

Frieze

Pleased To Meet You



BY KOLJA REICHERT
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In his 50-year career Franz Erhard Walther has challenged notions of sculpture and performance, insisting on the artwork's completion in the imagination



Sehkanal, 1968 from the series, *1. Werksatz*, 1963–69, Photographic documentation

We are standing between two long workbenches in Franz Erhard Walther's studio on the Klosterberg in Fulda: the artist in a skin-coloured flannel shirt approaching his 75th birthday and the visiting critic. Carefully balancing one another, we lean our unequal weights into the 6.2-metre length of fabric that is stretched around and between us: *Körpergewichte* (Body Weights, 1969), the 48th work in the series *1. Werksatz*, an ensemble of 58 fabric pieces that Walther began in 1963 in Dusseldorf and completed in 1969 in New York.

This is my first encounter with one of Walther's participatory works, which I know mainly from pictures. For example the Existentialist-looking black and white photographs taken by Timm Rautert in 1970 in the Upper Rhön region, an hour's drive from here: people with a great length of upholstered fabric suspended between their necks (*Elfmeterbahn*, Eleven-metre length, 1964), or walking nine in a row in fabric bags sewn together (*Sammelobjekt*, Collector's item, 1967). These absurd-looking rituals captivated me years ago, making me realize that I had some serious catching-up to do concerning the history of performative and participatory art of the 1960s and '70s and the social models that underpinned these art forms.

For the American painter Peter Halley, Rautert's photographs recalled the mythical landscapes of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Ingmar Bergman as well as Michel Foucault's genealogy of forms of discipline. Almost 40 years later, Halley activated the works himself and understood the light, down-to-earth conceptualism that gave rise to them.¹ In the same way, my visit to Fulda is a process of

disenchantment. In the best sense: a step-by-step removal of the projections that have been superimposed on Walther's fabric objects over the course of five decades. In the early 1960s, Walther's aim was to create art objects that were free of all meaning. But is that possible? Objects without meaning? Surely Walther's works – via countless photographs of their interactions with fellow artists and curators including Richard Artschwager, Sigmar Polke and Kasper König – are hugely charged with meaning?



Franz Erhard Walther: *The Body Decides*, 2014, Installation view, WIELS, Brussels

Installation views from the recent spate of Walther retrospectives offer no direct answer. For *The Body Decides*, his large retrospective at WIELS, Brussels earlier this year, the monochrome objects of 1. Werksatz were laid out like stock in a textiles factory awaiting inventory, like equipment in a school sports hall, like tents after camp has been struck or like the elements of an installation before the artist had come to arrange them. In fact, the elements were waiting for the viewer to turn them into artworks through use: waiting for someone to slip into *Objekt zum Hineinlegen* (Object To Lie Down, 1964) or for a couple of people to place the very long hood for two, *Sehkanal* (Sight Channel, 1968), over their heads. Walther's oeuvre is based at least as much on conceptual definitions as on formal choices, and there is an entire vocabulary associated with the fabric objects. They are 'Werkstücke' (workpieces) which sounds like 'Werkzeug' (tool), just as 'Werksatz' (set of works) sounds like 'Bausatz' (parts of kit). When in use, they take on 'Handlungsform' (action form), joining with the user to form 'Werkfiguren' (work figures). Subsequently, they return to their 'Lagerform' (storage form), the state in which they are displayed. But even here they await activation, now in the imagination of the viewer, as 'Werkvorstellung' (the work's idea). They possess a potential that can be specifically realized and influenced in usage without being exhausted. 'Someone once said they look like sleeping giants,' Walther recalls. It's a good comparison: over the past few decades, his oeuvre has woken up at a leisurely pace like a slumbering giant. When Walther's objects shine out in the frivolous colours of an Apple Retina display, when shots of the WIELS show appear on contemporaryartdaily.com, they suddenly seem free of the seriousness of postwar West Germany. They look wholly contemporary, perhaps even offering ultra-fresh building blocks for the future. Why is that?

KOLJA REICHERT Is it because your works were so out of step with the times when they were made that it is possible for them to be seen as in tune with the times today?

FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER Yes. It's really not possible to grasp the extent to which they weren't in tune back then.

KR At the time your stated aim was for the 'workpieces' to have no meaning, no semantic charge. Do they have meaning today?

FEW Yes, that's become a myth, I know. Even I cannot free myself from critical reception.

KR Does this mean what you did at the time is lost? It's not actually possible for something to have no meaning, no semantic charge.

FEW Oh yes it is! It works on the conceptual level. But it's necessary to explain how it was at the time.

