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Sculpture Not to Be Seen

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This text appeared in *Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Decides*, published in 2014 by WIELS Centre for Contemporary Art, Brussels and CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, in collaboration with the Franz Erhard Walther Foundation and König Books, London. This publication appeared on the occasion of the exhibition *Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Decides*, organised by WIELS and curated by Elena Filipovic.

It seems to me that there is as yet no adequate language to describe what it is that I want. Although I feel able to express it, other people have so far found it difficult to grasp and failed to see its relation to art... I'm not a painter, I'm not a sculptor, I don't stage happenings... A new term is required for what I do.

Franz Erhard Walther in a letter to
Jörg Immendorff (New York, September 1967)

Sewn, padded, pleated, folded and pocketed pieces of fabric, each in a signature hue and often evoking the crisp geometries and elementary forms of Minimalist sculpture: these are Franz Erhard Walther's ostensible materials. 'Ostensible', I say, because to limit our description to what the German artist's works look like, or what they're made from, is to miss the fact that they cannot be conceived as separate from the actions that activate them and the participatory activities they provoke. The viewer, in other words, is also in this case the 'content' of the artwork. He or she, perhaps as much as, if not more than the rest, is the artist's primary 'medium', and has been since the early 1960s. Nineteen sixty-three was a watershed year for the artist. Before that, while only eighteen in 1957, he had begun to make what he called his Wortbilder (Word Works): single words centred on a page in a coloured typeface of his design. He insisted they were artworks, not typographic studies, and were meant to prompt viewers to expand the signifying possibilities of words. His choice of rather simple words, beautiful but unspectacular in their treatment, paved the way for the austere elegance and direct address of his later works. So, too, did his fascination in the first years of the 1960s with making puffed enclosures of glued paper and air, such as Grosse Papierarbeit. 16 Lufteinschlüsse (Large Paper Work: 16 Air Enclosures, 1962), the performance of determining the proportions of an area with his hands (Proportionsbestimmungen (Determination of Proportion, 1962), or folded cardboard corners adapted to the dimensions of a given space, which he called Vier Stellecken (Four Standing Corners, 1963). But nothing quite affected his work as much as the discovery in March 1963 of a sewn and padded form used for shaping and pressing the arms of jackets at a tailor shop. From it he intuited the possibility of artworks that would be material embodiments of the notions of participation and process that had become his main concerns. Walther's experimentation that year, while he was still in art school in Düsseldorf alongside the likes of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, and where Joseph Beuys taught with Karl Otto Götz, would lead him to his first 'action' pieces and the beginning of what would be more than a half-century-long interest in the potential they implied. These included the 1963 works Zwei rotbraune Samtkissen (gefüllt und leer) (Two Reddish Brown Velvet Cushions [Filled and Empty]), pillow-like forms on which one could press one's hands; Zwei kleine Quader – Gewichtung (Two Small Blocks – Weighting), twin

weighted blocks to be held; 100m Schnur (100m Cord), 100 meters of cord to be stretched pell-mell across a space; and even Zwei Ovale mit Taschen (Two Ovals with Pockets), ovoid cushions with openings into which one could slip one's hands. In other words, simple forms inviting the simplest of actions. The immediate reception to them, by Beuys and his fellow art students, was a mix of ridicule and puzzled embrace. Still, with the help of the future Johanna Walther, daughter of the tailor shop's owner and a lifelong collaborator for the sewing of the artist's works, a pioneering oeuvre of sculpture that eschewed the obdurate materiality and conventional address of traditional bronze, marble or plaster was born. It was at around this same time that Ad Reinhardt famously defined sculpture as 'something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting'.¹ The American painter's impression of sculpture as not only ponderously in the way of 'real' art, but also fundamentally less interesting and intellectually engaging compared to painting, had been long-standing in the art world. Charles Baudelaire, after all, had already notoriously condemned the art form in his 1846 wrap-up of the Parisian Salon, one section of which was titled, 'Why Sculpture Is Boring'.² More than a century divided Baudelaire's quip from Reinhardt's. And yet, sculpture hadn't managed to distance itself from perceptions that shackled it to an inferior position in relation to painting. Gotthold Lessing's classic eighteenth-century aesthetic treatise *Laocoön* had, long before that, attempted to identify the particular experience and condition of sculpture, noting, for instance, that among the arts, sculpture (like painting) was distinct from poetry (and, although he didn't get to the comparison, theatre or dance), 'whose medium is time' because in contradistinction to 'a temporal event', sculpture is an undeniably 'static object'.³ But, unlike painting, which gave itself wholly and simultaneously to the viewer, to be perceived at once and from a single position, sculpture could be viewed from different angles, with no dominant—no evidently 'correct'—viewing position.⁴ For many, and well into the 1960s, this, precisely, was sculpture's specific and inexorable trait. It was also its fatal weakness. Shouldn't the artist be the ultimate form giver, able to control the perception of the work he or she creates? And wasn't there transcendental 'grace' in the instantaneous and total perception of the work without recourse to the perceptual implications of the viewer's (messy) body?⁵ The critical fate of sculpture had begun to shift in the early 1960s, when a new generation of artists started to champion precisely those elements that had been central to critiques

