

# BOLLINGER



# ART ON THE FLY

Elusive in his lifetime and nearly lost to memory after his death, the Post-Minimalist sculptor Bill Bollinger is getting some belated attention in an exhibition touring Europe.

BY WADE SAUNDERS AND ANNE ROCHETTE

NO LATE 20TH-CENTURY ARTIST as widely exhibited and admired as was Bill Bollinger (1939-1988) at his incandescent best has so completely eclipsed to darkness. Now, thanks to the first-ever large-scale Bollinger show at a museum, his work, hardly visible these past 35 years, matters anew. Curated by Christiane Meyer-Stoll at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz, "Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective" spans the years 1966-70 and includes 29 sculptures, numerous drawings, a movie and archival material. The show will travel in Europe; we find it telling that no U.S. venue has accepted the exhibition. Its account of Bollinger's oeuvre is partial, since the artist did have strong solo exhibitions after 1970 (in 1972, '73 and '74) in New York City. But the tightness of Meyer-Stoll's temporal frame aptly conveys Bollinger's headlong rush in his prime. Though largely linear and of little mass, Bollinger's sculptures exude confidence and command space with singular elegance and wit. The exhibition replays a moment when good sculptors were reinventing art on the fly.

In New York, Bollinger exhibited first, in 1966, with Paul Bianchini (who also showed Lee Lozano,

Robert Ryman and Elaine Sturtevant) and subsequently at Klaus Kertess's Bykert Gallery; in Europe he worked with Galerie Rolf Ricke in Cologne<sup>1</sup> and Galleria Sperone in Turin, where he had one show, in 1970. Bollinger's sculptures were included in crucial group exhibitions, including Harald Szeemann's "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form" (1969), originating at the Kunsthalle Bern, for which a Bollinger sculpture was the announcement image; James Monte and Marcia Tucker's "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials" (1969), at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; and Kynaston McShine's "Information" (1970), at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In 1970 Bollinger rented the spectacular 16,300-square-foot top floor of the Starrett-Lehigh building in Chelsea. He spent the month of April constructing over 60 works on site; the exhibition, announced under Bykert Gallery's aegis, comprised about 20 sculptures and ran from Apr. 26 to May 20.

Though Peter Schjeldahl reviewed it favorably in the *New York Times*, the show coincided with the Nixon inva-

View of "Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective," 2011, showing (left) *Cyclone Fence*, 1968/2011; at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz.

## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective," at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, through Sept. 25.



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sion of Cambodia, which consumed everyone's attention. It also occasioned Bollinger's rupture with Kertess, who was little invested in the show. Within a year other problems beset Bollinger, and his life began unraveling.<sup>2</sup> He was gone from the art world by 1976, and died forgotten in 1988, a full-blown alcoholic. He was just 48. Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Pino Pascali, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Bas Jan Ader, Blinky Palermo and Gordon Matta-Clark had similarly brief working lives, but their oeuvres were preserved after they died and have been shown widely since. Their reputations have grown. Bollinger's estate has never been accessible, because for 20 years his elder son has refused to answer inquiries concerning his father, most recently those of Meyer-Stoll.

Bollinger had an exceptionally quick understanding of the physical world, helped along by his having majored in aeronautical engineering at Brown University. As an artist, he wasn't interested in touch, and jettisoned the tentative and extraneous. A muscular man, he realized most of his sculptures rapidly and was insistent—to an extreme within his peer group—about using little-altered industrial materials. His pieces are direct and experimental. Bollinger had almost no use for the art market and sold few sculptures. He often found it quicker to reconstruct works than to transport and store them. And he moved frequently, abandoning pieces as he went. As a consequence, when he died, he possessed little of what he wrought.

Right, *Evergreen Joe Hemmis*,  
1970/2011, two-by-fours, sawhorse  
brackets, 25 feet in diameter.

Above, Bill Bollinger installing  
at Galleria Sperone, Turin, 1970.  
Photo Paolo Mussat Sartor.







Left, *Boston Common*, 1970/2011, steel barrels, rubber hoses, water, 70 inches in diameter. Photo Anne Rochette.

Right, *Untitled*, 1970, two wheelbarrows, water, 25 by 48 by 26 inches each. Photo Anne Rochette.

Below, view of Bollinger's work in the Starrett-Lehigh building, New York, 1970.

Meyer-Stoll has re-created 11 dismantled or lost sculptures. These fabrications derive from Bollinger's notes; from photographs of pieces whose dimensions are indicated, making reconstruction possible; or from bills for the original materials. Some pieces are copied exactly, while others are slightly scaled up to suit the large, high rooms at Vaduz and the other venues, something the artist's rare, but open-ended, instructions permitted. Without these "re-makes," the retrospective could never have achieved its breadth and energy.

