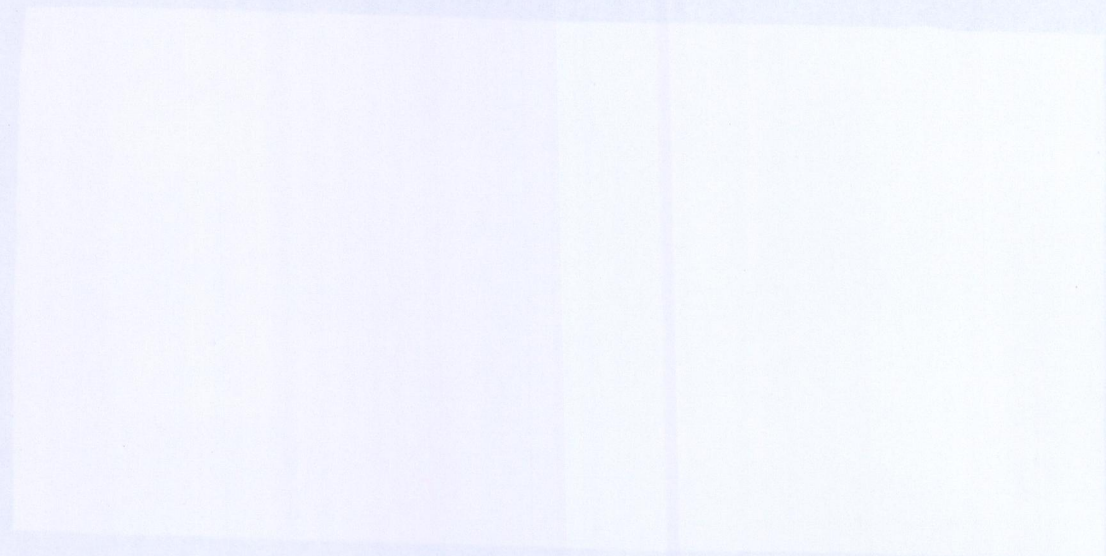


Plate 15; Dieter Roth, *Gesammelte Werke Band 1-7, 1976 - 1985*.



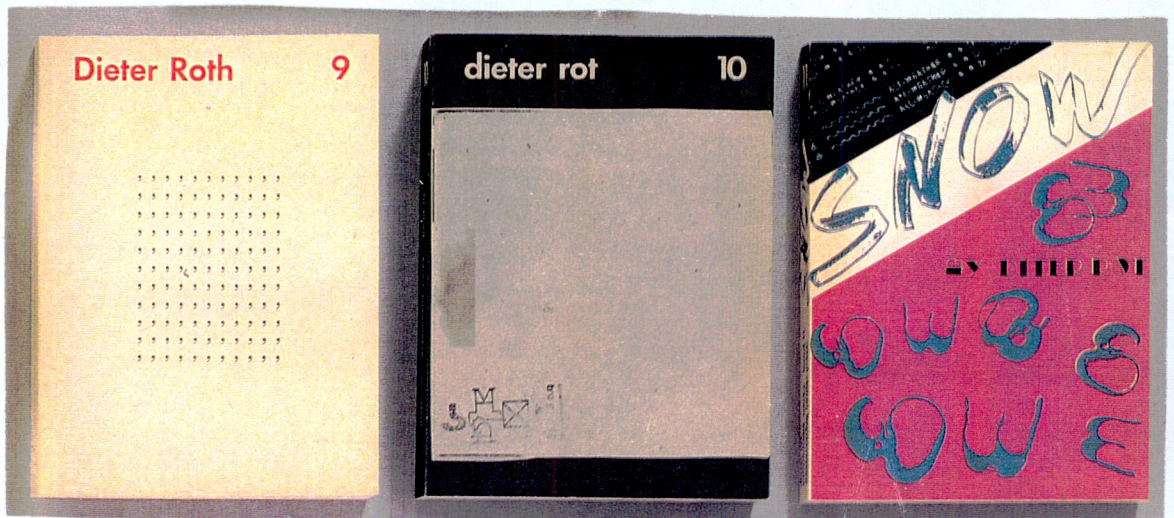
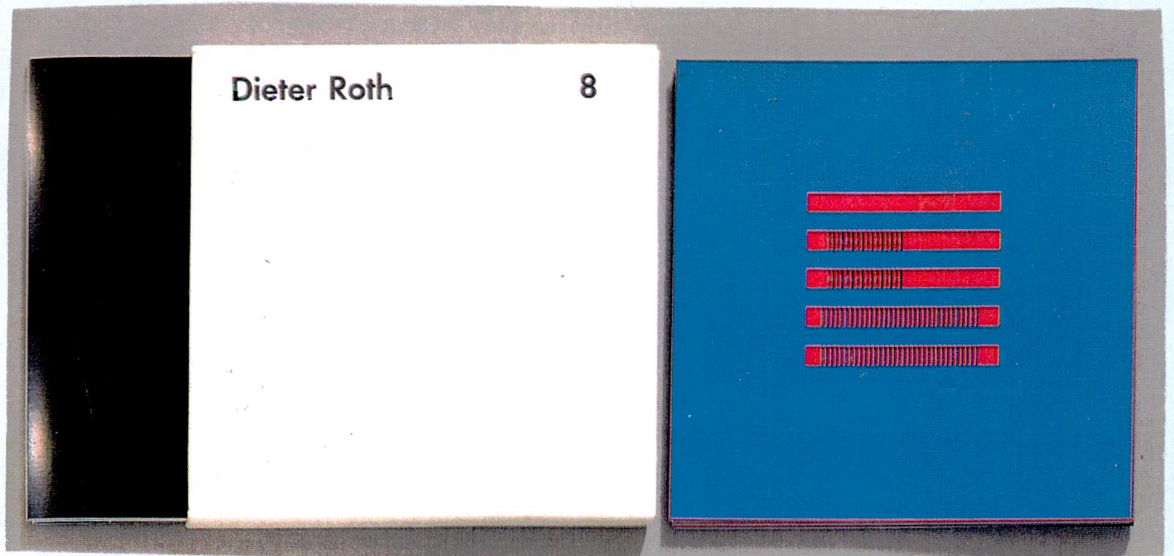
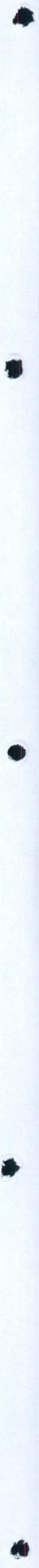