With his expansion of the classical definition of the artwork to include action in time, towards an open, process-based model, Walther took both a step forward and a step back – back to a position before the closed, autonomous work and forward to the involvement of the viewer as user. At the same time as the instruction pieces developed by Fluxus and before the text-based works of Conceptual art, he shifted the artwork's realization and production of meaning out of the material onto the active viewer. In doing so, he set off down a distinctive path within art history that would soon cause him a great deal of trouble.



The New Alphabet, Form Z, 1991 Cotton cloth and wood Six parts Work activation during Franz Erhard Walther. Das Neue Alphabet 1990-1996 Stiftung Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum – Zentrum für internationale Skulptur, Duisburg 2001

In 1962, as a student in of Karl Otto Götz at the Dusseldorf art academy, with Sigmar Polke, Konrad Fischer and Gerhard Richter, only three fellow artists didn't greet his early works with rejection, mockery and lack of understanding: Reiner Ruthenbeck and the late and Jörg Immendorff and Verena Pfisterer. In the winter of 1969-70 as an unknown artist, he was included in Jennifer Licht's Spaces exhibition at MoMA in New York alongside Dan Flavin, Michael Asher and Robert Morris. Visitors picked up 'workpieces' designed to be

stepped into and put them over their heads asking what all this had to do with art. At home the newspaper Die Welt used Walther's New York 'sack race' to illustrate the decline of contemporary art.

Today, on the other hand, with participatory art enjoying a boom, Walther is considered a pioneer, the inventor of a 'relational aesthetics avant la lettre', according to his gallerist Alexander Koch – perhaps even a pioneer of performance art, a point of reference for younger artists like Tino Sehgal and Santiago Sierra. Sierra (like others including Martin Kippenberger, John Bock, Christian Jankowski, Jonathan Meese and Rebecca Horn) studied with Walther in Hamburg, where he taught at the University of Fine Arts between 1970 and 2005. Two years ago, Walther performed 'work actions' at MoMA: 'the audience was 90 percent young people. They wouldn't stop applauding.' At Centre Pompidou in Paris, people even stood up and started chanting: 'I didn't know what to think. The curator said "well, you are a pop star." Goodness me, surely I can't be a pop star with works like this!'

KR In 1958, aged 19, you were photographed performing actions like spitting out water mixed with milk and baking powder. You called the works Versuch, eine Skulptur zu sein (Attempt at Being a Sculpture, 1958).

FEW I was thinking about whether it was possible to give a sculpture speed. Temporality. A flowing quality. Wood or stone were out of the question. And tracing out the actions of the sculptor wasn't the answer either. So I asked a friend to photograph me in my studio.

KR A single performance of an action for which there is no role and no script which is then recorded in a photograph – that later became the form of documentation for performance art. You anticipated what Yves Klein did later with his Leap into the Void (1960) or Bruce Nauman with his video documentation of seemingly banal actions in his studio.

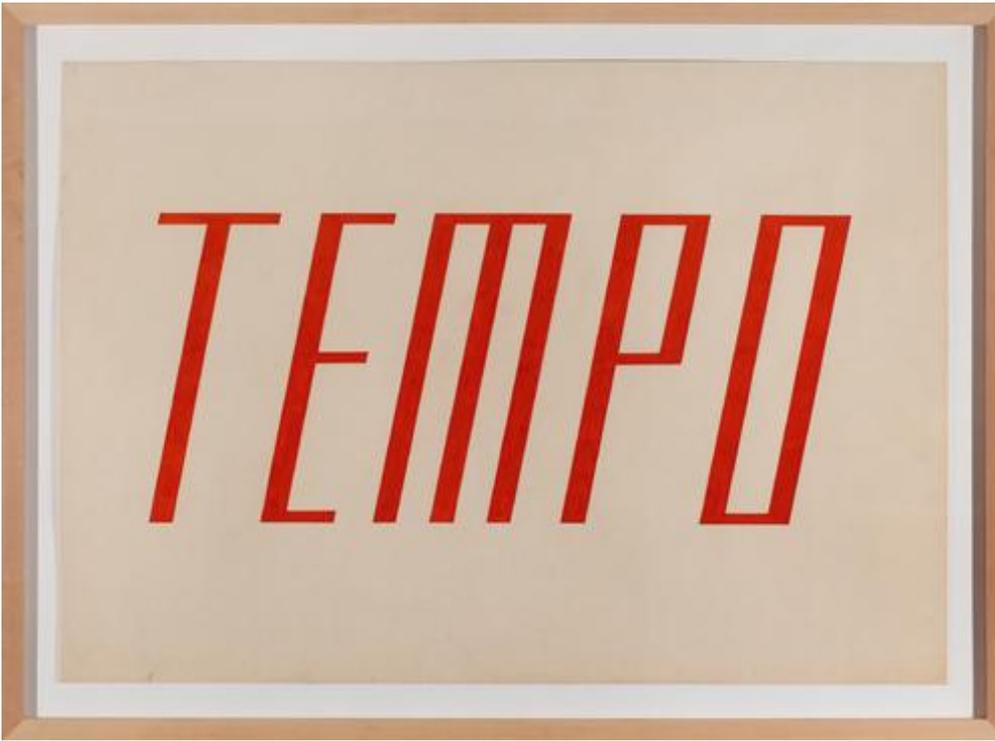
FEW Nothing like that existed at the time. Later, I encountered the gestures of Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, and the painting of Jackson Pollock and Wols – they appealed to me. People always look surprised when I say how important Art Informel was for me. My work is usually considered very formal.