The estate's 20-year-long silence throws the re-created sculptures into a moral and legal limbo. For now, anyone can reconstruct a "Bollinger," assuming they have descriptions or photographs to work from. Usually, estates arrange shows, sell works and authorize editions. They may refabricate pieces which weren't safeguarded after being exhibited. And dealers will promote an estate's holdings, thus furthering the dead artist's reputation and helping to preserve the work; Lee Lozano's recent, posthumous career is a ready example. None of that has happened with Bollinger.

AT VADUZ, THE EXHIBITION was spread liberally over the museum's entire upper floor. Rather than grouping works by type or year, Meyer-Stoll continually jazzed together different series, so that her installation swung with the rhythmic recurrence of materials, methods and shapes. Bollinger treated the stuff he grabbed in the world as plain material, not as Duchampian readymade. He used chain-link fencing, rope and eyebolts, heavy rubber hoses and 55-gallon



**BOLLINGER REALIZED MOST OF HIS SCULPTURES RAPIDLY AND WAS INSISTENT—TO AN EXTREME—ABOUT USING LITTLE-ALTERED INDUSTRIAL MATERIALS.**



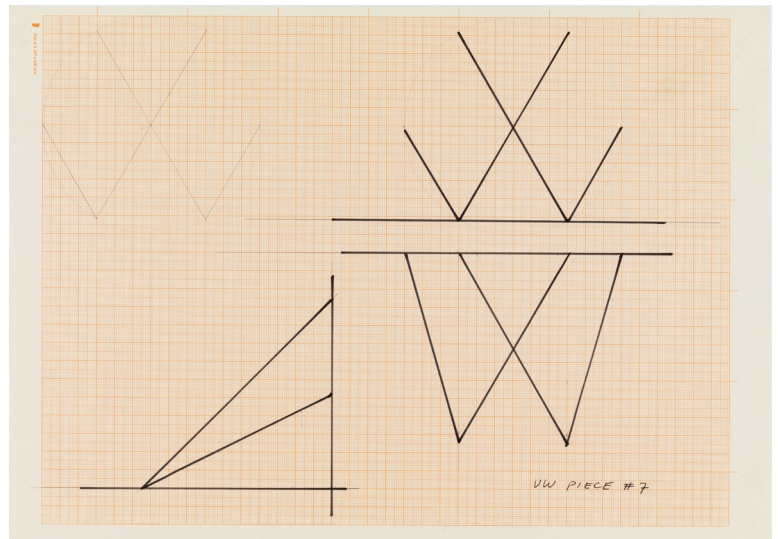
metal drums, transparent plastic tubing, two-by-fours and sawhorse brackets, aluminum tubing and Speed Rail fittings, droplights, industrial graphite powder, and spray paint. Though static, much of his work appears primed to move, to flow, to disperse, to alter.

Left to itself, chain link is floppy; when tensioned, it's a strong yet supple barrier in which interlocking wires seem to pull like muscle fibers. To make *Cyclone Fence* (1968/2011), one of three works in the show composed of chain link, Bollinger took a 50-foot length of 6-foot-wide fencing, anchored one end flat to the floor and then gave the fencing a half twist, so that it ran, rose up and descended again, to be anchored flat. The conception is limpid, the material apt and the making direct; the long strip of mesh breaks like a slow wave across the floor. Akin to a natural phenomenon, it has a grace unto itself.

*Wire Piece* (1970) presented a yet more radical wager. The chain link is unaltered, so Bollinger's

decisions concerned only quantity and placement. The roughly 10-by-7-foot rectangle is unobtrusively screwed flat onto the wall, its bottom edge about 15 inches up from the floor. Neither drawing, nor painting, nor sculpture, it behaves as all three. The wire draws a flowing diagonal grid, the chain link subtly shades the wall behind it and the metal's sheer presence establishes a forcefully frontal space. We see that Bollinger saw and chose, alertly and subtly.

During Bollinger's decade of activity (1966-75), artists could use and abuse exhibition spaces; now museums worry about in-floor heating, climate control, trustees' feelings. In Liechtenstein, a couple of Bollinger sculptures were ill served by this prevailing caution. One of two works in the show titled *Rope Piece*—the one from 1969/2000—is simple: a turnbuckle sufficiently tensions a length of half-inch manila rope so that it zips, just off the floor, between two eyebolts set about 30 feet apart. Constructivist sculptors are said to deal with line and plane; Bollinger kept the line and borrowed the floor for his plane. He drew his line between two points in space, using tension to hold gravity at bay. Except the eyebolts couldn't really be sunk



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into the museum's floor, so the rope couldn't be well tightened. Two thin, upright needles had to be placed beneath the rope to prevent it from sagging. It's still a sculpture, just not the tensile, essential one the artist conceived.

