

A thin, curved black line is drawn on a light, off-white background. The line starts at a point on the left side, approximately one-third of the way across the width, and curves upwards and to the right, ending near the top right corner. The curve is smooth and continuous.

Otto Boll

Otto Boll is an artist who operates from an expressly minimalist sensibility. His works are acutely reduced forms of steel that hover in space, almost cutting through it. Suspended by barely visible nylon threads, these sculptures — lines drawn in the air — seem to float, and inhabit the area and space overhead. Using 3 mm strips of steel, he sharpens the tip until he achieves a point so fine that its outer limit disappears. Thus, the artist is capable of shaping visual statements that linger precariously on the edge: the works oscillate between presence and absence, the seen and the unseen, suggesting both materiality and the void. The artist is thereby able to unsettle the viewer's conception of solidity.

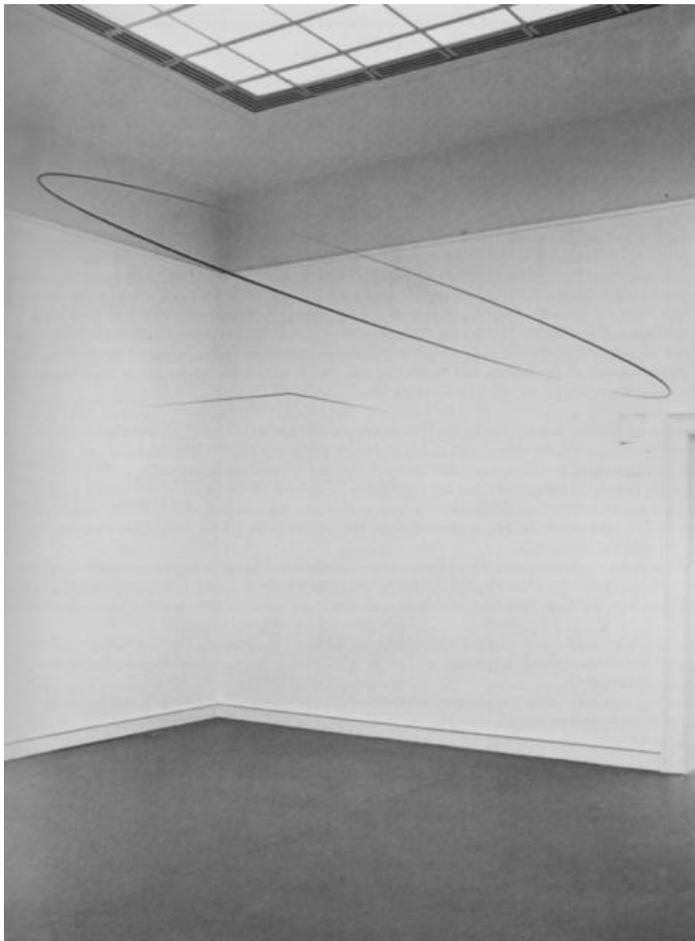
Articulating something that appears to be almost lighter than air, Boll invites us into a state of contemplation. One needs to walk around the work in order to attain a more "complete" experience of the sculptures. When one encounters the extremely thin floating lines in the emptiness of space, one's gaze is slowed down in order to take a closer look at the sculptures. Yet, the eye is unable to detect a real end: the imperceptibly fine strips of steel extend into the unknown, to which the sculptures—as impulse and guide—direct the view. The actual material extends beyond its own limitations into the realm of the potential. This potential is not only manifested by visible changes in the sculptures, but also by the viewer's observation.

The work provides a silence of space for the viewer to reorient the existence of visibility and reality. While being dazed by the irresolvable questions of reality, the viewer starts to engage with the emptiness of the void. In the meantime, the sculpture can open up the viewer's perceptions of the surroundings. It brings in "possibility" – it makes one aware. A great deal of awareness is involved in his work. Hence the void is a fullness as well – a plenitude of possibilities. Fullness and nothingness come together.

