

FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER
PARTICIPATORY
MINIMALISM

From 1963 till 1969, Franz Erhard Walther designed the 58 objects of his “1. Workset”, which would become a classic in German postwar art. It fit in the Bonner Republik”. Hardly 20 years after fascism had ended, there was a longing for new, progressive and unostentatious symbols of understanding and public spirit.

Symbols which the »1. Workset« offered. Simultaneously, he found recognition among the international avant-gardes. Already in 1969, his work was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art and in Szeemann’s Documenta in 1972. Walther’s 1. Workset became one of the artistic emblems for a new democratic German self image, a country open to the world.

In this respect, Walther’s role bore resemblance to Beuys’s. Beuys, however, belonged to another generation. Based on old, heroic artist images and a profoundly allegoric notion of the oeuvre, the shaman from Düsseldorf positioned himself in the center of his cosmos, fraught with meaning, and called to join him in his visions. Beuys temporarily transformed the Düsseldorf Art Academy into a place of national interest where hundreds of followers would gather. Walther attended the academy from 1962 till 1964, yet oriented himself towards artists like Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein und Piero Manzoni, modern altar robbers of old work liturgies and artist myths. Quite contrary to Beuys, Walther wanted his objects to be meaningless. In themselves, they should not offer anything more than the possibility of an action. Only through the act, the meaning would arise. »Their meaning is their use« is what Wittgenstein wrote about words. That is, language is empty without its practical framework and aims of usage. Words in themselves have no meaning. Walther said the same about artworks and took up, regarding their epistemological status, a decisive anti-essentialist and pragmatic position.

The objects of the »1. Workset« were not made to be looked at, searching for a deeper meaning which could be found if only we would gaze at them long enough. When the artworks were wrapped up – the state they were mostly in at exhibitions – they gave little ‘meaningful’ away. If there was anything they could contribute to cognition, then it would be merely a result of an experience which they evoked, but not determined. Their epistemic value remained undefined. They were made to be used by an audience. Only then did they ‘make sense’. ‘Using’ them meant, taking one of the 58 Work Pieces – which were conceived by Franz Erhard Walther and manufactured with the help of Johanna Walther – out of their storage packing and carrying them out by the instructions of the artist, i.e. to follow the possible ways of employment that the object suggested and that Walther had sometimes demonstrated. ‘Using’ meant, physically acquiring one of Walther’s objects. Rolling it out, readjusting it, covering up, often together with others. By doing so, one would gradually grasp its practical and symbolic functions and experience them in person. In Walther’s own words: to bring about a »Werksituation« (W), or a Werkprozess« (W), in which a »Werkgedanke« (W) takes place through the act of a »Werkhandlung« (W).



exhibition views MOMA, 1970

Situation, Process, Concept, Action.

Those are the key notions of the progressive and societal-oriented art movements of the sixties.

A time when many sought to break free from static and conventional art notions, which seemed too far from reality. Deference for a work of art and its creator was a byword for bourgeois conventions (those that made Walther flee his catholic hometown Fulda as soon as he could), for rooted social stereotypes, for institutionalized orders of things and human beings, for the logic of fordistic production and work relations. All which the conventional art notions set forth. In today's post-fordistic knowledge-based service economy with its mental and digital products and virtual values, we have at least, theoretically, less problems not equating artworks with visual objects, but acknowledging artworks as ideas, immaterial goods, processes, and even the audiences' integration and participation. In the mid-sixties, such an art notion met with strong opposition both in the public and academic world, since it did not only tamper with academic categories and the authorities that represented these categories, but also with existing possessory relations. (And also among the current 'avant-gardists' and notably within the mainstream, it is still a challenge to acknowledge the immateriality, the societal character of a work respectively – there are neither clear economic rules nor habitual institutional ways to go about it. If there were, how would Tino Sehgal's oral sales have caused so much fuss? And what would be so specific about the 'communicability' of Rikrit Tiravanijas or Liam Gillicks work?)

Franz Erhard Walther began to rewrite old notions of the artwork from the mid-sixties onwards. He gave them new performative connotations and created new scenarios for its utilization, both in artistic practice as in terminology (Walther conceived the form and content for numerous publications). Walther did not abandon the notion of the work of art; he gave it new twists. He did not replace it by an actionistic vocabulary and avoided formulas of removing boundaries of art and life. But he dissociated the artwork from the object. He dematerialized it like the Conceptual Art would later do, yet without intellectualizing it. He used it pragmatically, placed it in an instrumental context. He drafted and described his works almost in a literal sense as a means, as »vehicles«, »instruments« and »tools« (W). Yet, he did not stress their processual character and distanced himself from the reception of his work demonstrations as being performances. Walther remained close to typography and sculpture – he was interested in the interspace. However, he interpreted this space as relations between people. Writing and sculptural-like sketches come together in his Work Drawings and unite space, activity and terminology.

Nowadays, Walther's position is canonized and five out of eight editions of his »1. Workset« have found a place in museum collections. One easily tends to forget the original aim of his artistic and terminological work, namely to disconnect the art notion from its anchorage in a profoundly object-centred tradition and to establish a new understanding of 'practice', for which art is a societal event, not only in terms of its collective reception, but also in its production. Walther laid out the instruments and demonstrated how they functioned. But their actual usage that completed the work process every time anew, lied with their users and participants. Walther regarded them as co-authors. In a work diagram of 1966, he crossed out the term artist and put the producer of a work experience on par with the user of the worktools that he had set out. A gesture that reached out far into the future. Walther's conception was to cross out the omnipotent position of the artist in the production of meaning and to regard an artwork as the manifestation of an audience that takes up the offer to act.

