

# Object—Event—Performance

Art, Materiality, and Continuity  
since the 1960s

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Edited by Hanna B. Hölling

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## TWO

### Exhausting Conservation: Object, Event, Performance in Franz Erhard Walther's *Werkstücke*

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Hanna B. Hölling

An artist cannot work without material. Everything, including immaterial resources such as time, can be material I use to form things.

—Franz Erhard Walther, “Material”

#### ***Wersatz Rendezvous***

After entering a large exhibition room on one of the upper floors of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the visitor is confronted with curious fabric objects, folded and arranged neatly on shelves attached to a wall. The first off-white fabric bag, with a cross-shaped drawing and inscriptions, conceals unidentified contents. To the right, a similar smaller bag is placed on top of red folded fabric. Pencil inscriptions explain two symmetrical cross-shaped drawings of differing size (fig. 1). To the right, a khaki fabric bag is located on a shelf mounted slightly above and behind the other shelf (fig. 2). The photographs on the wall enhance this peculiar display. One large photograph shows four women lying on the floor, partially wrapped in canvas. A set of four smaller photographs on the right shows four different women placing their heads through the round openings in a cross-shaped dark-red fabric. Yet another, larger photograph shows a similar scene with a larger cross-shaped fabric worn

by yet another four participants. Finally, a set of six shots demonstrates the khaki canvas being folded into different shapes by five participants. Additional information about the works appears in a book containing captions, located at the entrance to the exhibition space.

The folded, shelved fabrics, explained through the drawings and annotations on their wrappings, offer an invitation to perform the actions in the photographs. Within the heterogeneous assortment that makes up the set, the objects, photographs, and instructions require different



Fig. 1. Franz Erhard Walther, components of *1 Werksatz* (*First Work Set*) 1963–69. Left, No. 23: *Gleichzeitigkeitstück* (Simultaneity piece); right, No. 36: *Politisch* (Political). Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, May 2019. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 2. Franz Erhard Walther, No. 26: *For Balance*, a component of *1 Werksatz* (*First Work Set*) 1963–69. Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, May 2019. Photograph by the author.

types of reading or decoding. The objects seem to be offered not so much for visual pleasure as for consumption. They are reminiscent of military gear or apparel displayed in pricey boutiques. The components of the artwork seem to rest, still and silent, ready to use, but the full work has not yet arrived. Energy has to be applied to release the work into the world, as if that is the only way the artwork can come into being, its dormant potential unleashed through human activation. Besides the physical acts of taking the pieces off the shelf, unfolding them, and collaborating to build different configurations, a sheer act of imagination might also be a way to complete the work.

I have been describing the components of *1 Werksatz* (*First Work Set*, 1963–69), a work created by the German artist Franz Erhard Walther (b. 1939).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of the most iconic works by Walther, *1 Werksatz* is an ensemble of fifty-eight individual elements—*Werkstücke* (Work pieces) or *Aktionsstücke* (Action pieces), (fig. 3). I encountered all three elements of *1 Werksatz* in an exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in April 2019. The first was *No. 23: Gleichzeitigkeitsstück* (Simultaneity piece),



Fig. 3. Franz Erhard Walther, *1 Werksatz* (*First Work Set*), 1963–69. Cotton cloth, foam, wood, and other materials; various dimensions, fifty-eight elements; edition 1/8. Installation view: *Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Decides*, WIELS, Brussels, February 21–May 11, 2014. Collection of The Franz Erhard Walther Foundation. Courtesy of The Franz Erhard Walther Foundation. Photograph © Sven Laurent—Let me shoot for you.

which has to be “activated”<sup>22</sup> by four participants lying between two layers of cloth, positioned on their backs with their heads pointing toward each other as if to forge a mental connection (fig. 4). The second, *No. 36: Politisch* (Political), consists of two cross-shaped pieces of cloth, one with longer ends than the other, with an opening for each of the participants’ head at the four ends (fig. 5). The fabrics instigate differing responses according to the distance of the participants from each other, including verbal and nonverbal interactions. The third piece, *No. 26: For Balance*, invites four participants to stretch the fabric and create a structure that depends on collaboration—an act that is coordinated by a fifth participant

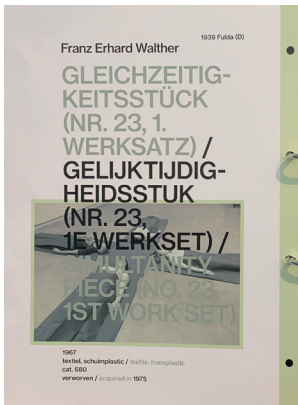


Fig. 4 (left). Franz Erhard Walther, *Gleichzeitigkeitsstück (No. 23, 1 Werksatz)* (in Dutch and English), Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, May 2019. Illustration from exhibition booklet, which also contains the following description: “Four participants lie between two layers of cloth, on their backs, with their heads towards each other to render silence palpable. In this imaginative act, a mental connection forms between the participants.” Photograph by the author.

