

# BUNDESKUNSTHALLE

## “Images in mind, bodies in space“

### FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER

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#### Unfinishable

Franz Erhard Walther in Conversation with Erik Verhagen,

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**EV:** You belong to a generation of artists with a certain ‘sensitivity’. A generation that has always tried to keep a distance between art and life. However, it seems that there are clear bridges and connections between certain events in your life and your body of work. This has been echoed in statements since the 1970s and is confirmed when reading your drawn diary *Sternenstaub* (Stardust) from 2009. These autobiographical sources seem all the more interesting to me because they include circumstances and memories that go back to your early childhood. In other words, it would be wrong to place the beginning of your work at the end of the 1950s. Your work is the result of a confrontation between events from the past and the present, in an attempt to come to terms with this past and to approach it anew. Could you talk about the events in question, which are linked to the barbarity of the Nazis on the one hand and to the ruins of post-war Germany on the other? From the traumatic images that haunted you in your early childhood to the rejection of any form of ‘completeness’, which ultimately played a decisive role in the development of your *Werkbegriff* (conception of the artwork)?

**FEW:** In my early years, when I started working as an artist, I wasn’t aware of any of this, but when I was asked later: ‘Where do your attitudes come from, certain ways of working, especially this open, processual approach, not specifically defining a work or a conception of the work’, I looked into it myself, and I think it has to do with early, childhood experiences. My first traumatic memories, the bombings in 1944, when I was five years old, were a very strange mixture of concrete fear that our house, our cellar, where we were hiding, would be hit by bombs. But also a fear that was based on the adults around us, namely seeing their helplessness. As a child you always rely on the security, the solidity of adults, the apparent solidity and security in the lives of adults, and I just saw that destroyed, melted, broken. Those were two levels of fear. I think that also influenced my artistic attempts from the very beginning – in other words, bringing together what I had actually seen, and what I had imagined; they flowed into each other, the imagined was ultimately just as real for me as what I had actually seen. Before this event – I also wrote about it in *Sternenstaub* – there was always the fear that I saw around me, of the superiority of the secret police, the Gestapo, that was generally there; I felt it when my parents sat around the table at home and discussed sensitive topics. I later realised that they were afraid that I would talk about these subjects in the street and that this would immediately lead to repression by the Gestapo. This is only vaguely formulated here, but it was the case that the fixed values that you probably had and sought as a child were shattered. I think that played a big part in my decision, my attitude, not to see works as something fixed, permanent – neither in history, nor in the present, nor in what I’ve done. I’m well aware that there can be artistic attitudes that imply exactly the opposite – namely to create something permanent again after such a moment of destruction, of annihilation, to oppose it. A sculptor who works with volume, for example, will certainly have to think in this way. That wasn’t the case for me. And I also think that this led to a particular

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sensitivity in my overall perception, which I developed very early – I would say too early. I can only explain this by these early events, combined with dramatic situations during the war.

**EV:** Could you talk about your first aesthetic experiences? Your first artistic motivations? How open was a town like Fulda to contemporary art? Did your family contribute to your artistic education?

**FEW:** The first thing that struck me was a wall painted with tar paint in a small railway signalman's house; it wasn't scribbled lines, but rather quite illustrative figures, faces, heads. I kept going back and looking at it. It fascinated me. There was nothing else visually interesting in the village. My grandparents had three albums at home with so-called 'cigarette cards' pasted in them. That was my little picture gallery, so to speak. When I was ten, we moved to Fulda. In the town, you could see a mixture of war damage and historic buildings, for example in the baroque style. Of course, this can also be a burden, and it was when you live in a town that has no contemporary art at all, where modernism is not present in public or in exhibitions. There was the contrast of our living room at home; I used to say: that's the Kandinsky wallpaper on the wall, typical of the fifties; so it was abstractly modern, visually fascinating – and years later, against this background, I lost respect for so-called abstract painting. It all seemed to me like a pattern that was already present in everyday life, used up. At a very early age, I began to visit the annual Christmas exhibitions of artists in Fulda. I knew next to nothing about the history of art, but there were certainly things there that fascinated me; strangely, however, it was less the subject matter or content than the way it was done. I remember watercolours running in water, for example. I can't really explain why I reacted to that in particular and not to the content and the themes; maybe it has something to do with the dissolution, this openness, being against form, against solidity – that's possible.

**EV:** In the late 1950s, you studied in Offenbach and Frankfurt am Main. Could you describe those first years of training and what you produced there?

