



EDITORIAL

My Body Is a Pen: Franz Erhard Walther's Drawings in Space

by Evan Moffitt
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Evan Moffitt looks at an artist featured in Mana Contemporary's exhibition *Flat Out: Works on Paper, 1960–2000* who endows the practice of drawing with “an almost impossible elasticity.”



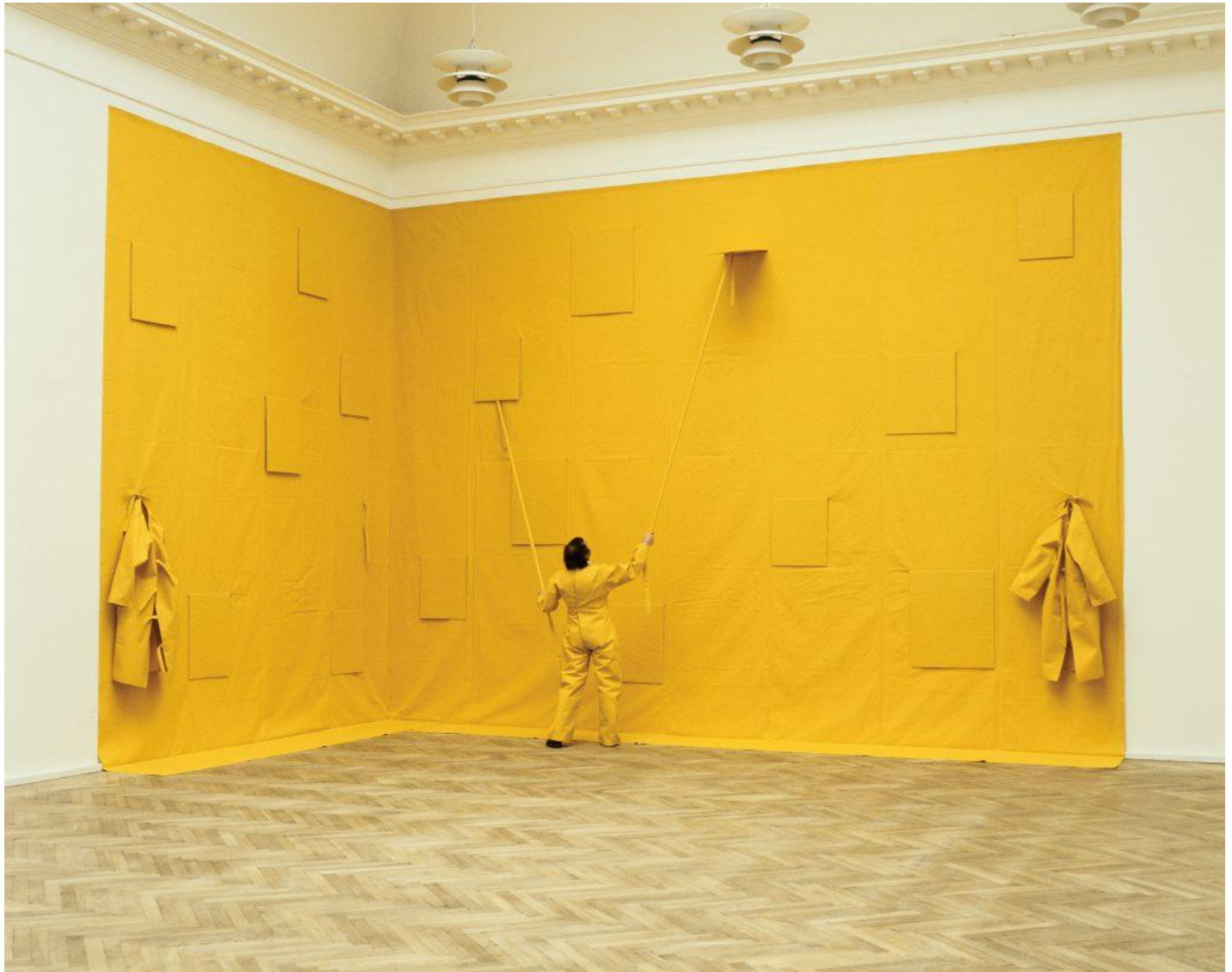
Franz Erhard Walther, *Modellsammlung*, 1983. Sewn dyed canvas. 120 x 157 1/2 x 15 3/4 inches. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Peter Freeman Inc. New York / Paris

“The history of drawing is a succession of gentle transformations,” Franz Erhard Walther wrote in 2016. In the artist’s case, however, gentle beginnings led to explosive change five decades earlier, when Walther translated his own drawing practice from two to three dimensions. Lines leapt off pages and became thread, then reams of cloth. They became geometric shapes in scarlet, orange, and marigold, neatly folded like the contents of a Boy Scout’s knapsack, which when unfurled became props and platforms for performances. Gestures Walther had studied as a student of plastic arts evolved into choreography for his and others’ bodies. In these works, the tension between performers—often cohesive, sometimes corrosive—is radically egalitarian, like Walther’s conception of drawing itself as a medium that spans time and space.

