

frieze

For God's Sake, Mr. Walther, Do Not Speak Of It

By Franz Erhard Walther 19 JULY 2018

German iconoclast Franz Erhard Walther on his life and influences: from expulsion from art school to a missed encounter with Marcel Duchamp For God's Sake, Mr. Walther, Do Not Speak Of It



I have always taken to radicalism in arts and politics. I developed a healthy spirit of contradiction and combativeness from an early age. I was born in 1939 in Fulda, Germany, into a conservative, Catholic family. As a child, I saw people at the train station being crammed into cattle cars. After the war, when I was 12 or 13, I asked the adults: 'What did you do about it?' Of course, they had no words. All of them claimed to be innocent and yet I knew this could not be so. As I saw it, the only way to oppose this environment a little was to become an artist.

I began studying at the Offenbach Werkkunstschule. I thought that it was an art school, but it turned out to be a design school. I went to Henry Gowa, the school's director. We students revered him because of his history. He came from a Jewish family in Hamburg and had fought in the French resistance against the Nazis. I told him that I could not progress with my work and he listened to me patiently. Then he said: 'We don't have what you want here. Go to the Städelschule. You can study fine art there.' Which is what I did.



Franz Erhard Walther, 'Objects, to use / Instruments for processes', 2018

This was 1959. Before I headed to Frankfurt, I visited the second documenta in Kassel. Good illustrations were a rarity even in art magazines back then, but I had tried to inform myself, and knew some names: Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still. In Fulda, there was a large American barracks. An older artist friend of mine worked there as an art instructor and sometimes brought me art magazines from the US. I would convert the sizes from inches to centimetres and could not believe the scale. In Kassel, I was finally able to encounter these enormous pictures by Jackson Pollock and WOLS, whom I revered.

I shall never forget the attic in the Fridericianum. It was the height of summer and the rooms were small. It was like a sauna. There were three, rather modest-sized, works. An artist had slashed the paintings with a knife. I was utterly stunned. At the time, I could only just grasp Newman. If you imagined that the thin, vertical line continued, then you could create a picture in your head. This suited my idea that the viewer participates in the creation of the image. But now I stood before these much smaller images, overwhelmed and fascinated. I was convinced: this is where we are headed, this is what the best young artists are doing today. I went to the wall and there it was: Lucio Fontana, born in 1899. I was floored. He was 60. When I returned to documenta two weeks later, several works of art had been taken down because of public complaints, including the Rauschenbergs. I found Fontana much more radical, but visitors hadn't made it up to the eaves, presumably. That's why his works were allowed to stay.

After this, the Städel Schule was a tremendous disappointment. I came from this radical experience at documenta and was now expected to do colour theory. I soon started doing experiments with materials alongside my coursework. I glued a variety of materials together and expected viewers to respond. The professors caught wind and were furious: before I concern myself with such experiments, I ought to study first! I told my professor, Ferdinand Lammeyer: 'Professor, these are my studies.' He was a tall, imposing man who always wore a white coat. He drew on his cigar

and slowly blew smoke into my face. Then, in 1961, the entire college of professors sent me a letter saying that I was forcibly expelled. My painting was apparently 'more of a paint clot than a painting', and I made works 'without any form'. This was actually a pretty good description of my work.

After being expelled from Frankfurt, I ordered brochures from all the German art academies and read that K. O. Götz was teaching at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. During the interview I showed Götz my material experiments – empty surfaces, where the material speaks for itself. He was so liberal as to reply: 'Mr. Walther, I do not understand at all what you are doing. But you are a serious young man. Go ahead.' It wasn't the professors who I had difficulties with in Düsseldorf, but rather my artist friends. The classes were rather small in those days. There were five of us: Manfred Kuttner, Sigmar Polke, Chris Reinecke, Gerhard Richter and I; Konrad Fischer, who at the time was still a painter, was in the next room. They all felt provoked by my paper works. Admittedly, it never came to a serious dispute, but there was always that classic Rhineland mockery.

After a few weeks I met Joseph Beuys in the hallway, who also taught at the Akademie. He wanted to know what my art looked like and came to my classroom straight away. My paper and cardboard works lay on the table. I explained to him that as a viewer you should turn them over and lay them out on the table. He was silent for a while and then simply said: 'Clerks' art! It's just like putting folders down in the office.' I was taken aback. The funny thing was that Blinky Palermo, who was in Beuys's class, told me a few weeks later: 'Hey, Beuys is also making work with stacks now.'