**FEW:** There's a prehistory that I'd like to talk about, because without it I can't explain my entry into the art academies. We were just now in 1958; but in 1955/56, I was already thinking about going beyond the purely pictorial, the mimetic narrative. There are earlier drawings that refer to landscapes, which I erased and in which I left traces, with the idea that the viewer develops the picture on the basis of these traces, which are ultimately actions. Of course, I didn't have the concept of action in mind yet, but the viewer should somehow participate in the picture. Then I made a series of *Umrisszeichnungen* (Outline Drawings) that refer to objects, but only hint at them rather than depicting them, again with the idea that the viewer would develop these forms, these outlines, into objects in their imagination. From today's perspective, I think there's a very simple reason for thinking of something like this at all, because it's not possible as an invention at that age. I used to roll out dough in my parents' bakery. There were these biscuit cutters. Everything was still done by hand, and I was fascinated when these shapes, object shapes, were cut out of the flat, rolled out dough. The perception was more or less unconscious, or semi-conscious. At the same time, I was also drawing realistically, but realistically with an awareness of form, not naively copying. At that time, when I was doing that, I found out by chance that there was an art school in Offenbach am Main, and I was amazed because I didn't know that there were art academies where you could study. I found the address and applied. There, I discovered the typeface constructions in the typography class; I then made the *Wortzeichnungen* (Word Drawings) and *Wortbilder*




(Word Pictures) and then these knife cut-outs from earlier caricatures. I cut out parts that I no longer found interesting, again with the idea that the viewer would fill in the blanks with their imagination. I wanted the viewer to develop the *Wortbilder* into their own images based on the word, the typeface, and the colour. Those were my thoughts; and at the same time, I wanted to save painting – yes, that too! Then I painted what I called *Symbolbilder* (Symbol Pictures), which illustrated both the object and the subject.

**EV:** Could you tell us about the discrepancy between what was already emerging in your work and the expectations of your teachers?

**FEW:** When I made these *Wortbilder*, I naturally tried to discuss them with my teacher, who then said: a single word on the surface, any sign painter can do that; here, it's about design. That's exactly what I didn't want – I was well aware of that. I went to the director at the time, Henry Gowa, with my problems, conflicts, and questions. And he said: 'Walther, the Werkkunstschule is not the right place for you. You need to go to an art academy', and recommended the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. I applied there with the knife cut-outs, the *Wortbilder*, and the *Schraffurzeichnungen* (Hatch Drawings). I discovered the *Schraffurzeichnungen* while tracing the constructed words onto the coloured areas. We didn't have tracing paper, so I hatched the letters on the reverse side; and, at some point, I discovered the reverse side as a valid work, as a pure drawing rhythm that the viewer should also develop into images in their imagination. I submitted such works, including *Wortbilder*, to the Städelschule and was promptly rejected. They said it was commercial art. I asked what was required and was told: for example, drawings of nudes, drawings of heads, still lifes. I looked through what I had in my portfolios and applied at the next appointment six months later and was accepted. At first, I had to bow to the requirements of this Städelschule, but soon I began again with my experimental works, with pasting over and empty surfaces. I immediately got into a lot of trouble; I couldn't get along in the class, wanted to change to a supposedly freer class, and was then expelled because of my work. I tried to work with these experimental works, including the material surfaces, without any ties to an academy, but it didn't work. I needed an environment where I could discuss things. I received the brochures of the German art academies and decided on Düsseldorf because I had read the name Karl Otto Götz in the academy's brochure, an important informal painter for Germany. I applied, was then accepted, and was able to continue my experimental work there.

**EV:** The 1959 documenta had a major influence on you. You even told me once that you thought it was more important than the one in 1972, which you participated in. Why is that?

**FEW:** The 1972 documenta was quite good for its time, but against the background of what was promised with [Harald] Szeeman's exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* – in my opinion, he didn't fulfil that with the 1972 documenta. It should have been better. The 1959 documenta was important because it was the first time that what was regarded as avant-garde in the art world at the time was shown on a large scale. Of course, young people like Yves Klein or [Piero] Manzoni weren't included, they were simply too young and hardly known, but everything else was there: Art Informel, Abstract Expressionism, and even Lucio Fontana. There were groups of works by Wols, Jackson Pollock, works by [Willem] de Kooning, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman. The states of the art scenes in France, Germany, Italy, and England were also on display.



**EV:** In the course of your studies, four artists have influenced you directly or indirectly. In chronological order and for different reasons: Rembrandt [van Rijn], [Paul] Cézanne, Yves Klein, and [Piero] Manzoni. What can you tell us about these four names?


**FEW:** With Rembrandt, it was mainly the high level of draughtsmanship that fascinated me, as well as the immediacy of his drawings.

**EV:** I'm thinking more of the anecdote at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main. Your encounter with *The Blinding of Samson* in 1960.