of the medium. It was then, too, that Walther had first touched on a practice for which he hardly had a name, as the letter to his friend and fellow artist Jörg Immendorff reveals.⁶ ‘Sculpture’, however, is what Walther most often settled on, even if his was a radical conception of sculpture in which objects are ‘instruments’ that have ‘little perceptual significance’ in themselves and are relevant, as he liked to say, ‘only through the possibilities originating from their use.’⁷

This notion of an art to be ‘used’ did not necessarily mean an art that was ‘useful’, at least not in the typical sense. Rather, Walther’s simple, direct titles often tell you exactly what the objects are and what they do (or what can be done with them): *Stirnstück* (1963), literally, ‘Forehead Piece’, is something on which to lean your forehead; *Vier Körperformen* (Four Body Shapes, 1963) are organic forms to be nestled against the body; and *Weste* (Vest, 1965) is a plump padded vest which, once worn, gives the body the feeling of expanded breadth. None of these examples incite particularly ‘useful’ tasks. ‘The sculpture is not to be seen’, one of his drawings from 1967 says, implying that it had other means of being apprehended as sculpture and should rather be touched, unfurled, worn, taken for a walk. *Der Körper entscheidet* (The body decides) says another from 1969, suggesting that the viewer’s body, not the artist’s mind, has a primary role in determining the form, purpose and perception of the artwork. Simple as these declarations might sound, they called for a breakdown of artistic control that was tantamount to a sabotage of sculpture’s integrity by insisting on an art of ‘instruments’ that was neither stable, autonomous, nor even, properly speaking, medium-specific. Not only was Walther overturning the very definition that supposedly distinguished sculpture from poetry or theatre by implying a durational experience for his art. He also pressed the idea that there is no ‘disinterested’ instantaneous perception or total apprehension of his sculpture by exacerbating this claim, making works that function as incitations to action that put the viewer’s body and haptic senses squarely at the centre.

If the resulting works were understood by critics as being ‘remote from art’ at the time of their first showing in the artist’s provincial Catholic hometown of Fulda, it was no doubt partly due to the fact that Walther’s elementary sewn forms looked and operated little like the more widely known art forms of the time.⁸ The artist’s insistence that his was a object to be acted with and upon and through by its public (sometimes also in public space, far from the hallowed confines of art), refused both the

