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Catalogue essay on occasion of *Bill Walton* at Arcadia University (2005)



Bill Walton, *Second Falls*, no date. Wood, copper, brass, oil paint. 50 x 67 x 2 5/8 in (127 x 170 x 6.7 cm).

As spare as it may appear, Bill Walton's sculpture is rich with telling details. Despite the initial impression of self-evidence made by his works, each is loaded with clues that reward forensic speculation about the layered identities of the objects and materials Walton employs, as well as the sequence of calibrated operations—both physical and cerebral—that he enacts to alter and join them.

Perusing the captions that label the photographs gathered between the linen-covered panels of this volume—a book that Walton played a large part in crafting—readers will soon become aware of another telling detail: No work

depicted has been given a date. This is not an omission but a conscious refusal on Walton's part to position his work within a specific calendar year, a practice he initiated in the late eighties and from which he has not wavered. Looking at an exhibition checklist, a gallery wall label, or a caption beneath a photograph depicting one of his works in another book one will find the words "no date" or "undated", terms more often associated with cultural artifacts rather than sculpture of the last quarter century, which is the span of creative production covered by this publication. The first ever to survey Walton's work, this comprehensive monograph takes the risk of authorizing an approach to chronology that will no doubt thwart the expectations of art historians. Even for those familiar with this idiosyncratic aspect of Walton's work, it still registers as a stubborn form of resistance to convention, a hearty toughness that distinguishes Walton as well as his practice.

Knowing that he was born in 1931 in Camden, New Jersey, and did not start exhibiting until the early seventies—long after his brief time at the Institute of Design in Chicago, in 1956—give us some sense of the historical and cultural climate in which Walton produced his first works. It also suggests a link to minimalism that the hard data of his sculpture eventually denies. (Despite their reductive forms—a minimalist tendency that Walton literalizes in his scale—his works' many references to nature, as well as their quiet illusionism, claim for him a territory all his own.) In understanding that many of Walton's sculptures were first shown close to the time that they were made, and by employing the exhibition chronology and index of works at the back of this book, one may be able to determine the exact year that a particular piece was exhibited, and thus hazard and educated guess at the year of its origin. The date would not mean much, however, or not to Walton, anyway.

When asked about his refusal to assign his works to particular years, he explains that it is not a strategy to mystify but, rather, a form of honesty. It comes from a reluctance to recognize any work of his as ever being one hundred percent complete, along with a desire "to let things sit for a while and vintage a bit." It is not that works once resolved remain "in progress" but that they are never not "in process". Sculpture that remains in the studio can easily become absorbed or divided into other works. Because of the slow but active chemical reactions initiated between combinations of materials he uses—aluminium and copper, for instance—some works that are out of

his hands continue to change on their own. Walton pays reverent attention to surfaces but avoids the precious by remaining mindful of the productive tension between what is found (or given) and what is made (or changed). He is always aware of the fresh plane waiting inside the block of old wood. Leafing the cut ends of wisteria branches with copper, or patinating scrap floorboards with palladium, he does not take the fact of finishing anything lightly.

In addition to the live dimension of the alchemical dynamics and restorative techniques that Walton employs, there is also the matter of his wanting to honour the true age of the objects and materials that he uses. (How does one accurately date a wisteria vine?) Walton recalls that some of his works have been made with timber removed from a house built with wood cut from a tree still growing when the Magna Carta was signed. In not dating pieces made with these planks, he gives them a chance of securing a stronger footing in epochs other than our own.

Leaving his sculpture temporally adrift also allows Walton the freedom to focus on other priorities to organise it, whether it is a connection with a place, an atomic number, or the variety of focused manual procedures that shape his work. It gives him, as he says, “a license to steal from myself,” and the liberty to move back and forth from one body of work to another without having to trouble himself with the fiction of forward motion. Looking through this book, one senses an organic set of layered relations ungoverned by preconceptions about artistic progress that is both unprecedented and refreshing.

Walton’s eschewal of dating also connects his sculpture to the open ended character of the incomplete sketch, long sanctioned by the academic tradition of the non-finito. It also links his work with other drawing strategies, such as the autographic mark and the performative gesture. The copper rod that Walton wedged between what looks like a tree trunk and its iron base in West Main 111 replaces a screwdriver he once inserted there to level the top plane of this piece. Given what appears to be the provisional placement of this rod, there is little to prevent us from imagining that it may just as soon be removed. The two cloths hanging from the pegs in West of Roulette #1 appear ready to serve whatever purpose we might apply to them. As

such, they possess a sense of immediacy that is, no doubt, amplified when encountered in a domestic setting. Dating these works might memorialise or burden the nuanced gestures they make, and perhaps, foreclose the open connection they enjoy with the present, even when within the photographs of this book. In the wager, it is a tradeoff that seems worth Walton’s while as well as our own.



Bill Walton, *Letters & Markers (Leaner)*, no date. Iron, wood. 41 x 12 x 9 in (104 x 30.5 x 23 cm)