**FEW:** Yes, but that also has to do with the fact that I was interested in Rembrandt in the first place. There were very few visitors at the time, so the guards were more or less alone with the paintings. I happened to walk into a side room where this painting was hanging – now it hangs prominently. A large format. The important thing is that the figures in the painting are almost life-size. An elderly lady was standing in front of it, hat on her head, silent, hands crossed, as if in meditation. It was basically like a still life, almost metaphysical, you could think of [Giorgio] de Chirico. I had visited Rembrandt again and again because I also liked his method of painting, which I saw as processual. But suddenly that was no longer important; instead, I saw the relationship between the person standing in front of the painting and the life-size figures in the painting; the relationship between the person and the painting became important to me. That became the theme for me. I went back to the Städelschule, which was next to the museum. With this painting in my mind, I suddenly had the idea of creating a sculptural formulation between the viewer and the object, in this case the painting. What fascinated me was the physical situation between a person and an object, and I playfully imagined living people instead of the painting. But that was very different from theatre situations with the audience and what happens on stage. I wasn't thinking about that, it was more something pictorial and sculptural. I think that, in the long run, this chance encounter had a significant impact on my development.

Cézanne for a different reason, but of course that had something to do with me too, especially his late, seemingly unfinished fragmentary paintings, which are so good, I have to say: Cézanne knew very well, at least in most of them, that they weren't fragments, that he couldn't complete them because he didn't know what colour to use. Not because he was incapable, but because the painting was already valid in its fragmentary state. And I playfully added that I, as a viewer, could develop the picture further in my imagination. To put it simply, I could paint it to the end, if you want to think of it that way. That was the great fascination, beyond the painterly quality, and also what impressed and influenced me very much, what appears in Cézanne, the moment of pictorial autonomy, that the picture, the painting itself becomes the object. It's not a thing that represents something, but the process of painting itself becomes the subject. I saw this as the beginning of modernism, whose main argument was the autonomous image.

Fontana had already played a role for me before I came across Manzoni. I had seen three of his paintings at the documenta, rather smaller formats, actually hung off to the side. That was the actual experience at the 1959 documenta, because it completely overrode the pictorial concepts I had brought with me. I also had problems with Barnett Newman. A yellow-ochre surface with a single vertical line, not so much for the sake of reduction or monochrome – I had practised that with my *Wortbilder*; I was to some extent trapped in compositional thinking. With Fontana, it was the radicalism; here, the classical pictorial space was destroyed. With Barnett Newman, it seemed to be preserved; it was still homogeneous. But with Fontana, it was destroyed; and that was a problem for me, and I




took that problem with me into my studies at the Städelschule. There, I met a teacher who told me: "Start with the object, then maybe, at some point, you'll get to abstraction. But remember, abstract art can't be taught!" I criticised a lot of Manzoni's work: I found a lot of it kitsch, like the velvet works, where this glass wool comes out. What I appreciated most, and still do, are his lines, which I first saw in 1963. They're concretely there, but they have to be developed in the imagination. It's no longer dependent on the visual. Of course, this affected me in a special way. At that time, I was already making works, actions, in which the work actually exists primarily in the imagination. With this, I found a confirmation of my own endeavours.

**EV:** The first third of the 1960s was decisive for you. What were the different stages that led from the *material processes* to the *action processes*? Could you please go back even further and talk about the *Rahmenzeichnungen* (Frame Drawings)? What has always amazed me is that their *modus operandi* goes against what we have been taught by various art theorists, starting with the French philosopher Louis Marin, who always saw the frame as an affirmation of the power of the image. Instead, you conceive the *Rahmenzeichnungen* as a means of overcoming the power of the image, dematerialising it, and strengthening the role of the viewer and their ability to project.

**FEW:** I can only think and say this if I address the subject of the frame. I was well aware that the frame, that is, the framing of a picture, no longer works, and that the classical plinth on which I place a sculpture no longer supports it. That's why things are on the floor or on the table. I also wasn't sure how I could thematise the frame. I probably remembered the earlier *Umrisszeichnungen*. It was also clear to me that Yves Klein, for example, could no longer have a frame. It was very important to me that he also applied paint around the edges. I had never seen that in any other artist. If the picture has no frame, it can potentially be something sculptural. This actually softened the concept of the picture, also with Yves Klein's idea that it's associated with immateriality, that it goes beyond the picture itself. Then I started to give volume to these things with the box forms and the cushion forms. This has to do with the idea of overcoming the classical concept of the picture and then actually moving into real space. But not to become a sculptor in the classical sense. I had to find forms outside the classical concept of sculpture. Otherwise, it would have just been a transition from one genre to another. I then took this further with the gluing and, at some point, I had the idea of bringing air into it as a material. This now had volume, but these papers were still too flat to be placed in the space, and they still had something pictorial about them. If I put them on the wall, it could be in a block form, in one row, in two rows. But when I put them on the floor as a pile, where the individual sheets could be turned over, the idea of the action emerged, the turning over became part of the work, and the idea of giving the whole thing more volume was obvious. That's how my cushion forms and the moment of action came about. I then developed pieces that were related to the hands and the body. As a result, the body became part of the work or could be seen as the basis for the *Werkstücke* (Workpieces). They became ambiguous when lying on a table or on the floor, for example. The moment I pick up the pieces or put them on the body, I transform the *Werkbegriff*, it becomes completely open. What is a work anyway? I've been working intensively on this, and, in doing so, I accidentally discovered the sewn works.