definition of sculpture as inert matter presented before a passive viewing subject, and also the placement of the genial artist at the epicentre of the artwork, best illustrated by the contemporaneous notion of the artist as messianic shaman that Beuys had so effectively promoted. And if Beuys had famously advanced the slogan 'everyone is an artist', even as he constructed vast mythologies that fortified his own artistic singularity, Walther's assertion was entirely different and more akin to the notion that the artist instead needed others to make the artwork because, as he said, 'the work is not brought about by the artist'; rather, it emerges 'in the course of processes of action in conjunction with vehicles he has made available... The emergence of a work is not dependent on the artist'.⁹ Neither illusionistic nor illustrative, and unconnected to the kinds of mystification in which felt and fat stood for specific personal allegories, Walther's works had an anti-authoritarian soberness to them that was at the opposite pole from the practice of Beuys.¹⁰ In the simple gestures of a group of people enveloped from their waists down in a single piece of fabric, *Kurz vor der Dämmerung* (Shortly Before Twilight, 1967), with their heads poking through two or four circular holes in a short stretch of fabric that unites them, *Für Zwei* (For Two) and *Kreuz Verbindungsform* (Cross Connecting Form, both 1967) or sharing a long double-hooded length of textile, *Sehkanal* (Channel of Sight, 1968), decisions about movement and action become shared, collective, communal. Walther thus proposes a possible social, relational transformation that orchestrates togetherness (or also, often, extreme intimacy), with potentially profound social implications. We should not underestimate their particular urgency in the context of Germany's postwar reconstruction and the discussions about *Öffentlichkeit* (the public sphere) initiated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.¹¹ In the wake of that groundbreaking study's publication and the discussion it incited at the time, Walther's reformulation of the sculptural enterprise in terms of a 'participatory esthetics' (to use the term the critic Hilton Kramer used to describe the work in 1970)¹² was a decided attempt to redefine an artwork's publicness. (The fact that the artist so insistently staged the first photographic documentation of the processes of deploying his works in the late 1960s in outdoor, public spaces -and indeed held some of the first large-scale demonstrations of his works there- is equally telling). It was also, inevitably, a reflection on how we are formed as subjects, and

what role sculpture can play in that process.¹³ Walther's notion of an art that is not so much material as conceptual, participatory, 'relational' even (to use a term that wouldn't come into use until some decades after he began but which is nevertheless relevant here) anticipated and extended so many tendencies of art at the time, some of which he was exposed to firsthand once he moved to New York in 1967. Walther relocated there a few years into what was a period of prolific production, and stayed until 1973. There, he was surrounded by a bohemian art scene that was in the throes of its own radical experimentation: the celebration of the idea over the object had already begun to define a new art called 'Conceptual' in the early 1960s; Donald Judd had written his seminal essay, 'Specific Objects', on an art that was neither painting nor sculpture in 1964; Yvonne Rainer first showed her landmark dance piece, *Trio A*, in 1966; the pared-down forms, systematic progressions, and new phenomenological concerns of the art called 'Minimalism' was burgeoning and had had its first institutional presentation in 1966 at the Primary Structures exhibition; Mel Bochner had just organised a show called *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, displaying four binders containing photocopies of preparatory studies for the projects of artists close to Minimalism and Conceptual art; Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', one of the most formative if antagonistic understandings of the implications of Minimal Art, was published on the pages of *Artforum* in June 1967; and Roland Barthes published the first English version of his path-breaking essay 'Death of the Author' in issue 5+6 of the avant-garde magazine *Aspen* in 1967. To name just a few era-defining events. Walther landed in the city in the wake of these and likely also because of them—because of the promise they held out to a young German artist of a more diverse context and better reception than his art academy, small hometown or even nearby art capitals of Düsseldorf or Cologne had afforded him. All of this made for a thrilling milieu in which to further develop his art, but also one in which the absolute singularity of his practice might have felt confirmed, too. He quickly befriended such artists as Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, Walter De Maria, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra and Donald Judd. Artschwager, a carpenter by trade, made the wood parts Walther needed for a piece; with Oldenburg, he discussed the origins of their respective and near-simultaneous discovery of soft, sewn forms; Paul Thek, Robert Ryman, Judd and James Lee Byars all activated his objects in 1968 for the

photographs appearing in Walther's first manifesto-like book, OBJEKTE, benutzen (OBJECTS, to use).¹⁴ Their world was in the midst of becoming a different place during exactly those years: widespread student revolts, political unrest and an ongoing, bloody American-Vietnam war loomed, leaving deep traces in the period's development of a new, anti-authoritarian art. It was in this context that Walther continued his conception of process-inducing objects and began, for the first time, to understand their coherence as a group and idea. By 1969, he decided that fifty-eight of the individual pieces that he had made up to that point, in fact, should constitute a single larger artwork that he entitled, simply and programmatically, 1. Werksatz (First Work Set, 1963 - 69).

