

Exhibition guide essay

Franz Erhard Walther: DRAWINGS

LINE/FRAME/ACTION/DRAWN NOVEL

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For Franz Erhard Walther drawing is not a static medium but rather a materially fluid generator of work processes, conceptual experiments and imaginative participation. Across a practice that ranges freely between graphic typography, painting on paper, artist's books, sculpture, photography, installation, actions and public demonstrations, the category of drawing emerges as an insistent presence explored through the continually transferable concepts of line, frame and action. Walther himself has always stressed the fundamental importance of drawing to his work, and by presenting a mere fragment of the artist's substantial oeuvre, the exhibition will trace a single path of continuity that extends from the artist's experimental works on paper of the late 1950s to his latest retrospective and autobiographical 'drawn novel' project.

The exhibition begins in 1958 with two work groups, the *Schraffurzeichnungen* (*Hatched Drawings*) and the *Wortbilder* (*Word Pictures*), whose apparent visual incompatibility and actual material congruency point to the plurality of drawing that the artist would fully explore in the 1960s. The word picture *Tempo* (1958) is an exemplary offering from this series, presenting a single capitalised and italicised word (evoking both the passage of time and musical timekeeping) in opaque red gouache on paper, the typography of Walther's own design. The artist trained in an applied arts context before a fine art one – a fact that informs his whole practice. Many of the *Hatched Drawings* used as their paper support the reverse of *Word Drawings*, the templates for works like *Tempo*. There is no cross-hatching, only singular strokes from top to bottom or left to right, in a predetermined action of linear accrual. Understanding writing and drawing to be equivalent processes at this time, Walther completely withheld psycho-grapheme registration in the hatching motion to hone an activity structured by a mechanical urge to obliterate the clarity of what was underneath.

Entering a space that prioritised materiality and processes, Walther's *Hatched Drawings* announced a new primacy of line, which explored its extension to three dimensions, freeing the line from its two-dimensional plane and extending it towards spatial and tactile materiality. *Drei breite Bänder (Three Broad Bands)*, 1963, is a tripartite arrangement of cotton strips attached to the wall using nails so that the thick strips of unbleached canvas, together totalling a length of over eight metres, cascade like wayward celluloid strips to a messy heap on the floor. Such an excess of line, such a slackness of shape in the three canvas bands' irregular configuration, is wholly a product of chance and gravity. *Three Broad Bands*, together with Walther's other contemporaneous 'sculptural drawings,' were inspired in part by works such as Lucio Fontana's *Ambiente Spaziale al neon (IX Triennale di Milano)*, 1951 and Piero Manzoni's *Line 1000 Metres Long*, 1961, both of which positioned line as a conceptual idea as much as a physical entity. The idea of material agency is fundamental to the open-ended constitution of these works, for example, *Sculptural Line, 21 metres*, 1963, is a coiled hemp rope in a state of perpetual potential activation.

Running parallel to Walther's varied investigations into line is his interest in the framing of space. The frame motif can be seen as the complement to line, beginning with the *Rahmenzeichnungen (Frame Drawings)*, which cleared away the centre of the image, often blocking out existing content as in the *Hatched Drawings*. The centre of the composition becomes empty space, designed for conceptual projection only. A very early example is *Rahmenzeichnung mit Raumhaken (Frame drawing with 'space hook')*, 1960, an *Informel*-inspired frame of energetic lines and painterly gestures on both sides of the paper. This drawing and others like it were influenced by the artist's impressions of the Wols exhibition at Documenta 2 in Kassel, 1959. Walther understood that he had come too late to continue with the *Informel* gesture that was so ingrained within European art of the later 1950s. Nevertheless, it was through such experiments that he arrived at the idea for *Sechzehn Lufteinschlüsse (Sixteen Air Enclosures)*, 1962–63, a further development of the frame motif. For this work two large sheets of paper were pasted together, the artist blowing a pocket of air inside before sealing the pillow-like structure. Pinned to the wall as a variable grid of sixteen enclosures, the paper sculpture combines austere repetitive geometric units with an

invisible bodily intervention that altered the empty space between each pair of sheets, adding mass but not weight.

During this period in Walther's practice we see drawing's utility intersecting with its haptic tactility. Paper is simultaneously a source and a site for the work, not simply a surface to be worked upon. An early instance of this new approach is the multipart work *Deckfarbenzeichnungen (16 Gruppen)*, (*Gouache drawings (16 Groups)*), 1961. This work is a prototypical exploration of material processes, for which Walther re-used a fellow artist's monoprints, cutting them up and painting over their verso surfaces to create new drawings. For another of the paper groups, Walther found that tearing the paper to a uniform size generated rough edges that signified an aspect of sculptural drawing. Even though the elements of the *Deckfarbenzeichnungen* have the appearance of painting, the artist understood them in terms of drawing, conducting an editorial process that selected and cut to size a huge variety of pre-used papers, card and canvas. Deconstructing the materials of his student painting practice (the canvas and paper detritus of his studio at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie), these works negotiate the artist's move into three dimensions with a spare elegance that anticipates much American post-minimalist and process art of the later 1960s. Several of these works also demanded an early manifestation of viewer participation. When first made, people were encouraged to interact physically with works such as *Zwei Stoffrahmen, Plastisch (Two Fabric Frames, Sculptural)*, 1963 – to press their hands to the surfaces, to (re)frame the muslin structures with their presence. The emphasis on touch in Walther's practice is intentional and methodical, and he often uses the term 'instrumentalisation' to signify the potentially active status of these plain, immobile and yet highly tactile instruments. With these pieces of 1962–63, Walther brings the idea of *use* into his work equation, together with object, artist and audience. As Susanne Lange has indicated¹, it is with this body of work that the concept of *handling* emerges as a key concern for the artist, laying the groundwork for the very physical handling required of an interaction with the *I. Werksatz (First Work Set)*, 1963–69, the major fifty-eight-part active sculptural work that immediately followed.