**EV:** The consolidation of the action process coincides with the discovery of sewing and the end of your studies in Düsseldorf. You were in the same class as [Sigmar] Polke and [Gerhard] Richter. But you didn't join their adventure of Capitalist Realism. The path you



took was rather a solitary one, far removed from any group dynamic. One could even say that this path was taken in a hostile environment. Could you talk about the years in Düsseldorf, the resistance you encountered from other students and professors?

**FEW:** I was concentrating on my conception of the work, and there were questions. For example, I was disturbed by the term 'gluing' with its connotation of collage. The simplest thing would have been to have pieces made of metal or wood. But that would have been too banal. I wanted handwriting, something materially tactile that could be related to art in terms of the impression of the material. A neutrally processed object couldn't do that. At that time, I was very close friends with Johanna,<sup>1</sup> whose parents ran a so-called Viennese court tailor's shop in Fulda. In March 1963, we met in the tailor's workshop, and there was a small satin cushion on the worktable. These were placed in the shoulders of suits to be pressed. This cushion looked very much like my glued work, but it was sewn all the way round. Eureka! That hit me. I knew immediately that this was it. I don't remember if I had already started in the workshop. Anyway, I sat down in my workroom and made rows of drawings of pieces that could be sewn, and Johanna immediately translated them into sewn works. When I went back to Düsseldorf after the semester break with these pieces, that was the big hello from [Joseph] Beuys, Richter, Polke – Beuys said: 'Now Walther is switching to tailoring' – and they all laughed their heads off. I was then 'the tailor'. This mockery and laughter suddenly stopped when Claes Oldenburg's works were published. If I had made my sewn works a few months later, I would have been accused of copying. They stopped laughing and saw that my work was made independently of Oldenburg. For the rest of my years in Düsseldorf, they couldn't make up for it. At some point, Polke and [Blinky] Palermo started sewing, and Beuys tried his hand at it too.

**EV:** You completed your *1. Werksatz* (First Work Set) in New York. This ensemble of fifty-eight *Werkstücke*, which can be seen as your *magnum opus*, condenses a whole series of variations that are on the one hand very 'readable', but at the same time difficult to describe or define. Do you think you could summarise the theme of the *Werksatz*, give a brief instruction for its use?

**FEW:** No, it's not homogeneous. It may seem so today. If you look at the first four, five, six *Werkstücke*, they still have a strong object character, which disappears at some point. There's a balance of physical action, imagined action, concepts of action, and there's the intrinsic value of the *Werkstück*. Around 1965/66, I realised that the classical object character was unimportant. This then had consequences for the development of further works. It was about ideas of time, ideas of space, ideas of bodies, bodies in space, taking bodies away, making bodies present. These are interesting ideas. But how does that relate to art, to the history of art, to the concepts that exist in art? At first, I completely omitted the concepts that come from art. I found that obstructive and then gradually discovered that if I looked at them differently, they could take on meanings from my *Werkbegriff* that they didn't have before. For example, the concept of the picture became important to me in a different way, it was included in the sculpture, it no longer had anything to do with what classical sculpture was. That gave me the freedom to use it in a different way. I've always been fascinated by the idea that the work exists in an action, that it remains a

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna E. Walther, née Frieß, is the artist's first wife and has been responsible for the sewing work since 1963.




figure of the imagination. The problem was that it was immaterial, that I couldn't give it a permanent form. It was against this background that the diagrams and then the *Werkzeichnungen* (cf. *infra*) became so important to me. So I had to develop a language in parallel, develop concepts, develop forms or drawings that were adequate, that ran in parallel.

**EV:** From the mid-1960s and then even more systematically from the end of the 1960s, you began to open up your works to the possibility of use by the audience. The path from 'theory' to 'practice' was not without difficulties, as the diary entry you wrote on the occasion of the *Spaces* exhibition organised by Jennifer Licht at MoMA, New York, in late 1969/early 1970 attests. In fact, it seems that the reactions and participation of the audience did not meet your expectations. How could it have been otherwise? By handing over co-responsibility for the creation of the work to someone else, your 'authority' is also diminished. However, not everything is possible, and you do not hesitate to reassert this authority when certain boundaries are crossed. Your work is often associated with Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work', which was theorised more or less at the same time (1962) as you began your *Werkstatt*. It is often forgotten, however, that Eco was the first to question or nuance his own theses in a book with the emblematic title: *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990). How can one find the right balance between this possibility of opening up and a necessary, even indispensable limitation?

