

“It is not “the new” in a work that shows the artist, but what is outside such competition.”

In this chapter entitled “The Metier” from the book Contemporary Sculpture (1965), George Rickey writes about his ideas of art making, historical context and aesthetic philosophy within the broader art world.

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CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

with an introduction by

WILLIAM SEITZ

ARTS YEARBOOK 8

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On the cover: John Chamberlain, *Bags Down* (1964), h. 37"; courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.

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The Métier

BY GEORGE RICKEY

Momentary trends may be rigged, but the long flow of the Tradition is established by the artists, who also declare what it is through their choice of what they admire, of what nourishes them, of what influences them. This acceptance and confirmation is then passed on in their work. Michelangelo's drawings after Giotto in the Bardi Chapel in Florence are an assessment and recommendation spanning two centuries of the Tradition. In criticism, the artists themselves are the authority—Raphael on Michelangelo, Ingres on Raphael, Delacroix on Géricault and Rubens, Picasso on El Greco and Velázquez, Europeans on Pollock, Americans on Gonzalez. Rauschenberg wins his laurels not in Venice nor in the Press nor on collectors' walls; he wins them a long time hence when some painter yet unborn thinks of him as he paints.

As for myself, I don't know whether I am in or out of step—either would be dangerous—or with what. I have plenty to occupy me without that worry. My concern with "movement itself"—Gabo's phrase—leads me into ever deeper, if narrower, water. I will never explore the whole gamut of it—the possibilities are too wide. I am less and less interested in exploration. I don't want to show, in my work, what can be done; I do that in my teaching. I want to make simple declaratory statements in a visual language I can control.

I was a long time getting over youth, misgivings, inexperience. I was a painter for twenty years. I have been a teacher for thirty-five. In 1930 I was a Cubist. In 1950, aged forty-three, I had become a sculptor, non-objective, and was soon committed to movement as a means.

I had had three temptations to apostasy—when I was briefly on the editorial staff of *Newsweek* in the thirties, when my father's firm offered me a job as I came out of the Air Corps in 1945, and when I had been chairman of a university art department for a time. All three were resisted with relative ease, though common sense argued the other side. One becomes an artist against prudence; one needs, in addition to talent and energy, a lot of luck.

I have been lucky. First in a couple of my teachers—George Lyward, who showed me the function of language; the power of imagination, precision and understatement; the nature of excellence; and what extraordinary results could come from persistence beyond ordinary fatigue. At sixteen I had to write an essay for him on "Order is heaven's first law." I was treated with undeserved kindness and tolerance by my history tutor in Oxford, Humphrey Sumner, later Warden of All Souls College, who introduced me to the just-formed Museum of Modern Art in the Hecksher Building in New York in 1930. He knew so much more about modern art than I, the would-be artist.

At that time I had learned something of academic drawing at the Ruskin School in Oxford and then had too orthodox a Cubist lesson from the books of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and from my articulate and witty master, André Lhote. At the Académie Moderne I had been baffled by Léger and charmed by Ozenfant.

Much later I was tempted toward art history by Richard Offner and, already forty, was shaken up by Lasansky

in Iowa and then disappointed by the Institute of Design, except for the luminous presence of Buckminster Fuller, an artistic Parsifal outside of art. I too wanted to make art outside of art and had thought the ideas of the Bauhaus would help me. But they had become too academic in Chicago. David Smith gave me my first and only welding lesson and the sound advice to be extravagant with materials. Gabo never taught me, but I have learned much from his Realist Manifesto of 1920 and from his work, in which I saw a lucid, sensitive poetry of space in form. I have learned from teaching and from certain students.

