

Should We Reproduce the Beauty of Decay? A *Museumsleben* in the work of Dieter Roth

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Fig. 1
Dieter Roth
Gartenzweg 1972
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In twentieth-century sculpture, artists increasingly used new materials which were unfamiliar to them in terms of resistance to aging, and so were unable to foresee the speed and degree of decay these works would undergo – many of them turning out to have only a fraction of the lifespan to that of works from earlier periods. On the other hand, artists played with the foreseeable and deliberate disintegration of works in which the process of decay is a central aspect of the artist's intention. This intended decay is an interesting problem in the dynamic field of art conservation and the controversial issue of replicas.

Preservation of visual art objects created over the last hundred years has two main aspects. The first is the preservation of the various materials used and the second is the preservation of the intention and meaning of the work which, in most cases, extends beyond the material structure and may even lie outside it. While these points are basic considerations that come up whenever conservation work is to be carried out, obvious challenges are presented by works which use materials that are intentionally subject to processes of change in the near future or conceptual and performance works, the ephemeral nature of which throws into question the importance of the material. By purposefully introducing decay, the artist appears to emphasise the irreconcilable need to simultaneously maintain both the material dimension of the work and its conceptual dimension. If we disregard works such as sculptures made of sugar in the Baroque period, it is evident that food has increasingly been incorporated into artistic works since the 1960s – the idea of the accidental transformation processes, and the beauty created by them, being an integral component of the art. More than any other artist, [Dieter Roth](#) was interested in the characteristics of decaying substances.

Dieter Roth (1930–1998) was one of the most diverse artists in the second half of the last century. He was a painter, graphic designer, sculptor, publisher, musician, filmmaker, as well as a poet. Although he himself was interested in collecting and archiving, Roth's complex and extremely varied oeuvre presents museums with a difficult task when it comes to the preservation of his works. Beyond the ironic and contradictory statements which he made, this is due to the nature of the works themselves: complex installation art;

monumental objects and sculptures made from edible substances, such as chocolate, sugar, yoghurt, cheese, bread, mince and spices, which beetles and micro-organisms then transform. And while mutability and transience are inherent in all works of art, Roth accelerates these phenomena, making them visible within a short period of time. Mortality is, in effect, paraded in front of us. And so, when setting aside the ambiguity of the works for a moment, we can see that Dieter Roth was extremely interested in the structure of decay – its form, play of colours, the variations of putrefaction and mould, and their ornamental aspects, the natural mutation of things – and felt that chance, as a shaping element, should be a part of the creation process.

Do we have the right to dispute these artistic intentions because of our responsibility as museums to acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit? Besides the usual preservation of the aesthetic and historical dimensions of a work, in Roth's case, the museum has the contradictory need to conserve that which was intended to be ephemeral. And so we need to ask: is it legitimate to slow down the decay processes in a museum, in order to preserve the object for reasons of cultural heritage? What strategies can an institution pursue if the conservation of a work appears to contradict the intention of the artist who created it? Can a replica be a way of overcoming this paradox?

Taking into account the processual nature of these works, there is still the question of when is the endpoint of such 'living works' reached. At what point is an adequate interaction between the viewer and the work no longer possible, making its exhibition no longer meaningful? What changes does processual decay entail: colour changes and discoloration, distortion, loss of elements or collapse? Can these works reach a state of aging in their material continuity that poses a threat to their integrity or which contradicts their importance in terms of art history? It is less the result and more the continuing genesis of the work – its change and deformation through to decay – that is of importance. Is the endpoint therefore only reached at the point of material disintegration? Or is it reached through intervention in an immutable process and by acting contrary to the original artistic intention? Dieter Roth himself described the state of hardly perceptible degradation that works of art often reach after initial rapid degradation as a 'museum life'.¹

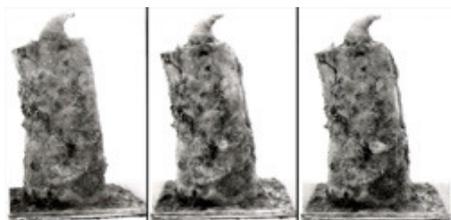


Fig.2
Dieter Roth
Gartenzwerg 1972
Changing condition of sculpture: May 2006 /
September 2006 / December 2006
© Dieter Roth Estate
[enlarge](#)

This threshold of slow aging has been passed by the sculpture of the *Gartenzwerg*² created in 1972 and now in the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. Because large cracks are forming in the chocolate casing which encloses the gnome, it is in danger of falling apart in the near future. Should we consider having a replica made to allow the visitor to visualise the original sculptural form? Admittedly, that is one of the ideas which comes to mind in this case. But are such approaches also to be adopted for his complex installation art which comprise numerous parts; the object images that have been assembled with great care; or the accumulation collages³ of diverse foods that give little clue any more as to the original contents? For example, what form should a replica of the latter works take? New layers of edible products such as bread, cheese and sausage mounted on a wooden sheet with milk and yoghurt poured over them? This option would limit the work to processuality and neglect any attempt to retain its authenticity, which may also include a large number of levels of meaning such as the aesthetic, historical, artistic, social and scientific dimensions.⁴ Umberto Eco spoke of the inequality of project and result: 'A work of art is both a trace of that which it wanted to be and of what it actually is, if the two values do not coincide.'⁵ If a work is viewed as an object possessing certain structural characteristics and very diverse meanings, then an aspect like the degree of decay could lead the viewer to draw a parallel between the life of the work and his/her own life up to that point – something no longer possible with a replica.