Bollinger seized upon water, which figured in eight sculptures shown in Vaduz, as no sculptor had before. Outdoors, he saw it as a medium to present and transport matter, at least twice making pieces in which he floated a heavy log in a large body of water. Indoors, he used tubes, barrels and

troughs to convey water in numerous ways. In 1970, the announcement for his Galleria Sperone show in Turin quoted him, in English and Italian: "Water is life and like art finds its own level."

*Boston Common* (1970/2011), originally shown in the Sperone exhibition, consists of seven open, upright, 55-gallon steel drums, set lip to lip; six of the drums surround the seventh. Six black rubber hoses link the outer drums to the central one, each hose arching up and out from its barrel, curving over the adjacent one, and then plunging into the central drum; seen from above, in photos, the work has the authoritative geometry of a mandala. The drums are equally full, with the water about a hand's breadth from their upper edges. The six tubes are siphons, so that the seven identical water levels fall (or rise) in unison, a connectedness the title summons. Bollinger made a piece that moves yet appears still. The work couldn't be simpler, yet it isn't simple at all. Bollinger's choice of opaque tubes to join seven discrete volumes of water into a single body forces viewers

to take a conceptual leap of faith, as there is no knowing if the tubes are empty and the barrels each manually filled.

On the other hand, visual transparency is crucial to Bollinger's technique, borrowed from masons and carpenters, of using water-filled tubes to mark identical elevations around a job site. In several linear sculptures, he filled 2-inch clear plastic tubing with water, sometimes using single lengths, other times connecting multiple branches connecting with hose clamps and iron tees, plugs and nipples. Meyer-Stoll reconstructed two of these

Left, *Volkswagen Rope Piece #7*, 1968, pencil and felt-tip pen on graph paper, 11 5/8 by 16 1/2 inches.

Far left, *Untitled*, 1969, spray paint on paper, 17 3/4 by 24 5/8 inches. Private collection, Berlin.

Below, *Rope Piece*, 1967/2011, manila rope, eye bolts, turnbuckles and screw clamps, approx. 10 by 20 by 9 feet.

York, the piece extends from wall to wall and holds the water still. Though the tubing is hardly an obstacle to our crossing the room, it is not to be stepped upon and imposes its translucency, commanding the space between the two erect ends and the tiny reflective pools they contain.

In an untitled, atypical water piece (1970), two ordinary galvanized wheelbarrows are aligned side by side, each filled to its low back rim with water; the doubling of the wheelbarrows and their unlikely contents is perfect, and unsettling. The absolute stillness of the pair runs counter to our expectations both of wheelbarrows and of water. Our immediate tempta-



pieces, *Rt. 23* and *Shelter Rock Road* (both 1970/2011), and installed them next to each other, much as they were shown at Galleria Sperone. In both, the clear plastic tubing lies on the floor and is full of water. In *Rt. 23*, the tubing runs across the roughly 30-foot-wide room and is wedged against facing walls, so that each extremity curves upward about a foot. The water rises to the same level at the two ends according to basic physics, something easy to figure out but hard to perceive, since the distance in between is too great. Titled for the road leading to Bollinger's Hillsdale studio in upstate New

York, the piece extends from wall to wall and holds the water still. Though the tubing is hardly an obstacle to our crossing the room, it is not to be stepped upon and imposes its translucency, commanding the space between the two erect ends and the tiny reflective pools they contain.<sup>3</sup>

tion is to lift up the handles in order to balance the load and get moving. The level plane defined by the two separated surfaces of water imposes horizontality as the axis of the sculpture, whether still or (in our imaginations) rolling. It's as though Bollinger were offering us a portable horizon.<sup>3</sup> Transport of another sort occurs with *Evergreen Joe Hemmis*, shown in the 1970 Whitney Annual and reconstructed here. Bollinger arranged 30 over-long, two-legged, 30-inch-high wooden sawhorses made of two-by-fours in a circle 25 feet in diameter. He pushed the legless ends together on the



ground so as to form a virtual hub, from which the stock 10-foot-long crossbars radiated up and outward like the spokes of a giant horizontal wheel. The two legs of each sawhorse touched those of its two neighbors, forming a round, crenelated barrier. When Bollinger made the piece, it harked back a few years, to when Minimal sculpture was homemade and troublesome rather than coldly repetitive. His piece conveys speed, with its center sucking in our sight like a vortex and the 60 legs seeming to mark the passing seconds. The title, obscure to all but hardcore bikers, pays homage to a hell-for-leather hill climber who excelled at a racing event that the Triumph-riding Bollinger knew well. The immediate, kinesthetic presence of the sculpture says it all.