In Walther's work, the formlessness in question relates not to a visual level but to his insistence on the unfinished quality of the work and its openness to the viewer. As a 17-year-old, when his engagement with contemporary art was limited to the annual Christmas exhibitions held by Fulda artists, Walther experimented with outline drawings intended to involve the viewers as co-authors who would complete the works in their imagination. The minimalist forms resemble the later 'workpieces', but also the cookie cutters used in his parents' bakery, a world from which he had already liberated himself, making his work in a separate studio apartment. Today, Walther traces his piles of glued paper and his stacks of air-filled cushions made of newspaper (developed during his studies at the Werkkunstschule Offenbach and the Städelschule Frankfurt) back to the racks of baking trays he remembers in his parents' bakery.

He saw his interest in unfinished, processual works reflected in Rembrandt and in late Cézanne, about which he has often spoken, as well as in Jackson Pollock and the cut canvases of Lucio Fontana, who Walther discovered at Il.documenta in 1959 – a key experience for him. Another crucial moment came in 1963 at the Europäische Avantgarde show organized by Galerie d in Frankfurt, where Walther saw *Line 1000 Meters Long* (1961) for the first time, Manzoni's line on paper hidden in a barrel. 'I was so touched, not least because it specifically concerned me. I had always espoused the view that a work can only exist in the imagination, and everyone would always say: oh, Franz! Here, for the first time, was a concrete example. I had an ally! I walked out of the exhibition with tears in my eyes. From that moment on, I was invulnerable.'

From 1957, Walther's move away from painting started with the drawings and paintings of empty frames, as well as the bafflingly simple performance *Proportionsbestimmung* (Defining Proportions, 1962) that he reprised in 1972 for Gerry Schum's *Fernsehgalerie* on WDR television: two hands, alternating between horizontal and vertical movements, measure out the same space, time and again. Having experimented with leaving the creation of forms to random processes of soaking paper in water, oil or soy sauce, active bodies returned to the centre of his practice – as in *Vier Körperformen* (Four Body forms, 1963), a set of foam-filled fabric objects to be worn against the body. 'In this way, I made the body into a plinth'. Franz West reportedly didn't like to be reminded of these precedents for the *Passtücke* (Adaptives) that he started making in 1974.

However, Walther was unhappy that his works were still associated with collage. In March 1963, in the dressmaker's workshop belonging to Johanna Friesz's parents, he finally discovered a material with no art-historical baggage: untreated cotton cloth. At the same time,



Wortbild *TEMPO*, 1958, Pencil and tempera on paper, 70 × 100 cm

Friesz discovered Walther's work. She promptly abandoned her studies and devoted the rest of her life to helping him fabricate his pieces. Later they married. Her skill as a tailor is the source of Walther's signature look that contrasts the male connotations of minimalist rigour with materials that – like it or not – bear domestic and female connotations. Similarly, this division of labour was in line with the conventional patriarchal model. Even today, decades after their divorce, Johanna Walther still produces her ex-husband's works and white 'exhibition copies' of his originals in a workshop in the Rhön region.

KR With the sewn works, you opened up a territory all of your own.

FEW That was my dream, to step out of history. The first time I had things that had not previously existed, it gave me a feeling of freedom. After the school break, I came back to Dusseldorf with the sewn works – they laughed their heads off. Beuys said: Walther wants to become a tailor! Ha ha! Six months later, Claes Oldenburg brought out his textile pieces. They stopped laughing then. A year later, Polke turned up and asked if Johanna would sew his fabric pictures for him. She told him, quite practically, that she had no time. Later Blinky Palermo showed up. We almost died laughing. We told him to go and see Gerhard Richter's wife Ema. She was a dressmaker, too, and she ended up doing it.

KR What kind of a character did Beuys perceive you as?

FEW A constant challenge. He couldn't bear the fact that a man almost 20 years his junior could stand there and assert his own positions. I saw him as a backward-looking artist, attached to history. I found his forced meaningfulness almost repulsive. In my eyes, he didn't meet his own standards.