Manhattan, New York 1970



Walther proposed to no longer think of art as being independent of its employment by a public. He saw the spectators as co-authors of the artworks that they would adopt in form and meaning both in private and in institutional contexts.

The point of this proposal was not to consider societal projects or products as objectives in themselves, but as organisational forms of social usage. As tools to construct social communities that, at best, are based on the experience of participation and communicability. To this very day, when using such an instrumental art notion, one encounters stiff opposition. Against purpose and aim of art. As if, of all things, we would rob it from its freedom! Apart from the fact that Artistic Independence is a myth and that every aesthetical act follows implicit aims, it is crucial to see that instruments and tools are, in fact, mostly invented to serve certain, predictable purposes, but that they also engender new purposes, once they have been devised. Suddenly, things can be done that would have been hard to imagine beforehand. With regard to the constitution of a community, this sounds less like attaining an aim, but more like a revolution (Thomas S. Kuhn actually described this performative character of new tools in 1962, in the book »The Structure of Scientific Revolutions«).

But which forms of usage are the Work Pieces of the »1. Workset« suited for? For which not? What ways of utilization would come as a surprise? Let us consider the Eleven Meter Strap of 1964. That white, eleven meters long nylon textile with long straps at both ends is rolled up in its storage state. What to do with it, we can derive from one of Walther's work demonstrations or from written instructions, from explanatory and reflective drawings or from documentations in the form of photography and film. Two persons can roll out the eleven meters of textile, bind the straps around their neck and span it between their bodies. The distance between the two is as variable as the nature of the strip allows. Perhaps they look at each other and talk about the situation. What is the appropriate location? A museum? An empty meadow? Berlin central station? Will they talk? About what? Will they move about? Will the users switch?

There are possible, plausible and canonized ways of using the Eleven Meter Strap. There are also silly, absurd, unanticipated employments. Pictures that remained unpublished or received little attention show Franz Erhard Walther and several co-authors in unorthodox situations that are discordant with the idealized and canonized representation of his work. These are not wrong. They are merely variations. When there is no work denotation that precedes the employment of an art object, then there is no wrong or right way of using it. There is an experience with the object at a specific location at a specific time, which is unprecedented and lies in the hands (and responsibility) of the performing actors.

**Drei Sockel. Vier Standstellen.
Zwei Schreitbahnen, 1975**



Walther's works remain inevitably incomplete. They call for our participation, not our deference.

They are time-based. Not because their existence lies exclusively in their act of usage. That would be a misunderstanding. Their main stage is their storage form, in which they conserve their potential to be enacted at all times. They are models of symbolic participation which are activated, experienced and verified from case to case. They do not want to be valued or assessed on the basis of their intrinsic qualities, but on their function as mediators. They are not even aesthetical objects in the traditional sense of the word. A perception that seeks to submerge in them will be referred to the acting situation, to which is given opportunity, and to the dimension of experience they can offer. This dimension is then aesthetically, empathically and socially completely real; a dimension of acting, not of contemplating.

In '62-'63, promptly before the »First Workset«, Walther had completed sculptural gestures – for instance, the laying out of right-angled paper objects on the floor or the marking of a geometrical shape using tightened threads in the room. Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Fred Sandback, leading figures of the American Minimalism had executed similar gestures at the same or a later point in time. However, unlike them, Walther had no interest in the depersonalization of the artwork, in its radical Selfness. He was not interested in the object lying on the floor, but in the act of spreading out, arranging and collecting, the fleetingness and the flexibility of the situation in the space; the work as a process. While long discussions were taking place in professional circles, to which extent the sculptures of American Minimalists were truly 'with themselves', alone in their objectivity, or whether they took up the role of their selfness for the eyes of the viewer – for which reason George Didi-Huberman identified them later as actors – Walther had always departed from a relational rapport between object and subject, where he gave preference to the experience of the subject and not to the identity of the art object.

This pulls his position very close to the recently well-received Charlotte Posenenske, who laid down her artistic practice in 1969 and abandoned the art field in order to continue working on participatorial working models in Sociology (which she considered being more adequate than the arts). Also Posenenskes sculptures from '67-'68, formally classified to Minimalism, were less developed for the observation, and much more for the adoption, usage, even rebuilding by its observer/user. Walther and Posenenske can represent a politicizable, societal-orientated alternative to American Minimal Art, that was criticized time and again for its essentialistic and apolitical character.

I propose to call Posenenske's and Walther's approach Participatorial Minimalism. On the one hand, in terms of an anti-essentialist Minimalism, that uses form and material to create social situations and that organizes them in space. Sculptural arrangements that mostly remain uncompleted, shift into the action radius of the observers, making them participants in the realization and/or possible alteration of these arrangements. This participation becomes constitutive for the work itself and therewith configures the reception of the sculpture as a shared, social activity. On the other hand, in terms of a strongly formalized offer for participation, both artists neither relate to an actual »Experience Dimension« of most participatory art, nor to a practical organisation of action groups, but rather gear towards a fundamentally relational art concept. Posenenske's and Walther's Participatory Minimalism – a coincidence that it arose 20 years after the end of war in Germany? – counts on the audience's willingness to act and designs typified action models for individual and collective symbolic usage. The participation to a cultural practice is ultimately understood as a concrete experience of composing a democratic community.



exhibition views CAPC Bordeaux and The Power Plant Toronto

The Robert Lehman Foundation, Inc. Gallery



Exhibition view MOMA, 2012



Exhibition view MOMA, 2012



Exhibition views MOMA, 2012





exhibition views Arsenale, 2017
La Biennale di Venezia, 57 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, Venice, Italy