The prototypes for the elements for the First Work Set had started several years before the artist was exposed to the heady inspiration of the New York art scene, but its final consolidation in 1969 testifies to his continued thinking about the form and implications of his objects in light of his new context. It was there as well that he developed the idea that they could be shown in any number of ways, presented at arm's reach and as if ready for action or encased in their individual fabric envelopes and stacked on shelves, in what the artist called their Lagerform (storage form). The latter possibility, whereby the elements might have seemed far removed from their potential deployment, was no less 'valid' for the artist: these were 'instruments' that could be acted with or on but didn't have to be in order to still be potent, expressive. And, almost immediately, the artist set upon having them made in an edition of eight. This was not so much a financial as a conceptual operation: rejecting the museum's culture of autonomous objects and the aura of the unique thing, the multiple copies of the First Work Set were meant to go in the hands of many (even if the actual production and material labour of the carefully sewn elements was so time-consuming that creating more than an edition of eight at the time was unimaginable). Still, Walther must have known that these might one day become museum objects, thus slipping out of the hands of users and finding themselves placed behind stanchions or under Plexiglas. But, the artist would tell you, this fate would not be entirely a contradiction. His forms are made for and imply their own use, they signal it in their forms, call for an imagination of it in their address, and their titles often name this use in a way that does not actually require it. No doubt Walther's single most important work, the First Work Set, contains the template of his entire practice and encapsulates well the radical implications of his

thinking. Upon seeing it, Harald Szeemann invited him to take part in his legendary *When Attitudes Become Form* exhibition in 1969 (where Walther showed ten elements and related drawings) and *documenta 5* in 1972 (where the artist showed the entire *First Work Set* and staged demonstrations of its elements on weekends). So, too, did the curator Jennifer Licht propose to show it in her groundbreaking exhibition *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970 (there, Walther was present every day during the run of the exhibition to demonstrate his *First Work Set* and accompany visitors in their experience of it).¹⁵ In each of these contexts, Walther's works sat alongside some of the most experimental art of his time, most often, in fact, positioned closest to the artists who were developing Minimal and Conceptual Art. Formally, Walther's sculptures echoed the pared-down aesthetic, Platonic forms and propensity for the repetition of modular elements of the Minimalist Art that was crystalizing in exactly the same years. Thus on the surface, his work may have appeared simply like malleable Donald Judds or Carl Andres. But, rather than lead or steel, or any other of the muscular, industrial materials so much in currency in the 1960s when he began (think: Serra's one-ton sheets of lead, Andre's firebricks and Judd's highly polished metal surfaces), Walther had turned to something at once soft, slight, and inescapably linked to women's work. Moreover, against the cool authority and rigid, mathematical precision of so much Minimalist work, there was something by turns pliant, aleatory and homespun about the infinitely changing formal aspects of Walther's work (which was different as well from the 'Process Art' of the time, which used chance means to inform the appearance of the work, which was often stabilized for the duration of an exhibition or, if not, changed only by the artist him- or herself). By enclosing them in individual cases, Walther was also making an artwork that could easily be packed up and carried, deployed and carried away again with ease (out of the 'white cube', their little baggies implied), something that the Minimalist (not to say Modernist) artwork could rarely do.

Beyond their formal similitudes, Walther's work did share what was perhaps the single most distinctive feature of Minimalism: its abiding interest in a mode of address that implicated the viewer's body.¹⁶

Minimalism radically insisted that the artwork was no longer a discrete thing, but instead 'part of the situation', including the room it was in and the viewer who was looking at it. Michael Fried, Minimalism's most vociferous critic and astute reader, understood this immediately:

