

## Conservation of Dieter Roth's *Snow*

### ABSTRACT

Throughout his career, Swiss-German artist Dieter Roth employed the book format as a key element of his work. Defining "book" as "a community of like-minded things," Roth stretched and challenged conventional ideas about the nature of artists' books, employing new formats and techniques to expand the book beyond its traditional boundaries.

In 1964, Roth began a residency at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, with the intention of creating a limited-edition artist's book. Over the course of three months, he produced about 6,000 drawings, prints, photographs, and notes, binding several hundred of them into a volume that he intended to photograph and reprint as a paperback. The ill-fated edition was never produced. In the 1970s, Roth constructed a table and two chairs to house and display the book, which he called *Snow*.

Since its acquisition by The Museum of Modern Art in 1998, *Snow* has been exhibited a handful of times, always with the album lying open on the table between the two chairs, and with a small number of works from the book removed and hung, framed, on the wall. The work's complexity and its poor condition have limited the ways in which it can be shown. An exhibition opening in February 2013 provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of *Snow*, employing conservation treatment, scientific analysis, and digital imaging of the work to change and enhance the ways that viewers and scholars can access, interpret, and enjoy one of Dieter Roth's most unique and important book projects.

### INTRODUCTION

As conservators, we are forced to consider the long-term implications of our work. Will this material stand the test of time? Will it be easy to reverse? Will my aesthetic choices

be appropriate to an unknown future context? And perhaps most confoundingly: Do my treatment decisions reflect a bias or value judgment about the importance of this work?

In general, these questions are more easily addressed because we make certain assumptions about the original creator. We assume that the work was intended to endure, and that all of the labor that went into its creation was a testament to its value and significance.

In the case of works by some contemporary artists, however, such assumptions cannot be made. These works throw our orderly world of preservation into chaos. If an object is made with materials the artist knew would decay, if indeed that was the artist's intention, what role should we, as conservators, play? Is it appropriate for us to subjugate the creator's vision to our own priorities? How do we preserve and protect cultural heritage, while still respecting the conceptual integrity of an ephemeral object?

These questions weighed heavily on three conservators at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in the months leading up to an exhibition of work by Swiss-German artist and iconoclast Dieter Roth. Best known for his engagement with the concept of decay, Roth created works out of materials including chocolate, cheese, and animal droppings, and allowed them to deteriorate at their own pace. When these works were acquired as part of an institutional collection, Roth considered them to have entered "museum life," a liminal state in which deterioration is slowed, but never entirely stopped. As Roth described it: "There is a general slowing down [of decay]. The images will outlive me. They will retain a certain standard too, though they point to decay ... . The whole putrefying image actually grows and increasingly takes on museum life ... although I have always regarded museums as funeral parlours to varying degrees" (Müller 1989, n.p.).

The role of the conservator, whether as preserver of a cultural legacy or as art mortician, was a central theme in the treatment of one of Roth's creations: a large, varied, and singularly problematic album called *Snow*.

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## DIETER ROTH

Karl-Dietrich Roth was born in Hannover in 1930, the eldest son of a German mother and a Swiss father. In 1943, Roth was sent to live with foster parents in Zurich, where he remained for the next three years. Although he was physically separated from the war, the experience marked him indelibly, emerging in his work throughout his career. After the end of WWII, Roth's entire family joined him in Switzerland. Roth, who had used drawing and poetry as a means of escape during his years as a refugee, now turned his focus to printmaking, dropping out of secondary school at 17 in order to pursue an apprenticeship with a commercial artist. This apprenticeship, and subsequent study at the School of Commercial Art in Bern, exposed Roth to many techniques of printmaking that would become central to his work. Throughout his career in advertising, Roth continued painting, drawing, and making prints, and in 1953 he collaborated on the publication of an "international journal of young art" called *Spirale*. It was during this period that Roth turned his full attention to the making of art, including artist's books. His early projects, which were heavily influenced by the constructivist movement, date from the mid-1950s, and mark the beginning of an engagement with the book-as-artistic-medium that would last for the next 40 years.

## SNOW

In September 1964, Dieter Roth came to Philadelphia at the invitation of Eugene Feldman, a professor of art and the proprietor of Falcon Press. Roth was to stay for three months and design a book, which would be printed in a small edition by the press. Feldman's expectation was that Roth would produce a constructivist book of the kind he had shown in New York a few years earlier. Feldman didn't know that, in the intervening years, Roth had begun exploring different expressions of the book form. Defining a book as "a community of like-minded things," (Vischer et al. 2003, 48) Roth entered a realm of book-as-sculpture. He employed everyday materials in works such as the tiny *daily mirror book* (1961), which was made of newspapers. He even challenged the concept of the book format, as with *Literaturwurst* (1961), or "literature sausage," in which ground books were mixed with spices and binders and stuffed into sausage casings. When Feldman saw the direction Roth's work had taken, he rescinded his offer to publish the book. Fortunately Roth was able to get permission to continue his work at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, with the understanding that the original would be a gift to the College.