Plate 16; Dieter Roth, *Gesamelte Werke Band 8 -13*, 1976 - 1985.



serial or sequential. The play on systems in artists' books is a mediumistic as well as a conceptual concern. Attention is focused upon the book as object - a direct manifestation derived from a given set of parameters. Systems set forth in artist's books develop from artists' concepts, which, in turn, evolve from a confluence of images, ideas, pre-determined constructs, and linguistic propositions.

More than thirtyfive years ago Roth said that "...instead of showing quality, surprising quality, we show quantity, surprising quantity".⁶ He viewed advertising's concept of "quality" as a subtle method of increasing quantity and hence profit and power. While many publishing companies fight for position and attention with elaborate displays of their 'quality' products, Roth seeks a more unfinished approach. Roth created art dependent on the book form, making the book into an art object very early on, moving in the direction of making it more and more accessible, rather than less. Some of his experiments with the book form have also led him towards book objects. For example his *Literaturwürst* or literature sausage (1961, **plate 17**), which was a sausage skin casing filled with cut up newspaper and works by writers that he disliked, mixed with water, gelatine or lard, and spices, was later produced as a multiple. *LiteraturWurst* predates John Latham's infamous regurgitation of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Language* (1965).⁷ *LiteraturWurst* participates in a significant moment in the development of Roth's practice - the abandonment of the investigation of form in favour of emphasis on the conceptual basis of art production.

With *Literaturwürst* Roth broke away from his geometric style and began to work with found printed material. *Bok 3a*, *Bok 3b*, *Bok 3c* and *Bok 3d* are similar to *Literaturwürst* in that they are made of, respectively, pages from newspapers, comics, printers run-up sheets and children's colouring books,

6. Roth is quoted in *Artforum*. January 1988, page 129, Anne Krauter review of a Dieter Roth exhibition in Frankfurt. (translated from the German by Charles Miller.)

7. Latham's piece was titled *Still and Chew*. Having checked Greenberg's book *Art and Language* (1965) out from the library in St. Martins School of Art in London he invited a group of friends over. They proceeded to rip pages out of the book, chew them and drop the masticated paper into a bottle of acid which Latham returned to the library.