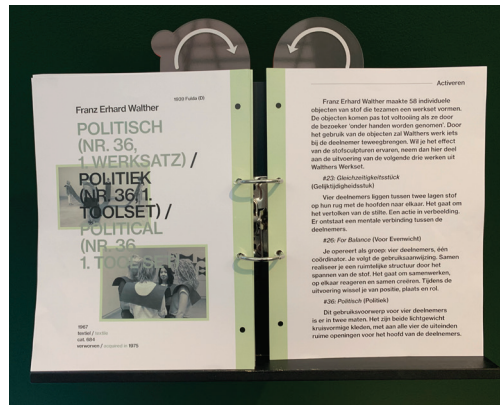


Fig. 5 (right). Franz Erhard Walther, *Politisch (No. 36, 1 Werksatz)* (in Dutch and English). Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, May 2019. Illustration from exhibition booklet, which also contains the following description: “This working object for four participants comes in two sizes. Both are lightweight pieces of cloth shaped in the form of a cross, with openings for the participants’ heads at each of the four ends. One piece of the cloth has long swaths to extend along the legs, the other short. The difference in shape and size influences verbal and non-verbal interaction among participants.” Photograph by the author.





Fig. 6. Franz Erhard Walther, *For Balance* (*No. 26, 1 Werksatz*) (in Dutch and English). Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, May 2019. Illustration from exhibition booklet, which also contains the following description: “Participants operate as a group: four participants and one coordinator. Following the manual, the group realizes a spatial structure by stretching parts of the cloth. Working together, responding to each other, and creating collectively are paramount. Upon execution, you change positions, places, and roles.” Photograph by the author.

(fig. 6). The participants are encouraged to change their roles and positions once the action is completed.<sup>3</sup>

But how do we define a time-based work as an “activation” and a physical object (to follow the traditional binary) in both short and long duration that rests somewhere in between its enlivened form and its apparently static form? When does this artwork come into being, and when might we actually say the work “is”? How do we determine what it is, and who gets to decide the angle from which it is analyzed? And as an object, performance, and process, how can this work be continued or preserved? The following discussion grapples with these and related questions, drawing on archival materials, secondary literature, and art criticism as well as my own experience as an observer, participant, and conservator-performer.<sup>4</sup>

## The Artist

It would surely be limiting and yet also accurate to say that Walther works predominantly in the physical medium of fabric. Although creating the sewn artifacts for display demands formal rigor, Walther’s works are simple, devoid of the mystery or mythology characteristic of the work of his fellow German artist Joseph Beuys.<sup>5</sup> From wearable sculptures to pieces requiring active participants, Walther’s art has an immaterial, paradyamic (in the sense of being ancillary or subsidiary to the dynamics of movement, for instance), and performative character. At times he restricts movements or choreographs gestures, directing attention to constellations of bodies, their relation to objects and to inhabited space. With all its

tensions and contradictions, his work embodies both freedom and a form of self-regulation.<sup>6</sup> His work demands a free, contemporary, self-motivated individual actively seeking experience. Along with its dependence on the human body, his work involves what he describes as “architectural moments . . . set always in dialogue with the physical, real room.”<sup>7</sup>

Walther’s art developed out of his rejection of the traditional forms that were still prevalent in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Early in his career, he set off to explore new material processes, actions, and modes of display. Although he refused to be associated with any art group or movement in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>8</sup> *art informel* may have influenced his artistic coming of age. *Art informel* was a primarily European form of abstract expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s emphasizing a direct engagement with the materials, gestural technique, chance (including unforeseen results, such as stains), improvisation, and openness. Although he is best known in Germany, Walther’s work has been exhibited worldwide, including in such early canonical exhibitions as *When Attitudes Become Form* at Kunsthalle Bern and *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both in 1969.<sup>9</sup> He was also involved in *Documenta 5: Questioning Reality—Image Worlds Today*, curated by Harald Szeemann in 1972, an exhibition that has been described as “the culmination of an already decade-long artistic interrogation of traditional models of contemplative spectatorship.”<sup>10</sup> His works have been represented in established art collections, beginning in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

Walther conceived of fabric objects—*Werkstücke*—as a starting point for actions performed by a viewer-participant. Often in a limited color palette, Walther’s *Werkstücke* are designed to develop a volume, that is, three-dimensional forms. But the definition of what his works are remains fluid, posing intriguing dilemmas for museums and conservators. Not exclusively objects and not entirely performances (a notion Walther has dismissed by saying “I never did performances”<sup>12</sup>), his works elude any stable definition. Over the years, Walther has referred to these artworks as “instruments” (implements) or “sculptures,”<sup>13</sup> implying not only distinct formal concepts but also ontologies. As instruments, his fabric objects appear to act as means to an end rather than ends in themselves. As autonomous sculptures, they are never inactive. Crucially, Walther conceives of his works as being completed in the mind of a viewer—a trope that connects them to the preconceptual legacy of Fluxus artists.

This essay slowly considers and dissects the vital materiality, lively power, and efficacy of Walther’s *Werkstücke*.<sup>14</sup> I want to expose the challenges involved in thinking about complex, heterogeneous works existing

as assemblages of activated performances and active physical artifacts—starting points and remnants of performance. The short durational character of aspects of Walther’s works troubles the established museological discourse that relies on the enduring physicality of art; their objectual element upsets the notion that this art can and should be used, thereby generating copies that confound the idea of an authentic original by shifting between ontological categories and material formations.

