

MARCH 16, 7PM AT GOETHE-INSTITUT WYOMING BUILDING

Conversation between Franz Erhard Walther, Tobi Maier and Yasmil Raymond

TM What we are looking at in the background is a work that is perhaps rather unusual for many people who do a quick internet search on Franz Erhard Walther's work.

FEW I was 18 years old at the time. [Laughs]

TM It is a work from 1957 and seems very connected to collage although it was made with ink on paper and it also takes a rebellious stance towards collage. It's titled *Schlauer Kopf mit Krawatte*.

FEW Clever Head with Necktie!

TM Is this a self-portrait or are you referring to someone else in this work?

FEW At the age of 15 I tried to be a cartoonist and I was successful in some ways, some of my cartoons were published in German magazines. But some years later I looked at them again and didn't feel good about them anymore. So I worked this one over with ink and cut out some parts with a knife. It's a portrait, that's right, with a necktie, and the idea was that the spectator would complete the missing parts with their own imagination. That means one would not only look at the piece but also do something, become active. So this idea of not only perceiving but also acting was in my work from the beginning. This is just one example, there are about 150 of these pieces.

YR Tell us what happened when you went to school in Frankfurt.

FEW I studied at a School for Applied Arts and I attended a typography class. The students were trained to become commercial artists, doing posters, packages, and book covers. Using typography, I came up with the idea to do these so called word-works. Again with the idea that the spectators would develop their own idea of the written word. Among other things I made a series of city portraits, portraits of countries, of continents. In this case, it was of *Athens* (1958). I connected the color blue to the idea of spirituality and the Mediterranean Sea. Brought together with the white, it refers to the marble columns of Athens, the Antique. Just putting a simple word in the center, the optical visual center of the set had nothing to do with what they taught us at the School for Applied Arts. So, when I did it, my teacher said: "You are such a gifted student by just putting a simple word in the center, any billboard painter can do this." [Laughs]

TM Is it true that at this time you were living in Fulda? I have read that the area surrounding the Rhön is known for occult activities and the secretive, the grotesque and the folkloric. This has played a role in your work. Can you tell us a little bit about your time in Fulda in the late 1950s? You were also a founding member of the so-called "Junge Kunstkreis" along with other artists that exhibited in this small city?

FEW We did the first one-man show of Gerhard Richter in this small town. I brought him there. It was a small town without a museum, without a gallery, without a collection. There was nothing. I had to build everything myself, but I had a circle of young artist friends and we had



Franz Erhard Walther, *Schlauer Kopf mit Krawatte* (Clever Head with Necktie), 1957
11.7 × 8.2 (29,7 × 20,9 cm)
Indian ink, crayon, cutouts

information about what was going on especially in America because there was a so-called "Amerika Haus." We had information of course also from magazines like *Art in America*, where I for the first time saw works by the New York School. This work looked strange to me. When I transferred the inches into centimeters I thought "Oh my goodness. What sizes. Unbelievable." In 1959 I went to documenta in Kassel. I was 20 years old and for the first time saw original artworks by contemporary artists. In my hometown, there was no contemporary or modern art, only a lot of historical structures and sculptures.

TM And here we see one of your early works from 1958, entitled *Versuch eine Skulptur zu sein*, Attempt of Being a Sculpture or Attempt to be a Sculpture. You were studying at that time in Frankfurt.

FEW At the The School of Applied Arts in Offenbach.

TM You were taking the train there from Fulda. Can you say a little bit about how you came to produce these early sculptural works. They have something very important to your work: activation.

YR The performative.

FEW At the Art School I saw for the first time that you can do something special with photography. It's hard to say why I doubted traditional sculptural working methods, like working with clay, or plaster or wood or stone. So what I did, was a series of about 12 photographs. It was an attempt trying to become a sculpture. I posed with pieces that have a biographical relation to my family. You can see by the way it is constructed—I did a frame, the gun, the pipe, this light—that it is referring to family, to biography. And there is the skull of a cow which refers to the art world. Picasso used it quite often and the most famous



Franz Erhard Walther, *Versuch eine Skulptur zu Sein* (Attempt of Being a Sculpture), 1958

young artist of the time, Bernard Buffet, did it as well. Maybe you are not familiar with him. [Laughs] He was unbelievably famous back then. So it's a bit of a game, but I was serious about it.

TM In the early 1960s at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf you did a lot of pieces made of paper, often inflated with air, so they form square or triangular pillows. Why did you decide to move away from Frankfurt?

FEW I was thrown out of the Academy because what I did was so different. [Laughs]

YR So how do you end up playing with something so immaterial like air?

FEW I was always trying to find materials that were not normally used in the art world.

TM But you also experimented with organic materials, no? Like oil and coffee.

FEW To avoid the idea of painting and to use substances that were free of associations with painting.