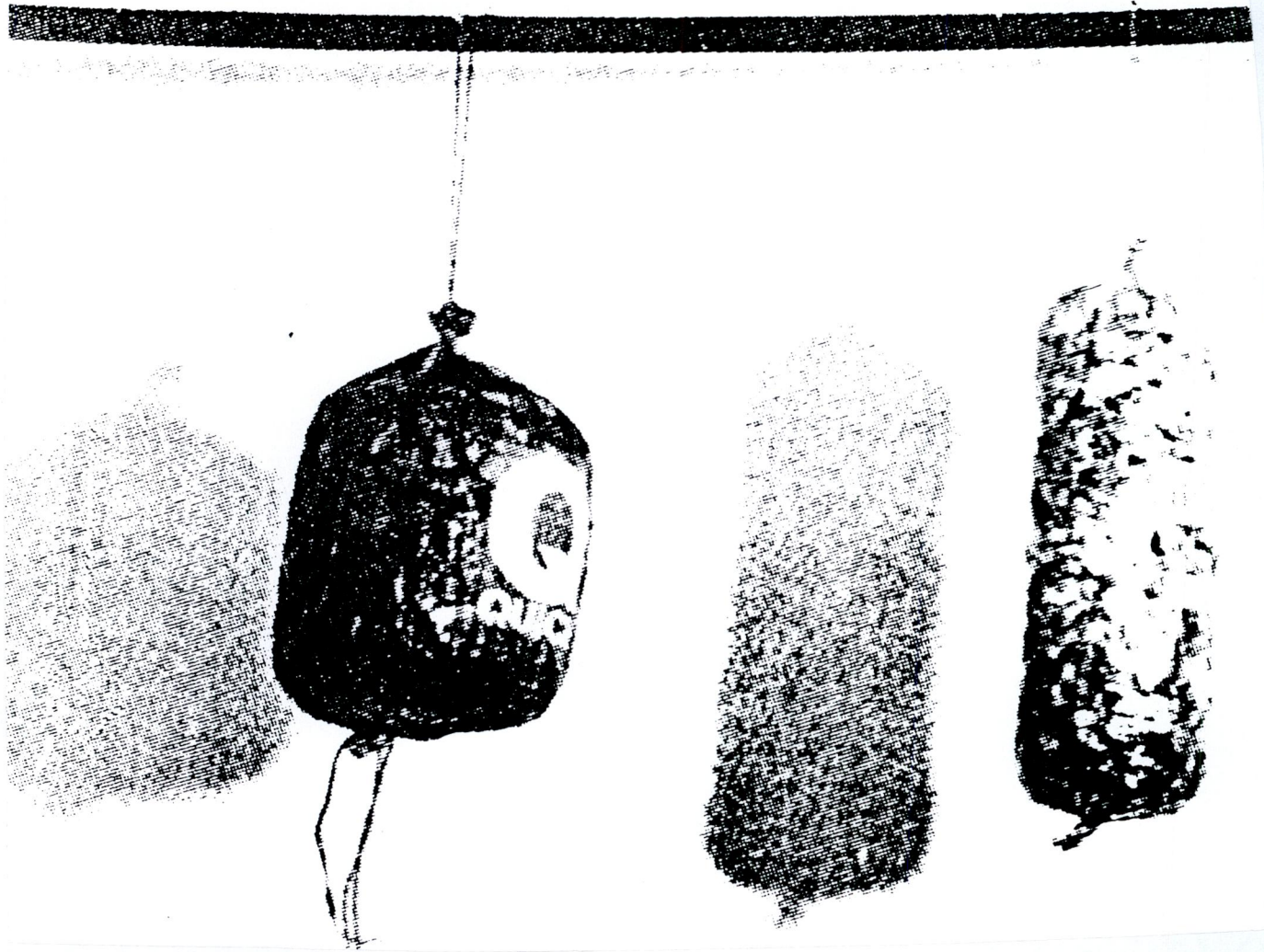


Plate 17; Dieter Roth, *LiteraturWurst*, 1961.

which were simply cut into uniform sized blocks and given an adhesive binding. They all measure approximately 20 x 20 cms and echo the *Daily Mirror Book*. Roth's engagement with found materials is conspicuous in these books and with the later rubbish pieces and installation in Holderbank, Switzerland the concept is developed.

Since the 1950s we have witnessed analogous investigations into the relationships between Fine Art and popular culture. The return of the Dadaist readymade contests the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and the expressionist artist through an embrace of everyday objects.



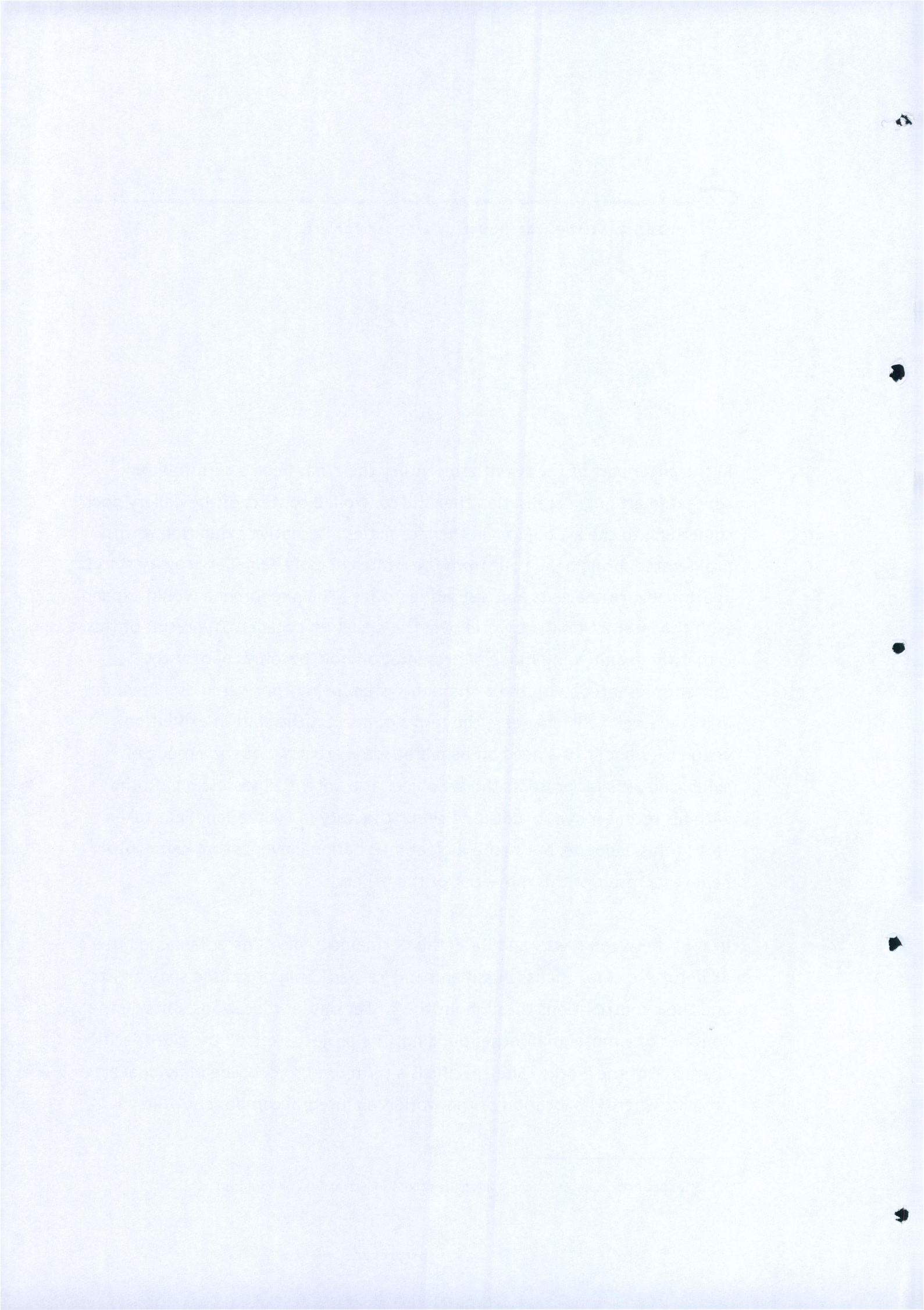
4

Holderbank, or the warehouse as a house for art

In the latter part of the twentieth century there has been a turn toward context in art and a realisation that the controlled context of the gallery does something to the art object. In the late sixties alternative exhibition forms proliferated, bringing art out from the white cube of the gallery to city streets apartments, restaurants and disused factories. The phenomena would expand with the international art world over the next two decades. The result of this is that the manner and mode of presentation now becomes part of the content presented, with the exhibition system being considered as a medium in its own right. By changing the terms of display, the shift in exhibition venue is symbolic of a need on behalf of some artists to query a mode of exhibiting art that presents the art object as a potential possession. Roth, with his recent move to a disused cement factory in Switzerland, has taken part in this dialogue, but first a look at international events that came into being as a result of this move out of the gallery.