*"My work – and sculptures in general – must be experienced first hand. They convey empirical values, i.e., they cannot be compared with anything but themselves. Only their proximity can bring about a pristine experience. Sharing space and time with them makes the experience unique: Sculpture demands our presence, especially in times when the 'media' push themselves into the foreground, pretending to be 'immediate'. This leads to diminished intimacy."*



Otto Boll - Skulpturen.  
Skulpturenpark Walfrieden, Cragg  
Foundation Wuppertal, 2019

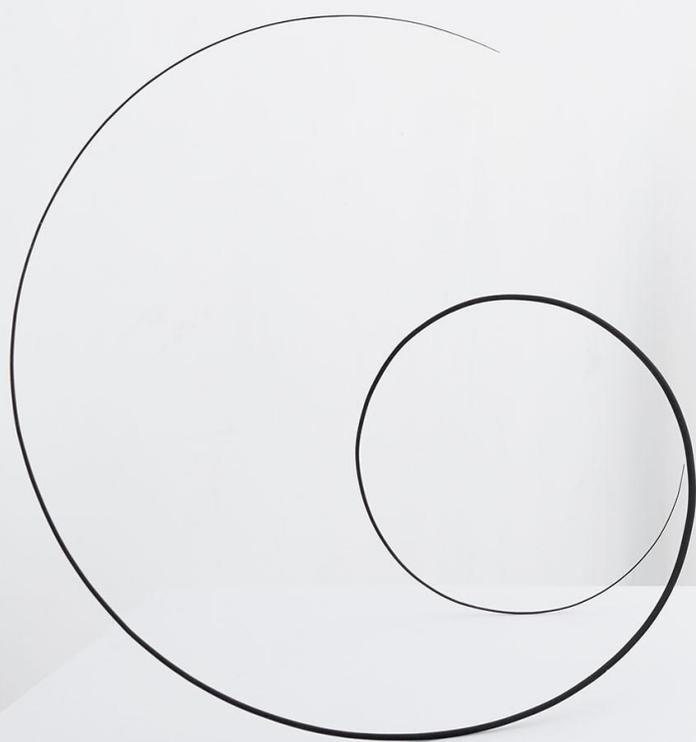


▲ *Otto Boll - Skulpturen.*  
Skulpturenpark Walfrieden, Cragg  
Foundation Wuppertal, Germany  
2019

◀ *Kunstpreis Junger Westen '81,*  
Kunsthalle Recklinghausen,  
Germany, 1981

# “A fanciful incision through reality”

British sculptor and Turner Prize winner  
Tony Cragg on Otto Bolls works



Form, the way something is shown, is essential, Susan Sontag wrote in 1964 in her seminal essay “Against Interpretation”.<sup>1</sup> It’s not only the form of Boll’s sculptures that resonates with this quote but also how they manifest themselves in space: apparently floating on nylon threads or with a fine chalk line against a black background; as subtle eruptions from the surface of the wall or as robust articulations of the contours of its surroundings. Boll’s creations oscillate between presence and absence, the seen and the unseen, suggesting both materiality and the void.

“A void for me is a beginning. There is nothing and from this point, you have to start anew. And to have the feeling of the void in the back of your mind, it’s just like looking for another country. It has something to do with possibility. A sense of the known possibility is necessary for combination with the void. On the one hand, there is nothing, but from this point onwards I start to build something, and it has to fill the nothing with something I do by myself,” Boll states.<sup>2</sup>

For the artist, language is a framework, “a constant companion” in the discourse of his work.<sup>3</sup> Boll invites the viewer into a sculptural event, the conception of solidity fading. The minimalist sensibility appeals to human feeling, the bodily sensation. Words try to develop between the heart and the brain, between perception and production. Language occupies a fundamental role in the sensations of the whole body and is always present. Boll’s words are not about the content of the work, but about its genesis, or the feeling that describes the visual idea. It leads to reflections, not to interpretations. It is precisely this tranquillity, free of interpretation, that Boll’s work refers to.

The approach to spatiality that characterises Boll’s works is not very different from that of Lucio Fontana, who created a void; invited a space to enter through slashes and holes in his work. By doing so, Fontana wanted to show real space, behind the canvas, as opposed to the two-dimensionality that had long been a defining characteristic of painting. Even before he applied his first *Tagli* (“cuts”) in 1958, Fontana tried to use brightly coloured paint to connect the material with space. “Colour in matter, developing in space, assuming different forms,” he wrote in his famous 1946 manifesto.<sup>4</sup> The light installations that Fontana made in the following years broadened the notion of human experience to include sculptures in the space in which the viewer finds himself. At the same time, he broke through the dichotomy of artwork versus exhibition space.