A rediscovered gem in the exhibition is the 9-minute-long, 8mm film *Movie* (1970; transferred to DVD), which Bollinger made for "Information," at MoMA.<sup>4</sup> *Movie* was shot from a single point of view and simply edited; it shows a strong, bare-armed Bollinger picking up one end of a 13-foot length of a hefty wooden pole and then "walking" it up to vertical. Once it's upright, Bollinger tries to stabilize it, his body holding it as if the two—man and pole—were a couple dancing. When it feels set, he steps back slightly; it stands for an instant and falls. Bollinger walks to the pole's far end and again raises it to vertical, steadies it and backs away, only to see it fall again. The action repeats and repeats, since tall poles aren't made for standing on end; we could be watching a 1920s two-reel comedy. Finally, it does remain standing on its own and Bollinger briefly leaves the frame, only to re-enter the scene and push the pole over. The dance starts anew.

The film is minimal: a man, a pole, open ground and gravity. The last was a subject that Bollinger shared with his generation of sculptors. The film is Bollinger's wittiest piece; his showing it in 1970 at MoMA suggests his contrariness. Many of his colleagues in the show strained toward seriousness.

MORE THAN 50 WORKS on paper were shown in Vaduz, all but a handful coming from European collections. Seeing so many drawings at once was an eye shaker. Bollinger was as agile on paper as in space. He drew to work out sculptures, and also drew to draw. The analytical drawings are on notebook pages or moderately sized sheets of graph paper; they are decisive, cleanly executed and communicative. Here, Bollinger summons forms and spatial arrangements in visual shorthand: straight lines for ropes, circles for steel drums, curved lines for flexible tubes. They show the conceptual bent of his sculptures, which may arise from an instant's intuition, but are furthered by a precise intelligence of proportions and relations.

"Volkswagen Rope Pieces" (1968) is a series of 18 drawings on graph paper that were hung in the same room as the second *Rope Piece* (1967/2011), a radical sculpture consisting of two identical, upside-down, inclined Vs. Bollinger made the Vs by running identical lengths of manila rope up the wall and then down to and outward on the floor. The drawings were after-the-fact musings on the sculpture. The car manufacturer's trademark—another instance of Bollinger's gearheadness—is present in two of the drawings; others show increasingly complex combinations of line lengths and angles. The depicted figures alternately appear flat or sited in space, either

**1** Rolf Ricke ran his gallery in Cologne from 1963 to 2004. In 2006 his collection was jointly acquired by the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen and the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main. Meyer-Stoll encountered Bollinger's works when she organized a comprehensive exhibition of the Ricke holdings for the three museums in 2008. In putting together the Bollinger retrospective, Meyer-Stoll has relied both on Ricke and on his exceptional archive, most of which will be donated to the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. **2** For more detailed information, see Wade Saunders, "Not Lost, Not Found," *Art in America*, March 2000, pp. 104-17, 143. We've borrowed some descriptive passages from that text. **3** Although the piece shown in Liechtenstein is dated 1970, the wheelbarrows differ slightly from those used by Bollinger and documented in vintage photographs; in the photographs, the geometry of the barrows' boxes is more pronounced, so the spatial dynamics are stronger. **4** Because Bollinger never retrieved the film from the show, MoMA now claims title to it.

"Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective" was organized by Christiane Meyer-Stoll at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz, where it premiered [Feb. 4-May 8]; after Karlsruhe, it will travel to the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh [Oct. 29, 2011-Jan. 8, 2012]. It is accompanied by a 256-page catalogue published by Walter König in German and English versions.

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View of *Movie*, 1970, 8mm film transferred to DVD, 9 minutes. Collection MoMA, New York.



in axonometric schemas or in views labeled “Top,” “Side” or “Front.” Drawn with pencil, ink pen, ruler and compass, they map the potential territory of a sculptural gesture. While *Rope Piece* remains lean and intractable, the drawings show the artist giving Minimalism a humorous tweak.

Bollinger made numerous works on paper with spray paint, a medium in which air and liquid briefly conjoin. When spray paint is used lightly, the air disperses the paint particles; applied with insistence, the spray creates a density of color

wherein the hand has no part. Here Bollinger’s spare repertory of circles, sharp lines and extended fields takes on an atmospheric quality. In some works he allows the diffusive quality of the medium to make shapes bristling with energy; in others he uses a mask to abruptly limit an otherwise shimmering veil of color, typically cyan or black. A few of the spray-paint works are polychrome, with uneven, overlapping, vertical stripes of close-hued color forming fields of sensual beauty radiating way beyond their edges. He could do that. ○