

Franz Erhard Walther at Wiels

THE EXPERIMENTAL EXERCISE OF FREEDOM

I challenge naysayers to brand Franz Erhard Walther a one-work wonder, peddling the same 'camping-gear' aesthetic for nearly fifty years. To those who readily dismiss his flimsy, wearable sculptures as just another slick gimmick to trick art lovers into doing ridiculous things in public, I say "please activate", as the text adjacent 15 exhibition copies states. Hardly 'old hat', the real mystery here concerns why it has taken so long for a veritable art world insider to gain widespread recognition.

Walther's career began with three solo shows at Heiner Friedrich's venerable gallery and a 1969 MoMA solo show, followed by 66 museum exhibitions plus four consecutive Documentas. At MoMA, either he or his wife Suzanne Walther personally assisted visitors keen to activate his 'Instruments for Processes', now known as '1. Werksatz (First Work Set)' (1963-69).

Five years after Friedrich co-founded Dia Art Foundation in 1973, Dia acquired '1. Werksatz (First Work Set)' (1963-69), though not the version exhibited here. This one is on loan from the Franz Erhard Walther Foundation in Fulda, Germany, where Walther lives with his wife, who has since 1963 played an integral role managing his sewn art's fabrication. Despite his renown, this work feels strangely foreign to most art lovers passing through Wiels, where I volunteer to assist people in the activation of his 'instruments'. When I ask "Vouslez-vous faire une exercise?", most respond "Peut-être une autre fois." With a little coaxing, most reconsider. And few stop after one, smiles shining all-around. So what's going on? I return to this a bit later on.

Walther's comprehensive career survey tours visitors through nine distinct bodies of work: 1) late 1950s drawings denoting selected words' inventive fonts; 2) early 'action pieces' for investigating proportion, weight, texture and bodily sensations; 3) a 'First Work Set', 58 black and white photographs capturing users plus 15 exhibition copies inviting experimentation; 4) dynamic sketches espousing relevant concepts such as 'Zeit' (time), 'Kopfruh' (calm head), 'Körper Plastik' (plastic body), 'Sprachintervention' (language intervention), etc.; 5) gorgeously-rendered layout drawings from the 1980s; 6) 60 entries spanning 1947 to 1973 from his 524-page graphic memoir 'Sternenstaub' (Dust of Stars)(2007-2009); 7) museum maps spanning several decades; 8) light-hearted fabric wall- and

floor-works inspired by alphabet letters; and 9) a vast treasure-trove of one-off 'trial sewn pieces' produced since 1969. 'Sternenstaub', which literally renders 'art-stars' in pencil dust, stars Joseph Beuys sporting Walther's over-sized vest, Eve Hesse eyeing Walther in his studio, a Duchamp bromance, well-attended performances, Harald Szeeman exhibitions, MoMA 1969, Documenta 1972, plus other life-changing events.

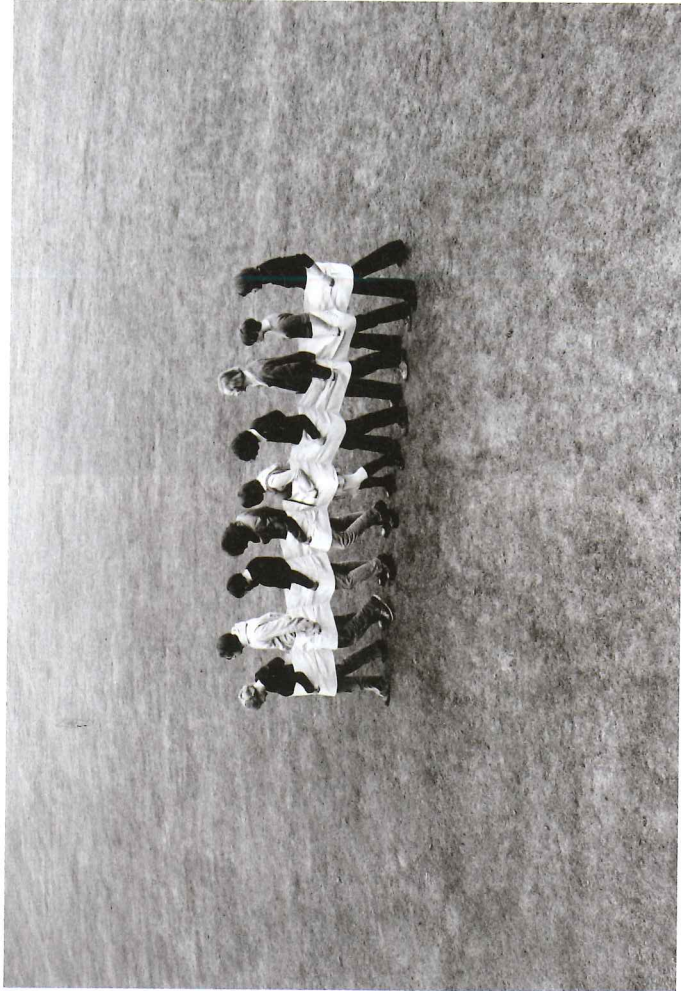
One explanation for Walther's relative obscurity is that his art targets non-artists, a practice initiated by Fluxus during the sixties, embraced by South American artists during the sixties and seventies, and reinvestigated with zest across the globe since the mid-nineties. Consider Brazilians Cildo Meireles' 'Espaços

Virtuals: Cantos' (Virtual Spaces: Corners) (1967-68), Helio Oiticica's 'Parangolés' (Capes) (1964-79) and 'Bollides' (Fireballs)(1963-67), and Lygia Clark's 'Sensorial Hoods' and 'Abyss Masks' (both 1967) and therapeutic 'Objetos Relacionales' (Relational Objects) (1976-81). Walther's puffed enclosures, corners and exercises unwittingly blend Meireles' quotidian spaces, Oiticica's imaginative games and Clark's goal to 'release the general creativity of everyone', what Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa termed the 'experimental exercise of freedom'.

Despite being open systems, Walther's exercises are constrained by scale, positions, maximum tension/torque, human imagination and devotional care. Some remark that the (un)wrapping process prepares the mind for open-ended engagement. Others recall activities associated with ritual, meditation, relaxation techniques or team-building activities. Most everyone gets entangled with strangers. One either recruits passersby when additional players are needed or stops to observe others command the sculptures in unsuspecting ways. Even we volunteers are vowed. Although everyone requests photographs, phones never ring.

Despite the nominal challenges involved, the uplift proves enormous due to these exercises' neuro-ameliorative propensities. As wordless bodies negotiate space and time with other wordless bodies, the left brain takes a pause, which may explain incessant smiles and repeat experiments. While living in New York City between 1967-73, Walther found inspiration in the anti-Vietnam movement, flower-power people and counter-cultural hippies, all under the spell of 'turn on, tune in, drop out'. By inviting spectators to explore freedom in the very public arena of the museum, these exercises now let us 'turn off, tune out, drop in', something one doesn't appreciate until it happens.

Franz Erhard Walther, 'The Body Decides', until 11 May at Wiels, Contemporary Art Centre, Avenue Van Volckemlaan 354, Brussels. Open Wed-Sun from 11am-6pm and every 1st and 3rd Wed of the Month until 9pm. www.wiels.org



Franz Erhard Walther, 'Kurz vor der Dämmerung (Short Before Twilight [First Work Set, element # 32])', 1967, cotton cloth, photo Timm Rautert