Roth

continued from page 110

history, one collected from the edges of the artist's (and our) existence, stuff rejected and then reclaimed that denies the binary of extraordinary art and ordinary junk.

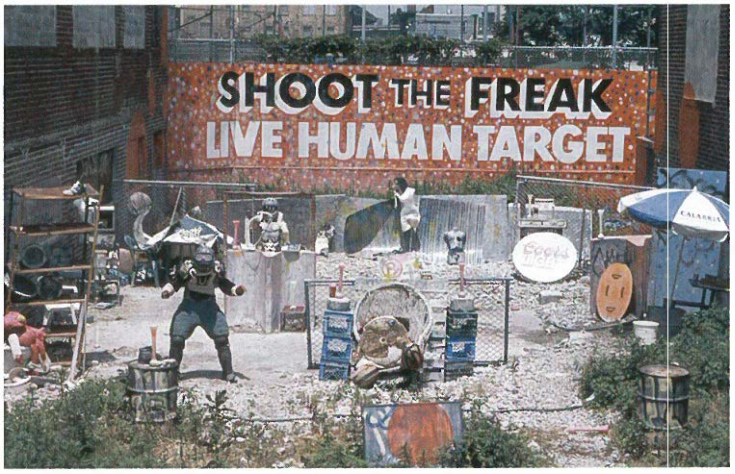
Roth's near total enmeshing of art and life is best represented by the compelling *Solo Scenes*, a multipart video simultaneously playing on a vast wall of 128 monitors, in which he recorded his everyday activities in his home and studio over the course of his final year (1997-98). If ever there were a work to interrogate the myth of the artist, *Solo Scenes*, shown at P.S. 1, is the one to do it. This piece at once plays on our voyeuristic fascination with the artist, ill but still working, and shatters his life irretrievably. The work is impossible to read coherently or comprehensively; forever in motion, it makes us aware of the fact that we never see the whole, regardless of how many screens there are or how long we look at them. In the end, as in so much of Roth's work, we are confronted with transience extended over expanses of time, an ongoing denouement. □

1. The only other significant museum exhibition of Roth's work in the U.S. was at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in 1984; it was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Mary Jane Jacob and Ann Goldstein (*Dieter Roth*, Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984). The show was drawn from the collection of Ira Wool, the foremost collector of Roth's work in this country.
2. See Bernadette Walter, "diter rot," in Dirk Dobke and Bernadette Walter, *Roth Time: A Dieter Roth Retrospective*, ed. by Theodora Vischer and Bernadette Walter, New York, Museum of Modern Art; Baden, Lars Müller Publishers, 2004, p. 42.
3. For the Icelandic meanings, see Dirk Dobke et al., *Dieter Roth: Books + Multiples*, London, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2004, p. 128.
4. Much of the information about Roth's career is derived from *Roth Time*; see especially pp. 76-105 for the years 1960-70. For Roth's early work, see also Dirk Dobke and Laszlo Glozer, *Dieter Roth: Unique Pieces*, London, New York, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 2002.
5. Roth never participated formally in Fluxus events, though he maintained close relations with Williams and other Fluxus artists throughout his lifetime, even producing *Footnotes to Sweethearts* with Williams in 1967. Williams's text for the book on the collaborations of Roth and Richard Hamilton (see note 6) is a testament to the strength of Williams's feelings for Roth. Roth also knew Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik and George Brecht.
6. See Dieter Roth and Richard Hamilton, *Collaborations: Relations–Confrontations*, with an introduction by Vicente Todolí, and texts by Etienne Lullin and Emmett Williams, London, Edition Hansjörg Mayer; Porto, Fundaçao de Serralves, 2003.
7. Roth often collaborated with other artists in this way: for a time, Hamilton sent him a proof from each of his editions, which Roth would overwork; and in 1970, he and the German artist and architect Stefan Wewerka would each finish drawings begun by the other. It was also with the Viennese Actionists that Roth first began publicly performing music (though he had a keen interest early on in avant-garde music). He was to regularly incorporate sound components in his work, including musical instruments and recordings he made with other artists and with his children.
8. "SNOW" was eventually published as the 11th volume of Roth's *Collected Works*, a total of 26 books of a projected 40, many of them cheap offset facsimiles of unique artist's books, issued by Edition Hansjörg Mayer in Stuttgart beginning in 1969.
9. *Roth Time*, p. 95.
10. For this show and its dating to 1970 rather than 1969, as frequently published, see Dirk Dobke, "Staple Cheese (A Race)," in ibid., pp. 130-31.
11. *Dieter Roth*, 1984, p. 9. An alternate version of the story is found in an interview with Roth, in Roth and Hamilton, *Collaborations*, p. 36: "I was completely fascinated and hypnotised by Bellmer. And I did things like him and Tinguely . . . . And then I found when I had made, let's say, a drawing, and even made objects with motors in them like Tinguely, and I found it could not go in a show under my name. Everybody would recognize 'Whow, this is Tinguely, this is Bellmer.' And then I thought, well you pour something over it to . . . to cover the traces of your thought and of your own work. And I poured sour milk over these objects. And this was the way I discovered that sour milk could give me satisfaction."
12. The title both refers to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and to the fact that 30 examples of the work were cast with birdseed and mounted outdoors, to be pecked at until they disappeared.