**FEW:** At the beginning of the work, that is, with the *Handstücke* (Hand Pieces) and then also the *Körperstücke* (Body Pieces), which you put on your body and don't hold in your hand, I didn't really have the role of the audience in mind. I just thought about what a work could be. In the process, these questions arose about the meaning of the action, how it could claim to be a work and so on. I didn't expect to be able to exhibit the works. It was a very personal endeavour with the hope that they would be shown at some point. But I didn't necessarily expect that. These were my efforts; and in the beginning, only a few artist friends took part. Among them were Jörg Immendorff, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Verena Pfisterer, Johanna, and Helga and Gisbert Seng. Apart from that, I can hardly remember anyone else showing any interest. Then, rather by chance, the opportunity arose to exhibit and perform the works. That was in 1966 at the Galerie Aachen in Aachen. So I did it, with Immendorff's help, and it worked well. We had one day of work performances, work demonstrations; and for the remaining weeks, I had left instructions on how to work with individual pieces. So this situation in the gallery in Aachen was the first time I tried out how it could be done at all. It worked as I had imagined, both the work performance, the audience situation, and then afterwards the exhibition situation and the working with the individual pieces according to instructions. And the form I tried out back then has actually remained valid to this day.

**EV:** Yes, but still, as you describe it in the MoMA diary entry, it didn't always work out that way, or only rarely.

**FEW:** Very rarely at that time. The problem was – and I experienced this more in Germany than in the United States with the MoMA exhibition – that people always asked: What does this mean? Everything seemed open, a theory, an assertion. The historical experience was missing. It just wasn't there. In the context of the MoMA show, statements like 'a kind of Happening' came up. Now I had to explain why this has nothing to do with Happenings. A Happening is ultimately something like a performance, extended theatre. My work has nothing to do with theatre; it's a sculptural situation. Then a lot of people came in with personal problems; it seemed like an open bag where you could put any-



thing. It was a big projection surface for personal, private things, where I could simply say: this has no place here. If I want that in an art context, certain things have to be there, while others are excluded. Then I describe why they are excluded, and people talk about me restricting personal freedoms. Then I say that they're being restricted all the time. Go to the exhibition now and look at a Mondrian; if you come with the wrong ideas, you won't get an answer. You have to engage with what is in the context, in the concept. On the other hand, there were always people there who went along with my artistic arguments. Questions, questions, questions predominated. I have a large audience; one person asks an interesting question, but you can't answer it in one or two sentences. This leads to other questions that have nothing to do with the work that was just discussed. That was a hard school for me.


**EV:** This also raises the question of the failure of the work. Your works can fail. Aren't you taking a big risk? Didn't you – with regard to the *Werkatz* – have more failures than successes, at least in the beginning?

**FEW:** In the beginning, it was a complete failure. Success with just a few people. Nevertheless, I have to say that I was repeatedly asked to show things. The fascination was there, even if it was peppered with the wrong questions and answers. There was one – and this was a certain consolation – monumental statement by Walter de Maria, who said: 'Think of the future; in ten years, you'll be one of the five most important artists on the planet.'

**EV:** Did this question of failure, which is also linked to the difficulty of communicating the works, contribute to the dissemination of the *Werkzeichnungen*? For a long time, these drawings, which you also refer to as *Diagramme* (Diagrams), were not shown. They had a private, almost intimate use. They were indications of your own experience in dealing with the *Werkstücke*. What also amazes me is that your own experience of the *Werkstücke* seems to have evolved, changed, as if you could not yet fully appreciate their potential, at least at first. For a long time, you claimed that they had no autonomy. You seem to have moved away from that claim.

**FEW:** It was ambivalent at first, and my view of it has changed. At first, I didn't think about publishing or exhibiting them. But I wanted to preserve these experiences, ideas, projections that were there in the actions and then pass them on, in the sense of: Anyone who has questions about it and is interested in it should learn something about it. At the beginning, I talked about it, and I realised that talking about it has its limits, that it is also tiring. It's a moment in time that disappears again. The photos could preserve working situations, at least what they look like at certain stages; but I can't show the action, which I called 'inner modelling' as a metaphor at the time, either with photos or with film. But I wanted to preserve it. That's what led me to start recording it, initially distinguishing between *Diagramme* and *Werkzeichnungen*. Incidentally, I avoided the terms 'work' and 'drawing' because there was far too much tradition involved. The term 'diagram' seemed neutral. But I soon realised that diagram is too narrow a framework. With a diagram, I can only create an outline of a work situation or a work concept, but I can't show all the experiences and projections that arise in the actions in the *Diagramme*, so I settled for the term *Werkzeichnung* and the general term 'drawing'. Nevertheless, the sheets were meant for me alone. It was at that time that Rudolf Zwirner appeared on the scene; he was enthusiastic about these drawings and said: 'We must exhibit them!' I replied: 'Mr Zwirner,