In 1987, between Kassel and Basel the German city of Münster launched the *Sculptor Projekte*. Klaus Bussmann and Kaspar König organised sixty artists and their contributions throughout the city at outdoor locations, outside the confines of a museum or other building. The project stressed the site-specific character of the works. Site-specific is a term used to describe individual art projects where the location of the work is an integral component of its

1. Site-specificity connotes the inseparability of location in relation to signification.



meaning. Since the eighties 'sites' have also been applied to exhibitions, and a number of works make reference to, or are inspired by, the site where they are shown.¹ In 1986 Ghent, located between Basel and Venice, was host to *Chambres d'Amis* which was organised by Jan Hoet. Fifty artists were invited to work in one or more rooms in private apartments which were left at their disposal. Both events sought city venues outside confines of the museum. Each stressed the site-specific character of the works, disdaining the ready-to-wear and requiring the spectator to move - to move literally in space.

Similarly the *Documenta*, which began in Kassel, Germany 42 years ago, replaces the museum visit with a series of itineraries throughout the city. The viewer is ever-ready with map in hand (**Plate 18**).² Catherine David, curator of the 1997 *Documenta X*, described her exhibition space as a "montage... similar to a book" and the accompanying *Documenta* book as "...an exhibition space" (David, 1997, page 46). This similarity between the space of a book and that of an exhibition can be seen in any number of installations and site-specific works. That is the reader, or spectator, can move through them at any speed, or in any direction they like, spending more time on one element than another, drawing their own conclusions.

It is interesting that artists' books have, since the eighties, been travelling between libraries and galleries. As the book has outgrown the library, it is carried in new dimensions, but has yet to fit in somewhere else. Museums get stuck as they consider ways of treating artists' books - as objects, prints or monographs for relegation to library stacks. At the same time that they have difficulty fitting the artist's book in, the installation becomes a fully fledged artistic medium, also refusing to fit comfortably in either galleries or museums.³

^{2.} Arnold Bode originally planned the *Documenta* as a one-off event. Out of that unique event grew a tradition. The 1997 *Documenta X* consists of three parts. An art exhibition spread out in various venues; 100 days of lectures by a wide range of artists, writers and philosophers, and finally, the *Book* - an 830 page *Odyssey* of theoretical essays, literary texts, and wide-ranging imagery. (There was also a series of film, television, internet and radio projects). Catherine David, the Canadian curator, considers the three parts of her *Documenta* equally important.

^{3.} Installation lies somewhere between art and architecture, with the conditions for creating installations not identical with those for creating art.

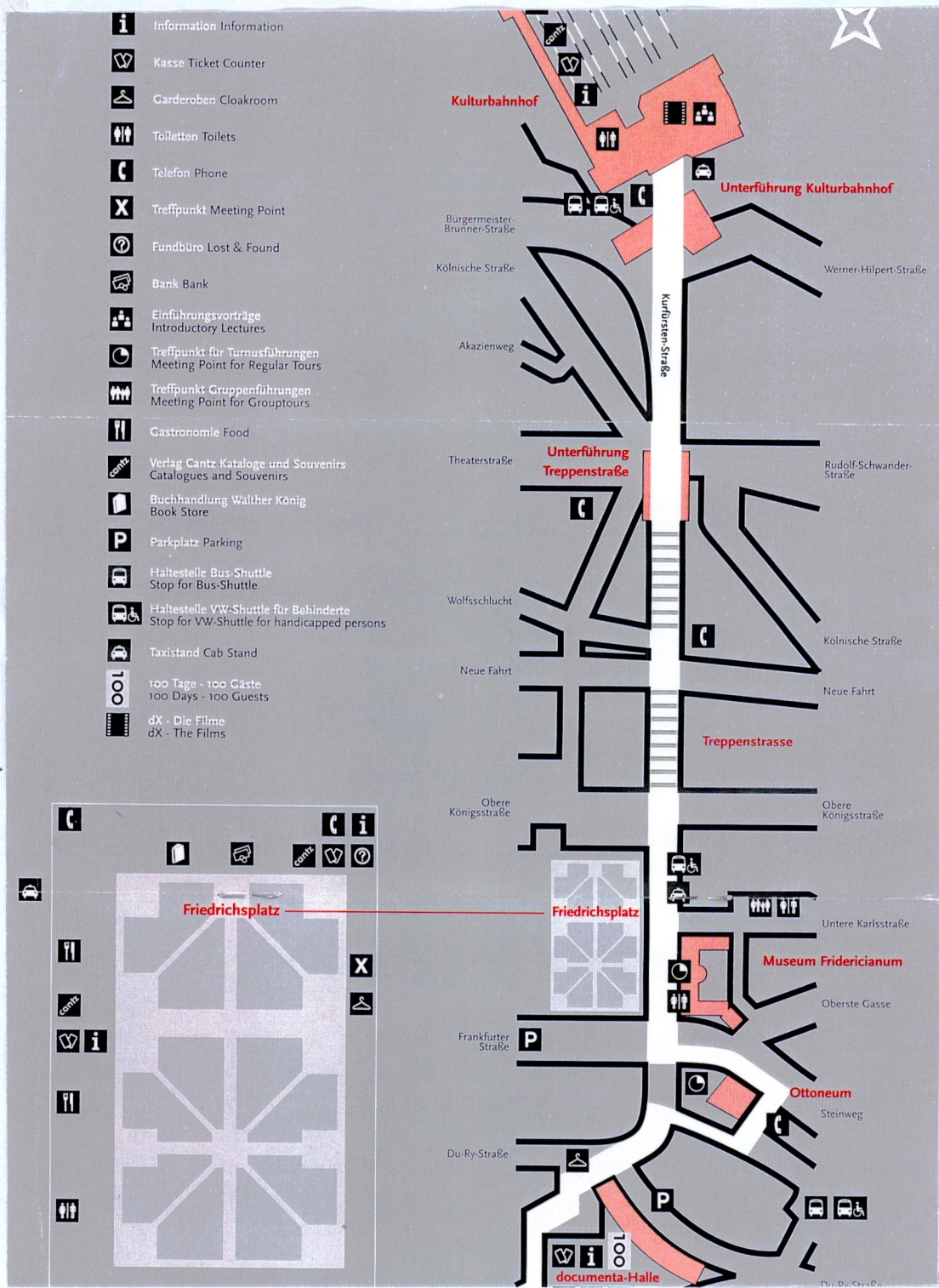


Plate 18; Map of the Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, 1997.