"Roth Time: A Dieter Roth Retrospective" opened at the Schaulager Basel [May 25-Sept. 16, 2003], and traveled to the Museum Ludwig, Cologne [Oct. 10, 2003-Jan. 11, 2004] and the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York [Mar. 12-June 7, 2004]. It was accompanied by a 304-page catalogue, edited by the head curator of the show, Theodora Vischer, with texts by Dirk Dobke and Bernadette Walter.

Author: *John T. Paoletti is professor of art history at Wesleyan University.*

Vol. 92, No. 8 (September) *Art in America* is published monthly except combined June/July by Brant Art Publications Incorporated, 575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. Tel: (212) 941-2800 Fax: (212) 941-2885. ISSN: 0004-3214. The opinions expressed in "Issues & Commentary," apart from the editor's comments, are those of the writers themselves and not necessarily those of this magazine. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or photographs. *Art in America* is indexed in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and the *Art Index*. Articles are abstracted and indexed in *BHA* (available on-line through Dialog and Questel) and in *Historical Abstracts* and/or *America: History and Life*. Back volumes of *Art in America* are available on microfiche from Bell & Howell, Mt. Periodical Department, Old Mansfield Road, Wooster, Ohio 44691. Microfilm copies are available through Xerox University Microfilm, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. Circulation is verified by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Periodicals postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. **BACK ISSUES AND COMPLETE VOLUMES:** Lawrence McGilvery, P.O. Box 852, La Jolla, Calif. 92038. **SUBSCRIPTIONS** include combined June/July which counts as 2 out of 12 annual issues: U.S. 12 issues $39.95, 24 issues $70.00. 36 issues $95.00. In Canada, add $20 per year + 7% GST; in U.S. possessions add $20 per year; all others add $30 per subscription year, payable in advance, in U.S. currency. Single/back issue: U.S. $10 prepaid; elsewhere $12 prepaid in U.S. currency. August/Annual Guide: U.S. $18 prepaid; elsewhere $20 prepaid in U.S. currency. Domestic newsstand distribution by Curtis Circulation Company, 730 River Road, New Milford, N.J. 07646. **FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE AND TO ORDER A NEW SUBSCRIPTION:** Write to ART IN AMERICA, P.O. Box 37003, Boone, Iowa 50037-0003, or call (toll-free) 1-800-925-8059. Outside the U.S., call (515) 246-6052. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to ART IN AMERICA, P.O. Box 37003, Boone, Iowa 50037-0003 and allow six weeks for change.



Craig Costello and Nathan Smith: *Shoot the Freak*, 2004, enamel on metal; in "Dreamland Artist Club" at Coney Island.

ugly duckling to world-famous, wildly successful beauty queen—is the real theme underlying most of Waters's oeuvre. But in looking at these methodically arranged and sedately framed photo works, it is easy to forget that Waters started out as an aficionado of truly transgressive imagery. Fortunately, some of his early, rarely seen short films were included in "Change of Life." His debut, *Hag in Black Leather Jacket* (1964), shot in grainy black-and-white 16mm and roughly edited, tells the story of an interracial couple who court at a garbage dump and are married by a Ku Klux Klansman. Almost as poorly edited, *Eat Your Makeup* (1967) shows a band of stylish anti-fashionistas forcing scantily clad Twiggy types to model themselves to death while Waters's favorite star, the late, great Divine, falls into a daydream and imagines himself as Jackie Kennedy in a truly tasteless and funny remake of the Zapruder footage of the JFK assassination.