Roth produced, by his estimate, 6000 drawings, prints, photographs, and notes over three months, working with an assistant provided by the college, and tacking "every piece of paper [he'd] touched during the day" onto the wall (Vischer



Fig. 1. Dieter Roth (Swiss, born Germany, 1930–1998). *Snow*. 1964/69. Artist's book of mixed mediums, with wood table and two wood chairs. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. Courtesy of John Wronn, © 2013 Estate of Dieter Roth

et al. 2003, 92). He called the work *Snow*. Five hundred of the paper works were selected and professionally photographed, to be printed as a limited-edition paperback. This printed edition was never produced. Eventually an exhibition, called an "ending" by Roth, was mounted to show the finished work. Roth signed and gave away many proofs, photographs, and other works created for the project, and took the book with him back to his home in Iceland. In the late 1960s, Roth commissioned a fabricator named Rudolf Reiser to construct a table and two chairs to house and display *Snow* (fig. 1), and had the 1964 photographs printed and bound as volume 11 of his self-published *Collected Works*.

Since its acquisition by The Museum of Modern Art in 1998, *Snow* has been exhibited a few times, always with the album lying open on the table between the two chairs, and with a small number of works removed and hung, framed, on the wall. The recent exhibition of Roth's books and multiples, which opened at The Museum of Modern Art in February 2013, provided an opportunity to devise a new approach to exhibiting *Snow*. Conservation staff worked closely with curatorial colleagues to gain a deeper understanding of the album, employing conservation treatment, scientific analysis, and digital imaging to change and enhance the ways that viewers and scholars can access, interpret, and enjoy one of Dieter Roth's most unique and important book projects.

## STRUCTURE AND CONDITION

As it exists now, *Snow* consists of a cardboard cover with four attached sections, and 31 homemade plastic sleeves, which are stab-sewn to the back cover with clear plastic tubing (fig. 2). The spine is divided into two halves joined by a row of bolts. The attached sections, made of tracing paper, cardboard, and clay-coated paper, are stapled and taped to the binding at the front of the book, and the sleeves at the back contain loose items. Materials used in the work include various plastics, pressure-sensitive tapes, photographs, diazotypes, printing proofs, and by-products (including cut

pieces of ink-saturated offset lithography mat, fig. 3), and a tiny wax still life. Oversized sheets, some of which are several feet long, are folded and inserted into the plastic sleeves (fig. 4). The work also includes a collapsed cardboard suitcase, constructed by Roth to house the album.

The work has changed over time, and a few serious condition problems have developed. One of the most readily apparent is related to the artist's abundant use of tape (fig. 5). Until the 1970s, most pressure-sensitive tape adhesives

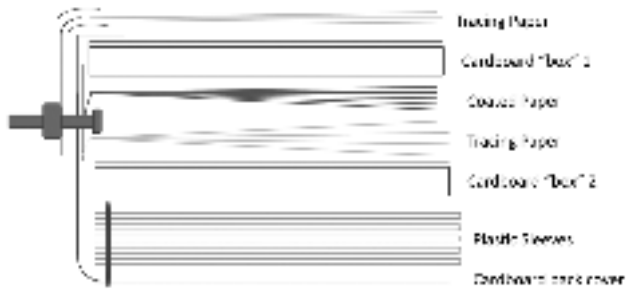


Fig. 2. Cross section showing the structure of *Snow*



Fig. 3. Spread from *Snow*. 1964/69. Lithograph with offset mats and felt-tip pen, 44.5 x 58.4 cm



Fig. 4. Spread from *Snow*. 1964/69. Felt-tip pen on cut diazotype, 46.4 x 115.6 cm

were rubber based. Over time, these adhesives spread, discolor, and eventually lose their tack (Smith et al. 1983). This deteriorating adhesive is particularly harmful where tape was used to join the edges of the plastic sleeves—still-tacky adhesive has crept beyond the boundary of the tape carrier, causing the sleeves to stick together.

