

## BROOKLYN RAIL

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# FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER

By David Rhodes

At Peter Freeman, Inc.



Courtesy of Peter Freeman, Inc, New York.

Facing the large gallery windows that open onto Grand Street, four white organic pillbox-like shapes hang on a free-standing floor to ceiling wall; one in each corner. The title of this piece is “Vier Körperperformen” (1963). A small, framed drawing to the right of this wall, “Körperperformen” (1963), shows the outline of five similar shapes. The artist decided to discard one of the original forms after using them in a performance. These two works indicate the conceptual origin of the subsequent works that comprise the main part of this exhibition.

Franz Erhard Walther is a significant artist who has been included in seminal exhibitions internationally for many years, including “When Attitudes Become Form” (1969) curated by Harald Szeeman at the Kunsthalle Berne (and recreated recently at the 2013 Venice Biennale) and in Documenta on four occasions between 1972 and 1987. His insistence on participatory exhibitions, or the “action process” as he calls it, which pre-dates and has a sharper social and political edge—whilst remaining accessible—than the more recent catchall of relational aesthetics.

Walther is best known for his participatory sculptures, though here the recent “Körperformen” (dating from 2006 to 2013) are grouped together on the floor. Some shapes are geometric, some organic; they are placed close enough to prohibit even walking amongst them. The idea is for the viewer to approach their previously intended use imaginatively. No more touching or moving things around.

Körperformen is translated here by the gallery as “body shapes,” which is misleading as it implies the shapes are derived from bodies, and they are not. An apposite translation would be “shapes for bodies,” indicating that the shapes Walther has constructed from dyed, canvas-covered foam are intended to be picked up, held against the body, sat beside, or leaned against.

In this exhibition, such use is denied and instead it is the placement of individual shapes within the set groups that offer variation from one exhibition to the next. In this way Walther’s work recalls Imi Knoebel’s “Raum 19” (1968), which consists of many stacked geometric forms that are re-assembled differently on each occasion that the piece is exhibited. “Raum 19” takes its name from the room in which Knoebel worked as a *Meister-student* of Joseph Beuys at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where Walther also studied (as did Blinky Palermo and Gerhard Richter, in the same decade), though Walther was a student of Karl Otto Götz. Despite the conceptual similarity between the two works, and the shared educational history of the two artists, Walther was not directly influenced by Knoebel.

The set groups contain four, six, or eight elements; some are triangular or rectangular, others undulate and curve. Included with a single group of dark red “Körpenformen” are “28 Untitled Drawings” (2013) hung in a frieze of pairs. The drawing on the left side of each pair is a yellow letter from the alphabet. The drawings on the right depict images derived from photographs of Walther performances, studio, or individual pieces. The letter “A” begins the sequence with a drawing of a photograph from the series “Attempt to be a Sculpture” from the fall of 1958. The photographs referred to by the drawings continue in a chronological progression recording moments in the artist’s past, both private and public, and at various stages of completion or enactment. What appears to fascinate formally, and is important as a subject both personally and socially, is the interaction of materials and ideas as communicated through actions and relationships. The “Körpenformen” are about potential and openness to rearrangement—not fixed statements—they are inclusive of the viewer and invite a

meditative consideration of further reconfigurations. Walther isn't interested in sharing humor or producing a performative collective spectacle—what appears to be intended is a slow, thoughtful engagement with abstracted shapes and forms other than our own.