YR And your professor's reaction?

FEW My professor was Karl Otto Götz. He was a very open teacher; I was in his class together with Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter.

YR He was open to experimentation?

FEW Yes. And works like *Sieben Papierbeklebungen* (1963). It looks a little bit like Eva Hesse. She had seen this work in 1964, at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf.

YR In your studio?

FEW In my studio. It's made of brown wrapping paper. I put glue on the margins of the paper with a brush and put another layer of wrapping paper on it, then glue again and so on. In the process of drying I took a knife and cut the paper into seven parts, then let it dry out. The structures you see came about because the paper got wet. So the work took shape through an experimental material process.

YR That's when the process-works began?



Frisches, soirée at the apartment of Jörg Immendorff, Düsseldorf, July 1966
With Joseph Beuys, Jörg Immendorff, Chris Reinecke, Verena Pfisterer and Franz Erhard Walther
Charlotte Moorman acting with Walther's *100 m long rope*, 1963, and Nam June Paik
and the audience acting with *Two jars filled with rice*, 1963

FEW Yes, but before I was involved with "Art Informel." The process of painting turned into material processes. This I could discuss quite well with Karl Otto Götz. He was one of the important German "Informel" painters at the time.

TM And were you also in touch with the Group Zero in Düsseldorf and artists like Otto Piene or Ferdinand Kriwet?

FEW Ferdinand Kriwet I had met. Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker were two of my first collectors. They bought pieces of my work in 1964 and 1965, which made me very proud because they were famous artists. I was completely unknown. It was a great thing for me.

YR So here we have an interesting situation. [Laughs]

FEW That was a soirée at the apartment of Jörg Immendorff in Düsseldorf.

YR He was your friend?

FEW He was a good friend of mine. And we invited people we thought were the most important in the art world in Düsseldorf. Jörg Immendorff took part and also Joseph Beuys. You see him here with his hat and white vest.

TM And Nam June Paik.

FEW Yes, Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman. They manipulated two pieces of mine. Charlotte worked with one of my rope-pieces. And Nam June Paik is holding a piece made of two jars with two different types of rice in it. Paik opened the lid and gave out grains of rice to people and asked them to count the grains. A useless exercise, but it was his approach. Charlotte Moorman entangled the people with the rope. It took me three days to get the rope in order again. [Laughs] This was in 1966.

YR And at that time you were attending Fluxus concerts?

FEW I saw one in early 1963.

YR And what was your impression?

FEW Some of the actions I didn't like—especially those of Beuys—because they were loaded with too much meaning. But, I liked the work of Dick Higgins and Philipp Corner. They were so fresh.

YR Lighthearted and playful?

FEW Yes, for me that was the future. Higgins was quite important at the time. He did wonderful pieces in 1962, like his works where he used butter. He did this long before Beuys did work with this material. There was a Fluxus performance in Wiesbaden, close to Frankfurt. I am sure there is a photograph that documents this but Beuys always denied it. On stage, Higgins worked with butter and eggs. Yet Beuys did something different with butter. He used it as sculptural material, whereas Higgins was working with butter as an actionist material. Two distinct approaches.

TM I also read about a tomato concert in 1965 that you participated in?

FEW That was a homage to Dick Higgins and Nam June Paik.

TM What happened at this tomato concert?

FEW It was in my hometown. For weeks after, there were letters written by readers published in the two local newspapers about the concert. [Laughs] I borrowed a piano from the jazz club and equipped myself with tubes of mayonnaise and ketchup. I opened the piano, set the clock, and emptied the tubes in lines over the keyboard. Then I took a piece of cloth and cleaned the keyboard. And when it was clean, I did the same thing again—mayonnaise and ketchup—over and over again for two hours.

YR Nice. [Laughs]

FEW But after two hours the piano was clean again. Then the crowd had their jazz again, but it was smeared between the keyboard even months later. [Laughs]

TM In contrast to some of your contemporaries like Ulrich Rückriem for example, in your work agency is very important. The viewer has to relate to or activate the object, like in the work *Zwei Papprohren. Verlegenheitsstück*. — Two Cardboard Pipes (1962).

FEW What is a good word for "Verlegenheit"?

TM Embarrassment?

FEW Embarrassment is something different, it's not like "Verlegenheit." When you talk to somebody, most people don't know what to



Franz Erhard Walther, *Zwei Papprohren. Verlegenheitsstück (Two Cardboard Pipes)*, 1962

do with their hands. So there are two pipes between your hands in the piece. But that's just one aspect of the work. The other is that the piece is on a pedestal or table. Therefore, it is possible to view it as a sculpture. At this time, it was strange to see these pieces as sculptures. But when you take it in your hands, you interact with it and you turn yourself into the pedestal—the plinth for these elements. That's something interesting. That was back in 1962.