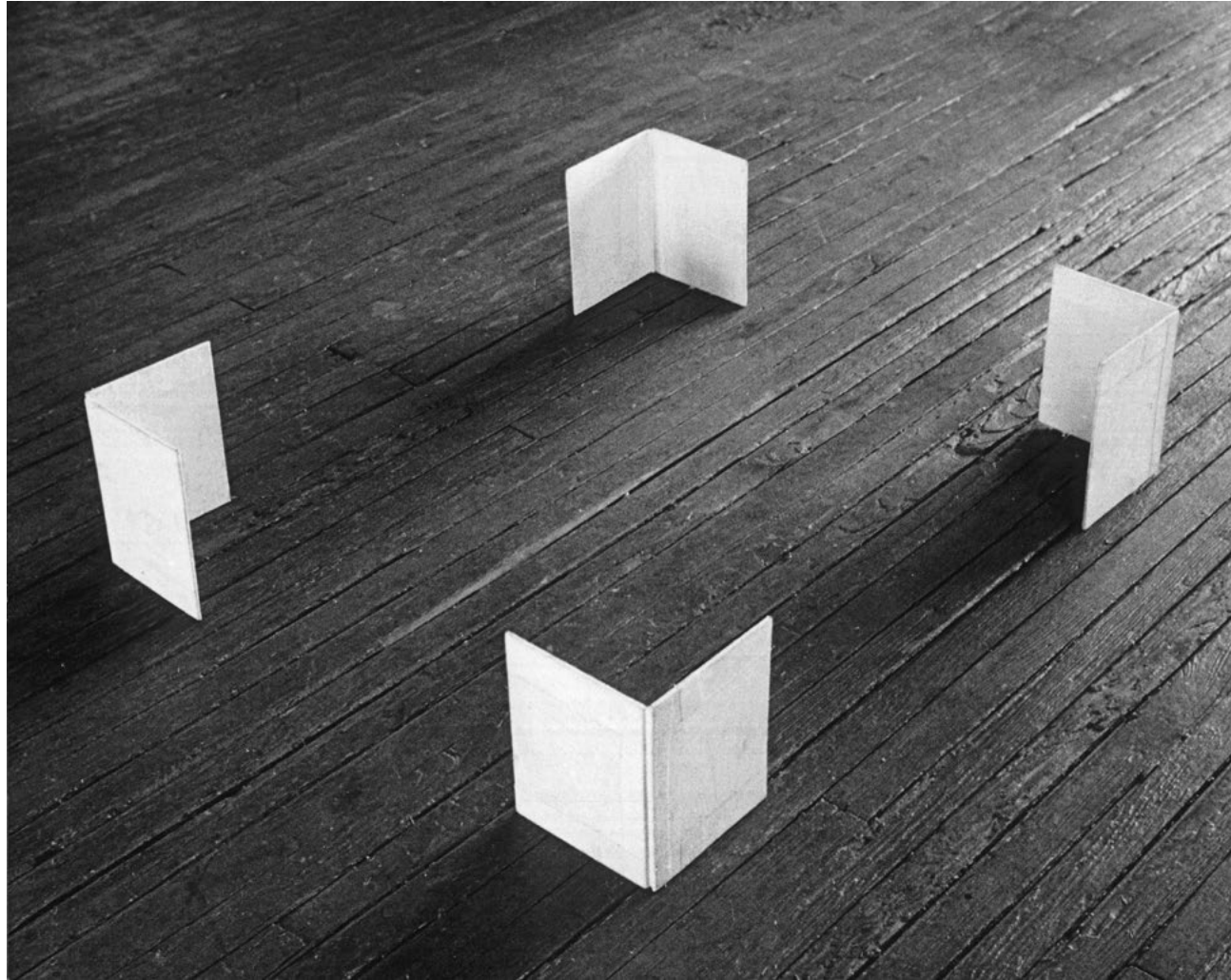
exhibition views Dia:Beacon, Dia Art Foundation 2012





exhibition views Dia:Beacon, Dia Art Foundation 2012





Vier Stellecken, 1963
fibre board, untreated cotton, glue
4 x 23.5–24 x 0.6 cm (opened)