In respect to the dialectic inherent in Roth's work, we have to ask what factors would induce us to create

replicas of his works.

1. The replica as a copy for exhibition purposes.⁶ For example, in order to make fragile works which are sensitive to shock and vibration more accessible in an era of numerous changing exhibitions.
2. The replica as a replacement. In the case of lost or damaged elements within an installation or an object image, this practice could be considered an equivalent to inpainting, which is intended to facilitate the reading and experience of a work.⁷
3. The replica as a duplicate, documentation, and didactic aid to understanding. It could be shown side by side with the original, which is now unrecognisable as a result of aging, in order to help the viewer engage with the work, as well as presenting the different stages in processual decay?
4. The replica as a starting point for a new aging process. As mentioned earlier, this would, however, reduce the work to its processual character.

Setting aside the questions of authorisation and value, and the problem of control over the replica in Roth's oeuvre, in which there are numerous editions, we also have to ask whether it is our intention to preserve for future generations the material form of works which have decay as their theme. Or would the importance of the artistic statement not be more powerfully put across if it was available solely in written and photographic documentation, as evidence of protest against the supposed eternal nature of art. 'Fotogeschieden können anstelle der Restaurierungen treten,'⁸ [Photography can take the place of restoration as historical record] Roth once said. If, however, we want to prevent the decomposition of works, we must first ignore Dieter Roth's questioning of the eternal nature of art and either use the methods of conservation to fix an object in a particular state or create replicas of works with a short lifespan. These replicas would repeat the process of decay for eternity.

Notes

¹ 'Es tritt allmählich eine Verlangsamung [des Verfalls] ein. Denn die Bilder werden mich ja überleben. Und einen gewissen Standard behalten die Bilder auch, wenn sie auf das Vergehen hinweisen. Die drücken dann doch auf einen zeitlichen Stop, sie halten sich als Bild, obschon sie als Material vielleicht untergehen. Das ganze durchfaulte Bild steigt eigentlich, bekommt immer mehr Museumsleben ... wobei das Museum für mich schon immer mehr oder weniger ein Begräbnisinstitut gewesen ist.' *Dieter Roth: Bilder, Zeichnungen, Objekte*. Gespräch mit Hans-Joachim Müller, Galerie Littmann, Basel, 1989, n.p. '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. Eventually they do press the button which stops time, surviving as an image although they may disappear as material. The whole putrefying image actually grows and increasingly takes on museum life ... although I have always regarded museums as funeral parlours to varying degrees.' *Dieter Roth: Bilder, Zeichnungen, Objekte*, discussion with Hans-Joachim Müller, Galerie Littmann, Basel, 1989, n.p.

² Dieter Roth, *Gartenzwerg* 1972. A garden gnome cast in a chocolate cylinder, with the cap protruding through the chocolate, white mould and the cocoons of moths, beneath the Plexiglas cover (height: 52 cm, diameter: 22 cm). Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

³ Dierk Dobke, *Dieter Roth 1960–1975*, volume 1, Cologne, 2002, p.34.

⁴ *Nara Document on Authenticity*, 1994, www.international.icomos.org/naradoc_eng.htm

⁵ Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk* Frankfurt a. M., 1977, p.11.

⁶ According to a statement of Getrud Otterbeck, conservator for the large Dieter Roth retrospective in 1998 (Schaulager, Basel, the Wallraf-Richartz Museum – Foundation Corboud, Cologne, and in the Museum of Modern Art, New York), elements of the lion's tower were recast in chocolate and destroyed at the end of the exhibition.

⁷ Roth wrote in this connection: 'fast (bald, aber noch nicht jetzt) könnte man Restaurationen zu den sichtbarzumachenden Prozessen zählen; Basel, 28. Dez 97' 'restorations could soon (almost, but not yet) be counted amongst processes to be made visible: Basle, 28 December 97', Dierk Dobke, *Dieter Roth 1960–1975*, volume 1, p.74.

⁸ Dieter Roth, handwritten note *ibid.*, p.125.

Tate Papers Autumn 2007 © Heide Skowranek

*This paper was written as a short discussion document for the Inherent Vice: The Replica and its Implications in Modern Sculpture Workshop, held at Tate Modern, 18–19 October 2007, and supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Other papers produced for this workshop can be found in [issue no.8](#) of *Tate Papers*.*

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