### **Time and Time-Basedness in Walther’s Work**

Every act of perpetuation or, for that matter, conservation presupposes a certain understanding of what the work is. Conservation, in other words, reflects our *Weltbild* (conception of the world) and leaves an imprint of cultural-archival permissions, educational provisions, social orders, and economic constraints—what is allowed and what is prohibited—determined by a given time and in a given situation. For a considerable time, conservation and museological approaches have centered on artworks that allow for spatial assessment (measurements), structural and surface analysis (weight, density, volume, texture), and research into how their materials age and degrade (fading, decomposition, etc.). Material objects presumably come with an assurance that their materials acquired for a collection are reliable, are reasonably stable, and can also be physically cared for. Recent studies in conservation have drawn attention to artworks that defy notions of stability and conservability because they are short-lived and intermittent and thus at odds with the notion of permanence.<sup>15</sup> Walther’s artworks fit, somewhat uncomfortably, in both categories, which is a blessing and a curse. *Werkstücke* are physically manifest in the material of the folded fabrics, which can be measured, assessed, and handled within the protocols of standard museological and conservation procedures. They can be physically cared for, safeguarded, and recorded in a collection database and conservation files. The tantalizing promise of their conservation for the future holds us in suspense. The “conservability” of these objects alludes to a future that is on its way, a fullness that is elsewhere.

Unlike the fabric objects themselves, bodily engagement with Walther’s works might be regarded as “ephemeral”—a term frequently used in relation to artworks that have a limited duration or rapidly decompose. Walther’s artworks create a specific time frame during which they pass from being apparently static objects to objects that are used to

perform an action. Walther recognizes that it takes time to activate one of his pieces, that in fact the participant works with time, and the artwork constitutes itself in time: “The time element becomes active work material, whereas it normally appears as duration for the work’s reception. . . . The person always simply came to it as the recipient—whereas here he can no longer be the recipient of something but has rather to produce something, he becomes the producer of temporal moments, of activity in time, of certain distances, certain actions, of determinants regarding self and others, and so on.”<sup>16</sup> The material of the performed component of Walther’s works is time, as the epigraph to this chapter acknowledges; time, in Walther’s view, is an immaterial medium that can be “used” for making art. Of course, the very idea that a specific work’s duration can be either short or long is enticing, but of greater interest is that Walther’s artworks coexist as both active objects and encouragements to perform actions. Such coexistence reflects Walther’s interest in and theoretical engagement with the *Werkbegriff* (concept of the work).

### **Sculpture and *Plastik*, *Lagerform*, and *Handlungsform***

Walther often refers to his early rejection of the traditional fine arts categories. He distinguishes between “sculpture” and *Plastik*, which he uses in its sense of “plastic art.”<sup>17</sup> Walther associates sculpture with subtraction, with taking away, whereas *Plastik* implies an active and creative addition of a material, including a performative aspect. One of his earliest works, *Versuch, eine Plastik zu sein* (An attempt to become a plastic art, 1958), treats *Plastik* not as a finished product but as a process. He is also interested in *Handlung*, a German noun indicating an action or deed. When one acts (*handelt*), a *Handlungsstück* (act piece) is created. *Handlung* incorporates *Hand* (the German word for “hand”), endowing action with an authorial—even if not necessarily manual—dimension. As will be seen, the hand can but does not need to be the artist’s. Viewing Walther’s works as *Handlungen* places them within the time they are enacted and emphasizes their short-lived character. According to the artist, these works are neither representational nor do they tell a story; rather, their meaning develops in action.

*Handlung* can take place both through the physical acts that a participant performs and through his or her imagination. *Handlung* is thus a form of imagination in which one projects an action just as much as it is a physical, corporeal act in which the body becomes a part of the work. Imagination and projection, as a form of realization of an artwork, have

a practical aspect. They can be employed, for instance, during biennales or exhibitions, when the loan of a *Werksatz* might result in damage due to shipping, exhibiting, or most important, handling. Because the work can occur both in projection and in action, they are interchangeable. Walther proposes one more distinction for his art: *Lagerform* (storage form) and *Handlungsform* (action form). Although a work that rests dormant enters a storage form, it is not to be conceived of as an incomplete work. According to the artist, a work's "inactive form" is but a different state of the same work.<sup>18</sup>

Walther, at least at the early stage of his career, was less concerned with the activation of the viewer<sup>19</sup> than with actions performed with an object, the articulation of spatial relations, and both embodied and liminal experience.<sup>20</sup> Walther's *Werkstücke* engage not only time but also space and form, and the ways that certain kinds of technology—including the very fabric of the apparently inactive objects—control and affect the body. But how can material form implicate a body? How does the environment shape our movements and define a specific type of viewer? What kind of body does his work demand? These are questions that this essay can only begin to explore.

### Scriptive Things

Walther's active notion of *Plastik* as a process is related to cultural historian Robin Bernstein's idea of "scriptive things." According to Bernstein, "Martin Heidegger and more recent scholars of 'thing theory' define an object as a chunk of matter that one looks through to understand something human," whereas a thing "asserts itself within a field of matter. . . . Objects are important insofar as they manifest, respond to, or transmit meaning that originates in humans. A thing demands that people confront it on its own terms; thus, a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing."<sup>21</sup> Things shape and influence human behavior; they "invite us to dance."<sup>22</sup> Thus, in J. L. Austin's terms, things are performative in that they cause actions in humans; they *do* something.<sup>23</sup> For Bernstein, things script bodily movements: for instance, one must open a book to read it. Rather than depending exclusively on a performer, Walther's *Werkstücke* script the performer's movements by eliciting certain gestures and constraining others (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Franz Erhard Walther, *1 Werksatz*. Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1971. Courtesy of The Franz Erhard Walther Foundation. Photograph by Timm Rautert.