“These artists,” as art historian, critic and museum curator Margit Rowell wrote about Fontana, Luciano Fabro, and German-born Eva Hesse among others, “explored similar ideas beginning in the 1960s, with a view to stimulating the mind and body’s response to unprecedented physical situations.”<sup>5</sup> The reduced form language of Luciano Fabro’s spatial experiences is also interesting to relate to this. Although he called himself a heretic, the Italian conceptual artist Fabro is associated with the Arte Povera—the movement that sought poetry in known materials. Referring to Fontana, he began his famous series of *Tautologies* in the 1960s, a term he borrowed from literature and rhetoric. With simple interventions to play on the relationship between his sculptures and their surroundings, he created a suggestion of approach and sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

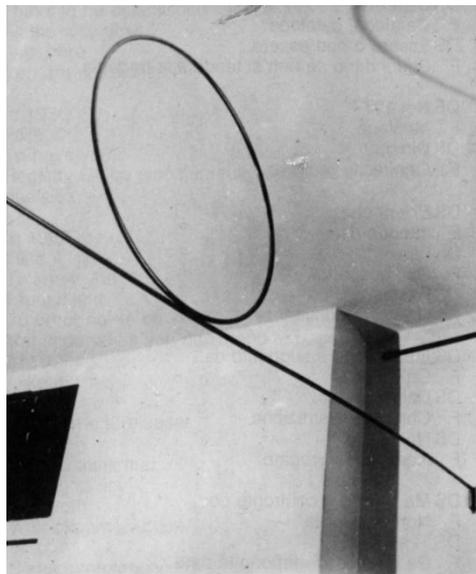
<sup>2</sup> Interview with Otto Boll on the occasion of Boll’s first solo exhibition in Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Antwerp, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Boll, ‘Introduction’, in *Otto Boll. Sculptures*, exh. cat. Sculpture Park Waldfrieden, Cragg Foundation, Wuppertal, 29 June – 22 September 2019 (London, Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2019). The introduction to this exhibition catalogue consists largely of a letter that Boll sent to the critic and philosopher Jürgen Morschel in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Lucio Fontana, Guido Le Noci, and others, *Manifesto Blanco*, 1946. Published in 1966 by Galleria Apollinaire Edizioni, Milan. The essay, also known as *White Manifesto*, was written in 1946 by artists and students in Buenos Aires under the direction of Fontana during his time in Argentina.

<sup>5</sup> Margit Rowell, ‘Luciano Fabro: Timely and Defiant,’ in *The Brooklyn Rail* (New York, September 2018). Rowell worked at the MoMA, Centre Pompidou, Centro de arte Reina Sofia and other renowned institutions.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, his series *Italie* and *Piedi* are particularly well known, as well as *Habitat*, *Attaccapanni* and *Arcobaleni*.



Luciano Fabro, *Ruota*, 1964, chromed brass.  
Source: Flash Art.

The mental dialogue that Boll allows his fragile forms to enter into with the mind of us, the observer, is similar to that of Fabro in a way. The invitation that Boll extends to the viewer is located in the mental interspace, which can only be bridged by feeling, sensation, and language. His sculptures call for closeness and presence, he says, at a time when indirectness comes increasingly to the force. Although the experience will differ with each viewing, the physical distance always remains. The question is whether this physical distance is also the substantial, essential one.

However, there is also a fundamental difference in the creation and thinking of both artists. Due to the clear presence of materiality, Fabro's work always has a subject. Through the metaphorical use of materials – in some cases, marble with veins – his sculptures seem inherently human, but also due to the dimensions that refer to his person. There is always a reference to a certain narrative, a certain passage from a certain past. In Boll's works, the materials, which are black or grey, with occasional white or silvery accents, do not remind one of anything found in the body, nor do the proportions refer to those of a human being. The human element takes place in the space in between, in the relationship that the viewer enters into with the steel, aluminium, or wooden creations.

Introspection, tactility, mental, and physical approach. These are words that have been frequently returning for a year now in various contexts, including in the discourse on art. It makes certain art more urgent, other art more relevant. With his creations, Otto Boll does not want to refer to a certain pattern of thought or a certain form of topicality. To summarise Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation": art does not require interpretation, and certainly not reduction to content. It is the form that is essential; with Boll, the form that invites the viewer to seek, feel, and express their language in new ways.