with these *Werkzeichnungen*, I'm expressing something that only concerns me. I can't sell them.' Because I didn't feel that these drawings had any intrinsic value. With many of the sheets, I couldn't even decide whether they were finished or unfinished and worked on them occasionally at intervals. That's why they often have two dates. It was a long process, and I wouldn't have exhibited them for that reason. This insistence that we must exhibit them was the first time I had thought about this possibility. But no exhibition followed; my resistance was too great. There was another reason for my reluctance to show them: they seemed completely old-fashioned against the background of the art of the time. Joseph Kosuth put it in a nutshell, he said: 'too private, too European; it smells too much, too much of Wols'. In 1976, I had the opportunity to exhibit drawings at the Kunstraum München, but only the black-and-white ones without colour were in demand. That was the mood at the time. Black-and-white to make it look as pure as possible – this obsession with objectification, legibility, comprehensibility, no narrative, and so on. That was the influence of conceptual art, which had a huge impact at the time, as represented by Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, for example. I had to laugh a little at that, but I accepted it because I was very aware that I couldn't exhibit these illustrative sheets at that time.

**EV:** What I think is decisive in your work, and the *Werkzeichnungen* also confirm this, is the intertextual nature of your endeavour, the extensions and expansions that it allows. It's also about using other means to show that completeness is contrary to your principles of creation. That nothing is ever completed or finished. That one work can lead to the emergence or formation of another. Working with a *Werkstück* from the *Werksatz* can lead to a *Werkzeichnung*, which in turn can be the origin of a *Wandformation* (Wall Formation).


**FEW:** Right up to the current *Körperformen* (Body Forms).

**EV:** Was that there from the beginning, this idea of expansion, that somehow nothing is closed?

**FEW:** It was already clear to me that it would be a never-ending story, so to speak. But I also only discovered that this was the case bit by bit. You can also assume that I will deal with a piece and then have something valid in my hands. But because it depends on me, the situation I'm in, physically, mentally, the time situation I'm in, the environment I'm in – that always influences the formulation, and because something like that is in a constant state of flux, changing, there are always new ideas for works, which is also a reason for the large number of *Werkzeichnungen*.

**EV:** Another possible variation is the *Lagerform* (Storage Form). You are, as it were, the inventor of this form. Could you describe it?

**FEW:** First of all, that was also a discovery. It started with the gluing of paper, which I described earlier, and always with the connection to concepts. When I put them on the wall, even though they have volume, I can say that they are images or that they represent images, which is definitely a difference. But if I left them as a pile, they were not simply put away, put into storage; I soon realised that this storage form could also be a work form, also by handling them. What was important was the observation that this storage could have its own value in contemplation, because it evokes, so to speak, an imagination of what is possible with the *Werkstück*. And in the *Handlungsstücke* (Action Pieces), it



really became a theme: by leaving them on the table or wherever, I can look at them, albeit as a strange sculptural work. But when I pick it up, when I interact with it, I change its status. To see the storage form as a work form was there from the beginning and has remained valid – to this day, by the way.


**EV:** Before we talk about the *Wandformationen*, could you talk about your production in the 1970s? In other words, what came after the *1. Werksatz*. Closing such a chapter was probably not an easy thing to do. Exploring new paths certainly wasn't either.

**FEW:** The idea soon arose that there might be a second *Werksatz*. About ten or twelve works had been created, but I realised with regret that it wouldn't work; they were individual pieces that couldn't be put together to form a second *Werksatz*. Then I decided to consistently work through everything that was conceivable. Anything that wasn't needed, that was just a variation, was excluded. That's how I came up with the *45 Schreitbahnen* (45 Walking Panels) and had the idea that everything was manageable. The exact opposite is the case: it's an unmanageable sequence.

