

## ARTFORUM

### ***Franz Erhard Walther***

At Peter Freeman, Inc.

By Alan Gilbert

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While living in Germany and New York during the 1960s, Franz Erhard Walther produced a series of fifty-eight sculptural objects designed for viewer interaction and direct handling, which were collectively titled “1. Werksatz” (First Set of Works). The earliest of these, *Stirnstück* (Forehead Piece), 1963, involved using the front of the head to slide a strip of maroon velvet down a wall. The final work in the project, *Zeit Stelle Dauer Richtung Bezug* (Time Place Duration Direction Relation), 1969, consists of two bedlike structures made with stretched canvas—again dyed maroon—covering wooden boards that divide the pieces into two and four sections, respectively. The piece was primed for repose at Walther’s recent exhibition at Peter Freeman, Inc., which also featured four other works from “1. Werksatz” as well as an earlier interactive object and thirty-odd watercolor drawings.

Some critics, and even Walther himself, downplay the visual quality of the canvas sculptures, instead stressing that they exist first and foremost as participatory works. In actuality, they’re formally precise: They tend to use standard geometric shapes, often as a means of situating bodies within a grid. Most of the pieces from “1. Werksatz” on display at Peter Freeman align participants face-to-face, head to toe, or side by side, though *Sockel, Vier Bereiche* (Pedestal, Four Areas), 1969, asks viewers to stand in holes cut at each corner of a square section of sewn canvas. Black-and-white photographs that document Walther’s project seem to shrink the individuals interacting with each piece as its formal component takes over. Indeed, the number of moves participants can make seems determined above all by the sculpture’s formal demands. Less stationary pieces from “1. Werksatz” that can be carried around or worn might appear as exceptions, but even these come with instructions.

In person, the works feel relatively modest and close to human in size, and the canvas material is more pronounced. *Für Zwei* (For Two), 1967, is a roughly forty-eight-by-eighteen-inch segment of green canvas with holes to accommodate two people’s heads. Trying it out firsthand at Peter Freeman—as visitors were encouraged to do—one experienced the feeling of encountering another head floating detached from its body. That body, in turn, becomes a plinth for the work as sculpture, whereas elsewhere (e.g., *Sockel, Vier Bereiche*) it’s the artwork that serves as plinth for those interacting with it. This suggests a fairly traditional concern with sculpture as such, albeit rendered in a novel format, distinguishing Walther’s art from, say, Lygia Clark’s participatory sculptural objects, which have an intimacy and sensuality that Walther’s more resolutely conceptual approach tends to keep at a distance.

Although Walther makes preparatory sketches for his works, the accompanying drawings at Peter Freeman—often in watercolor, gouache, and/or pencil, at times with typewritten text—were in many cases produced after a particular object was completed. They aim to inform as to the use and installation of a piece, as well as to guide its interpretation and visually expand upon it. *THE BODY IS THE SCULPTURE*, states one, in handpainted orange text. The words *field*, *action*, *state*, *balance*, *current*, and *maintaining* appear in another, as if proposing keywords for various themes in the work. Of note is the play between movement and stasis, a formulation that Walther's subsequent art addressed in less neatly dialectical ways.

Thus, in the 1970s, Walther created works whose participatory aspect is more open-ended. Titled “2. *Werksatz*,” these pieces include a large steel ring on the ground to be stepped on or over, conjoining boxes meant to be walked through, etc. Then, beginning in the '80s, he moved to the wall with brightly colored hung canvas and fabric installations that recast yet again his art's strategies of viewer engagement. The exhibition at Peter Freeman—and a Walther retrospective currently on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva—signals a reevaluation of his work, particularly “1. *Werksatz*.” Perhaps above all, Walther's project offers an intriguing counterweight to the emphasis on free individual choice often seen as typical of interactive art. In making the body serve as a formal component, his work sheds light on the hidden request for complicity that often lies behind the invitation to participate.

