

## The Seattle Times

### In stitches: the fabric-based performance art of Franz Erhard Walther



“Kopf zu Kopf ueber Kopf” (“Head to Head, Via Head”) being “activated” by participants in 2010.

**In the age of Etsy.com, fabric art has become commonplace. But in the 1960s, when Franz Erhard Walther started creating fabrics to be “activated” by volunteers, his fellow artists made fun of him.**

By [Michael Upchurch](#)

*Special to The Seattle Times*

Originally published November 3, 2015 at 7:00 am

Identify someone as a “fabric artist” these days, and most people will have some idea of what you’re talking about: cavernous webs of yarn filling a gallery, or fine-art quilts you hang on a wall rather than put on a bed. But in 1961, when [German artist Franz Erhard Walther](#) first started using fabric in his work, no one knew what to make of it.

As Walther explained last week at the media preview for his show at the Henry Art Gallery: “It was so unusual that the artists around me made jokes.” Some said he’d turned into a tailor.

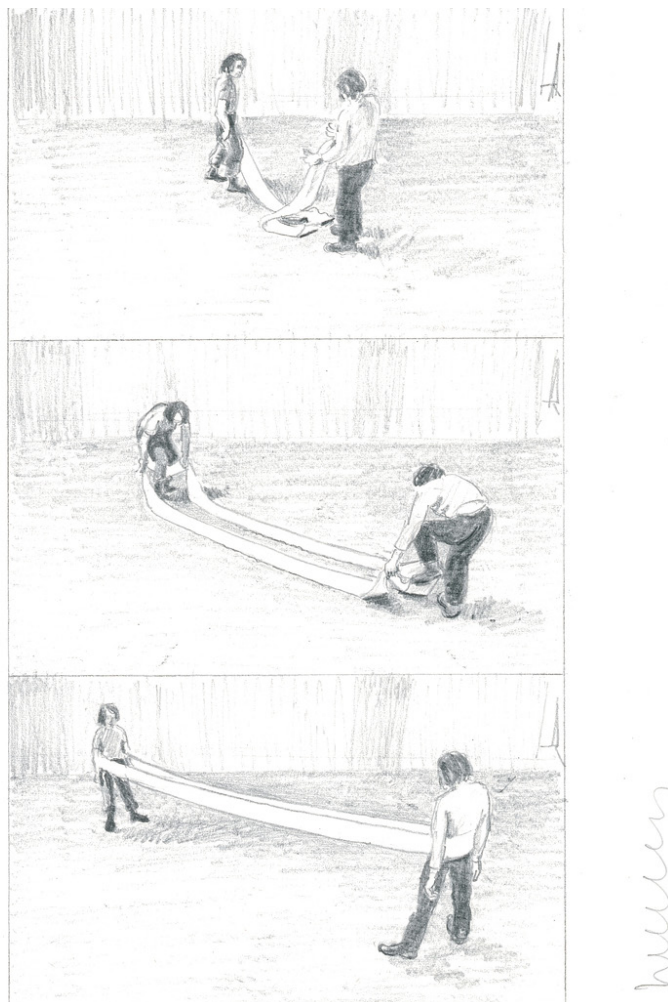
By 1963, when Walther began calling on volunteers to “activate” these fabric pieces, he was entering other artistic terrain that lacked a label, although it might now be called performance art.

“There wasn’t a real language to describe it,” Walther says. To his volunteers, he called it “a kind of activated minimal art.”

“Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Draws,” the first American museum survey of Walther’s career, covers almost six decades of work, starting in 1957 (Walther was born in 1939). It reveals a mind both extraordinarily methodical and extraordinarily variable. The work can seem dry or even sterile, more like the contents of some eccentric linen warehouse than an artistic endeavor. But when its human component is put into action, it becomes both playful and testing.

Walther has always tried to make more with less. His pencil-and-tempera-on-paper “Wortbilder” (“Word Picture”) series from 1957-1958 tries to conjure a sense of place without resorting to any pictorial depictions. Instead, it uses color and typography to suggest distant locales — “Afrika,” “Roma,” etc. — that Walter, then in his late teens, had never visited.