# Otto Boll's exhibition 'Widening the Language' is a minimalistic sculptural event

German artist Otto Boll's minimalistic sculptures at *Widening the Language*, at Patio Gallery at Axel Vervoordt's Gallery, are all about having a personal conversation with the viewers.

by Dilpreet Bhullar | Published on : Jun 03, 2021

A delicately twisted three mm strip of steel, hanging in the gallery space with an apparently visible nylon thread, is the work of the minimalistic artist, Otto Boll. The German artist is showcasing the exhibition *Widening the Language* at the Patio Gallery at Axel Vervoordt's Gallery, which happens to be his third solo exhibition with the gallery.

The sculptures, akin to the "lines drawn in the air", appear to have a floating effect in the space. The minimalism of the works straddles between "presence and absence", "seen and unseen" to recreate the idea of materiality and void.

Interestingly, for Boll, the void is not an end itself, but opens a plethora of new awakenings: a moment of epiphany. At the time of the artist's first exhibition with Axel Vervoordt, he gave an explicit account of void and what meaning does it hold for him. "A void for me is a beginning. There is nothing and from this point, you have to start anew. And to have the feeling of the void in the back of your mind, it's just like looking for another country. It has something to do with possibility. A sense of the known possibility is necessary for combination with the void. On the one hand, there is nothing, but from this point onwards I start to build something, and it has to fill the nothing with something I do by myself," he says.

The 17 sculptures at the display draw meaning from the close interactions

shared between viewers and creation to disturb the former's conventional understanding of what constitutes permanency of a solid material. The artist likes to formally name the shared exchanges between visitors and installation as the 'sculptural event'. In an interview with STIR, Boll explains its implications, "A 'sculptural event' means a meeting with a sculpture - direct in front of you. You are facing the sculpture. It is real. You can go around, feeling what is happening to you. You are alive. I like to repeat a statement of mine: sculpture demands presence — a necessary desire in an age when indirectness comes increasingly to the fore, behaving as though it were direct. The consequence is an increasing loss of closeness".

Since the exhibition is entitled *Widening the Language*, the 'sculptural event' is a way to enhance the meaning of language, which is a "constant companion" in his works. During this journey of the 'sculptural event', a string of words is formed and articulated, if not literally, verbally, but communicate an emotional feeling between the human minds and brain. Interestingly, the words here might not attempt to interpret the works of creation but encapsulate a sense of reflection on the works. So, the works for Boll are not limited to a single interpretation, as

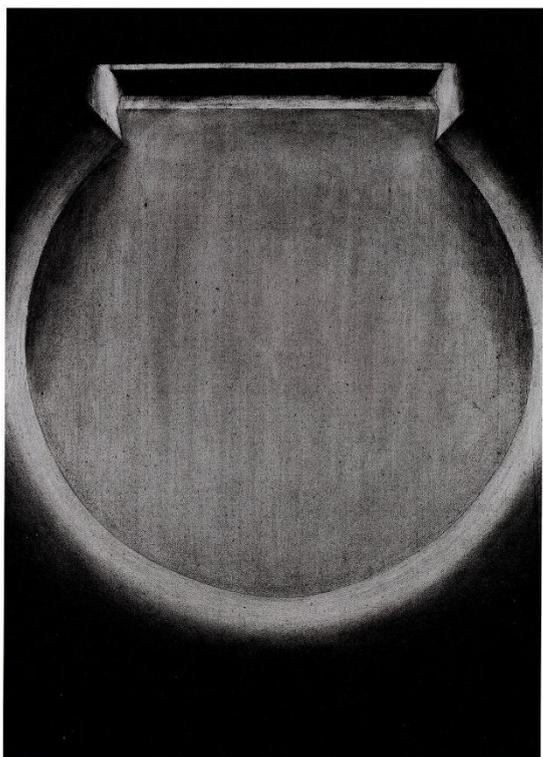
defined by the artist, but open an invitation to multiple reflections.

To visually translate these ideas into tangible forms, Boll offers a creative touch to the material, as firm as aluminium, steel or wood. To offer an insight into his inclination to use steel as a key material of his art practice, Boll explains, "'Form follows function' is a word for designing tools, for instance. Find the best way to handle that, to grip it and at least to like the form. In my work, steel follows form. Aside from steel, I use different other materials. So, steel doesn't dominate the first step. The origin of a work lies in thinking or feeling the form with the desire, to have the work in front of me; body to body. The challenge of steel, especially for my suspended sculptures, requires calmness and serenity".