¹ Susanne Lange, *Franz Erhard Walther: I. Werksatz (1963–1969)* (exh. cat., Museum für Moderne Kunst). Frankfurt am Main, 1991, p.30.

These fifty-eight canvas structures, represented in the exhibition by # 38, *Rahmen (Zentrum) Wege, (Frame (Centre) Ways)*, 1967, are worn or interacted with during object demonstrations in the gallery space. In the *First Work Set* there are no written instructions, other than the components' titles. The artist did not want to dictate how the work-action would unfold, but to extract from it information as it did so. The *First Work Set* was also a means for the artist to take drawing out into the landscape, to enact it on a larger scale than possible in the gallery or studio. A photograph of component # 45, *50 x 50 m Kreuz (Cross)*, 1968, shows its activation in the landscape around the artist's hometown of Fulda. It is a huge fabric cross that must be unfolded and stretched evenly from its centre, an action that requires the participation of four people, working together. The photograph, as with all *Work Set* photo-documents, shows the end of a process – the culmination of a procedure of staging.² The artist has spoken of his engagement with outdoor settings for his work, commenting: 'There are landscape spaces that are empty, into which I can bring something, by walking in them, for example. I have an awareness of it, in the same way that I can "walk" on a blank sheet of paper by drawing on it.'³

The *Werkzeichnungen (Work Drawings)* that relate to the *First Work Set* number over three thousand – a vast production that extended from 1964 to 1973, four years after the *Work Set* itself was completed. These are not working drawings in the sense of precursory studies or plans. Rather they are made *after* the construction and testing of the canvas components, as recorded in the photographs. They chart, through brightly coloured graphic layouts of text, geometric shapes and schematic figural representations, an abstraction negotiating its relationship to the body. Walther's *First Work Set* appears unconcerned with movement or performative displays of the human body; it revolves around stillness and tableau, contraction and concentration, and above all else the divestment of the object as producer and container of meaning. The drawings attempt to reach an in-depth understanding of what the work is and what its use reveals. This elongated state of reflection positions the *Work Drawings* as catalysts for the spectator and their own encounter with the work, which might be in a

² Barbara Clausen, 'Poses of a Work in Action', *First Work Set: Actions, Instruments and Presence 1963–1969* (colloquium, Dia:Beacon). New York, 17 September 2011.

³ Walther quoted in Renate Damsch-Wiehager, ed., *Franz Erhard Walther: Antwort der Körper* (exh. cat., Galerie Villa Merkel der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar). Stuttgart, 1993, p.53.

state of use, storage, documentation or demonstration. The drawings enable an unfolding of the work: they are ‘containers for the experience of the *First Work Set*’, as the artist puts it.

The *Nachzeichnungen (After Drawings)*, 1971, add another layer of extended temporality to the artist’s continuing investigations of the *First Work Set*, by returning to the landscape documentation of the 1960s and rendering these photographs as sequential, small-scale pencil on paper studies. The final work in the exhibition is a selection of 71 pages from *Sternenstaub (Dust of Stars)*, 2007–2009, which totals 524 sheets of A4 with text and image combinations in graphite pencil, recalling the graphic novel format. As a visual and textual record of his life and work, *Dust of Stars* traces the artist’s longstanding engagement with drawing as it informs the conceptual underpinnings of his work. It charts his early engagement with the medium as a child during the 1940s and 1950s, and reflects back on his career during the 1960s with candid and revealing personal insights, interlacing his own work with that of his fellow artists at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie and those whom he encountered during his time in New York from 1967 to 1973, including Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Eva Hesse and Marcel Duchamp. This is an education told through drawing, in an accumulative process that is both all-encompassing yet necessarily episodic and selective. In many ways a self-generated archive, *Dust of Stars* uses the most basic of drawing tools, pencil on paper. Just as the *Working Drawings* reflect back on a pre-established situation, so too does this newest work perform a return, amassing a cinematic run of images that attempt to capture a life as charted through its artistic developments and art-historical touchstones. The writing and drawing of these memories pulse with vitality rather than ossification, and the style of draughtsmanship ranges from quick and rough sketches to photorealistic accuracy. Some pages are indeed drawn from photographs, like the *After Drawings*. Both position drawing as something that comes after photography, an intriguing technological reversal that extends the moment of the snapshot to a vista that can be continually extended. Other scenes in the novel are imagined, or drawn as if from a photograph when there was none. This play between real and imagined closely approximates the vagaries of memory and personal interpretation. The lines of the text and the frame of the image come into close correspondence, knitted together by the action of the page. Drawing for Walther is a

form of orchestration, both a physical registration and an opportunity to reflect and relive that which has past.