

Dear people present, thank you for coming. Dear people of the Reykjavík Art Museum, thanks for making it possible to speak here.

I have prepared a short text I want to read to you today. The title of this text is

“Patience, Tolerance and Irony”.

These words are for me key words in an attempt to understand the person Dieter Roth and what he may mean to us.

I dedicate my words here to Dieter’s great friend Ira Wool who will turn 80 tomorrow.

The talks I gave before on Dieter Roth were concerned with Diter Rot, and Dieter Roth, as he spelled his name later.

Now I’ll try it again, with another version of his name in mind: Diëter (the one who is on a diët) (and the one who has to:) rot.

Diëter! Diëter, rot!

Some years ago I have seen (and I think I have at home in Amsterdam a copy of) the recording of a Swiss television talk-show, which was broadcast live, shortly after Christmas, maybe 15 years ago. There Dieter finds himself sitting at the same table together with I think 5, fairly straight Swiss characters.

If seen from a slightly shifted point of view, fairly straight means of course quite crazy.

The people at this table were invited to talk about the subject: “Should we get rid of the Christmas kilos if we could, and if yes, how can we?”

Dieter was the most voluminous person at the table.

It is quite difficult for Germans to understand the Swiss-German dialect. I am German and it was of course Swiss-German the people at this table spoke. But the bits I did understand and the body language, isn’t it called body language?: the involuntary gestures of the people at this table suggested that none of the invited talkers was at ease with himself or the others, they all seemed to suffer from a constipated mind and sat stiff in their chairs.

All were constipated except one: Dieter Roth. He was lively and he talks in private and in his private version of Swiss-German into which he was not born, but which was one of the many languages he had to learn. He kept whispering more than speaking to his neighbor but one got the idea he was having fun. At a given moment he got up to go to pee. He asked the talk-master where the toilets were.

After this unheard of incident, after television etiquette had come under this monstrous attack the Swiss daily paper “Blick” shoveled for I think 10 subsequent days front page shit at Dieter Roth. The tone was: “We’ll expose this drunk, dirty man to the public, this man who calls himself an artist and who can not even behave himself. We shall teach him manners.”

It was an altogether totally absurd nothing turned into a scandal. The talk-master lost his job over the affair. I met him in Basel a few years after Dieter’s death, around 10 years after the talk-show. He asked to be shown around in Dieters studio. I did show him around in the cave of the dragon by which he had been slain. The simple, unpretentious, self-made, at least self-designed interior of Dieter’s studio made the ex-talk-master sigh. I think the sigh was a sigh of recognition that his defeat was final.

Later it went through my mind that I should have asked the ex-talk-master whether it was customary before the show to apply make-up on the faces of the participants in his show. I’m certain I could have added another Dieter story to my repertoire if someone had tried to put rouge on his cheeks.

I remember one time when Dieter related laughingly what he had just read in one of the classical German or Austrian composer’s autobiographies. I think it was Brahms’. Brahms would leave his composer’s office an hour earlier than his wife thought. When he was expected at home for dinner at 7

he would go at 6 to eat at a restaurant, and then go home and declare to be hungry as a wolf and to be happy to finally get something to eat.

There is a poem by Dieter Roth which can serve as a key to how he saw eating, (or, of course, how he ate seeing). I have made for this occasion a translation of the poem into English:

my eye is a mouth
my eyelids are the mouth's lips
my eyelashes are the mouth's teeth
my eyeball is the mouth's tongue
my iris is the mouth's tip of the tongue
my pupil is the mouth's kiss
my eye socket is the mouth's palate
my optic nerve is the mouth's gullet
my brain is the mouth's stomach
my pictures are the mouth's digestion
my life is the mouth's excrement

my excrement is the eye's life
my digestion is the eye's pictures
my stomach is the eye's brain
my gullet is the eye's optic nerve
my palate is the eye's socket
my kiss is the pupil
my tip of the tongue is the iris
my tongue is the eye's ball
my teeth are the eye's lashes
my lips are the eye's lids
my mouth is an eye

Maybe not only the eye, but also the ear is a mouth if one considers aspects of the following observation:

Around 1970 Dieter was a frequent guest at Daniel Spoerri's, his old friend's and competitor's "Eat Art"-restaurant in Düsseldorf. I remember feasts there with both Daniel and Dieter deeply engaged in their work, the one as host and the other as guest. Daniel was serving for example sliced elephant trunks with a filling of steamed nightingale tongues and Dieter was stuffing his ears with spaghetti.