Walther’s engagement with textual possibilities in visual art continued throughout his career. “The New Alphabet, Form C” (1994), for instance, doesn’t simply replicate the letter “C,” but uses 15 fragments of foam-filled cotton to hint at the possibility of a gigantic “C” precipitating into existence.

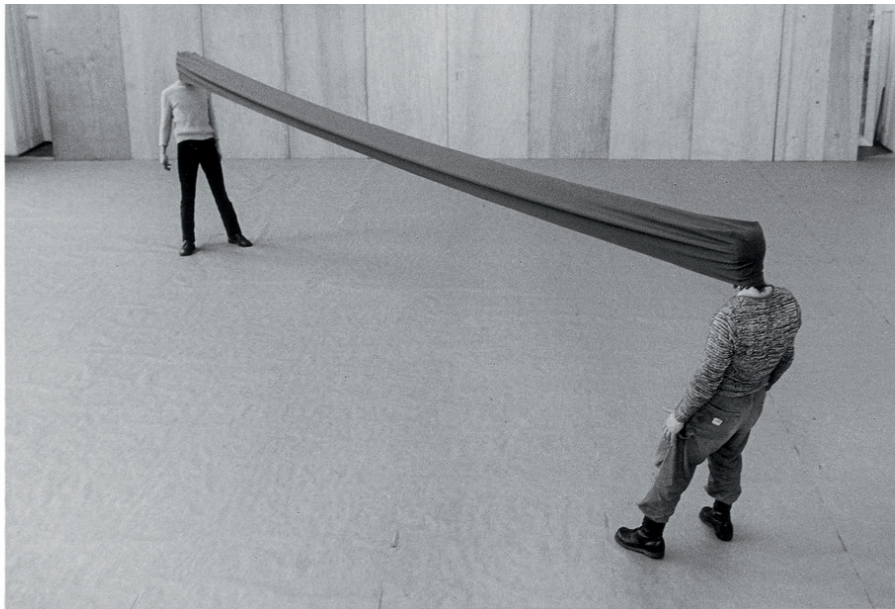


“Nachzeichnung” (“Copy Drawing”) by Franz Erhard Walther, 1971, at Henry Art Gallery.

Fabric first came into the picture in a big way with “Worksatz” (“First Work Set”) from 1963-1969. Walther’s bolts and bundles of cotton, stacked on two risers in the Henry, look like the folded tarpaulins and tents of an unusually finicky Boy Scout troop. They’re clean. They’re tidy. They’re impeccably organized.

In their inert state, it’s difficult to say what they’re organized for. But a video installation — featuring archival footage of pieces being “activated” — clarifies matters. So do live “activations” the Henry is staging.

Last Saturday I caught one, “Sehkanal” (“Sight Channel”), in which two volunteers carefully unfolded, then placed a 24-foot-long hood over their heads. Then they leaned away from each other in a ginger balancing act to pull the fabric taut. As long as it was tight, they could see each other. But once they began to fatigue, after 15 minutes or so, the fabric drooped and they lost eye contact.



A 1968 photograph of Franz Erhard Walther’s “Sehkanal” (“Sight Channel”), a 24-foot-long hood that participants put over their heads and try to keep taut for as long as possible, now on display at Henry Art Gallery.

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There are no instructions on how long to keep “Sehkanal” going, said Emily Zimmerman, one of Saturday’s volunteers and the Henry’s associate curator of programs. Instead, the participants have to take an “organic” approach. The neck tension and uncertain balance of the two participants communicate through the cloth. When things start getting shaky, it’s time to call it quits.

The fabric installations of “The Body Draws” are complemented by dozens of Walther drawings that, like the videos, document past activations. Scores of other drawings find Walther obsessing over the connection between text, color and shape. One snippet of text in capital letters — “WITHOUT FIXED STATE/SITE” — nicely sums up Walther’s methods and concerns.

This isn’t art that grabs you by the throat and shakes you. But it does have intriguing spirit of inquiry.

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## **“Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Draws”**

11 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday, through March 6, 2016, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle; \$5-\$10 (206-543-2280 or [henryart.org](http://henryart.org)).