

Play Theory

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“They call me a ‘playboy,’” Alexander Calder jokingly observed to a visitor in his studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, in the 1950s.¹ Calder, the most dedicated of family men and the most disciplined of artists, was of course anything but a playboy. For a quarter of a century he had been in the forefront of the international avant-garde, a pioneering abstractionist who, as a relatively young man in the 1930s, had already evolved an unprecedented sculptural language: the fluid phantasms that his friend Marcel Duchamp dubbed “mobiles.” Calder made sculpture kinetic. Where movement had previously been implicit, a matter of the eye traversing a stable form, now sculpture was mobilized, a three-dimensional form thrust into the fourth dimension of time. Such a radical revision of the nature of art could not have been expected from a man who was a mere playboy. And yet Calder’s work was so amusing, so beguiling, so fantastical that some observers were still inclined to underestimate the intellectual rigor of his accomplishment. The truth, of course, was that Calder was both playful and rigorous, a man with a rich, freewheeling imagination and an incisive, analytical mind.

How do we evaluate the achievement of a great artist whose work is powered by a love of play?

There is a catch-22 here, and it has haunted Calder studies for the past fifty years. If you emphasize the rigor of Calder’s art, you are in danger of losing track of its wit. But if you emphasize the beguilements of his art, you are in danger of losing track of its gravitas. The time has come to press a little harder on the whole matter of the relationship between Calder and play. The first thing that needs to be said is that play is a fundamental, elemental human impulse. Some critics and historians believe that the most natural way to approach the subject is through *Cirque Calder* (1926–31), the magnificent miniature circus with its dozens of tiny men, women, and animals that Calder for decades unpacked from a set of suitcases and performed in studios, galleries, and drawing rooms on both sides of the Atlantic. *Cirque Calder*—with its panoply of playful acts, its spear thrower, sword swallower, weightlifter, clowns, acrobats, and charioteers—is a grand salute to mankind’s theatrical nature, a connoisseur’s reinvention of popular entertainments. But Calder’s engagement with play neither begins nor ends with the *Cirque*. Although one of Calder’s signal achievements, a modern comic masterpiece, it is neither the summit of his art nor the key to his sense of play, which fuels everything he ever made, even his most austere magisterial mobiles.

Play—as impulse, idea, and ideal—is sunk deep in Calder’s art, permeating his achievement much as it permeates the history of Western thought. Far from reflecting the escapism of a playboy, Calder used play as an essential tool to engage with the world in all its variety. Even in the darkest days of the late 1930s, when Europe was hurtling toward war, Calder refused to renounce the centrality of play in his art. After his good friend the painter Joan Miró had introduced him to Josep Lluís Sert, one of the architects involved in readying the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition in the summer of 1937, Calder received a last-minute commission for a fountain. I cannot imagine a better place to begin an exploration of the place of play in Calder’s art than with *Mercury Fountain* (1937), one of two astonishing works of art

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fig. 1
Calder with *Mercury Fountain* (1937) in
the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris World's
Fair, July 1937
Photo by Hugo P. Herdeg

that visitors confronted upon entering the Spanish Pavilion. Mounted on the wall to their right was Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). And immediately in front of them, a few feet from *Guernica*, was Calder's *Mercury Fountain*.¹ No two works, so it must have seemed, had less in common. True enough, the silvery mercury moving over the black surfaces of Calder's fountain harmonized with the black, gray, and white palette of Picasso's mural. But the playful dynamic of Calder's fountain, with metal plates arranged so as to tease the heavy yet fluid substance into surprising blobs, drips, and spatters, was worlds away from the somber dynamic of Picasso's mural, with shattered images of men, women, and animals locked in an abstracted vision of the disasters of war. Picasso's *Guernica* was a lamentation, a howl, a vast painted tapestry emblazoned with all the cruelties that men visit upon mankind. Calder's *Mercury Fountain*, although showcasing a metal important for the making of armaments, was essentially the celebration of a natural wonder, a hymn to the mysterious delights of the physical world, a creation that confounded its public setting with an intricacy both intimate and idiosyncratic.

Although Calder's *Mercury Fountain* has been described many times, the power of the fountain as dazzling imaginative caprice has made it well nigh impossible to come to terms with the deeper significance of the artist's achievement in Paris in the summer of 1937. When the critic André Beucler, writing in the magazine *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, described the fountain as "a strange construction of black iron, graceful and precise like a great insect" that allowed the mercury "to play perpetually by itself," he took the idea of play no farther than that.² What he did not say, what he probably did not really understand—what Calder himself may only have recognized in some instinctive, unspoken way—was the profound significance of this bold assertion of the power of play. Picasso's *Guernica*, with its unflinching exploration of man's destructive powers, was the work that most obviously crystallized the perilous situation of the Spanish Republic in those summer months, when many already feared the Spanish Civil War would be won by Franco's Fascist forces. To assert the power of play, as Calder was doing that summer, was to take a stand against the forces of darkness enveloping not only Spain but also all of Europe. Those forces were very much on the minds of visitors to the Paris Exposition, where the German and Russian pavilions were set in a dramatic face-off, two fearsome monolithic monuments dedicated to two totalitarian states. Although Calder's fountain was a last-minute addition to the Spanish Pavilion and few visitors knew who had designed it (since, unlike *Guernica*, it did not bear the artist's name), it was, according to Calder's friend the critic and curator James Johnson Sweeney, "one of the most outstanding successes of the Exposition," a celebration of play in a world on the brink of war.³

