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INTERACTION
Museumgoers
engaging Franz
Erhard Walther's
"instrument"
artworks: "Sehkanal
(Sight Channel)"
(1968).
Paula Court, Courtesy of
Dia Art Foundation

Try These On. But Take Them Seriously.

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER SEPT. 30, 2011

At some point in the 1950s, artists around the globe decided they wanted to do more than just paint on canvas. Inspired in part by Jackson Pollock's dripped and poured paintings, and the idea that the process of making an artwork was as important as the final product, artists began puncturing, scorching and imprinting bodies on canvas. Franz Erhard Walther, a German artist whose work is currently on view at Dia:Beacon, took the idea a step further, creating objects out of fabric that people could manipulate to increase their awareness of time, space and the human body.

Mr. Walther, 72, is not well known in this country, although Dia acquired his "First Work Set," the centerpiece of this show, back in 1978. While studying art in Düsseldorf, Mr. Walther, like many young postwar artists, came under the influence of Art Informel, a European counterpart to Abstract Expressionism that emphasized the expressive instincts of the artist over defined subject matter. In the early '60s, he extended that approach by making objects — "instruments," he called them — that could be completed only when a viewer interacted with them.

To experience “First Work Set,” you first look at a brochure with photographs of people interacting with the 58 fabric instruments that Mr. Walther created between 1963 and 1969. Some can be experienced individually — like “Stirnstück (Forehead Piece),” a velvety cushion, similar to the ones on church kneelers, but attached vertically to a wall so that you can lean your head against it. Others require more participants. “Korpergewichte (Body Weights)” is a beltlike loop of canvas, about a dozen feet long, that two people stand inside, counterbalancing each other’s weight, while “Sehkanal (Sight Channel)” is slipped over the heads of two people standing about a dozen feet apart to create a private line of vision.

After choosing the instrument you’d like to engage with — you have to have the same number of people as in the photograph — you alert a gallery attendant. (You can also just sit on a wooden chair at the end of the room and observe.) When your turn arrives, the attendant leads you to where the instrument lies carefully folded on the perimeter of the room. You are then instructed to handle the object carefully, since these are original instruments, not exhibition copies, and use them in the way the artist intended. They are meant for “ceremonial” and “contemplative” use, you are told; they are not objects “for recreation.”



“Weste (Vest)” (1965).
Paula Court, Courtesy of Dia Art
Foundation

Mr. Walther's "Work Set" fits perfectly in Dia's collection of largely Minimalist artworks from the '60s and '70s, which consider how objects activate space and viewers' relationship to it. Photographs in a catalog available in the bookstore at Dia, which was published in conjunction with Mr. Walther's participation in the 1977 São Paulo Biennial, show larger and more stationary works by Mr. Walther that also dovetail with the concerns of so-called Minimal and Post-Minimal artists: Donald Judd, Walter De Maria, Robert Morris, Simone Forti, Richard Serra, Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown and others. (Drawings and small, rough objects made of muslin, cardboard and tape, exhibited alongside the "Work Set," also recall the work of Joseph Beuys.) Mr. Walther's "Work Set," however, takes Minimalism into the realm of participation, a previously overlooked area of contemporary art history that has become popular in recent years.

And this is where Mr. Walther's work seems to suffer from misinterpretation. There is something comical about his objects, and many viewers, at least during my visit, had a hard time stifling their laughter while looking at photographs of a person wearing an oversize padded vest, lying prone on the floor with hands thrust into canvas pockets, or wearing what we in America generally identify as dunce caps.

The gallery attendants seem accustomed to this reaction. One woman — from Germany, actually — complained to the attendant that having to remain serious while crawling into a body-size canvas pocket interfered with the "free space" of art. The young man nodded and repeated, with monklike patience, that Mr. Walther's intention was to create instruments for meditation, not recreation.

Mr. Walther's "First Work Set" upsets our expectations of how art functions: We don't like Big Brother telling us what to do, particularly when he's an artist. The qualms of contemporary viewers have clearly dogged Mr. Walther since the 1960s. Although Dia's brochure says that Mr. Walther's process "resists the sole authority of the artist and the contemplative passivity of the viewer," Carl Vogel wrote in the 1977 catalog that Mr. Walther had difficulty making his intentions clear, "especially with members of certain age groups of a generation which wants to be regarded as particularly antiauthoritarian."

But the participatory nature of the work is not the big culprit here. In addition to the Minimalists, Mr. Walther's works can also be compared to those of Brazilian artists from the '60s, like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Ms. Clark and Mr. Oiticica made objects that were activated by participants, but Mr. Oiticica's "Parangolés" (1964) were colorful fabrics to be worn by people twirling like dancers at Carnival,



“Positionen (Positions)” (1969). Paula Court, Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation

and Ms. Clark’s “Sensorial Objects” from the ’60s and “Relational Objects” from the ’70s and ’80s started with activating the senses and moved into a kind of radical art therapy.

Mr. Walther’s instruments, on the other hand, are beautifully crafted and austere — like objects one might find in a religious setting or on a meditation retreat. (The photographs also show people using them outdoors, a common thread for German art, which is historically known for engaging the landscape.) Despite their origin in the ’60s, they aren’t intended as a therapeutic liberation from everyday strictures. Fun is not their main objective, and yet even viewers familiar with contemporary art come at them through the filter of later works like the “Passestücke,” loosely translated as “Adaptives,” of the Viennese artist Franz West from the ’70s and ’80s — plaster sculpture-prosthetics that encouraged silly, absurdist behavior.

What Mr. Walther’s “Work Set” highlights is how much participatory art, and art in general, depends upon the cooperation of the viewer — and how hard it is to control that, particularly when your work runs counter to viewers’ expectations. Dia should be commended for enforcing Mr. Walther’s wishes and insisting on the original purpose of his instruments. At the same time, “enforcing” implies rules, and no one likes rules — particularly in the West, where art is often viewed as a free

imaginative space in which rules are temporarily suspended (and artists are “allowed,” often encouraged, to live outrageously, functioning as surrogates for the rest of us staid citizens).

This might also be the reason Mr. Walther’s work has remained relatively unknown in the United States, particularly compared with the colorful, sensory creations of Ms. Clark and Mr. Oiticica, who are treated, within the history of postwar contemporary art, as liberating superheroes.

“Franz Erhard Walther: Work as Action” continues through Feb. 13 at

Dia:Beacon, 3 Beekman Street, Beacon; (845) 440-0100 or diaart.org.

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