YR And these were not props, you were separating yourself from those artists who linked their work to theater. Those that made objects that were used to construct some sort of narrative. In this way, the objects themselves provoked or originated some reaction; these pieces were not part of a score. This is where I see a difference from some of the Fluxus activities that were scored or instructed.

FEW Definitely. There was never irony, which played an important role in all Fluxus works. It was all about the concept of becoming a sculpture. You couldn't say a piece is a sculpture or you are a sculpture but you can define yourself as a sculpture or a plinth for the piece. Time is also involved: the time it takes for you to become part of the work. That was also an interesting idea.

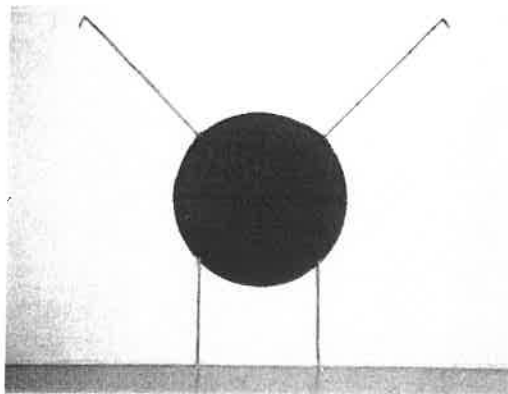
YR So you hold the piece in your hands and then you have to decide what to do with it. Is it a tool? An object? A weapon?

FEW Right, it is a question of definition. Is this a tool? On the table it resembles a sculpture. Then, in your hands when you turn into the plinth, you can say an action was implemented. But if you see it as an implementation, then of course the emphasis is put on the person "becoming" a sculpture. These were interesting questions for myself.

TM Let's move on to your textile-based works, such as *Red Disc with Four Ribbons* (1963). I think it is very much a predecessor of the sculptural installations that would come later.

FEW Sewing as a technique for art had to be discovered. It was not a medium of art at that time.

YR How did that happen?



Rote Scheibe mit vier Bändern (Red Disc with Four Ribbons), 1963
Disk 74.8 × 0.8 in (190 × 2 cm), bands each 78.7 × 1.4 in (200 × 3.5 cm)
Fabric, wood, two hooks

FEW I have to say that Claes Oldenburg used it but I didn't know that. It happened at the same time. I discovered sewing as a means for art in the tailor workshop of Johanna's parents in the spring of 1963. Johanna was my girlfriend at the time, she became my wife and she sewed then and she still does today. In this tailor shop, I also discovered the shaped pillows that were used as a technique for ironing the sleeves and shoulders of suits. These pillows were put inside the fabric and then the suit was ironed. This was an epiphany for me! I always wanted to step outside of traditional definitions of material and technique in art making. Sewing was not a medium in the art world. All of a sudden I realized that this meant freedom for me. On the spot I made some drawings and asked Johanna to sew them for me. Without her, the work wouldn't exist. At that time, I didn't expect that it would be accepted as art for decades.

TM You started working on the *1. Werksatz* in 1963, a phenomenal piece of which one edition is in the collection of Dia Art Foundation. For this piece you have considered the use of body and gesture in connection with the object as sculptural. The piece consists of 58 objects in total, 5000 drawings, and 500 prints, all made between 1963 and 1975. The piece also includes photo sequences to all 58 actions to show how all of these objects were enacted or activated. There are films as well.

FEW Prior to this piece, artists had begun to question what happened to works of art that are put in storage. What status do works of art hold when they are stored and when they are displayed and animated? These questions became part of the *Werksatz* pieces.

TM Your diagrams often work as instructions?

FEW No, I don't think they do.

TM As documentation?

FEW I try to document my experiences, projections, ideas and conceptions.



Demonstration of *1. Werksatz* in the assembly hall of
Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, May 1967
Franz Erhard Walther and Sigmar Polke performing *Elfmeterbahn*, 1964

YR There are some that you call "work drawings," right?

FEW I call them work drawings, yes. In the beginning, I called them diagrams to set them apart from traditional forms of drawing. But after a while it didn't make sense anymore so I began to call them "work drawings" and now I address them simply as works.

YR There are some drawings in which you explain, however not through illustrations, how the pieces should be enacted when you pull the materials out of the envelopes.

TM Here we can see Sigmar Polke and Franz Erhard Walther demonstrating one of the pieces from the *1. Werksatz*.

FEW For me there is an important distinction. I did demonstrations explaining the pieces to an audience. But for the actual work with the pieces, there is no audience or spectators: the actors are their own audience. That is important for me. This is an important distinction. But, of course, at the beginning I had to explain the pieces. People were interested "What are works like? How do they function?," so I enacted the pieces in front of others at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf in 1967. This was shortly before I left for New York. I was surprised at how many people came and were interested in this work.