So, when the art world is laden with the works crying for attention, Boll prefers to let his work have a private or a single conversation with the viewers or a collector. For the artist, this engagement is similar to the "instrumental music or lyrics – I like to compare with my works. In such an environment, there is a danger of being perceived as 'muzak'." It could not be denied that the works emphasise the art of introspection led by the viewers when they see the works carved in the hues of black, white

and greys. The physical proximity shared between minimalistic art practice by Boll and the viewers from all walks of life, is, in the terms of the artist, a rendezvous of a "counterpart". Lastly, the works at the display, for Boll must-have, "moved you twice – in a physical and intellectual way. Leaving questions virulent open".





Flute 5, 1975.  
Black chalk  
on paper

## Sculpture as the Object and Determiner of Perception

Jürgen Morschel Munich, January 1998 Translation: Cynthia Chapa

One of Otto Boll's earliest works is the series of "Flute Sketches" created in 1975/76. The sketches do not represent what we normally associate with the word flute: We see a pitch black surface with round and rectangular openings through which light falls. Only the title "Flute" clues us into the fact that these are openings for the fingers and mouth of the flutist. In observing the sketches, we do not look at the flute; instead, along with the artist, we look out through the openings from the dark interior. The artist himself is here the observer of an object, which he shows us in its potential as a determiner of perception, by positioning us inside the flute.

This approach to the object was – as we can now say in hindsight – foundational for the development of Otto Boll's sculptures, in which the actual object is replaced by the artist's shaping of it. One of the first black "Floating Sculptures", hung virtually invisibly, consists of a straight rod which gradually expands from extraordinarily thinly pointed tips to the center and, conversely, tapers from the center to the ends. Yet, the eye is unable to detect a real end: There is the impression that the rod, now imperceptibly fine, extends

into the unknown, to which the sculpture as impulse and guide directs the view. The connection with the view from within the flute toward an unknown outside world is obvious.

When the rods are bent and angled, which frequently results in two-part sculptures, the conditions of perception are further changed. Two rods, each expanding toward the center and tapering to the ends, are bent and arranged in such a way that the ends point toward each other and optically combine to form a horizontal ellipse across the empty space between them. If we move away from the sculpture, the ellipse shortens and from a relatively distant position, ultimately appears as a small vertical circle. As a fact of perception, this circle (as well as other optical changes produced by varying points of observation) is just as real as the ellipse. The actual material substance extends beyond its own limitations into the realm of the possible. This potential, however, is manifested not simply by visible changes in the sculpture, but by a way of observing which produces change, since the sculpture as a material object has not, in fact, been altered.

Optical mobility is even more apparent in the angled two-part floating sculptures where the parts no longer connect into closed forms as in the case with the ellipse. If we change our position in respect to the sculpture, the individual parts (angles expanding and contracting, lines lengthening and shortening) and the shape are changed. The sculptures go beyond what they actually are; they come into being only as the actual movement of the observer interacts with the potential of the object to move optically. By re-positioning himself, the observer elicits these potentials. This defines the space of the sculpture as well: It is that space in which this interaction takes place, the sphere of influence of the sculpture; in other words, the area in which the potentials determined by the object are perceived.

Thus, it is not just the viewing of the object that produces the perception, but the physical movement of the viewer as well. This is necessary in order to bring the sculptural event and the expansion of its space into existence and in this way to experience it in fact.

Another aspect of perception is evoked by the "Black Stone" sculptures – polyhedrons that are open to the observer and thus form an inner space along whose walls a chalk line is drawn corresponding to the angle by their coming together. Yet, we do not see the line adhering to the surface but hovering lightly in front of and above the pitch black base. At the same time, a movement of the surrounding area can be perceived in the structure of the stone which on the emotive level guards the impalpable with its enveloping form. We not only experience the sculptures, but, in doing so, we also experience the complexity of our potentials for perception which are determined and aroused by them.

*Untitled, 1993, and  
Untitled, 2006*



# Biography

Born 1952 in Issum/Geldern, Germany.

Lives and works in Krefeld, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

**1975-1980**

Studies art at the branch Münster of the Düsseldorf Academy (class Ernst Hermanns).