In Düsseldorf, I began my fabric pieces. My then wife Johanna had sewn all the parts for my 1. Werksatz (1963–69). Her parents had a tailor shop that we could use. I drew entire series and she sewed them. I came back to the art academy. Beuys said: 'Oh, Walther is a tailor now.' Everyone laughed. That was in the spring of 1963, but a few months later, an Italian art magazine printed a stitched work by Claes Oldenburg. The Academy were all silent, because New York and pop art really were the role models. It was fortunate that everyone had made fun of it earlier, as that way I had proof that I had already begun working with fabric before Oldenburg. Then everyone – Palermo, Polke – came to Johanna, and asked if she could help them with their own fabric pieces. But Johanna was too busy. In the end, Emma, Gerhard Richter's first wife, who had also trained as a tailor, began making them.



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Unlike Beuys, Heinz Mack from the artist group ZERO liked my work. He was the only jury member at an art award who defended me. I called him afterwards and invited him to my studio. He brought Günther Uecker with him. Mack bought one of my Rote Scheibe mit vier Bändern (Red Disc with Four Ribbons, 1963) immediately and Uecker a prototype of my Rote Weste (Red Vest, 1963). These two were my first collectors! They also wanted me to exhibit in Düsseldorf and promised to talk to their gallerist, Alfred Schmela, about it. He seemed to be interested initially, but he never followed up. Only later did I find out the reason from Mack. Schmela also exhibited Beuys and had asked him what he thought about me. Beuys had said, 'If you exhibit this arsehole, you won't get my work.' That was really bad for me, because it was the only European gallery where it was even a possibility to show. Later, though, I considered it an honour that Beuys had reacted so intensely to my work, time and again.

I went to New York in 1967. My image of New York was influenced by documenta and Newman in particular. For me, his pictures represented space, generosity and tolerance. Paradoxically, in New York, I was visited by people from back in Germany. Konrad Fischer came by and wanted to do an exhibition with me. Kasper König was interested in how I made a living in New York. I had my wife and two small children to support, after all. I had grown up in a family of bakers and I found work on the Upper West Side as a cake decorator, as a 'finisher'. König then did the first book of the Walther König publishing house with me: *Objekte, Benutzen* (Objects, to use, 1968).

At some point, I got a letter from Jennifer Licht at MoMA. She asked if I wanted to take part in an exhibition with a few other artists, including Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris. This led to the now famous exhibition 'Spaces' (1969–70). After that, some artists of my generation came to know my work and a few close friendships were formed, for instance Walter De Maria. In the early 1960s he had also made works that could be manipulated. He knew that his own pieces had something of Marcel Duchamp about them, and probably found it interesting that this element of the absurd did not exist in my work at all. Richard Artschwager also visited me regularly. Why he was interested, I do not know, since my work had little to do with his. Artschwager was a carpenter by training, and whenever wooden parts had to be sewn into my fabric works, he sawed them for me. Then a few museum people in Germany saw the König book and wanted to buy works from me. That was like winning the lottery. Suddenly I could live off my work.



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One day, I got a call from a man who spoke English with a strong French accent. It was Marcel Duchamp and he wanted to meet. I initially thought somebody was pulling my leg, but it was really him. Duchamp was friends with the painter William Copley who had shown him Barbara Brown's photographs of my 'work activations'. He had liked the photos so much that he wanted to meet the next day, because he was about to leave for his summer holidays in his French hometown Neuilly-sur-Seine. I could not make it as I had to be at work that day. We agreed to a meeting right after his return. But that meeting unfortunately never took place: he died during his holiday in Neuilly-sur-Seine.

In my whole career, I've never really felt the need to use my art to talk about myself. But the inspiration for my works must have come from somewhere. It clearly did not come from the art world. A central sentence in my diary: 'I want to resign from art history.' I discovered an unconscious source of inspiration in 1972: a publication about my early work, comprising papers, stacks, adhesions, pieces leaning against the wall. I wanted to give the book to my parents, who had never taken to my art. When she saw the book, though, my mother was very proud – at first. She then opened it and became quiet. Then she said: 'But Franz Erhard, this is art? It's our bakery!' She then explained it to me: 'When biscuit dough is rolled out, shapes are cut out of it that look like your outlines. The adhesions are like dough, when its edges are coated with egg yolk. The boards leaning against the wall are the stacked baking trays at the end of the day. The canvases are the dirty baking aprons. The shelf sculpture looks exactly like the window display for our bread.'

I had not been aware of all this. On the contrary, I had always thought that I was working against my family history. I told all of this to a museum director once, but he was appalled: 'For God's sake, Mr. Walther, do not speak of it.' He was afraid it would trivialize my work. But I liked that.