YR When you were observing people interacting with the *Werksatz*, were there moments when you didn't disclose the fact that you were the artist. Did you pretend to be just an observer trying to see how people would behave or have you always interfered and helped?

FEW At the beginning, I was simply happy that people were interested in interacting with the work at all. One of my first fans was Jörg Immendorf, which sounds funny when you think of his work.

TM When you were enacting these pieces in the countryside, in the Rhön, how would it work? Would you call up some friends and say "Hey, I finished another piece for the *1. Werksatz*, let's get in the car and go!" And then would you enact and document the piece?

FEW First of all, these gestures had to be taken seriously when walking with this piece in the landscape. It can be rolled apart and there are a series of pockets inside. You can choose objects to insert in them, putting them in relation or just choosing pieces for the sake of weight and balance.

YR There is an element of a journey or of meditation? Because this piece is large, and inside are these pockets, you have to think about what object goes in which pocket. You have to spend time in the outdoors to decide what you want to put inside the pockets.

FEW Yes, but for me it was more about the culture of the objet trouvé and the readymade. That was a big issue in Europe. Remember, in 1966 there was no land art yet. Therefore, to walk in the landscape as an act of art making was very unusual at the time. It was always important for me to relate the work back to the art world and in this case to the idea of collage, the readymade, and objet trouvé.

YR Let's return to what you described in the catalogue *Live in Your Head, When Attitudes Become Form*. What was really important to you was what was possible and what could take form by using these objects. What does the work promise? Or what kind of possibility or potential did you see for the visitor or the person who participated? What were you after?

FEW Firstly, I feel that my work was misinterpreted. In the early 1960s, artists began to use the term "happening." My work was never meant to be "happenings." After, they began to call it Actionist Minimal Art. Then it was called Body Art, then Performance Art, then Conceptual Art performed with objects. Then it became just a sculpture since, for instance, it could not be considered a performance because there is no audience: the actors are their own audience. Then we began discussing that a real artist needs material. Without material you can't be an artist. What is the material of this work? The material is the actors' bodies. The material is also the time and the space we are acting in and with and so on, whatever you wish. In the same way, the piece recalls a sculptor, a traditional one, who works with stone and wood. Body, time, and space are the materials that I have sculpted. It sounds very strange to claim this.

TM In a way for me these pieces are also an enactment of refusal, a refusal to function or to be present or to be productive. Then, I imagine what takes place as you are lying in one of the objects from *1. Wertsatz* in the corner of a forest and a passer-by walks towards you. Wasn't that a scary situation? How did people react when they encountered you?

FEW I don't know what the situation was, maybe they were thinking that I went there to sleep in this funny thing. [Laughs]

TM But you have mentioned loss of orientation, loss of time. All these different sensations when you were enrolled in something or placed in a passive role.

FEW It was open for many things. For me, the piece was a sign of the future, not just for me but also for the people around me.

TM The exhibition *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970

brought your work to the New York public for the first time. Did you have conversations with artists from Brazil who were here at the same time?

FEW Not at all. I heard the name of Lygia Clark for instance for the first time then. Someone asked me at the MoMA show "Do you know Lygia Clark?" and told me about her work. I was surprised, her work was not known. It also was not known in New York at that time.

TM We should open the discussion up for questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER Do you see your work being carried on by other artists?

FEW There are many which refer to me. [Laughs]

YR Yes, he had a lot of students.

FEW Well, like for instance the work of Erwin Wurm. Although, he plays around, he uses irony, which I never did. There are some works by Santiago Sierra. There are some body related works of the 1970s by Franz West. But it started quite early in the 1960s already. It's always difficult when you begin to name specific artists.

YR But you taught many artists in Hamburg, including John Bock.

FEW Oh yes, John Bock, Jonathan Meese, Santiago Sierra. And in the beginning there was Rebecca Horn, you can see from her early work that she was in my class. And also Martin Kippenberger in 1972.

AUDIENCE MEMBER How is your work presented in a museum context? You mentioned earlier when they are installed that people can use them. But how does the museum-visitor actually interact with the work? Are they intimidated? How is the work received?

FEW I had a great audience at documenta in 1972 and then in 1986 with the *Wallformations*. You could step into the work. Some really did participate and others just stepped in for a photograph. In a way when you look at it, it is a pictorial sculpture; when you step into it you incorporate your body into the work. The people said yes. They didn't refuse as much as they did in the 1960s. That was different. The change in reaction might have also been because the work had a certain appearance concerning color, form and shape. But when I think about the press, what they wrote about the work such as in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which is a serious newspaper, I find it silly what they said about it. They tried to make jokes about it as if to say "incorporate the body. So what?"

This is an edited transcript of the videotaped conversation that took place in March 2010.