**1980**

Gets the Caspar-von-Zumbusch-Preis.

**1981**

Gets the Förderpreis des Kulturkreises im Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie (BDI), the Förderpreis der Jürgen Ponto-Stiftung.

Kunstpries 'Junger Westen' of the City of Recklinghausen.

**1981-1982**

Obtains the Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Scholarship.

**1998**

Important solo exhibition at Goethe Institut, Houston.

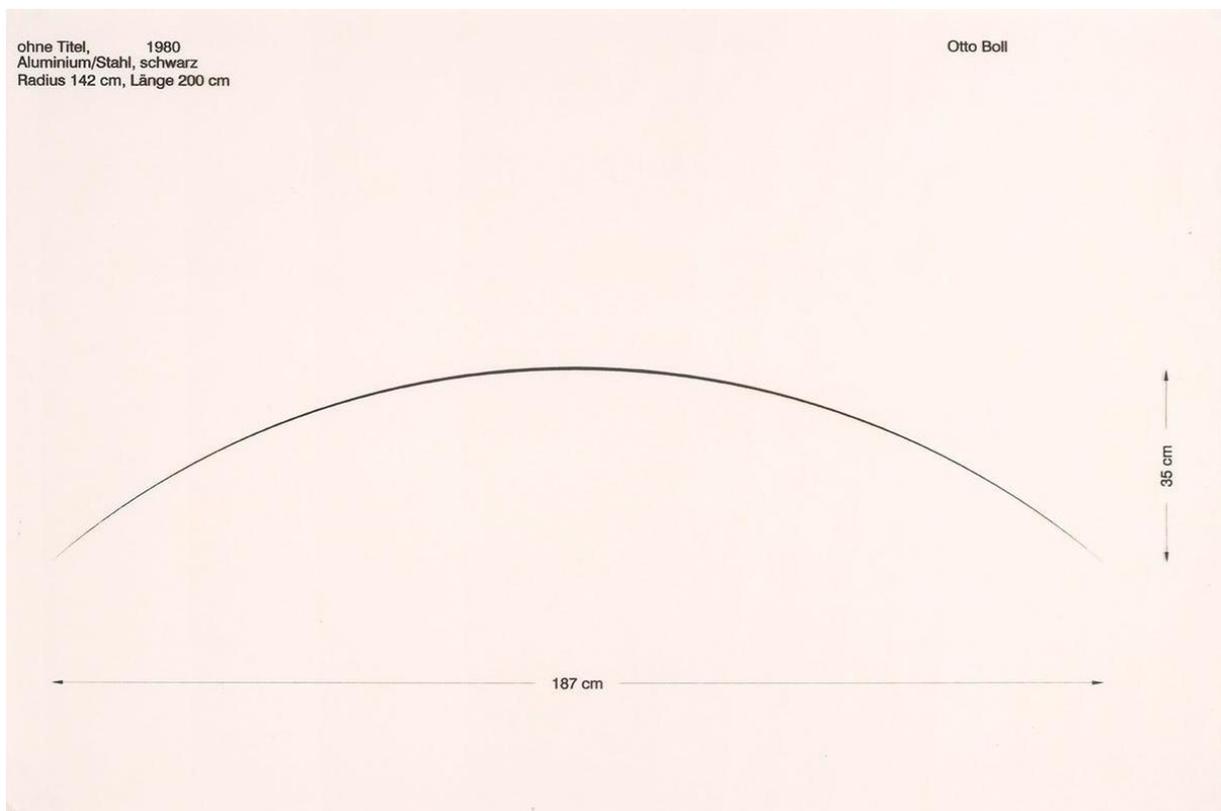
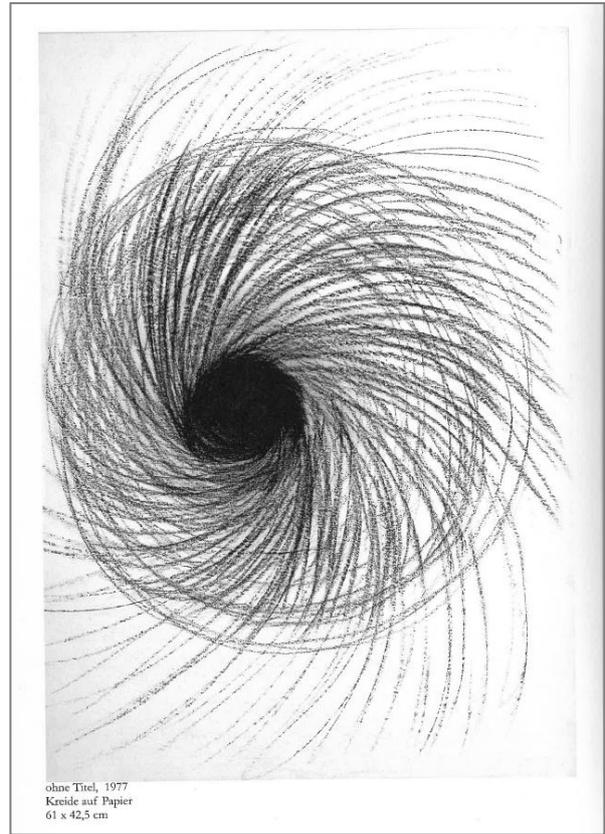
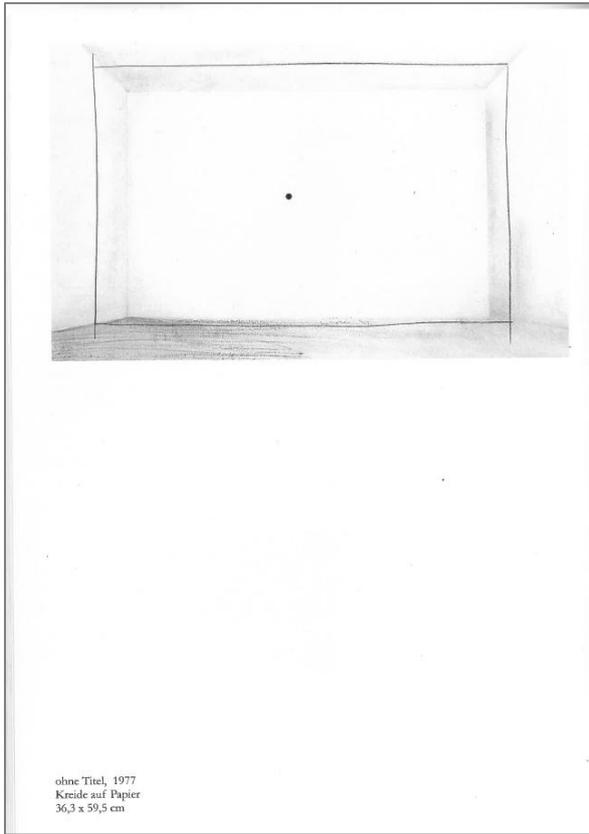
**1990**