### Twofoldness

As noted earlier, Walther distinguishes between an artwork's inactive form (*Lagerform*) and its active form (*Handlung*).<sup>24</sup> In *Handlung*, a viewer activates a *Werkstück* for a relatively short time. Once concluded, the performative aspect of the work appears to abate. So where do we locate the work? Does it reside in the viewer's or participant's experience or memory? The work seems to be partially contained in an object and yet partially unavailable when it is completed or discontinued (unlike a continuous object, *Handlungen* occur intermittently<sup>25</sup>). Walther claims that when he has completed an artwork, when he takes up a position in a piece, he cannot see it; and when he sees it, he cannot complete it.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the observation and the real *Handlung* are always divided; one of them always has to be imagined. Speaking of another series, Walther says, "When you look at a [*Wall Formation*], you address it as a sculptural painting, or a pictorial sculpture. And it's a fragment because there is a spot where you should incorporate your body. But when you step into it, what is it then? You complete

the work with your body, yet it's still a fragment because you can't see it anymore. It becomes a matter of imagination."<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, a temporary circumscribed moment is deepened during the artwork's engagement and activation, after which the work recedes into memory and imagination. On the other hand, the artwork is a physical object with its processual openness and availability for *Handlung*. This dynamic form—the interchangeable existence of the work as *Handlung* and *Handlung* as the work—has allowed Walther's art to persist and maintain its actuality for several decades. *Handlungsform* and *Lagerform*, however, coexist as ontologically diverse constructs—the kinetic event and the self-contained object—each implying the other. Sites of performative and material struggle, Walther's works are alternately object and action, the way Joseph Jastrow's duck/rabbit drawing shifts between the two animals. We can only experience and perceive them as one or the other, never simultaneously. Preserved as objects, Walther's pieces discourage use and the accompanying wear and tear; preserved as acts, they invite activation—and ultimately, destruction.

### Relics A Priori

Performance theory offers another perspective on the relation between objects and *Handlungen*. Events and performances that occupy a short time frame require a stable referent—such as a score or an instruction—that confirms their presence when an act comes to an end.<sup>28</sup> In the tradition of visual arts performances, scores and instructions often point forward, promising a repeated materialization of a work, while performance leftovers and residues point backward, testifying to the performance's having been present. In the case of Walther's *Werkstücke*, a clear distinction between scores and residues is missing. Kolya Reichert notes that “in Walther's work, action is always linked to material hardware. . . . This hardware never becomes an authentic relic of past performances. Instead, it is always ready and waiting for future ‘work actions.’”<sup>29</sup> *Werkstücke* are not only starting points for actions dictated by their form and shape, by affordances—properties that suggest how they might be used—and by their limits; they are also objects that are left over from these actions. Tangible and scrutable, *Werkstücke* offer us glimpses of themselves as relics a priori, as remnants from a future yet to come.<sup>30</sup> But Walther's fabric objects are not only works that act as temporal anchors that point both to the future and to

the present. If we consider photographs and drawings of *Handlungen* as a form of visual score prepared to facilitate the works, they too are anchors of the works' fleeting character.

### Scores, Instructions, Notations

Photographs and drawings can serve as evidence of *Handlungen*'s existence after their completion as well as stabilizing otherwise unstable work and ensuring that the work can be realized/activated in the future. British anthropologist Tim Ingold distinguishes between script and score, language and music, speech and song. According to Ingold, "reading a script is an instance of cognition, of *taking in* the meanings inscribed in the text; reading music is an instance of performance, of *acting out* the instructions inscribed in the score."<sup>31</sup> Ingold draws on British analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman, who maintains that "a musical score is in a notation and defines a work," whereas "a literary script is both in a notation and is itself a work." But drawing, according to Goodman, does not employ any kind of notation.<sup>32</sup> Ingold, however, is "reluctant to regard writing as a practice that supplants drawing. Writing is still drawing. But it is the special case of drawing in which *what is drawn comprises the elements of a notation*."<sup>33</sup> Writing and musical notation, according to Ingold, became separated in the modern era when music became devoid of its verbal component and language of its component of sound.<sup>34</sup>

Walther's instructions take the form of pencil drawings accompanied by verbal inscriptions on the fabric that encloses the *Werkstücke*. He also drew preliminary sketches that would indicate his thought process before constructing a work piece. The sketch is reproduced on the canvas bag of the *Werkstück*, which is also accompanied by photographs illustrating its activation—its transition from *Lagerform* to *Handlungform*. While the drawings on the bags are meant to be used for subsequent activations, the preparatory sketches for *Werkstücke* can only be reused when a copy of a *Werkstück* is sanctioned. Walther also utilizes photographs specifically for instructional purposes. Along with their function as visual scores for activating Walther's work, they also capture a memory of a past event and thus acquire historical value. The role of photographs is similar to the role of yet another form of visual score that sometimes accompanies displays of *Werkstücke*, namely, video recordings.<sup>35</sup> A video recording explains a work that is inaccessible because of conservation concerns or restrictions on use. Neither the videos nor photographs fully explain the work—some aspects are always left open.<sup>36</sup>



