

# Art in America

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## Franz Erhard Walther

BERLIN

at KOW

by [Mark Prince](#)



T.S. Eliot wrote that “no artist . . . has his complete meaning alone”: an artwork is activated by its relation to its contemporary and historical context. Since the early 1960s when, instead of painting, Franz Erhard Walther would deconstruct painting’s support, highlighting the absence of the work being framed, the German artist has created sculptures that assume the condition of negative space, defined by their use and context. But conversely, his work is also a collection of objects that can stand as an essence of basic sculptural form.

KOW presented four groups of Walther’s recent fabric-covered foam sculptures in conjunction with 16 parts of the earlier *24 Yellow Columns* (1982). Offset by the minimal showcase of a contemporary art gallery, Walther’s art has the self-deprecating, even apologetic air of objects placed in the position of claiming the undivided attention normally granted to work that professes a less partial autonomy. The 10 elements of *Body Shapes Bordeaux Red* (2013) resemble geometric minimalist sculpture, but softened up, their edges beveled, with sections removed from their rectangular shapes. Cylindrical incisions and variations in form deny the set the symmetry a Donald Judd installation would aspire to, suggesting that these might be pieces of a puzzle that fit together by some logic yet to be determined. Indeed, many of Walther’s multipart works are designed—with a modestly pragmatic, ecological intent—to be arranged into a single, space-saving form for storage between exhibitions.

If Minimal art comprehended a phenomenological engagement between viewer and artwork, Walther goes further, casting his sculptures as incomplete without physical interaction. Their soft, curved forms are intended to submit, at least in principle, to the viewer’s body, or to other elements of the work. His early sculptures were presented outdoors in the Hochrhön region around his native city of Fulda, extending context to take in the German landscape itself. Documentary photographs exist that show people engaging with the sculptures against a natural backdrop, which creates an uninflected foil for the work’s geometries. But those empty fields also charge the sculptures with associations and implications, as do the barren terrains against which many of Samuel Beckett novels play out. There is an implicitly theatrical dimension to Walther’s art, which would have been anathema to Minimalists such as Judd.

The modesty of the “Body Shapes” is their authority, in keeping with a philosophy for which modernist art’s embodiment of a singular subjectivity is naive. Walther conforms to post-structuralist theory of the 1960s and ’70s (when he was emerging as an artist), according to which the artist is a facilitator rather than a creator, synthesizing existing culture into new strains. Adjuncts to the human body as well as autonomous abstract artworks, Walther’s sculptures might be described as passive-aggressive: succumbing to their context, they dominate it as much as they are defined by it. The two parts of *Body Shapes Dark Grey* (2006) form a single, biomorphic shape, abutting along a straight vertical: an ideal, internal coherence, self-reflexively formalistic, that is contradicted by the implicit appeal of its curved outer edges to be “completed” by messy, unpredictable human engagement.

In KOW’s basement, *24 Yellow Columns* hung across one high wall. Here, context is art historical as well as art institutional. The columns invoke functional objects, but they are made of cotton duck canvas, Walther’s staple material but also the customary ground of high modernist American painting. The fabric cylinders hang like bats, collapsed ghosts of their former classical selves, ready to be folded away until they are next exhibited, encompassing an institutional future as well as an antique and modernist past—a temporal as well as a spatial context.