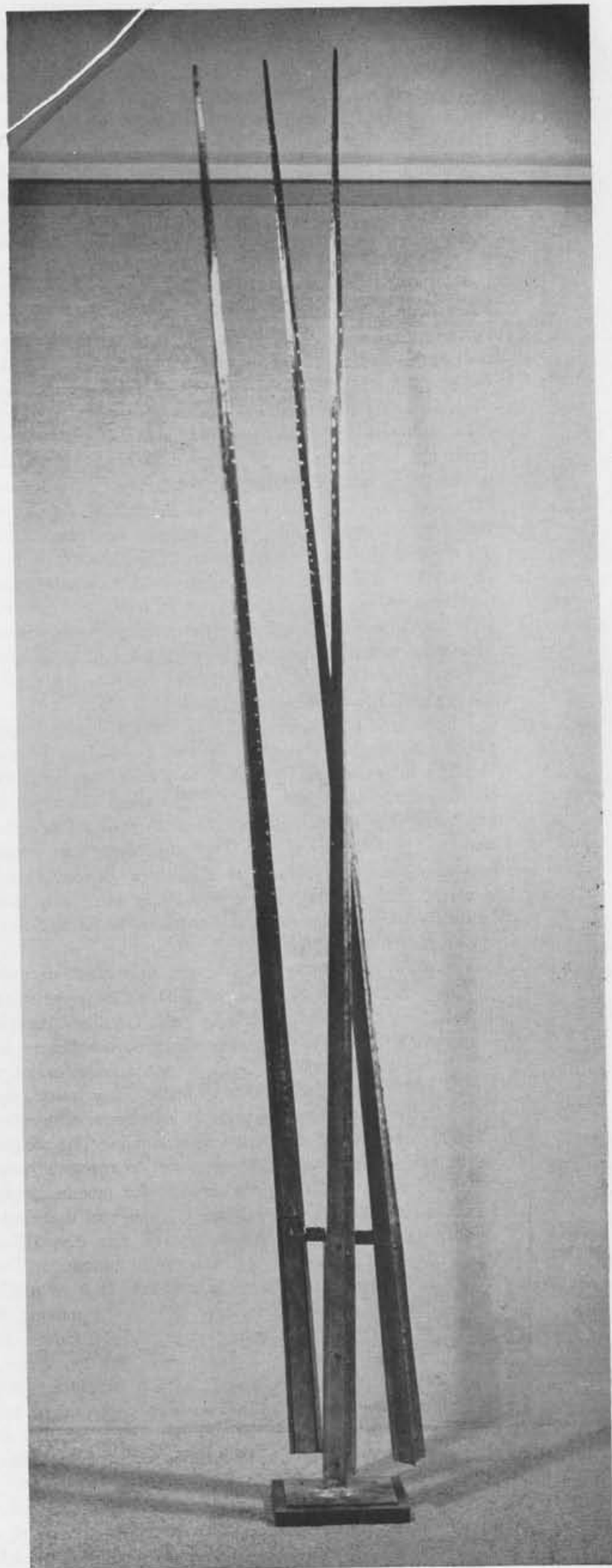
Some of my colleagues would like to reject the Tradition, like the Chinese emperor who wanted history to start with himself. I have fed on the masters—all the great names you would expect plus nameless hands in ancient, medieval and primitive art. None of the art history I have learned is wasted, though the pedagogy was often disastrous. I use it every day. It is not "the new" in a work that shows the artist, but what is outside such competition. Nor is it what he has borrowed from a master—rather what he shares with him.

We seek an artist's identity, whether we are Berenson in Florence or a visitor to the Biennale. An artist seeks his own; in finding it he reveals what he has in common with Giotto or Hokusai, not how he differs. If you're yourself, you're unique enough; nobody has been you before. The finest accolade to hear from a master is, "You are one of us." I should be happy to make an art as dull as Poussin, as conventional as Duccio, as neutral as Maillol, and as mechanical as a flying buttress of Chartres or the pavement of the Campidoglio, if I can do it in my own, old way.

I have worked for several years with the simple movement of straight lines, as they cut each other, slice the intervening space and divide time, responding to the gentlest air currents. I work also with large complexes of small forms—perhaps a stack of waving lines, or revolving squares in groups too numerous to count, or pivoting eccentric rotors bearing hundreds of light-reflecting strips. Such countless elements together compose simple, monolithic, seething forms, either volumes or surfaces, which oscillate or undulate slowly in a breeze.

My technology is borrowed from crafts and industry. It has more in common with clocks than with sculpture. The materials are simple: stainless-steel sheet, rods, bars, angles, pipe; silicon bronze, brass, very occasionally a little silver; lead for counterweights. I join by silver brazing, acetylene and heliarc welding, spot-welding, occasionally riveting or bolting. The tools are shear, sheet-metal bending brake, drill press, band saw, cut-off wheel, bench grinder, disk grinder, vise; pliers, hammers, files, in diverse shapes and sizes; and an anvil. You now find all these in any art school; they were formerly only in "industrial arts" departments. Hardware includes allen-head, phillips-head and binding screws; all kinds of nuts and bolts in stainless steel, bronze and brass; taps and dies; silicon carbide to weld onto bearing surfaces; and abrasives and solvents for cleaning.

Add to these young helpers when I can get them. Help is precious and a danger. Important work is done in



Three Lines (1964), h. 100"; courtesy Staempfli Gallery.

solitude. I will use any time-saving tool, but I must ration my help. I make up for this by working very long hours.

Time one must give as it is called for. Long hours are not a burden. I take pleasure in the slow repetitive operations if they are leading somewhere. Suspense builds up in pausing to make sure a sub-assembly is right; it heightens when enough is done to get the piece off the ground, like the launching of a ship. A new ship sometimes capsizes: "back to the old drawing board!" One may have to make a piece to find out how to make it, and junk what one learned from. Much that I make can never be exhibited. I draw what I can on paper first, to plan, to anticipate, to clarify. But it is difficult to find, much less solve, all the space and traffic problems on paper. Models help, but to work small may be harder than to work large; and some qualities, such as flexibility, do not change in direct ratio with size. So I may go from a drawing to a very crude but often large maquette, perhaps of a typical subsection of a complicated piece, improvised, rudimentary, but functional—without proportion, security, finish or elegance. I try to do this very fast, in a day perhaps, to get my direction: to find the limits, to find the proportion, to find if it will work at all. It may take weeks to make the same thing over properly, or it may be scrapped. Occasionally one is lucky and some completely unforeseen idea comes out of a debacle. My work must be precise or it fails. I am rather sloppy by nature; the precision comes out of need, not personality.

