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ART REVIEW

An Afterlife for a Sculptor

Bill Bollinger's Works Resurface in Two Exhibitions



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

"Rope Piece" (1969) was recreated to Bill Bollinger's original specifications years after his death.

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In the second half of the 1960s Richard Serra, Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, among others, were carving out the afterlife of Minimalism. Bill Bollinger, then in his 20s and now the subject of revelatory exhibitions at the SculptureCenter and at Albus Greenspon Gallery, was one of those others.

Perhaps you have never heard of Mr. Bollinger. Between 1965 and 1970 he was at the center of avant-gardist action in New York and Europe. Major exhibitions here and abroad included his elegant, stripped-down configurations of hardware store materials like chain-link fencing, pipe, rope, hoses, lumber, sawhorses, oil barrels and nuts and bolts. For a historic 1969 group exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "[Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials](#)," he extricated a boulder from the pit then being dug for the twin

towers and transported it to the museum, where it was awarded pride of place at the show's entrance.

In 1970 Mr. Bollinger organized an extraordinarily ambitious installation of water-filled barrels, hoses and wooden structures in a vast rented space on the 19th floor of the Starrett-Lehigh building in Chelsea. The critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote an appreciative [review](#) for The New York Times, but it was otherwise a disastrous undertaking for Mr. Bollinger. Partly because of the onerous financial obligations it left him with and partly because of personal issues related to a troubled marriage and a young son, he left the city to live upstate. He continued to make art and taught at various colleges, but his last exhibition in New York was in 1974, at OK Harris in SoHo. In the 1980s he tried to get back into the game, but the landscape of art had drastically changed and what he had to offer was no longer relevant. He was bitterly disappointed. When he died at 48 from the effects of alcoholism, he was a forgotten man.

Bollinger's return to art-world consciousness is owed in large part, if not entirely, to a remarkable [essay](#) by the sculptor Wade Saunders published in *Art in America* in 2000. Operating as much like a detective as an art historian, Mr. Saunders relied on photographs and other documentary materials, along with his memories, to reconstruct in detail a career that he felt deserved to be remembered and honored.

In 2007 Mitchell Algus, a dealer who has specialized in rediscovering forgotten artists, presented works by Mr. Bollinger in a two-person show. Then, last year, a version of the show now at the SculptureCenter made its debut at the [Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz](#). Organized by Christiane Meyer-Stoll, a curator there, it consisted mainly of works acquired by the German dealer and collector [Rolf Ricke](#) in the late 1960s.

Nicely installed in the SculptureCenter's cavernous spaces, "Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective" presents about 40 sculptures, installations and drawings from 1966 to 1970. Many are recent reconstructions based on Mr. Bollinger's exacting specifications. On display are metal pipes connected by flexible transparent tubing forming U-shapes on the floor; lengths of rope stretched between floor and ceiling and between bolts embedded in the floor; and a pair of wheelbarrows filled to their brims with water. Fine, black graphite powder covers half the floor of a side gallery. In the temporarily annexed, unfinished lobby of a neighboring building, an approximately 33-foot piece of transparent tubing formed into a circle and half full of water lies on the floor; black hoses snake in and out of water-filled oil drums; and a 12-foot square made of two-by-fours is mounted on sawhorses. Best of all, in

the main gallery a 50-foot section of six-foot-wide cyclone fencing twists 180 degrees so that its ends lie flat and its middle turns gracefully to nearly vertical. In its spectral, wavy beauty, it transforms the otherwise inert industrial material it is made of like nothing else in the show.

As a judiciously selected sampler, the exhibition is a good introduction for viewers unfamiliar with Mr. Bollinger. It also feels newly relevant in light of the still influential works of [Cady Noland](#) from the 1980s and '90s and [Virginia Overton's](#) recycling of used construction materials now at the Kitchen in Chelsea. But in its narrow focus on just four early years, the show does not do justice to the whole arc of Mr. Bollinger's career. With its documentary photographs representing many large-scale works not in the show, the catalog does a better job of reflecting his formal and conceptual themes and his tremendous, restless creative energy.

Mr. Bollinger continued to produce art with unabated urgency after leaving New York in 1970. One of his projects involved working at an iron foundry. He dug holes in sand in the form of lakes he had visited in the Northeast and had them filled with molten iron. Three of the resulting pieces and an earlier, classically Minimalist wall sculpture made from slender pieces of extruded aluminum channeling make up "[Aluminum channel, cast iron, paper: 1966-1977](#)," the gorgeous show at Albus Greenspon. Standing vertically — the biggest nearly seven feet tall — two of the craggy, rusty iron works resemble Chinese scholars' rocks; they have a shocking vitality. One lying on the floor with its flat side up bespeaks Mr. Bollinger's preoccupation with gravity, fluidity and raw materiality.

Also at the gallery are some small, colorful, geometric drawings from 1977, studies for paintings that Mr. Bollinger may or may not have made. Photographs and letters prove that he was painting with considerable ambition during his last decade, but no actual paintings have come to light, as family members in possession of his estate have not responded to entreaties from Bollinger aficionados. More revelations of this strange, sad and intriguing career may yet be forthcoming.

"Bill Bollinger: The Retrospective," runs through July 30 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org. "Bill Bollinger — Aluminum channel, cast iron, paper: 1966 -1977" runs through June 9 at Albus Greenspon, 71 Morton Street, West Village; (212) 255-7872, albusgreenspon.com