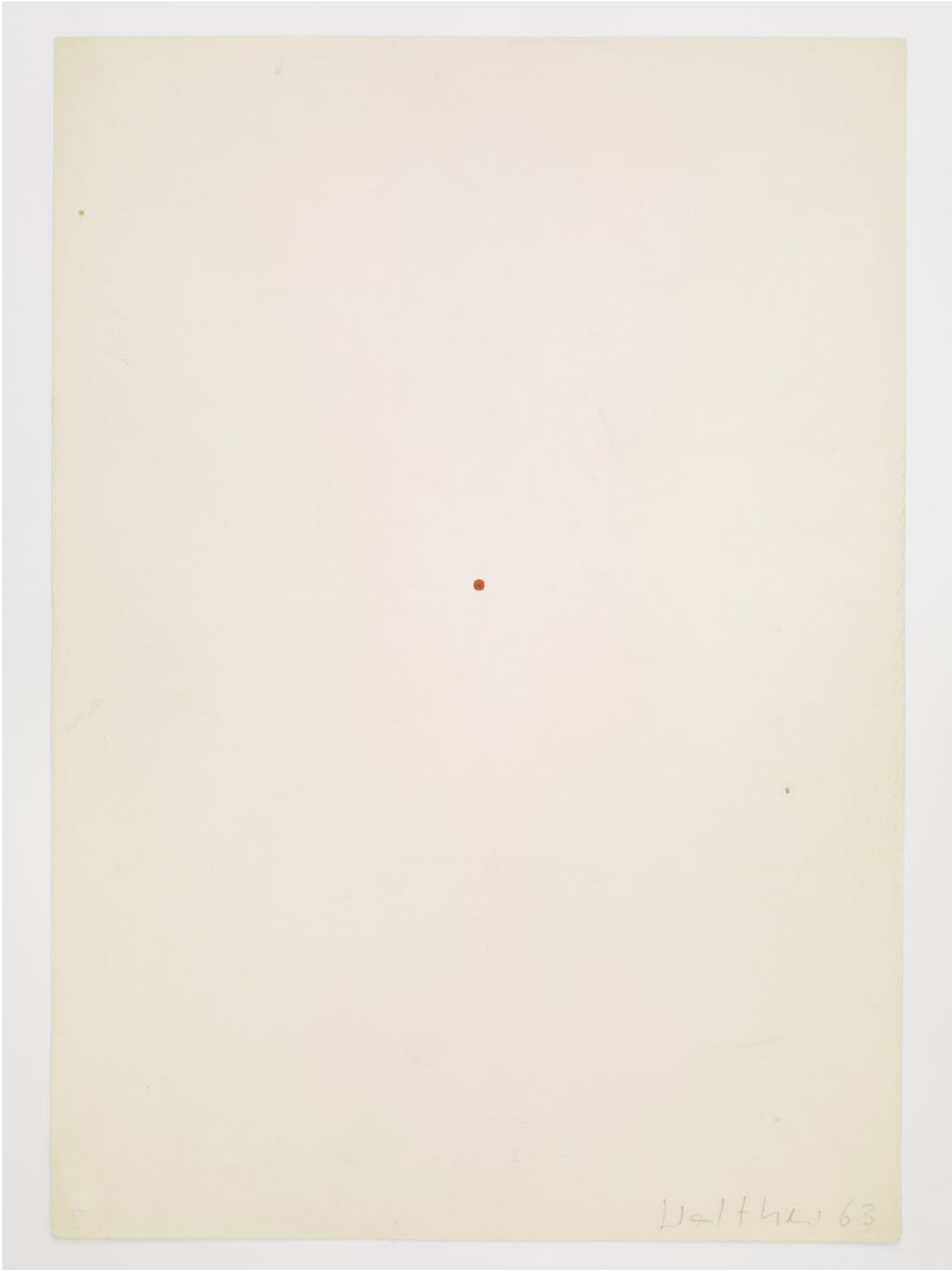




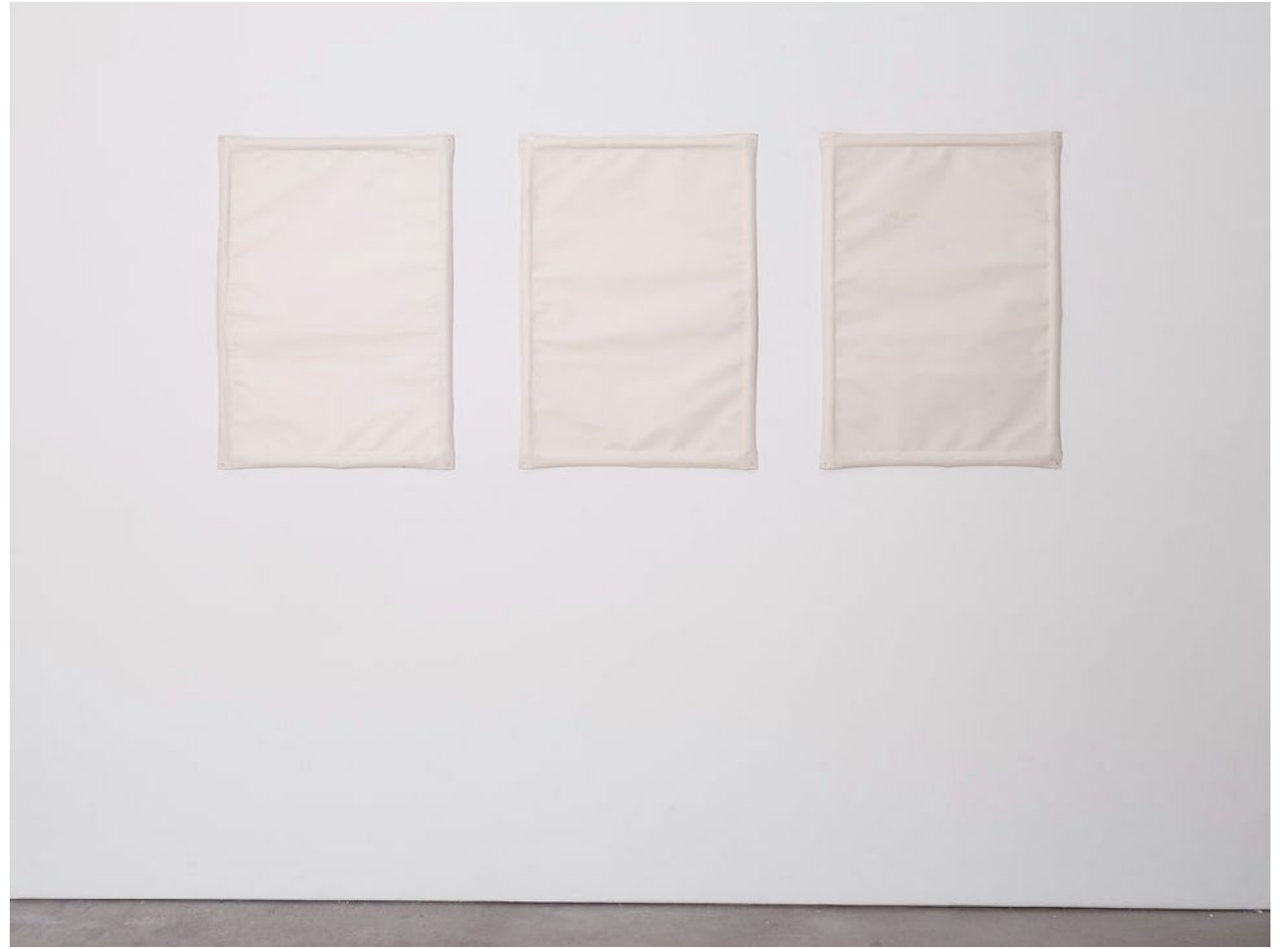
Zwei Stapel, 1962/63
 envelopes, paper, glue, 60 parts
 t Rahmenarbeit wo blocks, 11.3 x 9.5 x 16 cm