‘Whereas in previous art, “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]”, the experience of literalist art [his derogatory name for Minimalism] is... one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.’¹⁷ Fried comprehended well that, with Minimalism, the object itself was not as significant as the experience of it, a state of affairs he condemned as ‘theatrical’. Like Minimalism’s phenomenological address, Walther, too, sought out the perceptual implications of the body and the redefinition of the experience of the artwork. Still, Minimalist sculpture was on the whole not—decidedly not—meant to be touched or moved or actually ‘activated’ as such: the body was implied in its reflective surfaces and human proportions, but not meant to be literally participatory. Yet it was precisely in the tension of bodies stretching, pulling, standing and walking with Walther’s sculptures that his latent forms in cloth were transformed into new sets of Platonic geometries that at times might have connected most closely to Minimalism. And if Walther’s work was thus both like and unlike Minimalism, it arguably also remained distinct from an alternative strain of forms burgeoning in the mid-1960s as a specific riposte to Minimalism, such as Robert Morris’s flaccid felt sculptures or Eva Hesse’s evocative latex forms, each of which injected what Morris called ‘anti-form’ into the clean lines of Minimalism. One should not forget as well that Walther’s time in New York roughly corresponded to Lucy Lippard’s famous ‘six years’, from 1966 to 1972, when artists were, according to the critic and curator, ‘dematerializing’ the object of art.¹⁸ Against this tendency, his works might at first glance seem almost anachronistically material and formal (colourful, sensuous, effusively thingly). From the Bordeaux red velvet of his early Hand Pieces to the shocking orange, red and yellow textiles of some of his later Body Shapes and Wall Formations, there is something undeniably visual and tactile about Walther’s works. And yet, in his own words, their materiality is ultimately negligible, unimportant: each is ‘a set of conditions rather than a finite object’.¹⁹ The implications of the notion of an art of conditions are not insignificant. After all, where is the locus of the artwork when the artist himself has said that it need not have any perceptual significance and is instead a matter of conditional possibility? You could say that his works function almost like a conceptual artwork in which the document or score is a mere means to an end and the idea is the artwork. Perhaps for precisely that reason, Lippard included Walther among the entries in her seminal publication *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 - 1972*.²⁰ So, too, a several-page

spread in the spring 1972 issue of the art journal *Avalanche* positioned Walther on the pages of its 'Conceptual Art' issue alongside such artists as Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt.²¹ There, Walther's action-oriented fabric sculptures, photographed in black and white as they were being unfurled, positioned and used on the grass, called to mind so many shared concerns of artists at that time. Yet to have understood his works as 'Conceptual Art' is perhaps to overlook the important ways in which they are not merely material or wholly immaterial, but instead provocatively engaging both states at the same time. In contrast to so many so-called 'dematerialized' projects, notably the conceptual documents, event scores or instruction pieces to which his work might usefully be compared, Walther's sculptures act neither as props nor traces, recordings nor scripts. And they hold on fiercely to their own materiality—however pliable, conditional and unheroic it may be.²² Nor are Walther's sculpture's imperative or rule-bound in any way: 'I never give instructions for the user. I've never done that... How it is to be used is determined by the instrument, not by me.'²³ His works' incitation to 'doing' thus remains largely undefined even if unsparingly simple and intuitive. From 1963 to 1975, the artist created diagrams and what he called *Werkzeichnungen* (Work Drawings) that testified alternately to his experiences with the works and illustrated some ways in which they had been or could be used. But these were never meant as authoritative protocols. They were neither legislative, like a conceptual certificate, nor scripted, along the lines of a Sol LeWitt wall drawing or a Fluxus score. Moreover, in their sheer numbers (several thousands of these drawings were made) and in the necessarily contradictory and 'open' messages they provide, they suggest the multiple possibilities for each element. This decision was deliberate and far from anodyne. It shows his awareness, already then, that, as Mark Sperlinger has argued, no matter how seemingly whimsical the instruction piece, 'instructions are inherently political; they imply a hierarchy, whether of authority or knowledge.'²⁴ This hierarchical mode of address, which Lawrence Weiner called nothing less than 'aesthetic fascism', was decidedly not a part of Walther's practice.²⁵

