

Art in America

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Franz Erhard Walther

TORONTO

at The Power Plant

by Milena Tomic



German artist Franz Erhard Walther's interactive sculptures, made using primarily cloth, do not merely restrict bodily movement. They also direct users' attention to the way their bodies relate to objects and how rapport develops between multiple participants. Curated by Power Plant director Gaëtane Verna, Walther's recent exhibition at the institution, "Call to Action," spanned two floors and encompassed eight multipart projects from the late 1950s to the mid-2000s, many of which have participatory aspects.

Illustrating the complexity of Walther's oeuvre, "1. Werksatz" (First Work Set), 1963–69, comprises fifty-eight objects and could be experienced in several different ways in this show. It was displayed as a complete set arranged on a low pedestal in the center of The Power Plant's largest room. Neatly folded piles of dark green, reddish brown, navy blue, and off-white cloth, along with freestanding fabric-covered foam objects, vaguely recalled retail store displays of clothing, furnishings, or camping supplies. Viewers could also experience this project by watching videos on a row of ten monitors built directly into the wall. The videos—made between 1995 and 1998, some shot indoors and others in the countryside—show people wearing and using each of the components. A more hands-on context for activating the works was available on a stretch of gray carpet. Sixteen thin canvas copies could be used according to the artist's written instructions and gallery attendants' guidance. One of these—a copy of *Approach Sideways Steps* (1968)—consisted of a long fold of canvas into which two individuals could insert their toes. They were told to position themselves at opposite ends of the strip, and then to take small steps toward each other until they met in the middle, at which point they would move outward again. The videos playing on the monitors do not fully convey how specific situations can enliven the work; a romantic couple activating the aforementioned piece, for example, might see it as a metaphor for their relationship.

Another project featured in the show was "Das Neue Alphabet" (The New Alphabet), 1990–96. The presentation of this body of work began with a triptych of drawings showing Walther's plans for constructing the letters of the Latin alphabet in cloth, foam, and wood. Sculptures of "E," "S," "L," and "W" hung on the wall, while *Das Neue Alphabet Form G* (1993) was on the floor. The latter consists of two foam "G"s connected by a red cloth tube, resembling an enormous sock or deflated balloon. In the corresponding drawing, by contrast, the piece has a solid cylindrical shape, a theoretical hardness, which relaxes with the actual sculpture. Without a participatory aspect at The Power Plant, the letter sculptures could be seen as depicting language in a "resting" state, its characters taking a brief pause before social activation reanimates them.