Waters's self-deprecating humor and savvy appreciation of his own place in popular culture were evidenced here by a three-sided, full-scale photo tableau of a kitsch-filled room in the director's own apartment created by his longtime set designer Vince Peranio. As well as demonstrating the filmmaker's obsessive eye for pop trash, it was also a hilarious send-up of conventional, serious-minded museum re-creations.

Over the years, Waters's style—the triumph of "rude" over "good"—has become popularized, even cuddly. This evolution is due in part to Waters's taming of the more edgy aspects of his filmmaking. But it is also the result of an American public that has learned, in no small part through watching his films, to relax and enjoy at least some aspects of queer culture and bad taste. —*Barbara Pollack*

"Dreamland Artist Club" at Coney Island

For "The Dreamland Artist Club," a public-art intervention funded by Creative Time at Coney Island, graffiti artist Steve Powers selected 33 artists whom he saw as bringing something like street culture to the art world. Yet his dream team—a remarkably rowdy bunch, by gallery standards—makes only the tiniest dent on the eye-assaulting, perhaps impenetrably seedy, milieu of Coney Island's dilapidated amusement park. Locating the artworks (mostly signage for rides and games) proves challenging, even with a map, though they are relatively conspicuous for their esthetic and/or conceptual sophistication. (Half of them remain on more or less permanent display after their initial installation over the summer.)

Jack Pierson's project is the prettiest. Taking advantage of the sunlight, bold black letters shimmer against a hot-pink background of iridescent disks for a game pensively titled "Someday." Brooklyn-based artists Craig Costello and Nathan Smith contribute a mural-size sign for "Shoot the Freak," a game that entails firing paintballs at a live human target lurking behind a chain-link fence in a refuse-strewn gravel pit. The sign's aggressive black-and-white lettering stands out against a red background with multicolored polka dots—likely more legible and nicely designed than whatever preceded it. But is it such a radical departure from, say, the old sign for "Dunk the Creep" a few booths down?

Some artists strove to blend in, others did not. The most respectful intrusion came from Ellen Harvey, known for her little Hudson River School-style landscapes painted in oil on graffiti-covered public walls—her "New York Beautification Project." Here, she embellished the spiritual reader's booth with tarot cards and representations of chakras on pale blue walls. A suburban Joe might consider this good, "realistic" painting. The psychic was obviously quite pleased with her revamped stand, and Harvey signed one wall, "Love, Ellen."

Nicole Eisenman brings her customary first-rate painting and smartass humor to the mysteriously titled "Skin the Wire" game. Her sign shows a couple of ruddy-cheeked country bumpkins brandishing a pitchfork and an ax at a wire, personified with eyeballs and lacerated, sore-looking skin. A cow and a pig watch the chase disdainfully from a grassy knoll. Likely to fly over the heads of Coney Island regulars is the humor underlying Toland Grinnell's sign. Known for his tongue-in-cheek, stop-at-nothing constructions, Grinnell's lot was the "Dime Toss." True to form, he constructed a busy, over-designed sign of 24 different-sized circles bearing numbers and texts, among them his interlocking TG initials. Accustomed to making his mark in 24-karat gold, Grinnell proves with his sign, boringly painted black on gray, to be the worst at slumming, hands down.

For his part, Powers perfectly grooves with the atmosphere. With years of experience graffiti-tagging "ESPO" on walls—it stands for Exterior Surface Painting Operation—he has a knack for invigorating public visuals. He repainted the cars of the "Cyclone" roller coaster to pop like a candy bar wrapper and also made new, crisply designed signs for the "Eldorado Auto Skooter" bumper cars ("Bump your ass off," reads one text, alongside an illustration of a donkey's rear end).

Yet "The Dreamland Artist Club" mostly shoots itself in the foot. Out of their element, most of its members come off as much too refined—more, perhaps, than any of them might like to admit.

—*Sarah Valdez*

Howardena Pindell at Sragow

Howardena Pindell's first show in New York in a decade included nearly three dozen small works on paper or papyrus—collages, prints and drawings—ranging in date from 1968 to the present, with more than half from the past several years. Most consist of countless punched-out and notated paper dots arranged in abstract, high-relief compositions within scale-setting grids of various proportions, which have been either sectored by string or hand-drawn. Pindell first started working with grids and dots in the '70s, as was demonstrated in such pieces as the tutti-frutti *Untitled #28* (1974), with an undulating, speckled ground terraced in strips of collaged paper, or *Prism #2* (1973), in which drawn-on dots are partly enmeshed in the handmade paper surface. There were also interesting earlier drawings with handwritten words or slashes accumulated in graph-paper quadrants.

