

The causal chain that brought the Dieter Roth Academy in 2001 to Pécs for its annual general meeting and an exhibition of works by its members has a number of links, but ultimately goes back to the man whose name the Academy proudly bears: Dieter Roth. Without Dieter the idea at the back of the Academy would never have been hatched, and without his ability to attract like-minded friends the idea would never have been explored and continued. Moreover, without the presence in Hungary of Dieter's printer and publisher friend of many years' standing, Rainer Pretzell and his wife Agnes, the venue would never have been found for the second annual meeting of the Academy and the accompanying exhibitions.

The inaugural meeting was held on the first weekend of May 2000, almost two years after Dieter Roth's untimely death, when fifteen people – Henriëtte van Egten, Eggert Einarsson, Kristján Guðmundsson, Sigurður Guðmundsson, Gunnar Helgason, Dorothy Iannone, Bernd Koberling, Pétur Kristjánsson, Rainer and Agnes Pretzell, Björn Roth, Rína Thorkelsdóttir, Andrea Toppel, Jan Voss and Tom Wasmuth – met at the Volksdruckerei and Café Imprimerie in Basel, Switzerland, to officially launch the Academy. For three days they discussed the objectives and running of the institution, presented the idea to the world at large at a press conference, and drew a wider audience by putting on an exhibition of their works and opening Dieter Roth's last flat-cum-studio to the public. And they had a lot of fun. The fifteen people were all close friends and collaborators of Dieter's who had been invited to act as a representative cross-section of the artist's many friends and acquaintances by the Academy's two midwives: Jan Voss and Dieter's son, Björn Roth. Two people who perhaps pieced together various of the links in the chain.

The occasion has been amply documented in the subsequent publication *Dieter Roth Academy – Founding of the Dieter Roth Academy – Report on the Conference and Exhibition*, and looking at the photographs and texts one cannot help but be struck by the warmth and humour that united Dieter's old comrades-in-arms, and the urgency that informed the Academy's agenda born out of the gap and the heritage that Dieter left. Already in the mid-1990s Dieter had discussed the possibility of setting up an academy, initially when he and Kristján and Sigurður Guðmundsson came across an old disused factory in Seyðisfjörður, Iceland. Yet something inside the artist told him that the idea of a stationary institution was wrong – and as someone who had spent many years teaching in art schools he should know. Moving beyond the standard notion of an academy where the students wait for the professors to come to them, and reflecting on

the way he had personally learned many things during his life, he came up with the idea of an institution the other way round, where the students would forever be on the move, visiting the “professors” scattered around the globe, and coming into all of those creative and inspiring situations people only encounter when out and about. A move away from the peripatetic teacher to the peripatetic student, and a move to introduce students at an early age to one of Dieter’s favourite activities: travelling. Consequently, the Academy has its nominal home in Seyðisfjörður in Iceland, but is to be found anywhere where one of its members decides to screw a brass plate bearing the legend “Dieter Roth Academy” onto their door.

Another ingredient, as was discussed at length in Basel, is personal chemistry: the academy is or should also be about knowing who will benefit from meeting the academy members or one another; it’s about congeniality and creating the conditions and atmospheres where new things can happen. Also between the members, although that is a non-programmatic issue.

Apart from these points, the curriculum remains open and unfixed. But that, of course, *is* the curriculum. The Academy aims to develop in the sort of non-hierarchical, heterogeneous manner that typified not only Dieter Roth’s art, but also his entire approach to life and his way of seeing. Dieter already embodied the proto-Academy, for he was a great and fascinating teacher who did not simply offer stock answers to art problems, but rather strategies for getting through life, lessons in honesty, and examples of fearless thinking, far apart from the accepted patterns. The Academy members are almost without exception people who learnt this directly from their lives and work with him, and genuinely feel this is the best thing that an Academy can offer to others.

With this openness, the Academy aspires not to be some kind of ambivalent Dada prank, nor to “flux” as an artistic end in itself, nor to be a social sculpture posited as a work-in-progress that merely shows the lack of the artists’ imagination or energy to think the thing through to the end. Rather it is exploring and utilising the most powerful tool that Dieter had in his toolkit for all and everything. And Dieter was interested in almost everything, in an un-academic way – and if there is a touch of irony to the Academy, this is where it lies.

Apart from a steady influx of students (6, I believe, by August 2001, coming from at least 3 countries), one of the most visible manifestations of the Academy post-Basel was the decision to meet again in 2001, this time in Pécs, southern Hungary, slightly less than 20 km

from the home of Agnes and Rainer Pretzell. For the occasion, the Pretzells moved heaven and earth to organize two exhibitions in prime city galleries. Firstly “A Small Look at a Large Body of Work: Dieter Roth – Originals, Prints, Books and More” in the more graceful location, the Museum Gallery set in a garden looking out on Victor Vasarely’s place of birth, which showcased a truly enviable selection of Dieter Roth’s work from the Pretzells’ own private collection. And secondly “A Look Forwards: Dieter Roth Academy, Works by Dieter Roth’s Friends and Collaborators” in the grittier but no less impressive location, the Gallery Pécs in the heart of town, which centred on “works on paper” by the Academy members.