Walther was born in Fulda, Germany, in 1939. He was an avid drawer as a child, and by the age of fifteen his figurative ink-on-paper works had acquired a dimensional quality when he cut sections out of them. These early *Schnittzeichnungen* (Cut Drawings, 1954–57) prefigure his use of scissors and fabric to make *Werksatz* (First Work Set, 1963–69) ten years later. It was in 1964, however, that Walther’s real breakthrough occurred: while a student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, he began mapping geometric shapes onto

the floor with wire and string. This predated, by three years, Fred Sandback's first yarn drawings—though it's likely Walther saw the American minimalist's 1967 exhibition at Konrad Fischer.

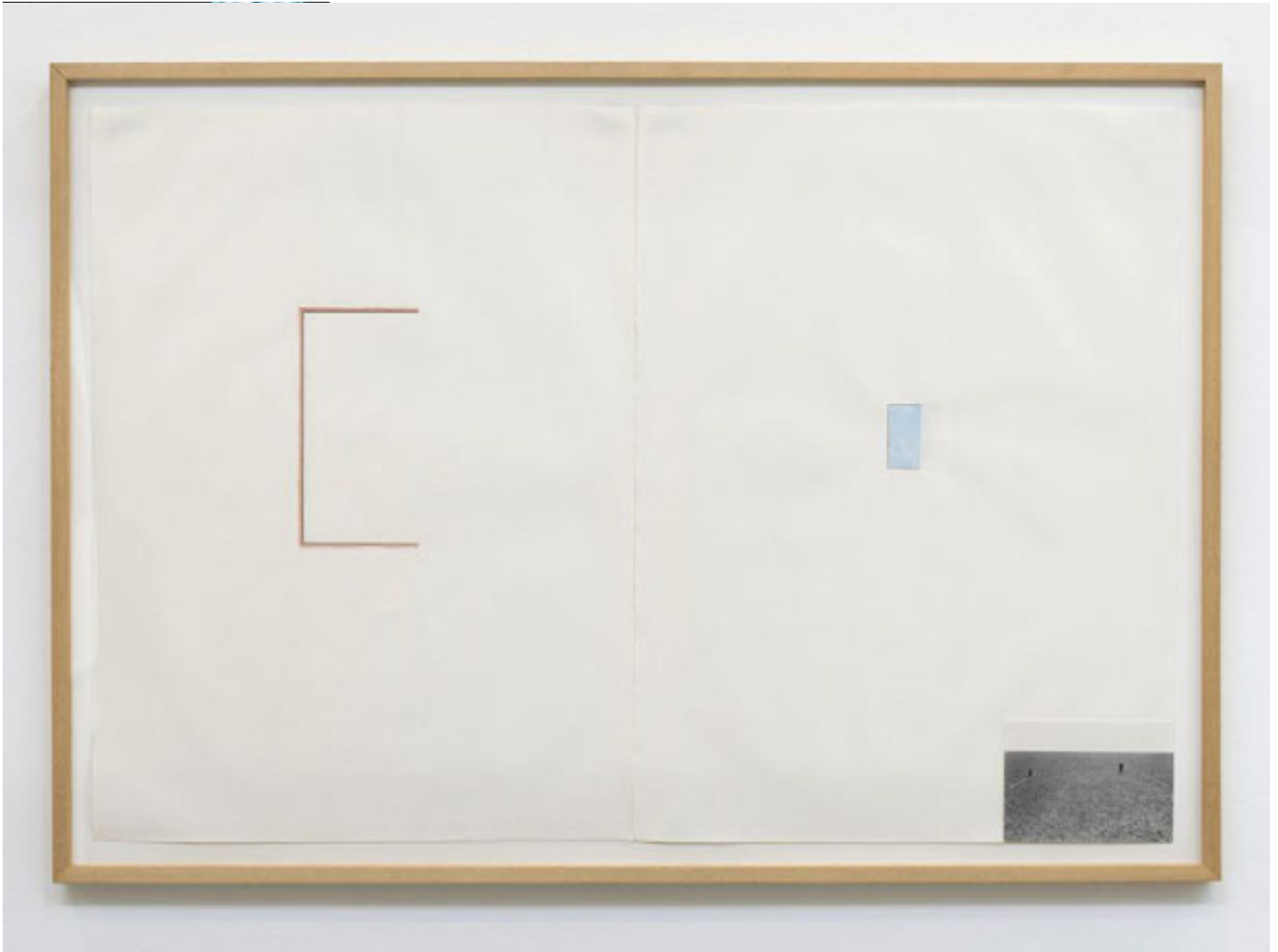
The radicality of these works lies in the simplicity with which they undermine the classical mediums of art history. Already in the very first years of the movement that came to be called minimalism, Walther had taken its core precepts to their logical conclusion: sculpture was nothing more than the delineation of form—marking the boundaries between what Sandback called “pedestrian space” and physical matter; presence and absence; bodies and non-bodies. It was, in a sense, a form of drawing—and a mere length of thread could prove it.