The idea that the fabric objects of *Werkstücke* serve as starting points rather than as remnants of events allows us to consider them as three-dimensional, performative score-*things* that outline the parameters of *Handlung*. *Werkstücke* overturn the centuries-old precedence of visual perceptions and the commodification of objects by establishing a relation between events, objects, and subjects. Seemingly random works register an openness that was important for the development of Walther's creative practice in the 1960s. *Werkstücke*, as three-dimensional scores, determine how the set of motions a participant performs is experienced. Appearing at times to be restrictive and reductive, Walther's artworks strip art down, as critic Joshua Mack puts it, to "an essential armature of movement and sensation-based experience."<sup>37</sup> But above all, Walther's concept of *Werkstücke* puts forward a multisensorial, epistemological-ontological practice.

Whether restrictive or permissive, Walther's drawings, photography, video, and different forms of scores, together with his verbal directions and photographs, complete the instructional dimension of *Werkstücke*. This dimension not only regulates *Handlungen*, it is also connected to the conceptual aspect of Walther's art. In their final collaborative work, *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggest that "every concept is at least double or triple, etc. . . . Every concept has irregular contour, defined by the sum of its components. The concept is a whole because it totalizes its components, but it is a fragmentary whole."<sup>38</sup> Their description helps explain the tensions caused by the multiplicity of ideas and conclusions in Walther's own interpretation of his work, as well as the resulting difficulty of describing his art. For Deleuze and Guattari, a concept "is obviously knowledge—but knowledge of itself, and what it knows is the pure event which must not be confused with the state of affairs in which it is embodied."<sup>39</sup> Things, like the language that serves to explain them, seem to stand in the way of properly understanding the concept.

### **Problematizing Use**

Using Walther's *Werkstücke* complicates their promise of longevity. Materials, when they are used, succumb to wear and tear; they accumulate dirt and dust; they can be stained, abraded, or torn. For this reason, institutions restrict the use of *Werkstücke* either by limiting viewers' direct encounter with them or by employing actors trained by the artist to perform his art. Walther instructs participants on how to use his

*Werkstücke* with verbal or written directions. This use endows him and the participants in his work with embodied knowledge and skills that often involve tacit aspects. Activating *Werkstücke* is similar to passing on knowledge about performance through body-to-body transmission. The physical archive (documents, scores, objects) is not sufficient for actualizing a Walther piece. Rather, memory, skills, gestures, and articulated movements of past activations are necessary to transmit the work from its virtual to its actual form.<sup>40</sup> The need for a participant to activate a work complicates the notion of individual authorship. To be sure, Walther is the author of the objects and imagined actions that are used to perform *Werkstücke*. But when the work is activated, the viewer becomes a coauthor or an accomplice in the realization of the actions. As Walther has said, *Werkstücke* are merely instruments. They are a collaborative production, relying on both the director/composer and the performers of Walther's scores. Our notion that an artwork is derived from the hand of a single individual is further complicated by the way *Werkstücke* have been fabricated. From the very beginning, the fabric objects in *I Werksatz*, for instance, were produced by others. Johanna Walther, Walther's first wife, has continued to fabricate Walther's works throughout his career, even after their separation.<sup>41</sup> Just as *Werkstücke* have been repeatedly activated, the physical objects have also been replicated. This, of course, has implications for conservation and its paradigm of intentionality. Usually assigned to a singular author, intention has been treated as a sacrosanct realm that explains how a work of art comes into existence. With *Werkstücke*, however, technical know-how and intentionality are distributed across a group of actors and actants. Walther's work asks us to register the experiences, knowledge, and memories of all the actors, past and present, involved in the making of his art.

### **Performing As Learning: *Werkstück* As Copy and As Act**

Because Walther's work demands activation by a viewer, copies of pieces that once were considered unique have been fabricated for handling as *Werkstücke* have been withdrawn from use and placed in museum collections. But what does it mean when a *Werkstück* begins its existence as a double, one that might develop its own parallel history and memory? As already mentioned, Walther's pieces move somewhat uneasily between ontological realms: they can be seen as unique objects inscribed or signed by the artist but also as instruments or three-dimensional scores

used to perform their activation. Whereas a *Handlungsform* permits multiple realizations, rendering its replication impossible (rather than being replicated, a *Handlungsform* is enacted or performed), a *Werkstück* is a unique physical object that can only be realized again when replicated. The essential difference is that a *Handlungsform* is occurrent, while a *Lagerform* is continuant. In other words, a *Lagerform* is usually preserved in its material, authentic form, while a *Handlungsform* is continued through repeated activation and completion of the piece.

Repetition of the works ensures the transmission of knowledge from one performance to the next. But recently repetitions have been performed not with the original but with a re-created *Werkstück*. Replicating a *Werkstück* requires a knowing hand, material intelligence, and craftsmanship. The fabric piece must be sewn from scratch based on the instructions conveyed in the artist's preparatory drawings and on the fabricator's technical knowledge and ability to interpret the drawings. Just as with learning a performance by repeating the gestures or choreography of articulated steps, sewing a piece from scratch requires a dissection of the *Werkstück's* structure and its material characteristics and then its reconstruction with the help of new materials and appropriate techniques. The experiential knowledge acquired through remaking is of high value because it provides a firsthand understanding of the artist's or the fabricator's working process. A different actor's remaking an object also challenges the notion of individual authorship. Whether in terms of the physical object or its activation, remaking mediates the creative, generative processes involved in the work and its world, including the social networks entailed in its fabrication and the conditions within which the work can be accomplished.

