

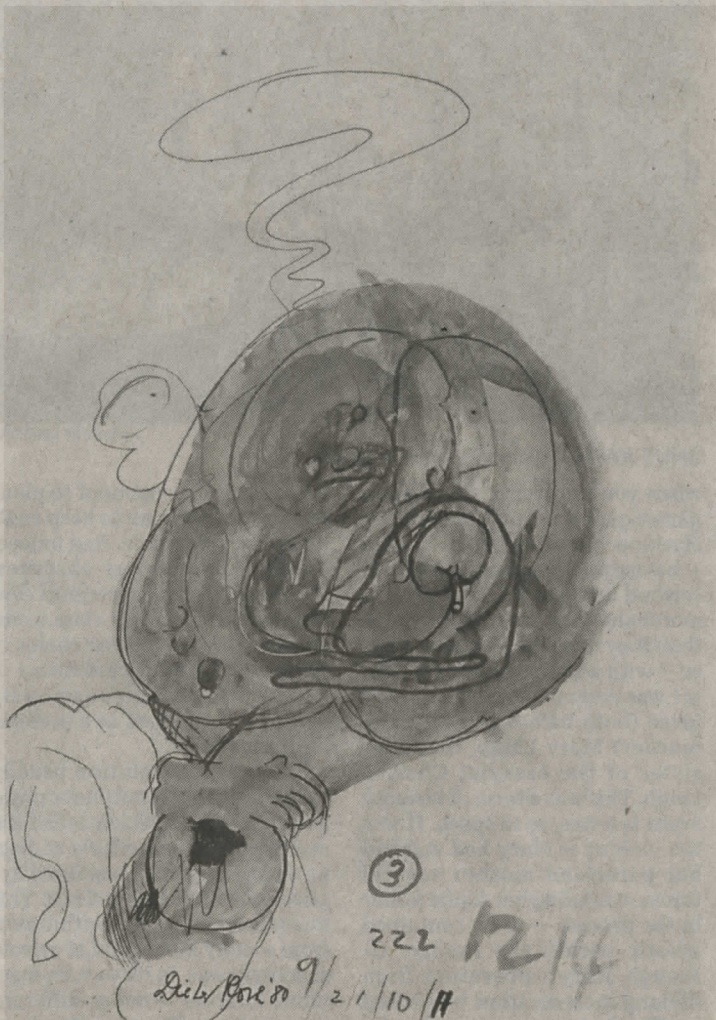
**GALLERY-GOING****Outflanking the Avant-Garde**By **STEPHEN MAINE**

**D**ecades before young artists took to speaking earnestly of their "practice," Dieter Roth (1930–98) seemed bent on subverting the very concept. In the early 1960s, the Swiss-German artist, a few hundred of whose furiously antic drawings are now on view at Gladstone Gallery, set aside his experiments in kinetic, optical, and concrete abstraction in favor of a profoundly personal, unclassifiable idiom. Prompted by the examples of Jean Tinguely and Robert Rauschenberg, Roth allowed himself enormous creative leeway. His mature output outflanks the avant-garde by disregarding its tactics, playfully prodding the frontiers of artistic propriety. Signature style? Archival materials? Roth shook off any such encumbrances.

**DIETER ROTH: DRAWINGS***Gladstone Gallery*

An early interest in concrete poetry led naturally to letterpress printing and offset lithography, and thence to the book as an art form. That may be Roth's greatest innovation. Beginning in the late 1950s, the artist produced hundreds of editions. The British Pop master Richard Hamilton, with whom Roth collaborated frequently, avers that "his books alone would give him a place of honor in twentieth-century art."

A staggeringly prolific polymath, Roth involved himself in print



**Dieter Roth, '17 fast fertige Selbstpopos mit 17 Durchgedrucktem' (17 almost finished self-bottles with 17 squeezed-throughers)' (1980).**

GLADSTONE GALLERY

A staggeringly prolific polymath, Roth involved himself in printmaking, painting, sculpture, film and video, sound recording, photography, jewelry, and even architecture. The performative aspect of his work was teased out in collaborations with the Viennese Actionists Hermann Nitsch and Günter Brus; one featured a concert of howling dogs. Art and life are blurred in another piece, anticipating Rudolf Stingel, in which Roth's grubby studio floor was excised and mounted on a gallery wall, postulating that traces of the artist's quotidian shuffling and spilling are the equal of his conscious, manual, easel-bound activities.

Roth's work possesses some of the neo-Dada characteristics of Pop art, but is as enmeshed with dissolution and decay as his American contemporaries were smitten with antiseptic consumerism. Today, Roth's greatest notoriety proceeds from olfactorily transgressive works confected of fugitive materials, notably chocolate, sausages, and cheese. Boundary-bashing was in the air during this heady time, of course, but in Roth the viewer senses not the state-side theatricality and optimism of Claes Oldenburg or Allan Kaprow, but a distinctly European interiority and skepticism, the radicalism of social disengagement.

Institutional validation was utterly unimportant to Roth, which is one reason why he was little-known in this country, outside of art-world circles, before the retrospective exhibition, "Roth Time," at the Museum of Modern Art/Queens and P.S.1 in 2004. Even then, skeptics refused to acknowl-

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edge that shows its horrific undertow, its circumspect but inexorable explication of bodily failure, and the artist's simultaneous fascination and disgust with the corporeal enormity of human existence.

Roth churned out drawings, though the MoMA show included none. An eye-blasting selection from 1977-90 now graces Gladstone, where the drawings are installed in misleadingly tidy groupings. They are executed on small sheets (both sides, sometimes) in various combinations of graphite, felt-tip pen, ballpoint, inks, and gouache. Roth's line is supple; the compositions are centralized yet liquid and unraveling. Loosely figurative, many suggest fantastical personages in the midst of some recondite activity, such as "30 Monsters from Danneckerstrasse." Interpenetrating forms give rise to a hint of narrative, but only a hint — one of these grotesques may be meditating, another looks for a handout, while a

third appears to be about to devour a bunny.

Others works conjure up landscape spaces, as in "Sino-Japanese wave pictures," in which torrents of undulating strokes of the pencil wash across the page, or in "13 Bridges," one of a series of roughly symmetrical drawings Roth executed using both hands simultaneously. Roth's work is unremittingly literary, and that impulse is reflected in his titles. Among the "13 unfinished, neglected drawings," for example, are some that are rather more graphically resolved than much else on view, for example the particularly inscrutable "11 dogpound drawings," laconic scribbles in which the artist's interest in entropy is unleashed.

The show is scattershot, as befits the work of an artist who made the quotidian details of living his subject. It also strongly suggests a hyperactive graphical imagination working through private fears and obsessions with as much grace and humor as could be mustered. In each of the "13 recalcitrantly commenced images of others," the artist's balding pate, seen from behind, anchors the bottom edge. Swirling apparitions appear above and beyond it, as if to the artist as well as to the viewer. Of course, these are self-portraits — the series' title notwithstanding — as much as any of the other enigmatic drawings in this fascinating show.

*Until May 3 (515 W. 24th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-206-9300).*