The tradition of artists' books also includes objects that specifically exploit the book "form" but do not necessarily include text. These cannot be adequately displayed in a museum or gallery context in any traditional manner as they are completed by the viewer in ways that static works of art are not, requiring an involvement that is literally "hands on". Then the museum or gallery faces the dilemma of displaying a format designed to sit quietly upon a shelf.

Most of the time books are displayed flat, and they really aren't flat. Their kinetic qualities are lost because you can't pick them up, open them and turn the pages. These are some of the inherent problems in displaying the work. Roth tackled this head on with his show in the René Block Galerie in Paris (1970). By attaching the books to chains which were hung from the ceiling Roth enabled the reader to participate naturally with the work, that is to read through the pages.

One form of installation that an artist has no, or very little, control over is the display of their work in private collections. Dieter Roth is a prominent figure in many, such as The Archiv Söhm (Söhm Archive) of the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, which is a museum within a museum.⁴ This carefully realised collection of unica, multiples, books, journals and other printed material documents the most important experiments and developments in the art of the sixties, like Fluxus, Happenings, Wiener Aktionismus, Concrete poetry, and other related movements. It was all to be found in the private home of Hans Söhm who was a dentist in Markgröningen. One entire room was dedicated to the work of Dieter Roth (**Plate 19**). It contained a collection of books, multiples, sculptural artworks and an extended version of *LiteraturWurst* consisting of twenty literature sausages attached to a wooden frame.

The last phase in Roth's writing, that of the diaries, began with Roth's contribution to the Venice Biennale in 1982.⁵ He was invited to make

4. Söhm Archiv is the biggest of its kind, but not the only one. Jean Brown lived in Tyngham, Massachusetts. Her interests were; multiples and periodicals, concrete poetry, the Something Else Press, Hansjörg Mayer, Fluxus and happenings and contained many works by both Duchamp and Roth.
5. Although Roth has always written diaries it was not until 1982, with his publication for the Venice Biennale, that they became artworks in their own right rather than sketches and notes for the finished pieces, be they books, sculptural works, or paintings.





Plate 19; The Dieter Roth room in Markgröningen, Germany.

something for the Swiss pavillion and decided to write a diary about the preparation. The art documentation, which contained polaroids and personal notes on the passing days, was published and sold at the Biennale. There is a direct link between this and other diaries, including Roth's recent installation at Holderbank.

Through these diaries and his bookworks Roth began to create installations. These were really nothing more than walk-in books, the space acting as pages which the viewer moved through. Even in an earlier show entitled *Smelly Cheese, a Race*, (1975), we see within the gallery the treatment of the space as an area primed for engaging with. Roth reflects on the object as a process to directly engage in through the very act of its creation and the trace that this



act leaves. The process was realised in an installation in which Roth filled forty suitcases with blue cheese which he then displayed on the floor of the gallery. The walls and floor of the gallery that contain, house and sanctify the artwork literally support the making and reception of *Smelly Cheese, a Race* as Roth collapsed process into reception. The result was a dynamic abstraction that traces the maturation of the cheese over the time of the exhibition and left the literary documentation of the installation as trace and result of the dual creation and reception of art as process. The result of this process was to lead to the closure of the gallery when the smell and the flies became unbearable.

Although Roth developed his bookworks into multiples, and later installations the largest and most all inclusive is in Holderbank. Holderbank is a cement factory in Switzerland, situated in the countryside between Brugg and Aarus (**plate 20**). In 1981 Derrick Widmer, the director of management services at Holderbank, offered Roth the disused factory building for use as a studio and



Plate 20; Exterior of Dieter Roth's studio in Holderbank, Switzerland.

1998

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exhibition space.⁶ What emerged from the endeavour is perhaps the largest Roth-Opus of all. A total-theatre of over 500 quadratmeters, an assemblage of pictures, sculptures, and ephemeral materials. With the help of his son Björn, Roth showed this live-in collection in Holderbank in 1983, 1987 and 1992. The phenomenon of the installation raises the interest in the ephemeral object to one of obsession. Every element of the installation which runs riot in the disused cement factory is a leftover from Roth's life outside the factory. Objects made twenty years ago sit rotting on specially constructed shelves.



Plate 21; Dieter Roth, *SelbstTürm*, 1970 - 1996.

⁶. For a survey of the conversion of the Holderbank factory see the autumn 1993 edition of *Du*, pp 7-11.



The self portraits in chocolate are piled high on the *SelbstTürm* (**Plate 21**) . Collected remnants from daily life are sorted and all of the flat objects are displayed in sealed plastic folders. This *Sammlung Flachen Abfall* (collected flat objects, **plate 22 , 23**) sits on a large wooden table in one corner of the large studio space, the plastic folders becoming pages of a textless book. Everything has been collected and 'bagged'. The excrements of daily life sit within the pages. The residues of daily life outside the walls of the museum are put into play in Roth's *Sammlung Flachen Abfall*. Roth subtly refers to museological display in his transparent display case, as it becomes a container for remnants of the mass-produced consumer culture of the west.