**EV:** But the works from the '70s are much more object orientated.

**FEW:** You can see it that way; but in the construction of these *Raumformen* (Spatial Forms) that follow the *45 Schreitbahnen*, they have a function, they are upright forms, they are pedestals, they define space, they are spaces within the space. You could say that the object character has become stronger, but I think the element of action is just as strong as it was in the 1960s. In the late 1970s, I set myself the task of making this large final work, the *40 Sockel* (40 Pedestals) in storage form. There were two ensembles. For me, a further reduction would have led to nothing, and the idea of intensifying the visual came about playfully. With the idea that I could betray my own *Werkbegriff*. And for twenty years, from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s, the idea of 'creating a formed counterpart' was practically non-existent. And so I came up with these *Wandformationen* playfully; and even then I hesitated for a long time to present them publicly because I was unsure whether this moment of the visual could be sustained, because it seemed to be a contradiction to works based on action. But an interesting thing emerged for me: on the one hand, there are elements in it that you can take out and act with. And I added what I call *Standstellen* (standing points) to the *Wandformationen*, which you can stand in. The contemplation of the work became an important element, which was also the reason why colour was added. When I stand in front of a *Wandformation*, I have the work in front of me, so I am a classic viewer, and I can define it as a sculptural image or a pictorial sculpture. When I then step into the *Standstelle*, I complete it with my body; but on another level, it's a fragment, because the visual element is gone: I cannot see the formation. And I can't be in two places at once.

**EV:** You have always rejected the concept of performance, believing that the action with your works does not necessarily require the presence of an audience. However, a large part of the activation of the *Werkstücke* takes place in public or at least under the gaze of an observer, such as a photographer, as Timm Rautert's impressive documentation shows. Moreover, it's difficult to imagine the *Werkstücke* being used 'privately', at least today. It seems to me that they follow a phenomenological imperative and that our status of seeing and being seen is systematically put to the test. This is particularly evident in the *Wandformationen*, where, as you have just explained, you often find yourself with



your back to the works and in the field of vision of an albeit hypothetical counterpart. What is this public space all about? And what about the visibility of the user?

**FEW:** From the very beginning, I made a distinction between the *Werkhandlung* (work action) and, when I had an offer to show it in Aachen, the *Werkvorführung* (work performance). *Werkvorführungen* cannot be *Werkhandlungen*, because part of a *Werkhandlung* is that I can freely choose the time, the duration, and the place, with the idea that my own body, the space in and with which I act, which I create, the time in and with which I act, that they are in a certain way work materials. Time and space must not be forced. I have always made a strict distinction between the two; even back then at MoMA, this was a subject of discussion. I made the work demonstration in order to raise awareness for the conception of the work. That would not have been possible with photos or reports, with silent work situations. And I still keep it that way today. The actors are their own audience. There are no spectators, and if there are spectators, it's a chance situation.

**EV:** Yes, but one is never actually alone.

**FEW:** But in this case, I distinguish between the random visitor – we're doing a *Werkhandlung* somewhere and people come along; it's like the weather. But it's not staged or commissioned; it's a random moment. One conflict for me at the beginning was being accompanied by a photographer. I also talked about this a lot with Timm Rautert and kept it in mind; sometimes I manage to block him out completely. He takes the photos, and I do my *Werkhandlung*. The moment I have him in my consciousness as a photographer, as someone accompanying me, it can't be a *Werkhandlung*; we've always been clear about that. But that applies primarily to the works of the 1960s and 1970s; the question is different with the *Wandformationen*.

**EV:** This status of being seen...

**FEW:** I don't need that. I'm not aiming at spectators at all. For the normal visitor, who's not directly involved in the art, it can always be a problem whether they're acting alone or whether someone is watching them. The spectator changes the situation completely and makes it difficult or even impossible for the actor to perform the work.

**EV:** So the aspect of being seen is actually problematic for you?

**FEW:** Problematic in the conception. In individual cases, it can work or not. When you have an audience, you're a performer, whether you like it or not – and for me that's a conflict because it's not meant to be a performance. Of course, there is a strong element of performance, but performance, a presentation for the audience, is not part of the works.

**EV:** Yes, but these *Wandformationen* are actually almost all museum pieces. If only because of the dimensions. That's interesting, this discrepancy, this paradox: you make works that are exhibited in museums, but actually this museum situation is not satisfying for you.

**FEW:** It was the same with the *Werksätze*. I had to come to terms with that. I was in conflict with that for a long time.



**EV:** So for you, the ideal situation, the ideal context, would be to exhibit these works in a space where one is actually alone.


**FEW:** That would probably be best. But that's not possible. I have to live with that. It's a conflict that's there; it can't be resolved in my conception.

**EV:** Before we finish, I'd like to talk about two very special parts of your work: the *Probenähungen* (Test Sewn Works) and *Sternenstaub* (Stardust). The *Probenähungen* have an ambiguous identity. On the one hand, they are a *before* state of the work (they are preparatory pieces, so to speak, for the elaboration of the 'official' work. In a way, they can be compared to Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, the identity of which is just as ambiguous), but they are also an *after* state of the work, in view of the formal and spatial variations you make, depending on the exhibition space available to you. You are simultaneously at the edge of the work and at the heart of it. Inside. Outside. Before. After. This raises again the question of the limits of the work, the impossibility of its completeness. Is it possible to complete a work, or is it always open to new variations? When you made your first *Probenähungen* or had them made, did you imagine that they would one day become *Werkstücke* that would inspire a work in progress?