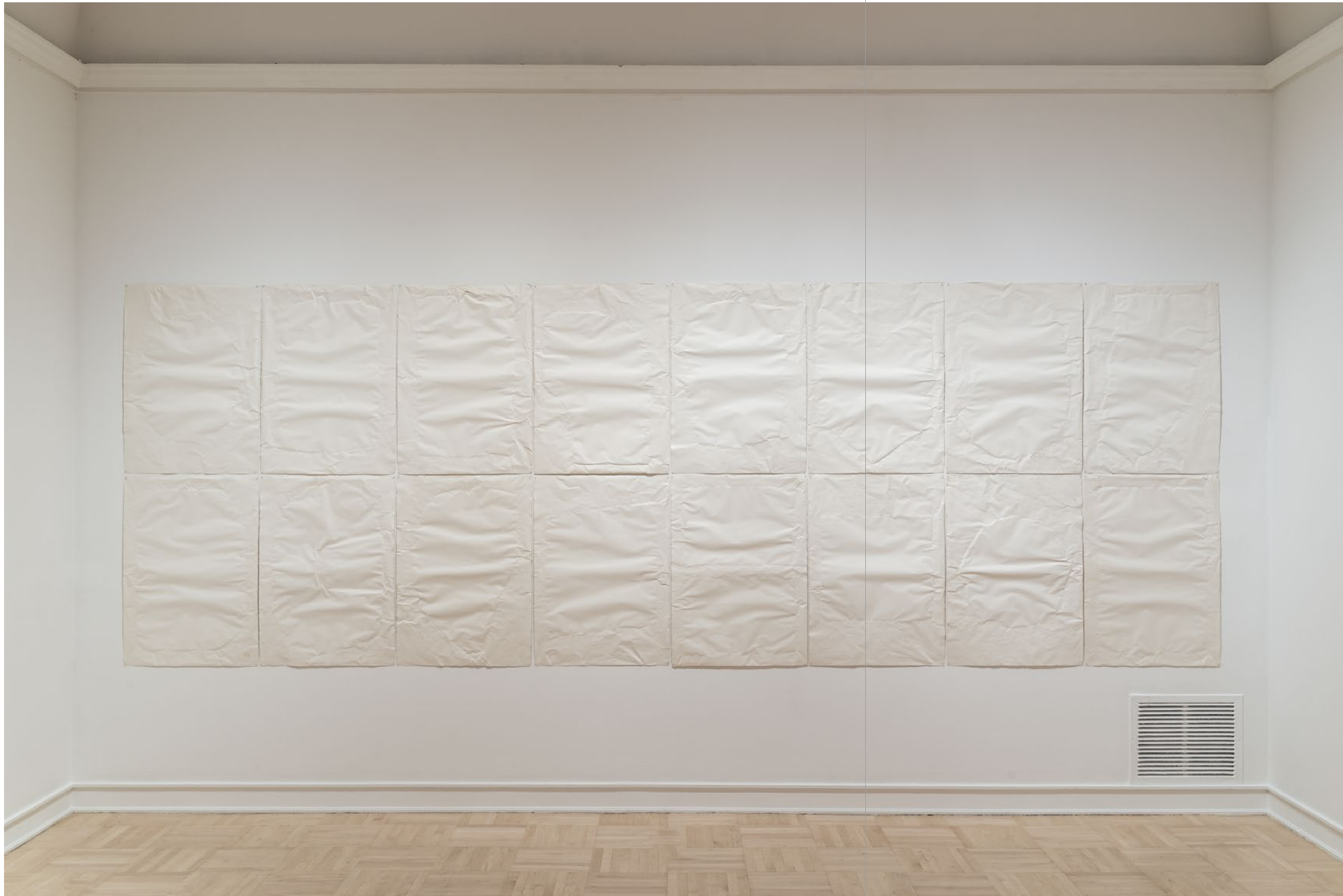
Rahmenarbeit, 1962
 adhesive tape on fibre board
 50.7 x 39 cm