Plate 22; Dieter Roth, individual pages from *Sammlung Flachen Abfall*.

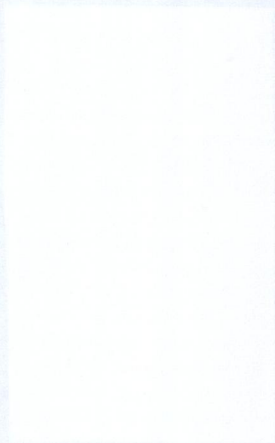




Plate 23; Dieter Roth, installation view of *Sammlung Flächen Abfall*, 1976 - 1996.



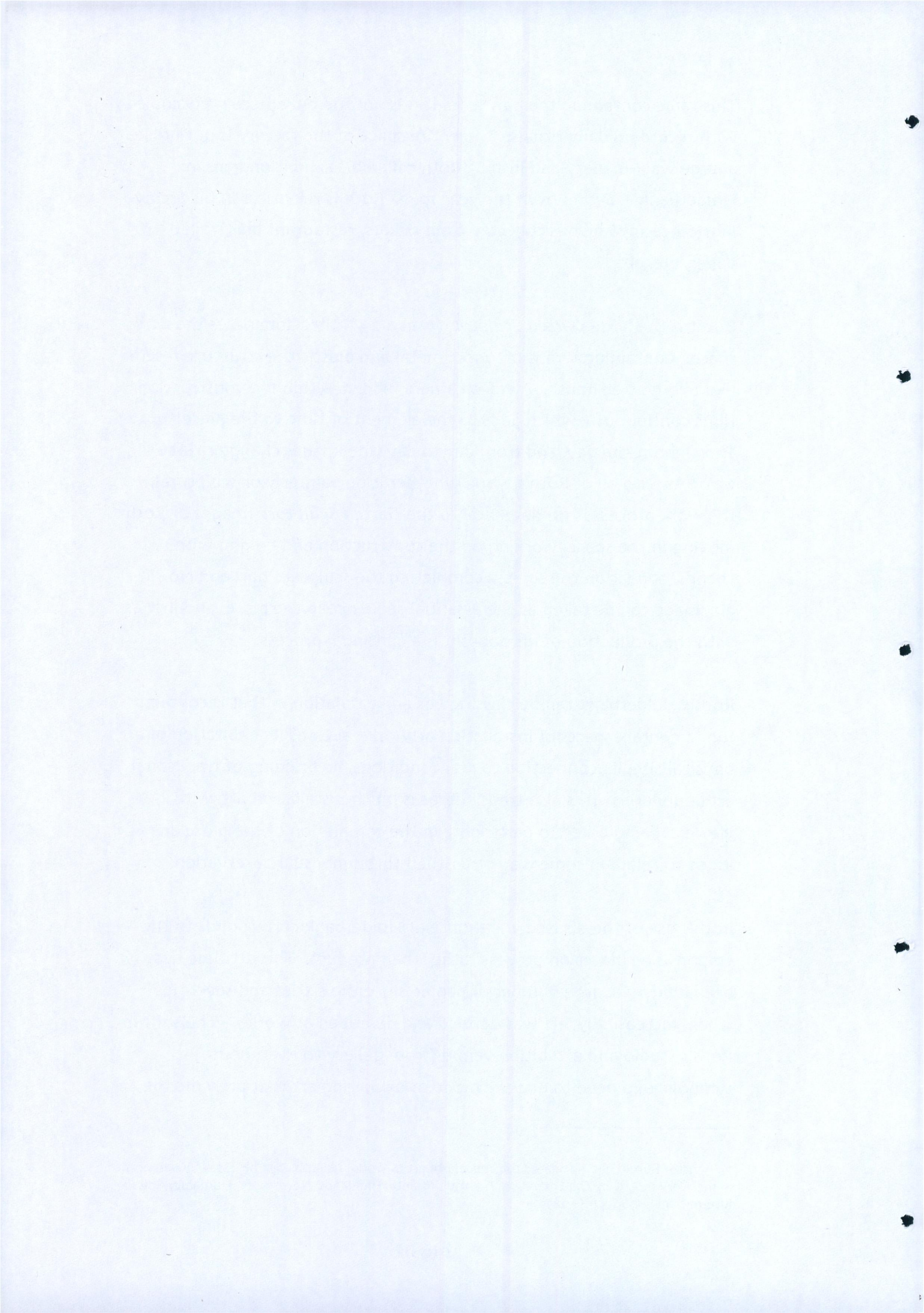
This table containing the plastic folders is not the only piece preoccupied with recording daily rituals. The entire space of the factory is not unlike a large walk-in diary and in 1983 Roth called his exhibition here in Holderbank *A Diary: from the year 1982*. Roth is relentless in his archiving. Since 1976 he has collected train tickets, restaurant bills, toilet paper, etc. etc.

But it is the large *Garten Sculptor* (plate 24) that dominates the space. Containing scraps of wood, metal and plastic the structure resembles a large tree house. A video camera hidden within the construction films continuously which adds to the element of time to the piece. Throughout the day, and from day to day, the images change (plate 25). As with all of Roth's work, whether it be painterly or sculptural, the work process is fundamental to the *Garten Sculptor*. Images of Roth moving in the space, working on the construction and talking with friends, appear on the screen, completing the sculpture garden. No single image can be taken as the essential sequence in the piece, and just as with the production of his books it is a continual process.

Roth's Holderbank can be classified as an installation in that it contains fundamental aspects of installation artworks, such as its habitation of a physical site, its connection to real conditions, its bridging of traditional art boundaries. It is also transient, as is much installation art, with viewers being asked to participate in the completion of the piece and asked to relate in some way other than through visual observation.