With his concept of work, Walther can be seen as anti-Beuys in every way. Whereas Beuys loaded materials with meaning, Walther showed that any such charge is always based on social usage. He was never tempted to focus attention on his own subjectivity or to make the body the key material in his art. 'I never did performances', he says: 'From the mid-1970s, my work was often viewed in that context, which obscured what it was that I was actually aiming for.' In Walther's work, action is always linked to material hardware. Unlike Beuys or Marina Abramovic', this hardware never becomes an authentic relic of past performances. Instead, it is always ready and waiting for future 'work actions'. In this way, it remains independent of the artist.

KR People often write that your work breaks with an indoctrinating relationship between artwork and viewer, fostering a democratization of the art experience. You yourself have never used the term democracy.



FEW No. I've never worked with that. I also never use the terms 'social' or 'participatory' to describe my work.

KR After all, when people want to negotiate their various interests, they don't go to Franz Erhard Walther where they find a predefined scope for action and even instructions for how to act. That's not democracy.

FEW No.

Walther has always kept his distance from teleological projects such as 'democratization' or 'breaking down barriers' in art, be it the 'being for itself' of Minimalist dogma, the overcoming of the object for Conceptualism, or the merging of art and life in socially engaged practice. He was never one to believe that a specific work or a new approach could change the direction of art as a whole or its role in the world. Instead, it is striking how strongly he situated himself within traditions from the outset. His opening up of the classic definition of the artwork was accompanied by a conspicuous adherence to this definition and its constant reiteration in an endless sequence of new combinations with other concepts.

KR What were you protecting yourself from by using terms like 'work', 'sculpture' or 'proportion'?

FEW In my work there are only fragments. The 'work' is an idea that holds everything together. Without this idea, my feeling for the whole would dissolve, fall apart. I wanted to maintain this in an art context at all costs, not least because it seemed at the time to be outside of art. Referring to this totally open way of working as 'sculpture' gave it a strange power that sparked opposition. People said I was somehow making 'Actionist Minimal art', it was somehow a 'happening' – always 'somehow'. But it wasn't somehow. And that's why the link to history was so crucial for me.

Between 1963 and 1971 alone, Walther made over 5,000 drawings and diagrams of works that recorded experiences with his 'workpieces'. He says that in New York, he worked 'like a medieval monk in a cell'. These works on paper are full of terms and definitions that point to a systematic approach. But the system is never completed, always remaining grounded in subjective experience. Then there is his obsession with drawings that document his exhibitions. Even a show of the 524 autobiographical text drawings of his 'drawn novel' *Sternenstaub* (Stardust, 2011) is rendered in 1:25 scale. For decades, Walther has worked in sculptures, drawings, concepts, actions and documentary photographs on this language that is all his own – a sculptural-discursive liturgy that insists on its distance from the world.

In the early 1990s, this language suddenly gelled into an alphabet. Astonished, Walther realized that his latest 'workpieces' resembled

Textzeichnung for Objekt zum Hineinlegen, 1968,
Pencil on paper, 21 x 15 cm



letters. Over the next six years, he completed the 26-letter set and gave them the title *Das Neue Alphabet* (The New Alphabet, 1990–96). When installing these works at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon in 2003, he realized that he had used the same colours that he had in early work with words in which he had explored the inseparability of form and content. He had come full circle. In these letters that can be dismantled and unfolded, all the elements of Walther's oeuvre come together. They hang on the wall or lie like deflated balloons on the floor; in their comic understatement they assert a peculiarly physical presence like clownish revenants or surrogates.

While others wished to push forward in specific directions – Yves Klein into immateriality, the Minimalists into objectivity, Performance art into immediacy, Land art into nature – Walther took in all of these movements as he went along, while remaining within the tradition of sculpture. As a result, his work is inscribed with a highly distinctive rhythm, an alternating current that constantly switches back and forth between classicism and the avant-garde, body and object, action and imagination, ensuring that it kept running like a reliable old engine.

'Donald Judd once said about me: "I like his work, but without the activation".' Walther has a long laugh as he recalls this statement by the pioneer and theorist of Minimal art. The essentialist material purism of the Minimalists is what makes their works appear so dated today, whereas the impact of Walther's fabric objects, also viewed within the context of Minimalism at the time, is growing and growing – doing so precisely because of what Judd didn't like: the concept of activation. With this concept, Walther anticipated the separation of gesture and material that is now taken for granted with the ubiquity of digitization. He shifted the production of meaning onto the body in action. Now that most of the avant-garde projects for breaking down barriers have culminated either in commercialization or academicism, his oeuvre stands unblemished and incorruptible – even if, as we conclude in his studio, long after midnight, this has been achieved at the price that his works as they were originally conceived can now only be accessed via the imagination.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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