Gets the Piepenbrock-Förderpreis for Sculpture.

Otto Boll has had several solo exhibitions in Germany, Belgium, USA, UK, Switzerland, Finland, Hong Kong and Japan. He has also taken part in group exhibitions at, amongst others, the Museum DKM in Duisburg, Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen and the Skulpturenmuseum in Marl, Germany.



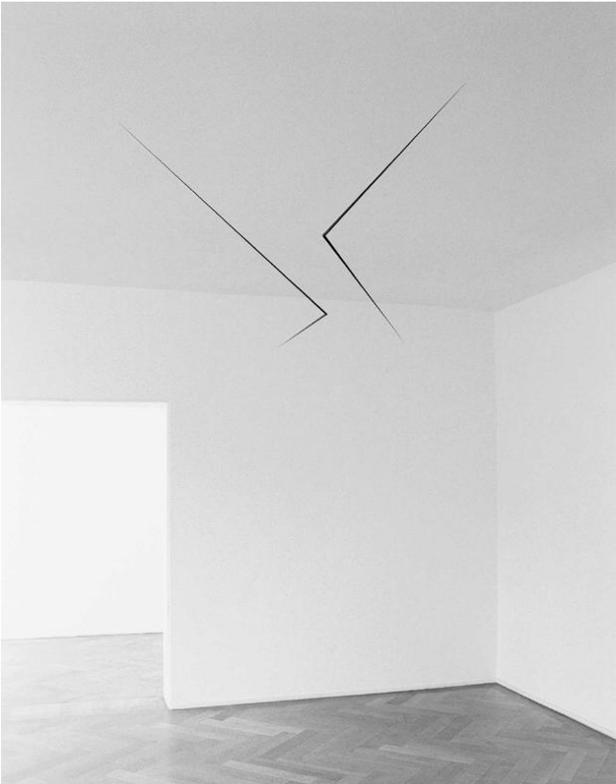
Goethe Institut Houston, 1998



← *Untitled*, 1980. Photocopy on mylar, 20 x 25 cm.  
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX



