

FrameWork 10/19

Pivot and Twist

I once worked in the gallery world and handled Alexander Calder mobiles.

I was an installer- my job was to uncrate sculptures, hang them from hooks in the ceiling, then deinstall after client viewings. Mostly medium sized, around 5' x 5', they weighed about 20lbs and could be unpacked and installed by a single unassuming human. It was relatively simple to do, but one had to be alert.

What impressed me most was how Calder imagined and engineered his work for movement not only as art objects for display but as objects in motion through the world. There was a grace and beauty to these mobiles in every state. I felt an intimacy and tenderness not only through a purely optical experience but also through design and construction that acknowledged my presence and my limitations. It was a privileged experience that heightened my awareness of the tangible and material world, its contingencies, and my perilous position within it. These mobiles relied upon a perfect balance between various multi-shaped elements. The slightest flaw in the tension or curvature of the wire could shift the equilibrium and the piece would fail. Anyone handling them had to become one with the inherent dynamics as not to distort this carefully crafted system.

And so, I stood precariously atop a ladder, and with one hand I unhinged the carabiner connecting the hanging wire to the hook in the ceiling. I felt my arm take the weight of the sculpture, becoming the extension of a complex constellation. I held it as a precious pendant hanging by a thin wire, pinched between my thumb and index finger. If there was a current of air in the room, I needed to respond to it, mimicking the mobile, contorting to allow the sculpture to rotate slowly. I would then reverse step down the ladder, maintaining the balance, twisting in space. No movement could be jarringly out of rhythm or the metal pieces would crash together, clanging noisily, alarming art lovers within earshot. Everything had to remain a continuous smooth motion from start to finish. I choreographed the entire procedure and had a plan. As I stepped off the ladder, I continued the momentum and danced my way to the prepared crate.

With the final approach, I slowed the momentum and hovered above the crate. There was a blueprint of the mobile on the inside intended as a guide for placing it to rest. Then came the most spectacular moment in this whole procedure- I patiently waited for the spin of the mobile elements to slow to a stop, and began to lower it. Eventually the lowest point of the sculpture, one of its biomorphic elements, would make contact with the ground. In that moment, as I continued the descent, the sculpture began to spin around its pivot. It unraveled gracefully and opened into a flattened irregular form, like a perfect two-dimensional arrangement of rare zoological specimens. Each element separately articulated and never overlapping. The final act was to tie down the individual parts with small cotton strings, then step away in awe.

Michael Antkowiak

Movement VII

by Robin Cameron

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Drawing our eyes upward, perhaps in wonderment, as we travel through the space under these lanterns, floating in the air above our heads, slowly spinning round and revealing cut-images like shadow-play, do they also transport us to a different landscape? A more alien and darker one framed by the domestication of the strange and unfamiliar? And we, like tourists in search of the exotic, undergo a shift of perception to an embodied experience through this movement in space.

Karen Tam

A mobile is joyful. It occupies space that might otherwise be empty and dead. Sometimes it makes noise. Like a wind chime. On my morning walk, passing a porch that has a wind chime chiming is always a delightful moment.

All you need to make a mobile is string, sticks and something to tie to it, like forks or spoons. Find the balance point and hang it up. It will move in space. I did that a lot when I was a kid. And at Christmas, each shiny ornament I put up on the tree was a little mobile, with tinsel magically twinkling and twirling around it.

A gong is a mobile too. It is suspended, usually from a gong stand, so that it floats freely. When played well, the vibrations of the sound can be felt in the body. The vibrations extend outward to all the particles in the room, making the room itself sing along with the gong.

Alexander Calder made several mobiles with gongs and mallets. As the gongs move in the air, the mallet occasionally strokes the gong softly. A beautiful sound, after which I feel like I am a celebration of Being.

I made a giant mobile for my exhibition Room for Mystics (2017). I didn't think of making it until surveying the space, before all the work was finished, and I saw the 24' ceiling, under which all the paintings, banners, Christopher's music, and people would be moving around. That grand openness above the work provided access to the universe and became the Place of the bright red smiling spirit. In meditation it's good to smile slightly, mouth closed with slightly upturned corners. The Masters say that with this simple action one can change from sadness to happiness. This pose is simple joy. I made the smile 13 feet across, to fit in the delivery truck, wooden, constructed like a kayak, painted red, red rope. Its balanced pose presided over the exhibition space. The bright red mobile in Room for Mystics now rests, wrapped in blankets, on a giant shelf in my studio, waiting for its next time to be a mobile again.

Sandra Meigs

"That art that matters to us- which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience-that work is received by us as a gift is received. Even if we have paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us which nothing to do with the price...The work appeals, as Joseph Conrad says, to a part of being which is itself a gift and not an acquisition- and, therefore, more permanently enduring..."

Lewis Hyde



Peggy Guggenheim's Calder mobile earrings. Now part of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, they are displayed in the museum, 18th c Palazzo Leoni, once the Venice home of Ms. Guggenheim. The titan gesture of having little Calder mobiles hanging from her ears is a nice metonym not only for Peggy Guggenheim's roles as a patron of the arts and intimate of artists, but also of the dizzying relationships between wealth, home, museum, patron, art, artist, etc. In particular I appreciate the scale confusion afforded by the images of Guggenheim wearing the Calder: the earrings as full-size mobiles, and Guggenheim the personification of a more art-engaged Friendly Giant. In some versions of early Nordic myth, the physical world is the skull of a dead giant, the clouds in the sky his floating brains, etc. Peggy's home which became a museum displaying full-size Calder's, in parallax as Peggy's head wearing diminutive ones.

Katie Bethune-Leamen

The image depicts an illustrated index of Calder's alphabet: a cast of biomorphic forms that have each been individually assigned a character from the western alphabet. A rather simple document with the ability to potentially decode his mobile compositions as balanced arrangements of individual letters. Given time and space these gestures can grow into words and statements, with a larger installation potentially narrating a chapter, or even telling a story. Calder as a writer in form. Which is to say, a writer like any other. Someone who narrates using a method of presentation that suspends a thought within the invisible atmosphere of a contained space. Letters strewn on a white page, black forms collecting into attempts at content: writing. It's a process not dissimilar to the way language uses air as the vehicle to communicate; uttered sounds crossing a landscape, a void, be it small or large, with the hope that someone might listen. And mobiles certainly occupy the air, they have to in order to work. Communication is a form of balance, one that engages with the transmission and reception of information by using carefully chosen compositions of content. Letters are symbols that are agreed upon. They have shapes, with attributed sounds, and, when arranged, collaborate to form meaning. They are the material blocks used for the formation of language taking shape as units in space. The styles may change, their looks might alter, but the essential job stays the same: to talk. Units of meaning choreographed into a balanced statement using form and space. Mobiles.



Zin Taylor