



Franz Erhard Walther, *Werkzeichnungen*. Double-sided drawing. 29.5 x 20.8 cm. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 1971.



Paleolithic and Neolithic stone tools from Europe.

LE MONDE EST DÉSORMAIS SANS MYSTÈRE FROM NOW ON, THE WORLD IS WITHOUT MYSTERY

Franz Erhard Walther invited to the Cahn Gallery during Art Basel 2018

A joint project by Jocelyn Wolff and Jean-David Cahn

Opening: June 11, 8–10 p.m.

Exhibition: June 12–17, 11 a.m.–6 p.m.

Cahn Gallery · Malzgasse 23 · Basel

Franz Erhard Walther's art practice integrates the concept of participation into sculpture. The art viewer is invited to actively engage in the artwork, either by performing or looking at the work being performed, or by using his or her own imagination to unlock its meaning. Walther has liberated sculpture from its three-dimensional boundaries into the dimension of time and imagination. A pioneer in the development of conceptual art and "relational aesthetics," Franz Erhard Walther has an immense influence on younger generations of artists all over the world. For Walther, the artwork itself is action in time and space, in most instances made possible through a material object, such as his interactive sewn-canvas sculptures.

Right from the beginning of his artistic career Franz Erhard Walther has had solo exhibitions in famous museums such as the MOMA New York (1970), the National Gallery in Berlin (1981), and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany (1977). He participated in now legendary exhibitions, such as "When Attitudes Become Form" (1969) and the 14th Biennale de Sao Paulo in Brazil (1977). He has appeared four times at the world's most famous international art show, documenta: documenta 5 (1972), documenta 6 (1977), documenta 7 (1982), documenta 8 (1987). He received the Golden Lion for the best artist in the main curated show of the Venice Biennale 2017 and has had important museum exhibitions all over the world.

Jocelyn Wolff: For years now, I have noticed how artists take an interest in prehistoric objects and art. These artists include Franz Erhard Walther, who, beyond reading widely on the subject and evincing an unquenchable curiosity, has for many years collected flint artefacts. These objects, whose form and technique fascinate him, also allow him to travel imaginatively in space (the landscape) and in time (human history), which is consistent with his artistic thinking.

For Franz Erhard Walther, the focus is on considering an art work as an action, in time and in space, activated either by the viewer's imagination on being confronted with the participative character of the object or by a performance according to a precise protocol. For me, there is an incredibly fertile dynamic in the relationship between the kind of time travel that comes through exploring prehistoric objects and the work of Walther.

At a time when we are becoming conscious of the possibilities of artificial intelligence, the famous words of French scientist Marcelin Berthelot written not long before the discovery of the atom, come to mind: "*From now on, the world is without mystery. Rational conception claims to clarify and comprehend everything.*"

Over the last few decades, scientific progress in the field of archaeology, which benefits from the latest technological advances, has been considerable. It allows us to delve into our common past with greater precision, and at the same time envelopes it in ever deeper mystery. For example, I recently read that, within a given time frame, *Homo sapiens* generated technically similar tools from one group to another, from one individual to another, while the Neanderthals gave each of their artefacts a unique, individual mark.

I am convinced that, when used as a cognitive tool and as a *mise-en-abîme* of what underlies the singularities and the limits of the exploration of human intelligence and creativity, the readings that artists make of prehistoric artefacts can tell us something about art today. For this latest collaboration between Jean-David Cahn and Jocelyn Wolff, we asked Franz Erhard Walther to develop an exhibition according to his personal interpretation of some exceptional prehistoric objects provided by the Cahn Gallery.

Jean-David Cahn: Prehistoric artefacts, in the present case mainly stone tools from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, exert a great fascination on today's beholders. The complex interplay between naturally occurring stone material and man-made shapes results in truly remarkable objects. Made thousands of years ago, they are no less appealing today than they were necessary then. The *longue durée* of their impact generates considerable tension between the analytical, (archaeo-)logical gaze of the present and a diffuse sense of past mystery.

Is a stone tool a work of art? The positivistic principle according to which "*form follows function*" is too simplistic for the case in question. Certainly, there are some remarkable solutions to the optimisation of efficiency which are reflected in the choice of material, the shape and surface finishing of the tools. At the same time, it is well known that individual design skills and creative freedom were also exercised. The clear preference of a group of people for certain raw materials (interestingly not necessarily those which were the simplest to procure or the easiest to process!) and for distinctive shapes bears witness to a collectively shared and binding symbolic language that was not governed by functional necessity alone. Rather, it is closely related to a consciously fostered group identity. The prehistoric export of stone material – most notably silex from Grand Pressigny during the Neolithic period – over great distances and into regions which had their own flint resources also points to an interest in quality and aesthetics far transcending the exigencies of pure survival. The ideological and symbolic appreciation of stone artefacts eventually culminates in the prehistoric use of stone axes as insignia of power, idols and fetishes, and even in the creation of artefacts exclusively for these purposes.

The intellectual, physical and emotional engagement with a stone tool begins with its manufacture, continues in its usage and ends with its disposal, its loss or deliberate final deposition, permitting the object to become part of the archaeological record. This exhibition project was conceived as a continuation of our active engagement with the objects, certainly also from an archaeological point of view, but more importantly on an intuitive level. In the interaction between participant and object, through the visual and tactile experience of a stone tool, a dialogue between past and present, here and there, us and our ancestors unfolds, the exceptional appeal of which lies in its very subjectivity.

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