*Tripping into Infinity*, Axel Vervoordt  
Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium, 2012





Untitled, 2009. Aluminum and steel, black. Diameter 150 cm.  
Collection Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation

## Selected solo exhibitions (from 2005 onwards)

2023

*Otto Boll. Space Walk*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong.

2021

*Otto Boll. Widening the Language*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, Belgium.

2019

*Otto Boll. Skulpturen*, Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden – Cragg Foundation, Wuppertal, Germany.

2018

*Space and Time Odyssey*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, Belgium.

*Otto Boll – Jef Verheyen*, Modern Art, London, United Kingdom.

2017

*Otto Boll*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong.

*Sculptures*, Galerie Forsblom, Helsinki, Finland.

2015

*In Space – Arbeiten von Otto Boll, Dierking, Zürich*, Switzerland.

2012

*Tipping into Infinity*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium.

2011

Schönewald Fine Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany.



*Otto Boll*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery,  
Hong Kong, 2017



## Selected group exhibitions (from 2005 onwards)

2025

*Vessel of Emptiness*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong, China.

*On The Weight Of Lightness – Sculpture as a Field of Perception*, Gallery Dierking, Zurich

2024

*Raum Schroth*, Museum Wilhelm Morgner, Soest, Germany.

*Cloudwalker*, Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands.

2023

*Between Emptiness and Form. Exploring Emotion and Essence*, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Hong Kong, China.

*Productive Spaces. Art and Design from Krefeld*, Haus Lange, Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Germany.

*Night is the Shadow of the Earth*, Click Ten Art Centre, Beijing, China.

2021

*Ways of Seeing Abstraction*, PalaisPopulaire, Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle, Berlin, Germany.

2020

*Licht Vor Der Haustür*, Schönewald Fine Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany.

*The Poetic Object*, Schönewald Fine Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany.

2017

*Ernst Hermanns und sechs Preisträger aus siebzig Jahren. 70 Jahre „junger westen“*, Museum DKM, Duisburg, Germany.

2016

*Living Collection. In Front of the Audience*, Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland.

2015

*PROPORTIO*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, Italy.

*Allez les boules*, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen, Kunstmuseum Gelsenkirchen, Germany.

*Clear Form*, Galerie Forsblom, Helsinki, Finland.

2014

*Konzept-Form-Raum*, Schönewald Fine Arts, Düsseldorf, Germany.

2011

*TRA*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, Italy.

2009

*Linien stiller Schönheit*, Museum DKM, Duisburg, Germany.

*In-Finitum*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice, Italy.

2007

*Back and Forth 01*, Villa Grisebach Gallery, Berlin, Germany.

*Productive Spaces. Art and Design from Krefeld*, Haus Lange, Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Germany

Otto Boll is one of the participating artists in the *Productive Spaces* exhibition, which invited artists and designers from the Krefeld area to reflect on the concept of space—analogue, digital, social, political, communicative, economic, or virtual, landscape or thought.

With a minimalist intervention of two works made of aluminium, Otto Boll reflects on the viewer's perception. He invites us to sculptural events, a state of contemplation or rest, with works that seemingly hover, oscillating somewhere between the present and absent. For him, space is a potential; the void is a starting point and beginning for artistic intervention.

The exhibition takes place in Haus Lange, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as his first modernist building in Germany. In keeping with the city's 650th anniversary, *Productive Spaces* illuminates the diversity of artistic production that has, and still, shaped Krefeld.



## Public collections

Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation  
EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo, Finland  
Glaskasten Skulpturenmuseum, Marl, Germany  
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, USA  
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands  
Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland  
Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden - Cragg Foundation, Wuppertal, Germany  
Städtische Kunsthalle, Recklinghausen, Germany

*HELIX 5*, 2017. Aluminium and black steel, 198 x 149 x 90 cm.  
Collection Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, The Netherlands