Punktzeichnung, 1963
watercolor on paper, two-sided
29.6 x 21 cm



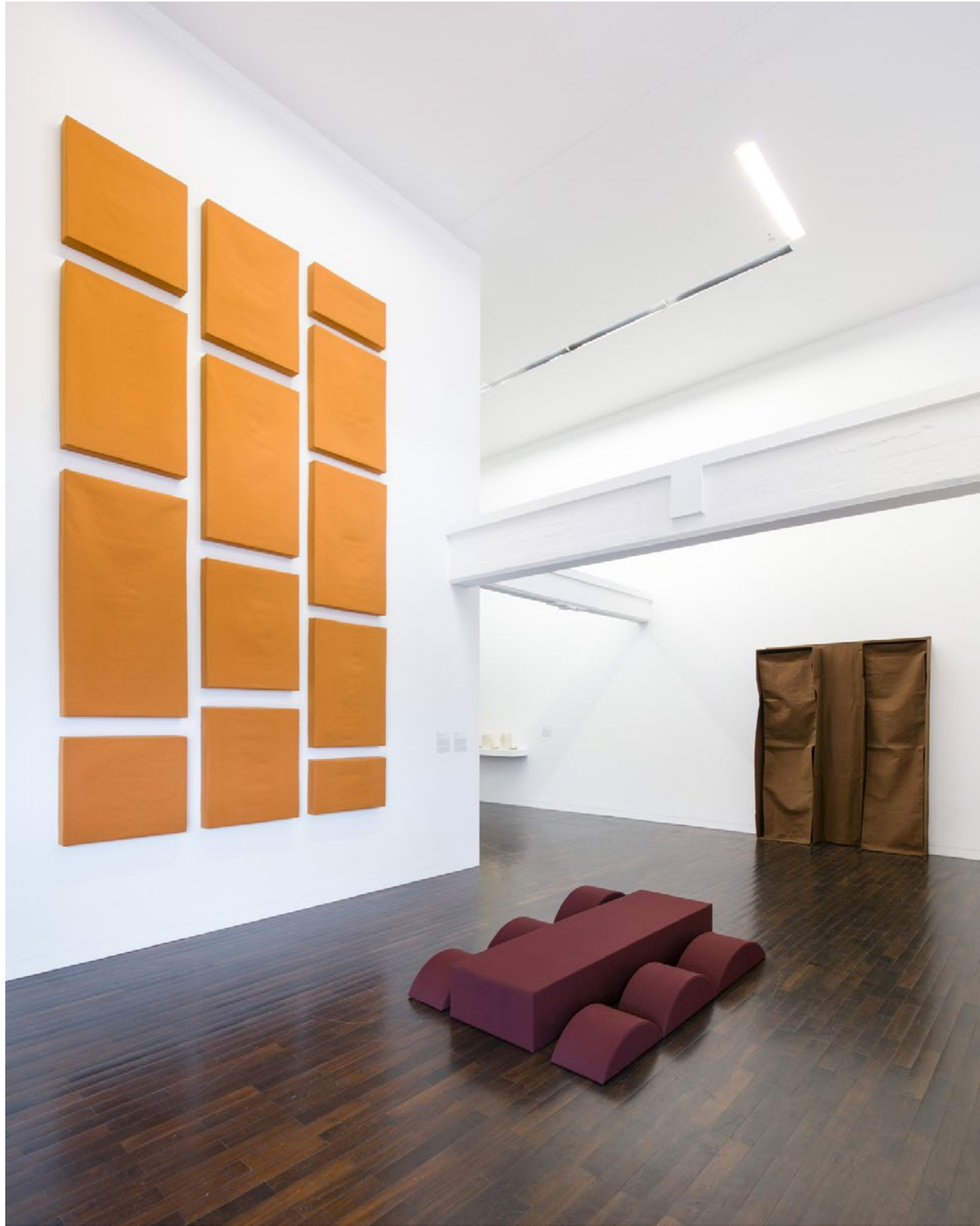
Drei Blätter mit gewölbtem Rand, 1962
paper, tape, 3 parts
69.5 x 49.5 cm each



exhibition view Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 2016

Drei Bänder, 1963
heavy linen strips, nails
450 cm x 5 cm x 0.75 mm





exhibition view Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2017



Block Ocker, 1993
Configurations
cotton fabric (13 elements)
dimensions variable



Der Körper muss entsprechen II, 1984
sewn dyed cotton fabric, wood
275 x 200 x 36 cm



Körperformen WEINROT, 2013
 Körperformen
 sewn dyed cotton fabric, foam, nettle cloth (10 parts)
 dimensions variable