The perspective on the art of Dieter Roth granted by the first exhibition was not merely augmented by the works of his friends and collaborators, all of whom explore avenues of art in ways that have in one way or another been influenced by working with or being friends with him, but also by the written reflections on his life and work and on living and working with him, which were hung in juxtaposition to the “works on paper”. The contributions to the Pécs exhibition were made by

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Sigríður Björnsdóttir | Magnús Reynir Jónsson | Vera Roth |
| Henriëtte van Egten | Beat Keusch | Dominik Steiger |
| Eggert Einarsson | Bernd Koberling | Erika Streit |
| Malcolm Green | Pétur Kristjánsson | Rúna Thorkelsdóttir |
| Kristján Guðmundsson | Uwe Lohrer | Andrea Toppel |
| Sigurður | Ann Noël | Jan Voss |
| Guðmundsson | Gertrud Otterbeck | Tom Wasmuth |
| Richard Hamilton | Rainer Pretzell | Ingrid Wiener |
| Gunnar Helgason | Arnulf Rainer | Emmett Williams |
| Dietrich Helms | Björn Roth | Dadi Wirz. |
| Dorothy Iannone | Karl Roth | |

Not forgetting, of course, Dieter Roth, represented in a selection of his letters to Gertrud Otterbeck and various collaborations with Richard Hamilton, Arnulf Rainer, Björn Roth, Vera Roth, Jan Voss and Stefan Wewerka.

Naturally not everyone could be expected to travel in person to the exhibition: many had other commitments, or live as far away as China (a major test for the prospective peripatetic student!), so arrangements were made to send contributions by mail. This was not least due to the question of import duties: a work on paper could be introduced into the country far more discreetly than a 6 x 4 canvas. So it was a pleasant surprise to see that almost half of the contribu-

tors arrived in person, and many several days before the opening, meaning that the serious work of cleaning frames and framing several hundred pictures could be done as a team. Congeniality reigned much of the time, ably supported by volunteers who went out to fetch suitable refreshments. Apart from the “Hungarian Section” of the Dieter Roth Academy, Agnes and Rainer, a large contingent from Iceland arrived early on to put up the show: First was Runá Thorkelsdóttir, who came a good week before the opening to single-handedly represent Boekie Woekie of Amsterdam until Jan Voss, who was looking after a hospitalised Hettie van Egten, managed to arrive on the day of the opening. Runá was soon followed by Eggert Einarsson, Magnús Reynir Jónsson and Pétur Kristjánsson, with Björn Roth arriving in slightly more last-minute fashion to make a few small but very telling additions. Indeed, Björn was compelled to cut things very fine because as he landed at Airport Budapest, his fellow traveller Gunnar Helgason discovered that he had come with his son’s passport; Gunnar was obliged to acquire provisional papers from the Hungarian authorities before he could continue his way, meaning that he and Björn missed the last train and were forced to travel the 200 km to Pécs by taxi. Several days before the opening, the Icelandic members of the work force were joined by their colleagues from continental Europe, including Gertrud Otterbeck, Erika Streit, and Malcolm Green.

The opening of the two exhibitions took place under near perfect conditions: the sun shone, the ranks of the Academy members swelled with the additions of Andrea Toppel, Dominik Steiger and family, plus welcome visitors Aldo Frei and Hubert Klocker. And a sizeable audience of art-lovers, culture-vultures, press and perhaps the simply curious gathered first at the Museum Gallery, and then an hour later in the Gallery Pécs, to listen to the welcoming addresses given by László Beke, art historian of Hungarian renown, and László Glozer, art theorist and curator who requires little introduction in Germany.

These feasts for the ears, both held in Hungarian and assisted by an interpreter (whose services László Glozer chose to dispense with in order to allow his impassioned style freer rein – leaving most of the Academy members somewhat clueless as to what he had said) plus a rather infirm loudspeaker system, inspired additional impromptu speeches by Pétur Kristjánsson and Jan Voss. And I am sure that one of them at least suggested that the opening would not be in the true spirit of Dieter Roth if justice were not done to the bar: the rest of the

evening was dedicated body and soul to the spirit of Dieter Roth – justice was done.

The DRA exhibition ran for four weeks, and it would be fair to say that the participants were truly pleased with the result: a highly heterogeneous array of works that nevertheless created a very strong, cohesive overall impression.

Naturally the occasion did not revolve solely around the works hanging on the walls. The day after the opening was spent at the Pretzells' in the refreshing countryside at Abaliget, where the joy of being together was marred only by the fact that the Rose Pub a few miles down the road had chosen this day, of all, to be closed. New ideas were explored, tentative friendships deepened, stomachs were filled in the finest manner. And although the "big meeting" failed to materialise – perhaps because everyone was too tired after the preparations, perhaps because the meeting did in many ways take place in the form of chatting, casual exchanges of ideas, relaxing, and regaling – serious plans for the Academy were made, not least to meet again as a body in Iceland in 2002.

This remarkable event would not have been possible without the generous help and cooperation of György Várkonyi, Árpád Gamus, Zoltán Huszár, and József Sárkány, to whom the Dieter Roth Academy would like to express its heartfelt thanks. Additionally, this book would not have been possible without the photographs of Magnús Reynir Jónsson and Hungarian photographer László Ornódi. Magnús already excelled himself through his documentation of the Basel meeting; László stood out among the many wonderful contacts we had in Pécs through his enormous friendliness and his sympathy towards of the DRA project. Our thanks to them both. The front inner flap of the present volume lists the participants of the exhibition (arranged by surname), and the rear flap lists the participants at the meeting, arranged by first name.

Parallel to this visual documentation of the Pécs meeting, which is more akin to a family album, a second book entitled *Til Dæmis And Whatsoe'er* has been produced for the Academy by Boekie Woekie, Amsterdam, and Roths' Verlag, Basel, which focuses on texts by the members relating to Dieter Roth and the Academy.

Malcolm Green