The sleeves themselves are made from poly(vinyl chloride) or PVC, a rigid plastic that is manufactured in combination with plasticizer to make pliable sheets. As PVC ages, it gives off hydrochloric acid, causing damage to adjacent materials (Shashoua 2002), and the plasticizer migrates to the surface, creating a sticky residue (Shashoua 1996). In *Snow*, this residue made it difficult to remove components housed within the sleeves.

Transparentized or tracing papers, like those at the beginning of the album, are manufactured to be translucent. This translucency is achieved by a variety of methods, all of which weaken the paper (Hofmann et al. 1992). Due in large part to this inherent fragility, the tracing paper sections at the beginning of the album have become brittle and torn (fig. 5). In an apparent effort to provide support to the weak paper, each page was taped to a sheet of clear plastic film. FTIR analysis identified the plastic sheets as cellulose acetate, an unstable material that shrinks and distorts over time and



Fig. 5. Discolored tape on a tracing paper page from *Snow*. 1964/69. Tracing paper, notebook paper, tape and ink, 38.7 x 45.7 cm.

that can give off harmful acetic acid vapor as it deteriorates (Williams 2002). The degraded cellulose acetate posed a structural as well as a chemical danger: Because the tape was failing and the stiff plastic interfered with the turning of the pages, this past attempt at stabilization resulted in further damage to the tracing paper.

#### “ORIGINAL ORDER”

By comparing the images of *Snow* taken in 1964 with the work as it exists today (figs. 6a and 6b), it is possible to see changes that have taken place in the intervening years. The plastic sleeves, which now comprise a large portion of the binding, were not present when the work was originally photographed. The tracing paper sections, now heavily mended with tape and backed with sheets of cellulose acetate, were once intact and supple. It is also apparent that a few components photographed in 1964 are no longer with the album. Whether they were given away during the ending exhibition in Philadelphia or disappeared at a later date is unknown.

These discrepancies, paired with the fact that many components have been shuffled, raise questions about Roth's intended order for the work. Close examination allowed for a partial recreation of the original order. For instance, cut edges on loose sheets were matched with corresponding stubs left in the binding, indicating where a page had been removed. Roth's artistic process also offered hints: a few sections were marked with a target and shot with a BB gun. The size and position of the resulting holes allowed for reconstruction of the original sequence of pages. Even the deteriorating tape provided clues, as stains from failed adhesive marked locations where loose items were once attached. Roth's published photographs were a valuable, but not entirely reliable, resource. While they revealed much about the original condition of the work, and gave important insights into the overarching meaning and organization of *Snow*, there were instances where the order of the photographs appeared to have been shuffled prior to publication.

Even with all of the evidence collected, the question of “originality” was problematic. An important goal of conservation treatment is to allow the viewer to understand a work in a way that is faithful to the artist's intent. However, a responsible treatment must allow for the possibility that new information could become available in the future, and should not attempt to recreate lost information based on potentially faulty impressions. Roth is known to have revisited many of his works at later dates, and it is certain that he continued to make changes to *Snow* at least through the late 1960s. Indeed, curatorial research revealed that the PVC sleeves and the damaging cellulose acetate sheet liners were added at Roth's request by Rudolf Reiser, the same fabricator who constructed the furniture on which *Snow* is now displayed. The changes were made in preparation for an exhibition at Michael Werner's Cologne

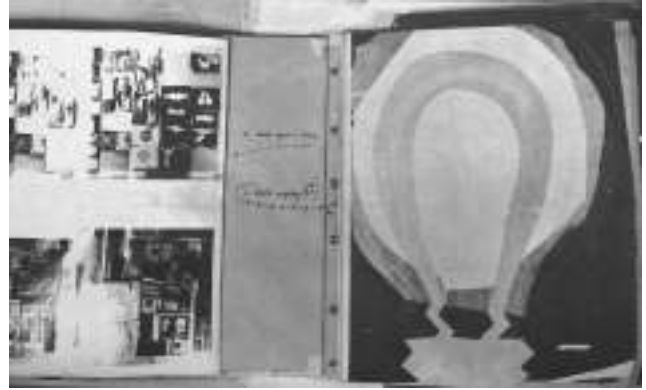


Fig. 6a. Page showing 1964 photograph of *Snow*, from *Gesammelt Werke, Band 11: Snow* (Collected Works, volume 11: *Snow*). 1970, photographed 1964. Artist's book, offset printed, page 22.8 x 16.8 cm.



Fig. 6b. Spread from *Snow* as it exists today, showing PVC sleeves and partial binding structure. 1964/69. 50.8 x 89.5 cm.

gallery in 1969, in which visitors would be able to turn the pages of the album and access its many components. Reiser indicated that the new material was added solely to facilitate handling, and stated that Roth would not have felt that it was part of the work. Nevertheless, it altered the album in ways that could not be completely undone.