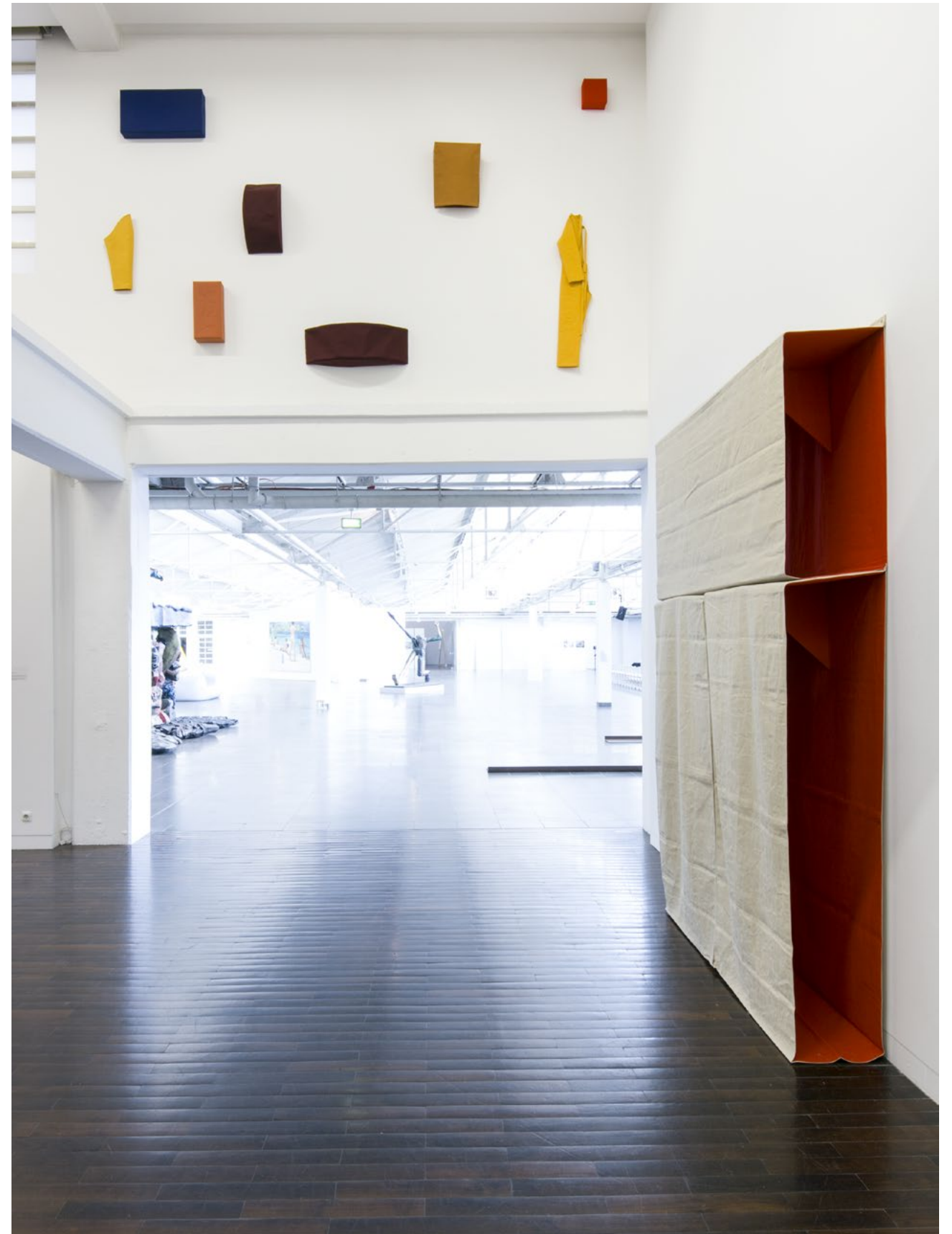


KÖRPER Weinrot, grün, ocker, schwarz (Nr. 15), 1989/90
 cotton fabrics, 7 parts
 dimensions variable

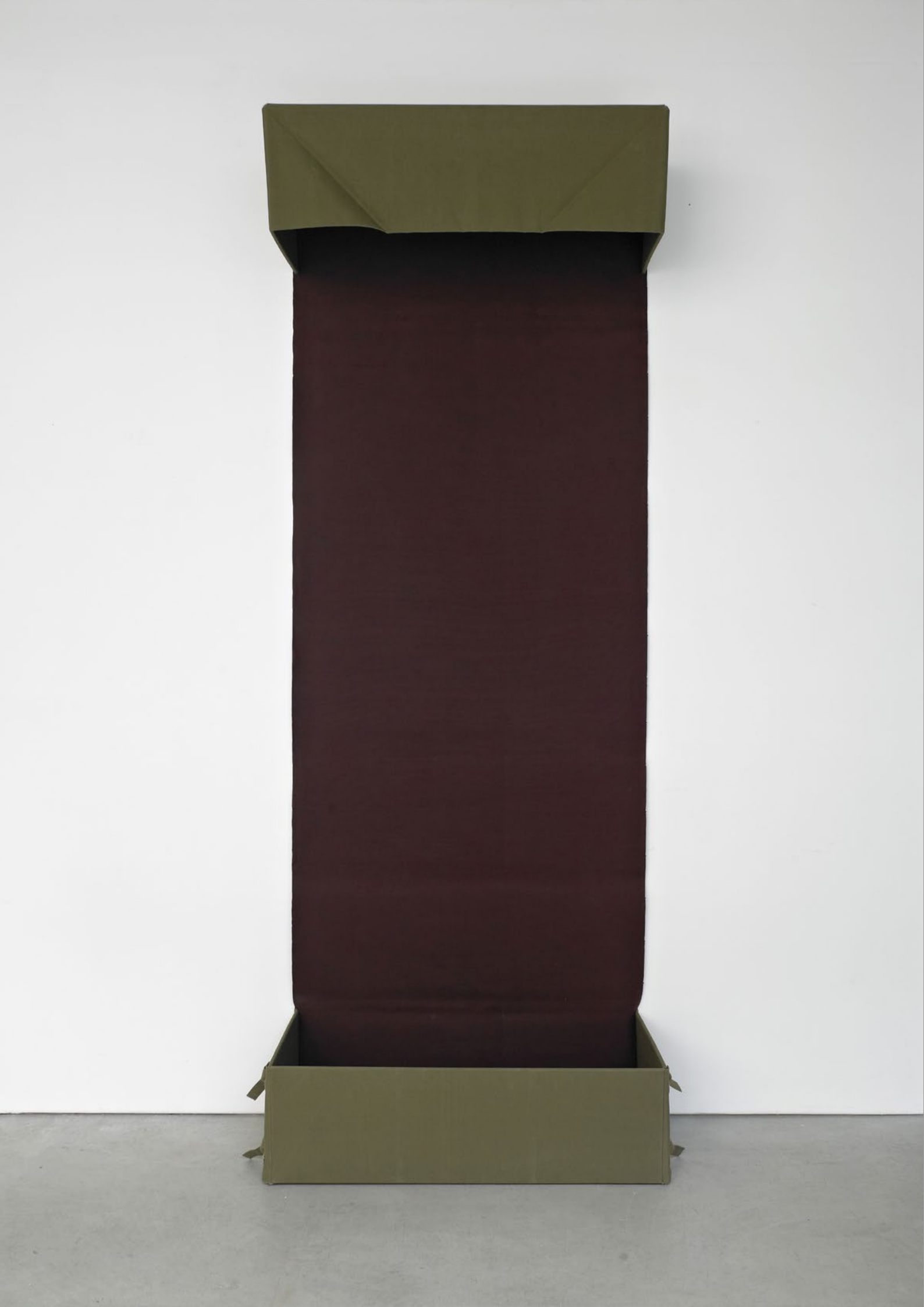




Drei Räume, 1981
cotton fabrics, wood
305 x 200 x 40 cm



exhibition view Ludwig Forum Aachen, 2017



Spricht nicht III, 1980
cotton fabrics, wood
275 x 100 x 40 cm



exhibition view The Power Plant, Toronto, 2016



Metallarbeit/Strecke und halbe Strecke.
Zwei Richtungen, 1975
 steel sheet, 4 parts
 7 × 265 × 38 cm



exhibition view Städel Museum Frankfurt, 2014



Körperformen WEINROT, 2018
 Körperformen
 sewn dyed cotton fabric, foam
 180 x 360 cm (variable)