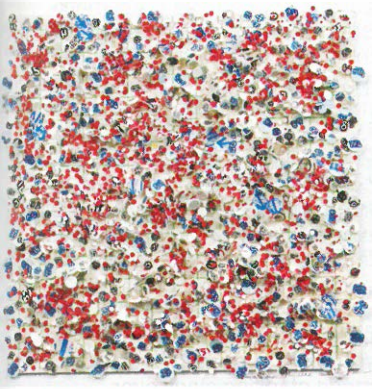
Pindell is enormously inventive with the consciously limited vocabulary that situates her work in a minimalist tradition of serial theme-and-variations. At the same time, the abundance of the dots signals a very unminimalist excess feeling all the more profligate for the constraints imposed. *Untitled #32* (2003-04) is a telling example. Glued to a white ground sectored in green thread is a veritable profusion of dots in two sizes, either printed with numbers and arrows in blue and black (larger), or painted a solid red (smaller). Pindell dusted the work with a sensuous layer of fine powder at the end. Festively colored, the work recalls an after-party floor, with the confetti-like dots clumping in drifts over the surface.

Pindell uses open-bite etching in her prints (there were a few on

John Waters: *Puke in the Cinema*, 1998, two of 10 chromogenic prints, 5 by 7 inches each; at the New Museum.

view, including those in which dots represent stars, numbers galaxies, and arrows the continual expansion of the universe), and the technique appears, too, at tiny scale, in dots that are punched out of already etched sheets. The miniature number or arrow created by this technique is surrounded by a haze of ink, a linear ambiguity enhancing the sense that the artist intends to undermine clarity in one way or another.

Pindell has related the grids and numbers to memories of her father, who was a mathematician, and the dots to history (in segregation-era restaurants, for example, red dots painted on dishware and utensils designated use by black people). It is not necessary to know this in order to sense that these works, which so effectively inhabit a territory of secret codes and broken rules, are somehow connected to highly personal meanings. *—Faye Hirsch*



Howardena Pindell: *Untitled #32*, 2003-04, etching, punched paper, watercolor, thread, spray adhesive, 13¾ inches square; at Sragow.

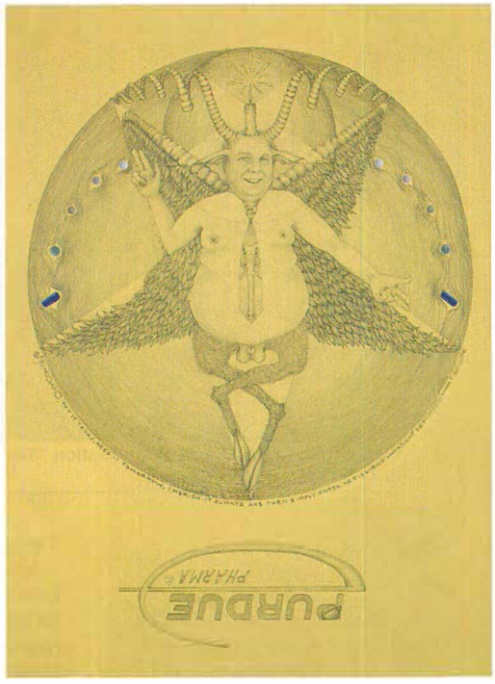
Alex Bag at Elizabeth Dee

Seriously engaged with grudges to bare, Alex Bag conjured the multifaceted installation "Coven Services for Consumer Mesmerism, Product Sorcery, and the Necromantic Reimagination of Consumption," a fantasy PR firm in the service of big science, corporate whores and media luminaries. Papering the gallery space with tear sheets, notes and drawings, Bag offered an abundance of Research and Development ideas for clients on one of three chartreuse-painted walls. Among much else, she provides Halliburton with a new approach to the promotion of tampons and pads high in toxic dioxin. Coven Services clocks 38 years of menstruation and thousands of contacts at the site of the most absorbent part of a woman's body before turning its attention to Halliburton's opportunities in Iraq. Elsewhere, Coven offers Procter & Gamble a drawing with a woman's face in place of reproductive organs, "giving a face to the genitalia," and enumerates the instances of the firm's use of animal testing.