Further complicating the treatment was a question inherent to all book conservation treatments—must the book function? If *Snow* were disbound, or if the pages no longer turned, would it cease to be the work that Roth intended? If the work is an object to be exhibited in a museum, does it only need to *look* like a book, rather than actually *be* one? Is this what Dieter Roth envisioned when he referred to museums as funeral parlors?

#### TREATMENT APPROACH

In planning conservation treatment, it was clear that it would be impossible to return *Snow* to its original state, or even to know definitively what that state would have been. The immediate goals were threefold: first, to stabilize the album



so that it could be handled and displayed safely; second, to gain a better understanding of the artist's process, and the conservation implications of his choices, through identification of materials; and third, to take high-quality digital images of every component of the album. These images will facilitate future access to the work while limiting handling.

#### TREATMENT PROCEDURE

The treatment plan was made with close consultation between the conservators and with their curatorial colleagues. Given *Snow*'s complex history and Roth's well-documented tolerance for change and deterioration in his work, an approach of minimal stabilization was taken, addressing only the most serious condition problems.

The first step was to partially disbind the album. This facilitated access to damage in the gutters of some sections, and allowed multiple conservators to work on the treatment simultaneously. Some taped sections were released from the binding, and the two bolted-together halves of the spine were separated. Loose items from the sleeves were removed and housed in folders.

Based on the information provided by Rudolf Reiser, the decision was made to remove the harmful cellulose acetate linings. Each tracing paper sheet was released by lifting the tape around the edges with a heated spatula. Without the lining, the sheets were able to drape and move much more naturally.

Over time, adhesive from the tape had crept beyond the carrier. Because each page was pressed against the smooth surface of the previous page's plastic lining, this adhesive residue had an extremely shiny surface. Acetone was used to reduce this residue, and xylene removed residual spots of stickiness.

Tears were mended using homemade heat-set tissue. A 1:1 mixture of Lascaux 498 HV and water was brushed through nonwoven polyester onto very thin Japanese tissue on top of Mylar and allowed to dry. Narrow strips were pre-cut while the tissue was still attached to the Mylar, and then peeled off as needed. The adhesive was swollen with ethanol, and then the strip was placed over the tear. The mend was then burnished with a warm tacking iron to improve adhesion and transparency.

Because they are now part of the structure of the binding, the PVC sleeves were left in place. Loose tape carrier from the sleeves was consolidated or removed. In cases where the carrier was removed or already missing, the fore-edge of the sleeve was allowed to remain open. The sleeves were cleaned of excess plasticizer and surface grime using a cotton pad moistened with water and ethanol.

Loose elements that had been attached to pages were re-adhered, using the original tape carrier wherever possible.

Because of the potential for damage, the loose components were not returned to the PVC sleeves. Instead, they will be

stored in individual folders within a custom housing, which will hold all the components of *Snow*.

#### EXHIBITION

The exhibition opened in February 2013. While the display format borrows from tradition, it also shows many more components of the work, removed from their sleeves and mounted on the wall (fig. 7). A touch-screen monitor in the galleries (fig. 8) allows visitors to view every page of the album and to gain a better sense of the scope and exuberance of Roth's creation.

#### CONCLUSION

*Snow* represents a transitional moment in Roth's artistic career, after the constructivist books of his early years but before the chocolate sculptures and rotting food installations for which he later became famous. In devising a treatment plan, it was important to acknowledge and accept the changes that had taken place in the work, and to think about ways to improve its condition without attempting to return it to an "ideal" state that may never have been the artist's intention.



Fig. 7. Installation view of *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth*. Shown: Dieter Roth. *Snow*. 1964/69. Artist's book of mixed mediums, with wood table and two wood chairs. The Museum of Modern Art. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. © 2013 Estate of Dieter Roth



Fig. 8. Installation view of *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth*, showing touch-screen monitor in gallery

Dieter Roth's work is a challenge to conservators not only because of its physical and material complexity, but also because Roth directly confronted the traditional role of the museum. By creating art that was likely—and in many cases designed—to decay, Roth left conservators with conflicting responsibilities: to physically preserve the work of art, and to be respectful of the intent of the art's creator. *Snow* seems to particularly embody these conflicts through its problematic structure, its incompatible and incredibly varied materials, and through the numerous messages left for future custodians of the work. Notes in and on *Snow* include the warning "DO NOT DISTURB," a note on the aging properties of Scotch tape, and—perhaps most presciently—scrawled along the edge of an oversized print: "Wait, later this will be nothing."

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