Franz Erhard Walther, *Wallformation Gelbmodellierung*, 1980/1981. Sewn dyed canvas, canvas covered wooden sticks, canvas coat, canvas coat in two parts, and canvas suit in two parts, each fixed with laces and bands. 204 11/16 x 433 x 23 5/8 inches. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Peter Freeman Inc. New York / Paris

Perhaps the most primary and still most undervalued of mediums, drawing was metabolized by the European canon for more than five hundred years as a method for making plans to be executed in sturdier materials; by definition, a sketch was incomplete. This changed irrevocably in the late 1960s with the burst of conceptual activity that Lucy R. Lippard chronicled in *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972*. Within an emerging feminist criticism, permanence became affiliated with institutionalism, and especially with institutions dominated by men—so drawings are often all that remain of some of the era's most critical artworks. As several recent exhibitions revisiting these practices attest, you kind of had to be there.

There's a certain nostalgic gloss to the many black-and-white documentary photographs of Walther's first activated sculptures. The performers in them stand stiffly; the images themselves are banal. Yet their mutual actions—leaning backwards while pulling lengths of cloth, moving in unison along the pathways formed by sewn tarpaulin—suggest a collectivism redolent of the late 1960s, its communes and marches. The political, social, and economic rifts of the Cold War era made democratic participation a crucial component of much art at that time, and Walther's is no exception. If his *Werksatz* recalls the experiments of Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica—whose *Bichos* and *Parangoles*, respectively, brought the intelligentsia's favored form of geometric abstraction to the Brazilian masses at a time when democratic rights had been stripped by the ruling junta—it is another accident of the zeitgeist, though one that would lead to Walther's inclusion in the 1977 São Paulo Biennial.



Franz Erhard Walther, *Untitled*, 1970. Mixed media on paper. 40 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Ayn Foundation

One of those photographs has been pasted in the bottom right corner of Walther's untitled 1970 drawing on display in *Flat Out: Works on Paper, 1960–2000* at Mana Contemporary. In it, two figures stand still along a white fabric strip, shaped like a hard-edged bracket, laid out across a grassy field. Above it, two of the same forms appear, completed in colored pencil: one large, one small; one open, the other shaded in. Rather than propose any specific scale, or leave instructions for future performers, the drawing—one of Walther's *Werkzeichnungen* (Work Drawings, 1963–75)—seems to suggest a possible shift, from an open line to a closed geometric form, from a linear edge to a volume. As the painter Peter Halley has observed, Walther “redeployed the lessons of geometric abstraction in the field of installation and performance.”

Walther's work lends the field of drawing an almost impossible elasticity, as his lines stretch into real space, are unfurled in fabric form, and pulled taut by the bodies who then perform on them. Nonetheless, the *Werkzeichnungen*—so conventionally executed in paper and pencil—serve a particular role. According to art historian Gregory H. Williams, “[Drawing] became increasingly associated with retrospective analysis and explication intended to help both the viewer and the artist gain access to the sculptural objects.” After *Werksatz*, Walther's drawings on paper became the only part of his practice that bore the marks of his own manual labor, as his wife Johanna took over production of the fabric works. They enabled him to respond subjectively to actions he had devised, rather than produce diagrams to circumscribe these performances. Drawing, Walther writes, became a score that could “capture all the work's formulations and experiences.”

“It is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material,” Rosalind Krauss wrote in 1979's “[Sculpture in the Expanded Field](#).” “It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition.” Body and non-body, surface and volume, action and score: these oppositions come harmoniously together in Franz Erhard Walther's drawings. No longer restricted to the page, they extend not just our understanding of the medium but also our perceptions of the world.—*Evan Moffitt*

Flat Out: Works on Paper, 1960–2000 is on view in the Floor 5 Gallery, Mana Contemporary, through April 1, 2019.