I think it is possible to describe Dieter Roth as a man who made his living by newly explaining the processes of participation in life. He researches himself. He researches his dependence on and the interaction with the others and with that which surrounds him. Eating and seeing, the eating of substantial and unsubstantial food and digesting it make him tick. The poem I just read shows he discovered a scientific as well as poetic formula which allowed him to call equal those processes which take place in the body as well as in the mind. This discovery gained him a powerful superiority over other people and for quite a while granted him a great ease of mind.

Instead of "he discovered a formula" I should probably say "he rediscovered a formula", a formula hidden under a thick layer of cultural waste as Dieter Roth would have called it. Identical mouth/eye processes as Dieter knows them, must long ago have been common knowledge. In this sense Dieter would be a person with a better memory than others. Or he would be one who was sort of lucky not getting his brains washed. Or he kept a sense for the oneness of the whole in spite of the whole being scattered into endlessly many facets.

Anyhow, what he rediscovered and expressed in that poem is the likeness of two physiological processes. Those processes happen on behalf of that nature which man until now has not yet learnt

how to fiddle around with. Man has a mouth through which his food has to go and he has eyes through which he must see. The rediscovery of the likeness of the processes of seeing and eating allow Dieter, so to say, to lean back in his chair. He knows he can trust nature. Therefore he can quite patiently participate in whatever there is - the digestive processes of eye and mouth are there to feed him. For the time being he doesn't need to struggle for his existence. Instead, he gains time – time in paradise so to say. It becomes easy for him to be tolerant – everything is good the way it is.

But the time gained needs to be spent. As one was able to see in Reykjavík during the last 3 months, Dieter accomplished an enormous body of work. That one man who only lived for 68 years could have done all this has astounded many. In my eyes this became possible because the working formula gained time for him. There is a gigantic factory at work. The digestive processes work so well, that only the tops of the funny red hats of the little workmen stick out of the brown massa they produce.

Of course the time comes when only irony helps him to cope with the experience of how well the digestive processes are taking care of themselves and everything around them: being visible is being eaten. Not only Dieter Roth digests, others digest him too. The struggle for existence is back on the menu card.

Coincidence wants it that to rot is understood in the English language as a digestive process. Therefore: whether he is on a diät or whether he is an eater, Dieter will rot.

Dieter's (re)discovery of the sameness and the naturalness of the digestive processes of mind and body also point at the fact that he laid bare the bone structure of what seems a basic truth. He got rid of the thick layer of the before mentioned cultural waste which had grown like meat on this bone. Men can't help it, they develop habits of perception. We like to call our eating habits "grand cuisine". We forget that we only see what we can recognize and that we only eat what we have learnt to recognize as food. We are convinced we really see what in reality we only imagine.

Dieter, to round things up and to come to an end, has carried out work on the inner relation of life processes. He could show us that things work by themselves. His patiently inquisitive mind was rewarded with tolerance. His discovery gave him time to play with and test his ideas. Irony was needed to cope with the insight that you see and you eat means you are seen and you are eaten.

At last I want to point to a moral quintessence which can be of far-reaching importance. Dieter Roth triggered it off as a result of his discovery. I think namely that the works by Dieter which now hang on the walls of other people produce time too. Whatever Dieter did, it had become of independent quality. Had he not invented the perpetuum mobile? As the better machines are, once they work, they don't need their inventor. This invention we have learnt to recognize as Dieter's art. Each of his art works had to be itself so to say a branch office of the big factory. The endless number of small factories, called pictures, which Dieter has put on the walls of the homes of an endless number of people can now produce time for those who see (or eat) them. That is it what I think of when I say "moral quintessence": that now, since these branch offices produce time for us, did we think about how we will spend it?

Thank you.