One might then ask: what models of action or performativity existed at the time, and how was Walther's work related, or not, to them? Far from Fluxus actions, for instance, with their ironic or comical aspects, and decidedly not an art to be 'performed'—theatrically, spectacularly—Walther's elementary works could also not be further from the shock

tactics, sexual innuendo or exhibitionism present in much Body Art, Happenings and Performance Art tendencies of the time, whether Carolee Schneemann's 1964 *Meat Joy* or Chris Burden's 1971 *Shoot*. So, too, was Walther's work quite unlike that of those artists who had taken Minimalism's pared-down aesthetic and inserted the (mediated) body explicitly in them, as in Bruce Nauman's 1970 *Live-Taped Video Corridor* or Vito Acconci's 1972 *Seedbed*. Walther's work might instead more productively be compared to Hélio Oiticica's development of *Parangolés* in 1964, multilayered swaths of fabric in the form of painted capes, tents and banners that were meant to be worn and inspire free interpretation of their use. In Oiticica's case, that use was often akin to play and dancing, emerging as the works did from the influence of Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns and their inhabitants' love of samba.²⁶ The ideas for these are shared in the parallel work of fellow Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape involving the body, such as Clark's *Caminhando* (*Walking*) of 1964, a spiralling paper form meant to be worn, walked with, thus entangling the viewer in the act, or Pape's *Divisor* (*Divider*) of 1968, a massive, thirty-by-thirty square metre piece of textile with hundreds of openings through which participants might press their heads so as to collectively move with the object and each other.²⁷ Each of these works was inseparable from the increasingly policed society in the dictatorial Brazil where they were created and from the possibility that each collective action they promoted might be considered politically subversive. Yet, however distinct their origins and immediate contexts, there is a shared sense of the radical revision of traditional sculptural materiality and interest in the participatory possibilities of the artwork in their and Walther's works. Whether one walks, stands, leans, pulls, lays, holds or dances, the fact that these works simultaneously developed ideas for how to empower and activate viewers through the use of malleable, wearable materials is striking. One might also see in the elementary forms and the almost mundane 'uses' of Walther's works an echo of the modern dance being developed at around the same time by choreographers such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and Simone Forti, among others, around the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, known as Judson Dance Theatre. Theirs was a dance made from ordinary 'task-like' gestures and motions—talking, walking, reaching, running—'found' in the realm of life, not that of art or dance.²⁸ The choreographies that Rainer, for instance, so emblematically developed aimed for no psychological

expansiveness, no dramatic or athletic display - in short, no spectacle (as her 1965 declaration 'No to spectacle' contended).²⁹ Importantly, Rainer also rejected, as the critic Annette Michelson understood early on, the metaphysical 'synthetic time' of traditional dance in favour of 'a time that is operational, the time of experience, of our actions in the world'.³⁰ Rainer herself saw connections between this new dance and the simultaneous developments of Minimal art and, indeed, of Judd's idea of 'Specific Objects,' which were meant to hold visitors in a real-time experience of both the object's materiality and the spectator's own physical location as he or she viewed them.³¹ Exactly these 'task-like' gestures and notion of 'real-time' engagement with a viewer lay at the heart of Walther's own practice.

Layered with traits that connect it to some of the most radical practices of the era as well as features that also utterly distinguish it from them, it is hard to know where to place Walther's practice. Besides Lippard's *Six Years* and the spring 1972 issue of *Avalanche*, the perception of Walther's work as an example of Conceptual Art never quite stuck, perhaps understandably. And, for being neither exactly Conceptual Art nor Minimal Art, neither Performance Art nor Process Art, neither Installation Art nor 'Anti-Form,' neither Land Art nor Arte Povera, Walther largely fell in the gaps of a wider art history that didn't quite know how to categorize him, then or now.³² And yet, the influence of his conception of the object and the possible action that emerges from it is far-reaching, and not only in those most evident examples, which range from Franz West's *Passstück* (Adaptive) sculptures made between the 1970s and 1990s and Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* (one noddingly titled *Make Your Own Franz Erhard Walther*) developed since the 1980s, to the various artworks of what came to be called 'Relational Aesthetics' in the 1990s. Moreover, this influence has, it seems, been so prevalent because, beyond Walther's 1960s works, the artist has continued to build on and reconfigure his early postulates to create, for instance, ever-larger structures for collective action in the 1970s, as well as works that stretched to architectural dimensions (his *Wandformationen* [Wall Formations] and *Formabnahmen* [Space-Skinings] in the 1980s), or that combine performativity and language (*Das Neue Alphabet* [The New Alphabet] in the 1990s), or that return to the phenomenological implications of organic forms (*Körperformen* [Body Shapes] in the 2000s). And throughout his more than half a century of practice, the question of publicness—of how art and the