Roth's use of the disused warehouse at Holderbank corresponds to the emphasis he places on process rather than product. This attitude has been held by a large number of people since the sixties and seventies when, increasingly, art was defined and described as work.⁷ The shift in Roth's studio and exhibition venue (from gallery to warehouse) is symbolic of a need to query a mode of exhibiting art that presents the

7. Victor Burgin has elucidated the concept of art as work in length. See his essay "Modernism in the work of Art" in *The End of Art Theory*. (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, Humanity Press International, 1986, pp 1 - 28)



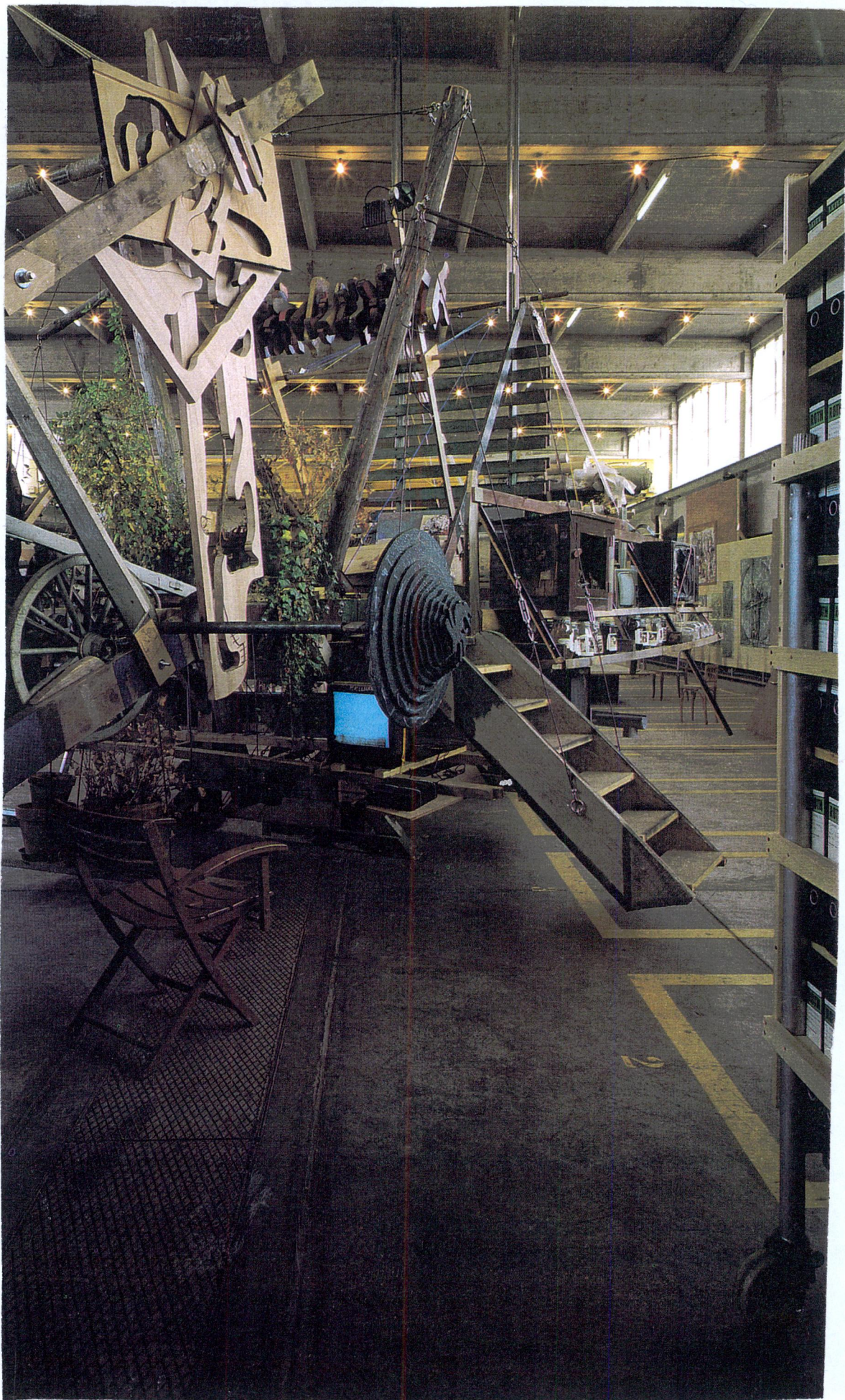


Plate 24; Dieter Roth, installation view of *Garten Sculptor*. 1996.





Plate 25; Dieter Roth, detail of *Garten Sculptor*, 1996.



art object as a potential possession. Holderbank is not designed to be sold and there is no way for someone to purchase it or its contents. This directly confronts and stands as a convincing alternative to the museum as the institution which confers value, both cultural and monetary, on works of art. In Holderbank art is running wild. Chaos becomes pictures, or does it? Chaos is the disguise that Roth uses. There is a system of order underlying it all. This ordering system is based on decisions, for example to collect the rubbish everyday. The artist employs decisions, and often they have chaotic results. By changing the terms of display, as Roth has done here, there is the possibility of indicating that art exists in a wider variety of social contexts and has meanings other than the purely monetary.