**FEW:** No, not at all. Of course, there were also failed sewn works, and there are the *Probenähungen* – these are test pieces that are completely uninteresting both visually and for the performance; they don't even appear in this context. But a lot of situations where I was trying out technical things, proportions, handling, where test pieces were necessary – they were too good to throw away, so I kept them, initially without any particular intention. That dragged on from the mid-60s, when I was reluctant to throw away test pieces. They have a visuality, a materiality, a form, even in their non-form, that I find interesting. That was dormant for a long time, and with the emergence of the *Wandformationen* and then the *Configurations*, the group *Das Neue Alphabet* (The New Alphabet), the *Handlungsbahnen* (Action Panels), and these *Körperformen*, it became necessary to make trial sewn works, test sewn works, to see if they worked the way they were supposed to. The idea arose that these could potentially also be works, and Johanna knew that too, so she kept everything.

**EV:** So that was in the '80s.

**FEW:** It started in the late '70s. At some point, the storage room was being rearranged, and I laid out test pieces like this to try them out. They are visually different, they are different in form, and there is always the potential for action – you can see that immediately. So the first opportunity I had – but that was a long time ago, about twenty-five years ago – for an exhibition for which neither the *Handlungsbahnen* nor anything similar were available, I thought I would make an exhibition with the *Probenähungen* and see if it would work. But also with the idea of laying out a field in the exhibition space for viewing, without any design, and taking pieces from it to hang on the wall. On the wall, it's also storage again, but it also represents the picture again, so I'm back to these old concepts. This exhibition took place at the *Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen* in Düsseldorf. It worked very well. During the opening, I worked with some of these *Probenähungen* and said to myself that this could be a body of work in its own right, but a work alongside the actual work. The *Probenähungen* were then left to rest for a long time until they were shown at *Marta Herford*. That gave me so much freedom. I was now sure that it would have to become its own body of work, and that's what happened. It's still



being expanded with *Probenähungen*, as well as with failed sewn works, but I only include them when they have the character of a work. But my *Werkbegriff*, which is linked to action, is so virulent in it, as I saw in Herford and now again in Bochum. It is a work complex in its own right, also because it reinforces the storage form so much as a work form.

**EV:** And of course, you find the idea of the work again, that you can't finish it.

**FEW:** Absolutely unfinishable and again this balance in the setups; of course, I don't put it down randomly, the arrangement is determined by compositional ideas, but it's a total improvisation. In the end, there is a convincing finished picture, and the terms are also out there: pictorial sculpture, sculptural picture, storage form, action, this moment of potentiality, the unfinishable, also provocation – who actually decides what is valid in the setup? Is it an imagination, projection, fantasy? Is it even true? It's all out there. For me, it's a blissful state that I was able to discover this unfinishable complex for myself at all.

**EV:** What's the story behind *Sternenstaub*, this very atypical, even extraordinary work that you published in 2009?

**FEW:** The reason is very simple. I've been asked again and again, especially by young people: How did you come up with this work concept, and how did you bring it to the public, how do you bring something like this to the art public? At the academy in Hamburg, I kept telling people how I came up with the concept for the work. Then I thought: Why don't I just write it down? It seems interesting. I thought: How can I do that? I write it down without any literary ambitions, without any literary form, without any linguistic form superimposed on what is to be said. And what were the situations like that could only be inadequately described? There weren't enough photographs; so I thought: I have to draw it. I have to illustrate it. And then it turned out that sometimes a simple sketch is enough, and sometimes I have to draw it as if there were a photo of it. Actually, the reason was to write it down for people who are interested in my biography. In the end, it was about the biography of the work, but it always turned out to be very personal, which surprised me, by the way, because as an artist I don't work biographically at all.

**EV:** Which is not really true. We know that.

**FEW:** But I didn't know that. I should know it. There's a simple reason for that: I never wanted to work biographically as an artist. But it kept coming up, unintentionally. That's why I wrote it down in the form I chose. Then I realised that I was reporting on things, even into the late '60s, that told stories before they became history. It wasn't just about me, but I also tell a lot about my artist friends and the situation at the time. And because I know pretty well what's in the literature and what's not, I shouldn't go beyond 1973/74, because there's already literature about what I'd be talking about, and that would probably influence my view. I didn't think about publishing the notes at all, nor did I think about exhibiting them. Jocelyn Wolff persuaded me to exhibit them, and Helmut Ritter persuaded me to publish them.

**EV:** And you didn't see it as a work either.

**FEW:** No, and I still don't. It's a work, of course, otherwise I'd be lying to myself; but that wasn't the intention. But it has become its own body within the work.