exhibition might be means for constructing notions of “public” and “public space” and for investing these with critical agency—is traced in his exact renderings of the exhibition floor plans for each show in which his work was presented, from 1962 to the present. They tell the story of an artist who never once stopped believing that the public presentation of an art that encouraged action mattered, and was urgent. It may consequently make little sense to tie Walther to movements or categories. One must speak, instead, of how his art functions and what it says about the work of art as such. In their destabilization of the conventional idea of the art object, their transformation of the spectator into an active creator and their dissipation of the traditional notion of author, Walther’s uncompromising works could be understood as ‘performative’, like saying ‘I do’ at the altar or, conversely, the spouting of an obscenity: the effectiveness and meaning of these utterances is in the act of saying them. For my part, I would prefer to describe them as ‘operational’, for they stage a situation in which the artwork is an incentive to an action that, thenceforward, inheres in the work itself. Indeed, like Wittgenstein’s famous explanation of words—‘their meaning is their use’—so, too, Walther’s sculptures’ ‘meaning’ lies in their use.³³ His is a ‘use’ that so revises the traditional subjecthood and objecthood of art that it has, from the 1960s to the present, served as a relentless inquiry into what art, in its most fundamental sense, is, and what it can do - of how, through its very material reality, it can create the conditions through which both the artwork and a potential (unknown and unknowable) public might simultaneously be challenged and made complete.

1 Cited in Lucy Lippard, 'As Painting Is to Sculpture: A Changing Ratio', *American Sculpture in the Sixties*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 31.

2 Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon of 1846', *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 47-107.

3 The citations here are from Rosalind Krauss's seminal discussion of Lessing's Laocoön in relation to the developments of Modernist sculpture. See Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 3.

4 The legacy of Baudelairean thought on sculpture held extraordinary sway: 'Brutal and positive like nature, [sculpture] is at the same time vague and elusive, because it presents too many faces at once'. Or: 'the spectator, who turns around the figure, can choose a hundred points of views, except the correct one'. See Baudelaire, 'Salon of 1846', 47-107.

5 The state of aesthetic 'grace' that critic Michael Fried champions in his landmark 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood' (and in which he condemns Minimalism as lacking) is described as follows: 'a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it'. See Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* V, 10 (June 1967): 22.

6 Letter cited in Susanne Richardt, *Stirn statt Auge. Das Sprachwerk* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 123.

7 Walther, statement from 1968, which appeared in German in *OBJEKTE, benutzen*, and was translated and cited in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 36.

8 Excerpts of press reviews, included in Franz Erhard Walther: *Arbeiten 1954-1963 aus der Sammlung Seng* (Fulda: Stadtschloss Fulda, 1978), cited in Luisa Pauline Fink, 'Franz Erhard Walther in the Collection of the Hamburger Kunsthalle', *Franz Erhard Walther* (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2013), 119.

9 Franz Erhard Walther, cited in Michael Lingner, ed., *Romanticism Revisited. Runge heute. Konstruierte Empfindung—Beobachtbare Zeit* (Hamburg: Kunsthaus Hamburg, 2011), 150.

10 Benjamin Buchloh perhaps describes this practice best when he claims that Beuys reintegrated the object 'into the most traditional context of literary and referential representation: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object'. Buchloh, 'Beuys: Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique', originally published in *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (1980): 35-43; cited here from Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955-1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 52.

11 So influential was this study that it was extended by sociologist Oskar Negt and writer-filmmaker Alexander Kluge in their 1972 book *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public) (Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 1972).

12 Hilton Kramer, 'Participatory Esthetics', *New York Times* (January 11, 1971).

13 Artist Peter Halley, who has written extensively and eloquently about Walther's work, suggests a connection between it and Michel Foucault's writings on the body disciplined through the modern regulation of institutions and spaces (schools, factories, hospitals, prisons) for the purposes of both commerce and social control. Halley sees Walther's work as a 'powerful evocative enactment' of the kind of autonomous movement, even chaos, which Foucault saw as absent from modern life.

Halley, *Franz Erhard Walther/Work Needs the Body—A Strong Misreading* (Fulda: Vonderau Museum Fulda, 2003), 8-9.