Körperformen WEINROT, 2018
 Körperformen
 sewn dyed cotton fabric, foam
 180 x 360 cm (variable)





Körperformen WEINROT, 2018
Körperformen
sewn dyed cotton fabric, foam
180 x 360 cm (variable)





Körperformen WEINROT, 2018
 Körperformen
 sewn dyed cotton fabric, foam
 180 x 360 cm (variable)





Wall Formations
exhibition views Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2017





Wall Formation, 1979
dyed cotton, wood
300 x 175 x 40 cm each



24 Gelbe Säulen, 1982
 cotton fabric
 dimensions variable
 exhibition view CAPC Bordeaux

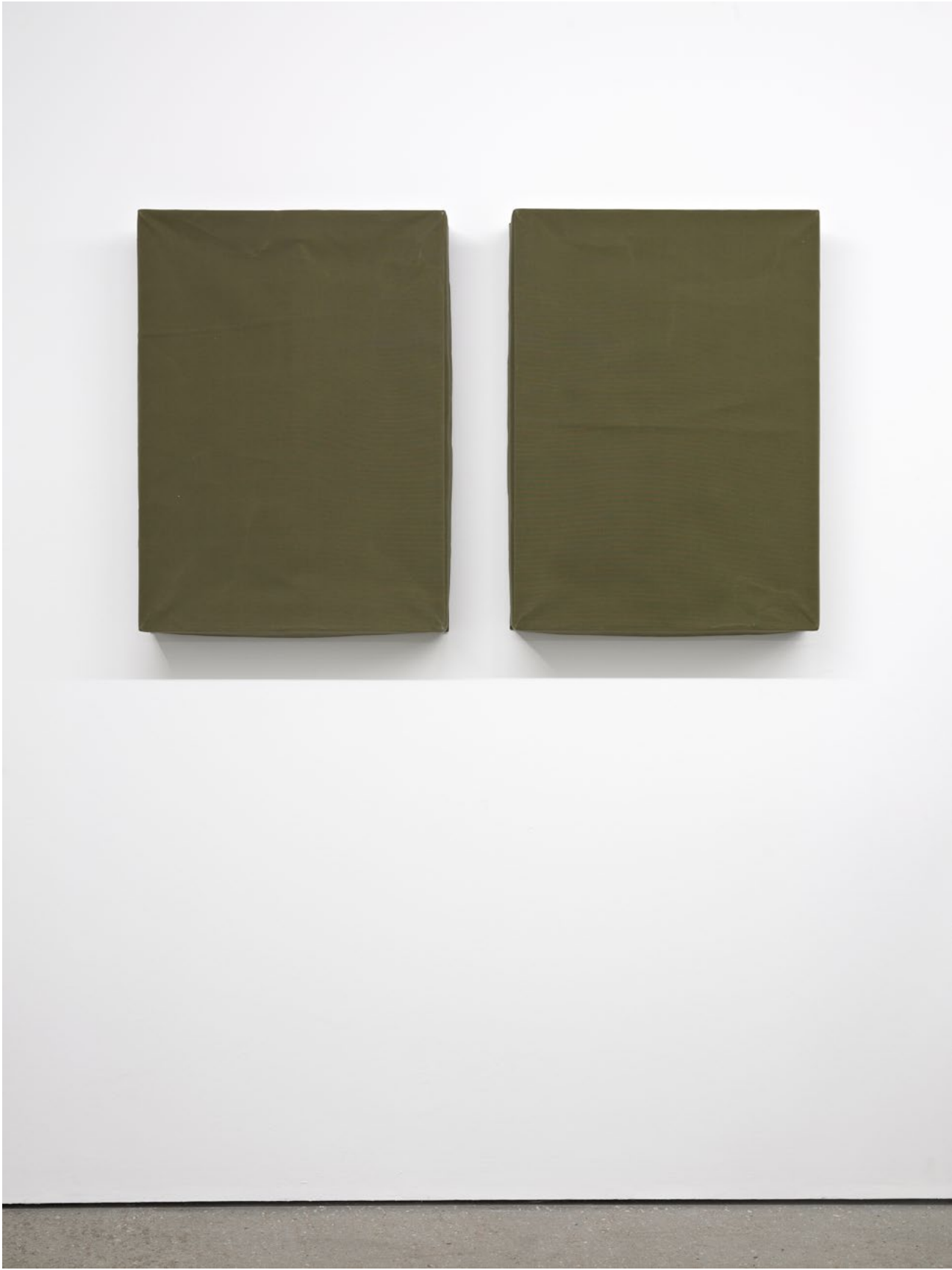




Wall Formation, 1981
exhibition view Museo Jumex, Mexico City,
2018



exhibition view WIELS Brussels, 2014



Die Verlangsamung der Bilder OLIVGRÜN / DUNKELGRAU, 1994

dyed cotton fabric, wood

72 x 52 x 11 cm each





Probenähungen: Nürnberger Raum, 2017

trial pieces from 1978–2015

cotton fabrics, foam

installation view Neues Museum Nürnberg



Probenähungen: Nürnberger Raum, 2017
 oeuvre samples from 1978–2015
 cotton fabrics, foam
 installation view Neues Museum Nürnberg



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FRANZ ERHARD WALTHER
PARTICIPATORY MINIMALISM