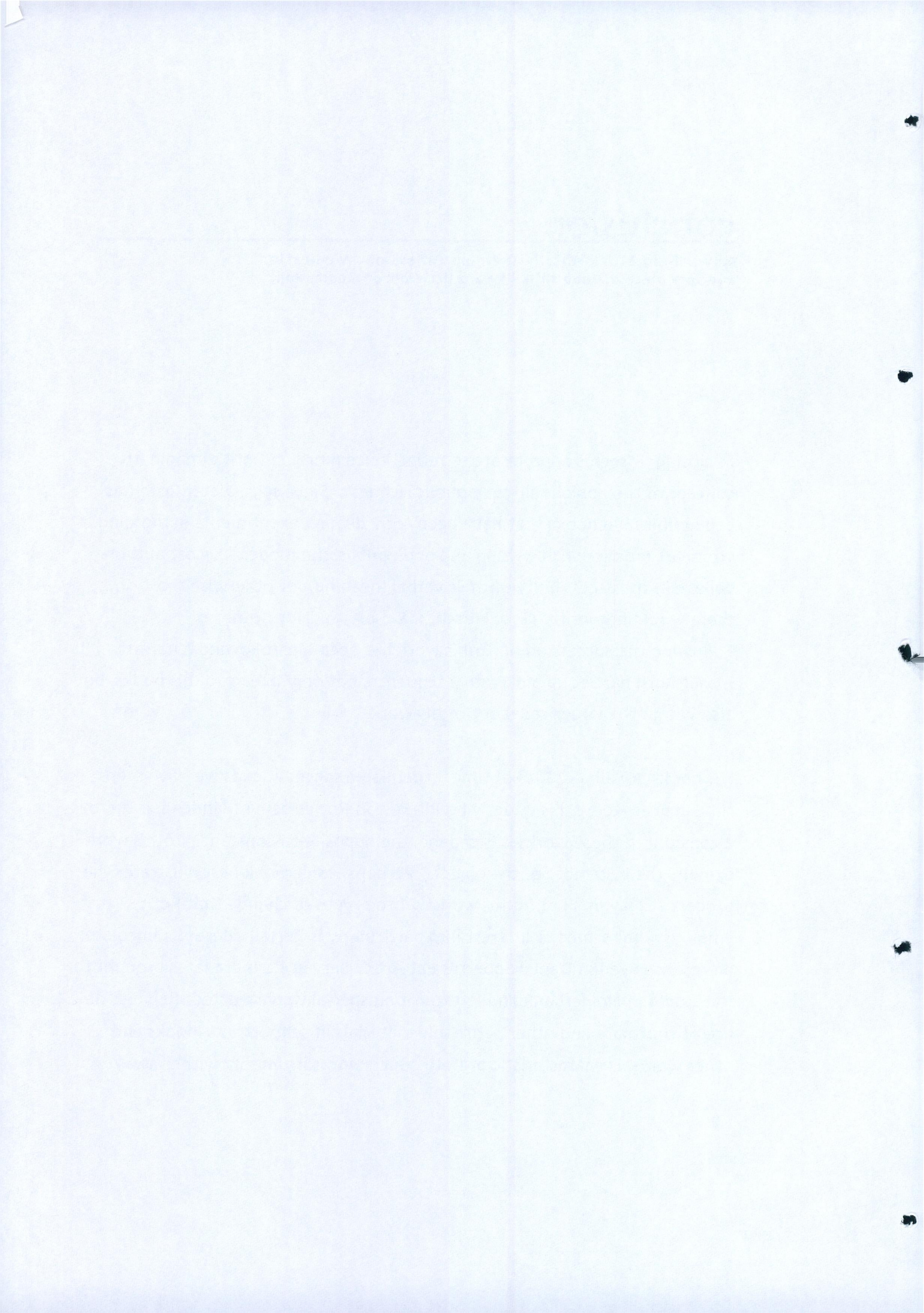
conclusion

so wird ein Stück Abfall zu einem Anlass der Meditation.
and so a piece of rubbish is like a little bit of meditation.

In closing, it seems appropriate to reflect once more on Roth's imaginative concept of the book in all its symbolic richness. Since 1955 Dieter Roth has been publishing books that have been truly distinct experiments in merging visual art practice with writing and book publishing modes. "Most authors believe in the accessibility of their verbal meaning, for otherwise most of them would not write" (E.D. Hirsch, 1984, p.353). Not Roth.

Following the succession of Roth's work has been like following a narrative. It is as if Roth has set up a narrative sequence, not only in each of his books, but also within the larger collective of his work.

His books are all passages of time, expandable spaces and, as we have seen, time appears to be this underlying interest in Roth's oeuvre. Indeed, if there is a constant in these works it is change, the opposite to constant. Roth's work exploits the instability of the object. Perhaps Holderbank best illustrates the process at play in all of Roth's work. Of the types of change that Roth employs what seems to interest him particularly is Zerfall - decay. Chocolate pieces displayed in Daniel Spoerri's Eat Art Gallery in Paris are later brought to the studio in Holderbank and left to rot on specially constructed shelves. The use of chocolate and other perishable materials in selfportraits, books and other works, is characteristic of Roth. Such works inevitably wither away.



Everything is recorded, down to the drained coffee grains and coffee filter. Everything that he finds in the world, is archived and transformed. Everything changes and from old results new ones emerge. Recording, 'diarying' and archiving everything comes naturally to Roth. He picks up the discarded detritus of our society and reintegrates it into an artwork which cleverly manipulates their inherent ambiguities, leaving us to read them if we can, or to ponder the all-too-short time frame in which objects can become obsolete or misunderstood. His found objects disregard the 'old order' of their original meanings, being transformed into a kind of running commentary, both socio-political, as with the self portraits, and humorous, as with the chocolate gnomes.

Roth makes the work of art appear to be similar to non-art objects by employing non-art objects and attacks the notion of aesthetic qualities. Not only are representation, colour, and form radically reduced, but aesthetic pleasure itself is withdrawn. It's not just the linguistic nature of art that is at the core of Roth's work, but also the simplification of procedures of production. It's the de-aestheticisation. It's the decentering of the artist.

Artist's books are often perceived as exemplifying the spirit of experimentation and rebellion which characterised the sixties and seventies, but Roth's work shows that the book as art form is still in use today.

Perhaps it is best to leave the last words to Dieter Roth;

The sheet on which this text is being written in fair hand has a sheep liver sausage stain on the front side which has oozed through to the back side.

ok?

y'rs tr'ly, Dieter Roth

basel, 7. 11. 97

(letter to the author from Dieter Roth)



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