14 *OBJEKTE, benutzen* (OBJECTS, to use) was made in collaboration with Kasper König (Cologne/New York: Verlag Gebr. König, 1968) and was the curator's first publication.

15 See the Tagebuch Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 28, 1969 – March 1, 1970, a diary-like report of observations, reactions and reflections written during Walther's participation in Spaces. It was not only the case that Walther activated the work every day during the exhibition but, in recording daily reactions to it, he was also documenting the work, an idiosyncratic method that he would use throughout his life, in his vast series of Planzeichnungen (Plan Drawings, 1962–ongoing), Sternenstaub Zeichnungen (Dust of Stars Drawings, 2007–09), and numerous other drawn copies of photographs. Throughout his life, many photographs of Walther's works and life would, in turn, get replicated by being drawn so that the indexical quality of the photograph would get rubbed against memory, time and handwork.

16 Perhaps one of the best early readings of these works remains Rosalind Krauss's in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 243–88.

17 Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 12–23.

18 Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972*, op. cit.

19 Walther speaking via Hilton Kramer in Kramer's 1970 *New York Times* article called 'Participatory Esthetics' (January 11, 1970).

20 Ibid.

21 The spring 1972 issue of *Avalanche* featuring Walther was published between the 'Post-Studio Sculptures' issue, featuring the likes of Robert Morris and Barry Le Va, and the 'Performance' issue, featuring the likes of Philip Glass and Yvonne Rainer,

22 Rejecting Lippard's application of the term 'dematerialization' for much art of the period, Michael Newman compellingly argues instead that we should speak of the 'displacements and rethinking of materiality' advanced by artists in the 1960s. These 'rethinkings' constitute, according to Newman, one of the most significant shifts in the art of the epoch. See Newman, 'The Material Turn in the Art of Western Europe and North American in the 1960s', in Milena Kalinovska, ed., *Beyond*

Preconceptions: The Sixties Experiment (New York: Independent Curators International, 2000), 73.

23 Walther, cited in Lingner, ed., *Romanticism Revisited*, 150.

24 Mark Sperlinger, 'Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives', in Mark Sperlinger, ed., *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art* (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2005), 7

25 Lawrence Weiner, interview with Patricia Norvell (June 3, 1969) in Alexander Alberro and Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 105. Cited in Sperlinger, 'Orders!', 7.

26 See Anna Dezeuze, 'Tactile Dematerialization, Sensory Politics: Hélio Oiticica's Parangolés', *Art Journal* (summer 2004): 59 - 71.

27 See Guy Brett, 'Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body', *Art in America* (July 1994): 57–108 and Anna Dezeuze, 'The 1960s: A Decade Out of Bounds', in Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006), 38–59.

28 On Rainer, see Carrie Lambert's excellent article 'Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's Trio A' *October* 89 (summer, 1999): 87–112.

29 In 1965 Rainer wrote: 'No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved'. See Rainer, 'No manifesto', *Tulane Drama Review* (1965) 10, 2: 178. See also Yvonne Rainer: *Work 1961–73* (Halifax and New York: Presses of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design and New York University, 1974).

30 Annette Michelson, 'Yvonne Rainer – Part I: The Dancer and the Dance', *Artforum* 12, no. 5 (January 1974): 57–63.

31 See Yvonne Rainer, 'A Quasi-Survey of Some

Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A, in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 270.

32 One must wonder if the ‘unclassifiability’ of Walther’s practice might explain why his work is so glaringly absent from exactly those survey publications focused on defining the new art of the period, including Paul Wood, Francis Fracsine, Jonathan Harris, and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004); Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-1969* (London: Calmann and King, Ltd., 1996); or, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al., eds., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). Numerous others could be cited. Needless to say, he also remains almost wholly absent from publications devoted to any single one of the abovementioned movements—Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Performance, etc.

33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, eds., trans by Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 43. The connection between Wittgenstein’s definition of words and Walther’s art of action is made in Alexander Koch, ‘Franz Erhard Walther’s Participatory Minimalism’, *KOW* issue 1, 2009.

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the first copy of *ily cere- cahier 15* was printed in november 2023

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