### **Meshwork, Assemblage, and Systems**

In addition to destabilizing the notion of individual authorship, the existence of exhibition copies shifts our attention from single pieces to Walther's work as a totality of offspring and potentialities, a whole without a center. Ingold's account of making as a mindful activity offers a helpful perspective. Ingold questions the conventional conception of artworks as emerging from a preconceived form and the possibility of reading back the artist's idea from the object. He chooses to attend to "the material flows and currents of sensory awareness within which both ideas and things reciprocally take shape."<sup>42</sup> In Western thought, he points out, "form came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while

matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon."<sup>43</sup> Making, however, is "more analogous . . . to sewing or weaving than to shooting arrows at a target."<sup>44</sup> Rather than a linear progression from a single point of creation, an artwork's trajectory can be seen as a meshwork, with countless open nodes and loose ends.<sup>45</sup> In such a meshwork of interconnections, both physical objects and activations can be regarded as points of arrival and departure. Among the myriad possibilities for activating *Werkstücke*, exhibition copies—created to provide the viewer with an experience of (once) unique objects—can not only acquire their own history and character but also produce further offspring. By assembling and disassembling the concepts of originals and remakes, replicas make it possible to reenact the making and thus reinstantiate the physical object.

Political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett proposes the idea of an assemblage as a swarm of material agencies.<sup>46</sup> Rather than treating the world as passive, raw, inert matter, Bennett revives the idea of vibrant matter, which has a long history in Western philosophy.<sup>47</sup> For Bennett, things have the capacity "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."<sup>48</sup> An assemblage is a working set of vibrant materialities and an interaction of bodies and forces. Assemblages, according to Bennett, "are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others. . . . Each member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage."<sup>49</sup> Assemblages are not governed by any central force and exist only in a particular time and place. Viewed as assemblages rather than ad hoc groupings, Walther's artworks are fully spontaneous in their activation; they generate meshworks of already performed and still-to-be enacted potentialities. Rather than being instrumentalized for human action, Walther's fabric objects exert their own agency, inviting, if not controlling, the movements of bodies and choreographing topographies as they are used in space and experienced corporeally. A dynamic system (a sort of ecology), his works self-organize, determining—by fitting and fixing—what in a particular arrangement is possible and what transgresses the limits of acceptable change. These limits are imposed by the three-dimensional scores, aided by photography, video, and drawings.

Walther's *Werkstücke* are activated by the beholder or the participant's involvement, but they are also active and acting, exerting their agency on and through the participant's body and imaginative powers, capable of affecting just as much as being affected. So the exclusivity of the work's capability to be acted upon is destabilized. In fact, because the *Handlungsform* is already implied in the *Lagerform*'s capacity to exert material agency, corporeal activation may be entirely redundant. In other words, the *Handlungsform* is already implied in the *Lagerform* capable of exerting material agency. If we fully embrace this perspective, emphasis is placed on the activation of objects producing events with chance effects rather than on *Werkstücke* as objects that depend on an active subject. Removed as a root cause of an effect, the subject is placed on an equal level with the object. The division between subject and object is replaced by the notion of an event. Power can be ascribed to materials and matter (in this case, to *Werkstücke*) just as it is to humans (their beholders/participants). And the active, vibrant matter of Walther's *Werkstücke* permeates yet another dimension of his work, its capability to build a meshwork of nodes and points of arrival and departure—an infinite swarm of possibilities for activation, enactment, and replication in the ever-changing world in which any ambition for arresting such change—once considered a tenet of traditional conservation—is illusory and unwarranted.

### The System As Medium

Walther's pieces can be seen not only as assemblages that articulate relations between their spatial and temporal component parts but also as systems. Conceived in the late 1960s, systems theory coincided with the period in which Walther's creativity began to proliferate. Not exclusive to science and engineering, systems aesthetics is considered to be among the most significant critical theories of postformalist art practice. In the late 1960s, critic and theorist Jack Burnham wrote, "We are now in transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture* [in which] change emanates, not from things, but from *the way things are done*."<sup>50</sup> A system is a relation among things, consisting of the structural and material characteristics of parts and their organization.<sup>51</sup> Focusing on systems shifts the focus away from the "skin" of objects to meaningful relations found in and between objects, including their organization and dynamic interaction. Systems aesthetics offers a useful framework for thinking about Walther's *Werkstücke* as systems that organize and regulate actions.

Systems theory emphasizes process over product, organism over mechanism, and holism over reductionism.<sup>52</sup> The systemic interrelatedness of Walther's work is reflected in the way *Werkstücke* organize the realization of *Handlungen* while simultaneously operating on material objects. Understanding Walther's works as systems helps overcome the duality between objects and actions in his artistic project. It also helps explain how the fragments, as Walther calls them, of a work come together to form a whole in which they are intimately interconnected and explicable only in relation to the whole. Transcending their physical presence, his works take place in the realm of the invisible, in the relation established between the object and the body.