I have been able in the last two years to make larger pieces—the largest is thirty-four feet high. Part of the spectrum of movement is related to size. In sculpture or painting there is a change in thought when the work is bigger than the artist; with movement there is a functional change in performance as well. Two lines twenty-four inches long may swing across each other at three- or four-second intervals. This seems very slow. A big piece can take half a minute to swing from side to side; this is as different as red from purple.

My work must have air. Indoors, movement depends on open windows, air conditioning, fans, or, with the more delicate pieces, merely on walking past. Outdoors the air is never quite still, the direction changes, the breeze is, for the most part, silent. Outdoor space requires large pieces and outdoor wind strong ones. They must not only survive, but behave properly in a forty- or fifty-mile-an-hour wind as well as in the lightest airs. The weight of the rain will make a difference, not to mention snow and ice. I must watch a piece outdoors for months before I can be sure of it. Yet I welcome the range of the winds and the hazards of the weather, even if size disqualifies most of these pieces for galleries and museums. The strength of the structure is not a problem. It faces much less buffeting than an airplane or a tree. In moving it gives to the wind, like a sailing ship. But the movement must be limited by stops that are durable, not too abrupt, don't mess up the design, and leave the movement free in gentle air. In a high wind, moving parts might hit the ground. Ideally the bearings themselves should so shift the center of gravity with turning (cam action) that gravity itself becomes the brake.

At present my linear forms have a simple triangular section. If over six feet long each comprises three strips at 60°, with spot-welded flanges, tapering to a point with

thicker metal at the wide end, which contains the counterweight and the bearing. Metal must be pieced, as ten or twelve feet are standard lengths. I mark the sheets and have them cut up and the flanges bent at a shop in Albany. My helpers and I weld the parts together in my studio.

I cast counterweights of lead in triangular prisms in one piece for blades up to twenty feet long, in segments weighing twenty-five to thirty pounds apiece for the large ones. The counterweights for each component of my largest sculpture weighed more than a hundred pounds. The bearings are knife edges, much like those on lever scales, with contact surfaces of tungsten carbide polished and very hard, to reduce friction.

Though I do not imitate nature I am aware of resemblances. If my sculptures sometimes look like plants or clouds or waves of the sea, it is because they respond to the same laws of motion and follow the same mechanical principles. Periodicity produces similar images in sand, water, a skip-rope and an oscilloscope, but none of these is a record of the other. Sometimes I have recognized analogues in titles, after the event, such as *Sedge* and *Windflower*. Recently I have preferred a title which identifies the piece without suggestion, such as *Six Lines Horizontal* or *Ten Pendulums*, *Ten Cubes*, *Ten Rotors*.

Even without titles abstract works evoke all kinds of associations. Machinery has always done this, as have ships, plows and tools. What I have associated with leaves of grass others have seen as weapons; of course "spears," "shoots" and "blades" are ancient botanical terms. I cannot control evocations.

I respect fine workmanship when it furthers a firmly held purpose. I can see the use of exactness to eliminate mystique and confusion. I am interested in the recent trend toward objectification of the work of art and the attempts to eliminate emotive, expressive, subjective or personalized influences from the object, also in the idea of a spectator who has no conditioning as a connoisseur. Others as well as I have begun to find that movement is more accessible than static relations in form, and certainly more so than the esoteric calligraphy which has been so important in recent painting. I feel lucky to live in an epoch when such interests are allowable in art.

I do not claim to be a Constructivist. Yet I respect the humility, rigor, self-effacement and regard for object-rather-than-process which characterized early Constructivist work and gave meaning to the "real" in Gabo's Realist Manifesto. I see no reason why analytical thought and rational systems need endanger an artist's work, nor do I mind temperament, if the show of it is not made the purpose. There is a bloom of temperament in Malevich and Albers just as there is a core of reason in Van Gogh and Klee.

Artists prosper, but it becomes no clearer what art is. To present a Swedish roller bearing as art is at least as plausible as Warhol presenting a commercial container. The ultimate in kinetic art may well have been Galileo's pendulum which swung clear not only of his temperament but of the very rotation of the earth. It was a conscious, bold, imaginative act.

I distrust the idea of art as process or performance, especially when it is a wanton effusion masquerading as "automatic." Art is not somnambulist. I respect a temperament which can endure control.