

LAST CHANCE

A Time to Play, in a Flashback to the '70s Art World



Peter Freeman

“Plinth, Four Areas,” from 1969, is one of the sculptures in Franz Erhard Walther’s first solo show in New York in nearly 20 years.

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

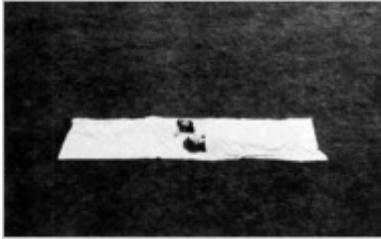
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Participatory art came to the Museum of Modern Art long before [Marina Abramovic](#) began her daylong vigils seated opposite one random museum visitor at a time. It arrived at least as early as 1970, with the interactive, sewn-canvas sculptures of a young German artist named Franz Erhard Walther. These works were included in the museum’s “Spaces” exhibition, a show of installations by five artists and one collective that was itself among the first of its kind.



Claude Picasso

Franz Erhard Walther arranging the sculpture for the Museum of Modern Art’s “Spaces” exhibition in 1970: the floor-to-ceiling windows allowed pedestrians to observe as visitors participated.



Franz Erhard Walther/Courtesy of Peter Freeman

"Head to Head Via Head," from 1967.

So it makes a certain sense that while Ms. Abramovic is performing in the Modern's atrium, Mr. Walther — much better known in Europe than here — is having his first solo show in New York in nearly 20 years. On view at Peter Freeman Inc. in SoHo, it contains 6 sculptures and more than 30 works on paper. Nearly all date from 1967 to 1973, when Mr. Walther was living and working in New York.

Mr. Walther is one of the precursors of relational aesthetics: that welter of participatory art forms that sprang up in the 1990s and emphasized social interaction above all else, especially art objects. Born in 1939 in Fulda, Germany, where he now lives again, he studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in the early 1960s, when Joseph Beuys, a precursor to the precursors, was teaching there. But his work is far less flamboyant than Beuys's (or Ms. Abramovic's, for that matter), or that of some of his own students at the art academy in Hamburg. Their ranks include [Martin Kippenberger](#), Jonathan Meese and John Bock.

In a sense Mr. Walther has spent his career putting his own quiet, ego-free stamp on Beuys's notion of "social sculpture." His canvas pieces resemble L. L. Bean products gone awry: abbreviated, detail-free fire hoses, sleeping bags, collapsible bus shelters or tents, life vests, backpacks. They are simply meant to be held, worn, lain in or stood under, usually by two or more people, creating strange moments of social intimacy and spatial awareness.

"The pieces are to be used," Mr. Walther wrote, a bit flatfootedly, in the "Spaces" catalog. "Everyone has to make use of his own abilities, to experience his own possibilities."

I may remember Mr. Walther's New York debut in "Spaces" better than many people because my first job out of college was in the Modern's department of painting and sculpture; I was secretary to Jennifer Licht, the associate curator who dreamed up and organized the show, which was one of the first by a major museum to invite artists to make installations specifically.

Incredibly green, I didn't understand that there was anything unusual about typing letters in which my boss asked companies like General Electric and Hewlett-Packard to lend equipment or donate materials so that, for example, Pulsa, a group of Yale graduate

students, could accomplish a light-and-sound piece in the museum's garden. Or so that Michael Asher, another forerunner of relational aesthetics, could build a kind of sensory-deprivation chamber, or Robert Morris could create a bonsai forest of fir trees. ([Dan Flavin](#) and Larry Bell were also in the show.)

Mr. Walther had the use of a small, rather discrete space at the back of the D'Harnoncourt galleries on the Modern's ground floor. It was separated from 54th Street only by windows and doors of floor-to-ceiling glass. He covered the area with a thick pad encased in pristine, raw canvas; every day the pieces emerged, folded or rolled, from individual canvas carrying cases.

I seem to remember trying out a couple of them, but I think they made me uptight. Still, I loved their skewed practicality and quiet serenity, as well as the look and feel of the canvas-covered pad and the optional levels of engagement. People could participate or watch, and pedestrians walking along 54th Street could also stop and observe.

At Peter Freeman's, the canvas pad is missing, but the serenity is not and Mr. Walther's sculptures await activation. "Head to Head Via Head," from 1967, is spread on the floor, a flat, rectangular double envelope of canvas nearly 14 feet long, something like a giant Pony Express pouch or very austere sleeping bag for four, with two pairs of users lying head-to-head, their feet pointing in opposite directions.

Or so it seems, until you lie down in it and realize that the gap between the opposing pockets is slightly too short: there is actually room for only two people, lying shoulder to shoulder in opposite directions and — if they turn their heads — face to face.

To really understand it, you have to be there, using the piece, watching it being used or thinking your way through how it might be used to grasp the strange physical proximity it might create.

Nearby, "Plinth, Four Areas" from 1969, is basically a flat square of canvas, about seven feet on a side, with a small opening sliced in its top at each corner. And it remains so unless four people step into the holes, pull the piece up around their knees (it fits snugly) and lean back a little. Together they create, and seem to grow out of, an almost geometric, pedestal-like volume.

Mr. Walther's work comes across at Freeman as a peculiar fusion of Allan Kaprow (restrained, private mini-Happenings), [Donald Judd](#) (plain, symmetrical, static) and Temple Grandin (reassuring tactile contact and containment). The show's two-sided watercolors, which have barely been exhibited here, soften the sculptures' somewhat Protestant ethic. Conjuring a range of references, from studies for Soviet agitprop posters

to semiabstract landscapes to concrete poetry, they fill in the background of his reticent, radical objects with a kind of illuminating white noise.

An exhibition of the work of Franz Erhard Walther runs through Saturday at Peter Freeman Inc., 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo; (212) 966-5154.

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