Museums are another component in *Werkstücke's* systemic relations, serving as a locus for *Lagerform*, the storage state of Walther's pieces. A musealized *Werkstück* becomes part of a system of enclosures: a cloth envelope holds the folded canvas bundles, which are stored in an archival box, which is in turn located in an enclosed, temperature-controlled, and securely locked museum archive or storage space. The system of containers inherent to the artwork is extended by the departmental and architectural structure of the institution that harbors the work under its protective roof. Musealization—as a process of placing an artifact in a museum and withdrawing it from everyday experience—extracts a work physically and/or conceptually from its cultural setting, rendering it into a “musealium” (a museum object).<sup>53</sup> This process is also referred to—often pejoratively—as “museumification.” As a reflection of systems culture, musealization reveals change as a result of how things are done and redone, how relations are erased and established, and how these processes reflect the characteristics of a larger organization, a museum system. Such systems evolve toward ever-greater complexity and enclosure, a recurring division of the “safe space,” which may be ruptured by a momentary request for a *Werkstück* for display or research.

So how can systemic thinking play out in conservation? Rather than attempting to anchor a work in its physical properties, preserving it as a system requires thinking through its systemic relations. The concepts of a work's authentic and original condition, on which traditional conservation is based, no longer offer stable points of reference. Tracing an artwork back to its origins by following a linear trajectory, regressing to a single point at the beginning of an artwork's history, or seeking the artwork's original form in the mind of its maker, is ultimately ineffectual. Making is never finished; it is interconnected, interrelational, and

systemic. Walther's art is a kind of thinking; it generates material and corporeal knowledge. The material used to form these works is far from still or inert. Rather, it is active and potent, incommensurate with the traditional approaches to perpetuating objects as impassive and dormant, as lumps of unruly—because continually degrading—matter. Conservation must therefore emerge as a form of creative, interventive, and generative process that perpetuates making.

## NOTES

Epigraph: From “Lexicon of Terms and Concepts,” in *Franz Erhard Walther: Dialogues*, ed. Erik Verhagen (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), 169. “Material” stems from key terms and concepts of Franz Erhard Walther's artistic vocabulary first defined in a 1995 interview with Susanne Richardt, specifically in relation to the concepts behind the series *Standstellen* (Standing places).

1. See figure 3 and, for its variant from 1971, figure 7.
2. Walther uses the word “activation” when he refers to his works, which complicates the dichotomy between activation and stasis.
3. This description of *No. 26: For Balance* is based on the exhibition booklet I consulted at the Van Abbemuseum in April 2019.
4. Although this essay foregrounds theoretical reflections on Walther's work, I also reference my practical knowledge through a direct involvement in display and care for his objects as a conservator at ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany.
5. During his time at Düsseldorf Art Academy, Walther interacted with the circle of students attached to Beuys but felt unappreciated. He recalls that Beuys went so far as to designate him a “tailor” and his art, “Beamtenart” (clerk or bureaucratic art).
6. Mika Tajima, “Mika Tajima on Franz Erhard Walther,” video recording of Dia:Chelsea lecture, March 22, 2016, <https://www.diaart.org/media/watch-listen/video-mika-tajima-on-franz-erhard-walther/media-type/video>.
7. Franz Erhard Walther, “Künstlertgespräch: Franz Erhard Walther” video recording from Mudam Luxembourg Museum, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VixobObjhKA>. Walther recalls that his romance with art's spatial relations began in Frankfurt's Städel Museum, where he observed an elderly person looking at a large painting. He realized that the distance between the person and the painting was crucial, and this realization led to the formation of his concept of *Handlung*. According to Walther, the relation between the object and the viewer is more important than the picture itself.
8. Referring to his unprecedented use of canvas and rejection of traditional media, Walther told an interviewer, “I stepped out of history.” Franz Erhard Walther, “Kunst nach 1945: Franz Erhard Walther,” video record-

- ing, Städel Museum, Frankfurt, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/de/werk/spricht-nicht>.
9. Verhagen, “Franz Erhard Walther,” 7.
  10. Shop, “Active Duty.”
  11. For instance, his *1 Werksatz* was acquired by Dia Art Foundation in 1978. Schwendener, “Try These On.”
  12. Kolja Reichert, “Pleased to Meet You,” *Frieze*, August 29, 2014, <https://frieze.com/article/pleased-meet-you>.
  13. Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Attempt to Be a Sculpture: Franz Erhard Walther,” *Mousse Magazine* 43 (2014), <http://moussemagazine.it/franz-erhard-walther-hans-ulrich-obrist-2014/>. An anecdote has it that the minimalist Donald Judd expressed his approval of Walther’s inactivated work—an opinion that underscored the essentialist material purism present in Walther’s works in their inactive state.
  14. By efficacy, I mean the creativity of agency, “making something new appear.”
  15. Short-duration artworks include kinetic artworks, performances, and events, but also artworks that involve media technologies, such as video, film, and computer-based works. To be sure, even long-duration works have a lifespan that classifies them as time-based in a long duration. See my *Revisions—Zen for Film*, 78–86, and *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 120–22.
  16. Franz Erhard Walther, in a conversation with Ursula Meyer, New York, 1970, in Adriani, *Franz Erhard Walther*, 279. Reprinted in Walther, *Dialogues*, 16.
  17. This paragraph draws on Walther, “Interview.” Walther expresses his disapproval of the notion of traditional sculpture. In an anecdote, he recalls throwing plaster powder into the room during one of his classes. When the powder settled, Walther insisted that he had just created a sculpture using traditional materials.
  18. “Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art—Franz Erhard Walther *Werksatz* (Workset) 2008,” accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/case-studies/franz-erhard-walther>.
  19. Activation of the viewer is an aspect of the participatory, social forms of engaged spectatorship of the 1960s, such as Happenings, and is also central to relational aesthetics.
  20. Shop, “Active Duty.” A liminal experience (or a threshold experience) refers to the state of being that occupies a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold. In anthropology, liminality is associated with a transitional period or phase of a rite of passage. In my use, a liminal experience is an experience that is barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response.
  21. Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 69–70. Focusing on human-object interactions in culture and deriving from the Heideggerian distinction between objects and things, “thing theory” is a branch of critical theory that posits that the thingness of objects can be confronted when they cease to function. Brown, “Thing Theory.”
  22. Bernstein, “Dances with Things,” 70.
  23. For Austin’s concepts of performative and constative utterances, which have impacted much of the discourse of performativity, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.