A storyboard for Bechtel begins with the corporate logo, proceeds through drawings of an orgy and concludes as a sated participant licks the logo. NIMH lists mental disorders prevalent in the U.S., and Eli Lilly appears as an octopus, an idea nixed as "confusing and unsettling" by the manufacturer of Prozac. Reimagined as the suicide of a depressed teen, the revised plan addresses "the depressive, Christian youth we want." The adjacent wall is given to drawings of Michael Jackson and Rush Limbaugh. With his children masked as Spider-Man, Jackson is wrapped in the twin serpents of the caduceus—one of them a double helix—promoting trust in Monsanto, deliverers of Agent Orange, Bovine Growth Hormone and aspartame, for "changing the global food market forever." Limbaugh's body is a pentagram, crowned by horns and a burning candle, surrounded by an aura depicting OxyContin, a highly addictive narcotic famously used by Limbaugh himself, who says, "Try it today, need it tomorrow, cherish it always, and then simply enter an exclusive inpatient detoxification facility." The remaining wall is covered with a wallpaperlike series of repeated images in ink, ornamented by scrolls in red and featuring drawings of hanged witches, palmistry and physiognomy studies.

Screened large in a darkened gallery, Bag's video loop sent up the enthusiasm of television advertisements, one of them promoting Jessica Lynch's "I Am a Soldier Too," starring Bag as Lynch, praising Halliburton's presence in Iraq: "Halliburton will be here every step of the way, making bad things good." For Eli Lilly, Bag is the Wicked Witch, observing that "Prozac has made us all so much happier. I'm Eli Lilly. Trust me with your child's mind." Between commercials, a recurrently startled audience viewed the infamous phosphorescent chartreuse of the Paris Hilton sex video, an enthusiastic icon of conspicuous consumption, filthy rich and happy at last. Eschewing the gritty anger of Sue Coe and the street cynicism of Robbie Conal, Bag reaches an audience she has primed with laughter.

—Edward Leffingwell



Alex Bag: *Rush Limbaugh*, 2004, graphite on paper, 22 by 19½ inches; at Elizabeth Dee.

Helen Altman at DCKT

For her first New York solo show, "Smoke Signal," Fort Worth-based artist Helen Altman presented a small selection of her unusual works—12 "torch drawings" and three quilted "moving blankets." To make the former pieces, Altman soaks sheets of cotton paper in water for hours or sometimes days; then, using the flame of a propane torch as one would a paintbrush, she delicately, and swiftly, sears images of various creatures (a rooster, two mules, a rearing horse, among others) onto the damp paper. This unforgiving technique, open to chance and ruin—the pictures must be completed in under 10 minutes so as not to ignite—results in sharp, elegant renderings.

Hung unframed, these stark works covered an entire wall of the gallery (they average in size around 24 by 20 inches). Each animal is shown completely isolated, without context or even a horizon line, while the siennas, ochers and blacks of the scorches make for forms that pop out from the bare backgrounds. They hover like sad, inadequate specters of their real-life alternates on the empty white ground. Altman wields her torch with great dexterity, varying the shape and size of her stroke—*Standing Polar Bear* (2002) appears composed of blotches rather than the velvety strokes found in *Panda* or *Duck* (both 2003), the polar bear's soft, sagging underbelly a bouquet of chocolaty and tawny brown splotches.

The vulnerability, both in method and display, of the torch drawings contrasts with the inherent durability of Altman's moving blankets. In making the latter works, Altman frequently uses found photographic images of animals, but this time set amid natural scenery—on view here were a horse, dog and a flock of seagulls. The photos are then scanned into a computer and printed on canvas, which Altman subsequently applies to a packing blanket using a thermal transfer technique. The topstitching is professionally applied at a quilting factory. Calling attention to the framing edge of the composition, all three quilts on view here were bordered with a narrow strip of solid-colored cloth. But *Gulls* (2003, 78 by 109 inches) and *Horse* (2002, 128 by 134 inches) also had broad, irregular rectangular swatches of patterned fabric placed along one edge.

Like *Ark*, her 1992-95 work consisting of an 11-foot-tall mound of store-bought faux burning logs that emit an electrical glow like firelight, Altman continues to explore our human compulsion to manufacture nature, and the inevitable feeling of nostalgia that follows our unavoidable failure.

—Jessica Ostrower

Helen Altman: *Panda*, 2003, torch drawing on paper, 23½ by 22¼ inches; at DCKT.