

Adolf Behne, "Plastik als Lustakt," *Welt Am Abend*, 11 April 1929. Translation by Ross Benjamin.

Sculpture as Aerial Act: Alexander Calder at the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf

Of all the arts, sculpture has always been the most serious, perhaps because at its cradle—if one may put it this way—stood the grave. It was always the art of the tombstone, and so it always remained solemn, dignified, and serious.

Alexander Calder comes to us from America, but not from the America of skyscrapers and billionaire kitsch, rather from the America of Mark Twain and Buster Keaton; not from the America that imitates beaux-arts from Europe, rather from the young America of healthy primitivity, of the grotesque, of brilliant clownery.

Alexander Calder might well be the first humorist of sculpture.

He leaves out of his sculpture what has been regarded as the alpha and omega of all sculpture since Thutmose in Egypt: mass, corporeality. For clay, wood, stone, ore he substitutes—air, simply air, no matter whether mountain air or cellar air, thin air or thick air. And he makes the air spatial through cleanly arranged contours made of wire. With a minimum of means he conjures striking effects. In the past the material with which Calder gets by for a whole troupe of acrobats wouldn't even have sufficed to form a big toe.

Acrobats are, incidentally, a favorite subject of Calder's ... no wonder: he himself is a sort of acrobat, a circus performer of craft, a Rastelli of sculpture. Thorvaldsen would have a screaming fit at the sight of him.

The wire frames, which stand there gently bobbing, springing, vibrating like soundlessly working circus performers, are drawn with wonderful wit, and it's delightful to follow how the loops, bends, and twists of wire drastically characterize human and animal. Their fine observation, their confident primitivity are slightly reminiscent of prehistoric rock art. Masterpieces of keen wit: the fat policeman, the Josephine Baker swinging in all her limbs, the Zillean chanteuse. But the actual humor is in the method, in the joyful dismantling of Michelangelo, in the (downright usurious) exploitation of air, in the bold abbreviation of the process that knows how to precisely form space with the hint of a few pressure points. Sculpture has become ... an aerial act. Oh how refreshing this cheerfulness is, this art without humbug. You see freely through Calder's sculptures as if with x-ray eyes (how nice it would be if one could see the Siegesallee like that!) and you don't even need to dust them off. Indeed, you can just leave them outside during the next world war ... no bomb can harm them.

The conveyor belt, rationalization, the conquest of the air ... here they are naively detoxified, humanly meaningful, have become art.

With Calder something of the sculptural experiments of the Russian constructivists has been revived. But Calder's constructivism isn't mechanistic ... he plays.

The first to dismantle Renaissance and Baroque sculpture, to work with negations, with perforations and voids, was *Archipenko*. Whether Calder met him over there, I don't know, nor does it matter. His wooden figures, also exhibited here, prove to anyone who still needs it his great artistry, which isn't based on a cheap trick, but rather is humanly alive, rich, and truly full of humor.

We're very grateful to the *Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf* (Lützowstraße 32) for this *Alexander Calder* and strongly recommend our readers to visit it.

Incidentally: would there be a more magnificent adornment for a modern variety theater than ... in some form ... these aerial acrobats of Calder's, which are a downright apotheosis of the circus performer. It's simply incredible how astonishingly conventional, how sterilely decorative even our new variety theaters are. And yet it would be a marvelous task to create a variety theater space that didn't lag behind the mastery of the best gymnasts, dancers, jugglers, and clowns in succinct and wittily bold elegance.

At *Flechtheim* (Lützowufer 13) a very extensive collection of *André Dérain* is on exhibit. There are several excellent pieces in it, such as the portrait of Poiret and the small still life “with grapes and pears,” but also much that is trivial and weak, so that the overall impression is hardly likely to enhance Dérain’s reputation.

Adolf Behne.

Translated by Ross Benjamin

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