24. Twofoldness is associated with the analytic tradition of Western philosophy and particularly with the writings of the philosopher Richard Wollheim. Pictures, according to Wollheim, are objects that are experienced simultaneously as depicted contents and surface marks.
25. The concept of *Handlung* is similar to the philosophical distinction between continuants, which persist by enduring, and occurrents, whose existence is limited to a certain time. For more, see Simons and Melia, “Continuants and Occurrents,” and also the introduction to this volume.
26. Walther, “Interview.”
27. Obrist, “Attempt to Be a Sculpture.”
28. See Hölling, *Revisions—Zen for Film*, chap. 10.
29. Reichert, “Pleased to Meet You.”
30. “Relics a priori” require conceptual work before they come into being, in contrast to conventional relics, which remain after an event. I am relying on the philosophical distinction between a posteriori (knowledge derived from experience or personal observation) and a priori (self-evident truths). “Relics a priori” might be thought of as “relics from the start.”
31. Ingold, *Lines*, 12.
32. *Ibid.*, 11, citing Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 210 (in Goodman’s words, “a sketch or picture is not a notation but is itself a work that does not employ any kind of notation”).
33. *Ibid.*, 122.
34. *Ibid.*, 10.
35. Works of art that involve the viewer’s activation are often presented alongside video recordings, photographs, and drawings. For instance, the Franz West retrospective at Tate Modern, London (February 20–June 20, 2019) made use of multiple media to explain and instruct the participant how to use the replicas of West’s objects.
36. Tomic, “Franz Erhard Walther.”
37. Mack, “Franz Erhard Walther.”
38. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 15–16.
39. *Ibid.*, 33. The passage continues: “The task of philosophy when it creates concepts, entities, is always to extract an event from things and beings, to set up the new event from things and beings, always to give them a new event: space, time, matter, thought, the possible as events.” *Ibid.*
40. For my notions of the virtual and the physical archive, based on Deleuzian philosophy, see *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 141–66. According to Diana Taylor, archival documents must be supplemented by embodied cultural practices (such as ritual, dance, and cooking). Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16–32. Megan Metcalf discusses Taylor’s performance theory in chapter 6 of this volume.
41. Shop, “Active Duty.”
42. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 10.
43. *Ibid.*, 210.
44. *Ibid.*, 178.
45. Some similarities might be seen between Ingold’s ideas of open nodes and the proposition that works of art develop trajectories “as consisting of vari-

- ous singular interweaving partial biographies with different beginnings, itineraries, dynamics and endings.” Van de Vall, Hölling, Scholte, and Stigter, “Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation,” 6, citing Latour and Lowe, “Migration of the Aura,” 278.
46. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 107. For a useful overview of other concepts of assemblage, see Hamilakis and Jones, “Archaeology and Assemblage.”
  47. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.
  48. Ibid. Bennett adopts the term “actant” to designate a source of human or nonhuman action that not only has efficacy but is also able to produce effects that can change the course of actions.
  49. Ibid., 24.
  50. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” 16. See also Burnham’s “Real Time Systems,” in *The Great Western Salt Works*, 26–38. For a discussion of Burnham’s work, see Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Aesthetics,’” *Tate Papers*, no. 5 (Spring 2005), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/05/all-systems-go-recovering-jack-burnhams-systems-aesthetics>. Burnham is best known for *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: Braziller, 1968). Drawing on technology and applying the language of general systems theory (including cybernetics), Burnham focuses on the exchanges between matter and energy rather than on confined, discrete artifacts. Burnham was not the first to implement systems theory. In 1930, biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy proposed a general systems theory to understand systems that continuously interact with their surroundings.
  51. Systems theory helped establish studies of art as social systems, such as Niklas Luhmann’s *Art as a Social System* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). The studies developed into systemic forms of cultural analysis, such as actor-network theory, which acknowledges that not only human but also nonhuman actors can exercise agency.
  52. Shanken, “Introduction,” 13.
  53. On the topic of musealization, both as revival and afterlife from Adorno’s perspective and as a separation from everyday life from Dewey’s, see my *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 22–23; for museological and museographical applications, see Desvallées and Mairesse, *Key Concepts in Museology*, 50–52.

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