If *Mercury Fountain* has never been properly celebrated as a vision of delight and surprise erected in a time of profound danger, part of the explanation may be that there has always been, even among Calder's staunchest defenders, some confusion or anxiety as to how to explain and perhaps justify the place of play in his art. Sweeney, one of the most acute interpreters of Calder's work, touches on the matter but

does not take it very far. Writing in an exhibition catalogue published by the Museum of Modern Art at the time of Calder's retrospective in 1943, Sweeney associated play with humor, and explained, "Through this conscious infusion of a playful element, Calder has maintained an independence of the doctrinaire school of abstract art as well as of orthodox surrealism."⁴ Thirteen years later, in an essay titled "Alexander Calder... Work and Play," he went somewhat farther, asserting that the basis of Calder's sculpture is "a love of play." "Play with Calder," he argued, "is never frivolous. It is serious, but never solemn. Play is a necessity for Calder which he has to respect, to treat seriously."⁵ True enough. But Sweeney stopped there, without confronting the even more essential question of the nature of play in Calder's work. In what sense was play a necessity for Calder?

Play, as Sweeney obviously understood, is a highly charged word, suggesting both some of the most admirable aspects of the human condition and some of the least attractive or at least most problematic aspects of the human condition. Play is associated with engagement, discipline, creativity, adventure. It is also associated with escapism, lack of discipline, anarchy, nihilism. And Calder's reputation has hardly been immune to those negative connotations. While the ever-growing public for his work in the last half century has all too frequently mistaken him for a guy who just wants to have fun, there are also many art historians and critics who have dismissed Calder as a man who is out of step with what they see as the essentially somber and analytical spirit of modern art. Sweeney was aware of the problem. My suspicion is that he did not want the discussion to become bogged down in intricate philosophic arguments that might rob Calder's art of its immediacy and vitality. Sweeney, let us not forget, had been friends with James Joyce, that sublime master of word play, in the years when *Finnegans Wake* was being composed; he knew what a complex subject serious play can be. He may have worried, and not without reason, that insisting too much on a defense of play would violate the spirit of Calder's work. He pointed us in the right direction and left it at that.

One can understand Sweeney's predicament. Certainly Calder would have left it to others to explain that his love of play could be related, in ways he may have scarcely suspected, to the thought of Heraclitus, Plato, Friedrich Schiller, and the twentieth-century historian Johan Huizinga in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*. But I do not think that Calder, who tended to recoil when asked to explain or interpret his own work, would have gainsaid the seriousness of what he was doing. When asked by the poet Selden Rodman in the 1950s whether "the expression of tragic feeling in such sculptures as Michelangelo's 'Slaves' in the Louvre appealed to him at all," Calder had this to say: "The lugubrious aspect of such work is eliminated in my approach to sculpture. But the gay and the joyous, when I can hit it right, are there."⁶ By opposing gay and joyous feeling with tragic feeling, Calder was arguing that joyous feelings were also significant and equally worthy of the artist's consideration. In doing so, he was reaffirming a very ancient idea about the dialectical nature of human experience, the necessity of acknowledging both the comic and the tragic,

the playful and the serious. We can only understand the true nature of Calder's feeling for play when we have explored a sense of play as experience, idea, and ideal that goes back to the Ancient Greeks, who embraced play with as much intensity as they embraced tragedy.

What is unnecessary, when considering the place of play in the imagination of this great artist, is to insist too much on the distinctions between play and games or play and toys that have preoccupied many philosophical explorations of these matters. The artist's imagination is by its very nature fluid, allowing for an overlap and interpenetration of experiences and ideas and ideals. In French, Calder's second language, the act of playing (*jouer*) is irrevocably linked with the toy (*jouet*); it is perhaps worth pointing out that in 1927 a French magazine published a page of photographs of works by Calder, including a wire sculpture of the dancer Josephine Baker, under the title "*Les Jouets de Calder*". As for the relationship between play and games, which some say the Greeks saw as distinct categories, in French *jeu* signifies both the less orderly state of children's play and the more clearly designed arrangements of a game. But the implications of *jeu* go farther than that, suggesting not only the discipline of sport but also sexual play. In 1913, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes produced *Jeux*, a ballet with a score by Claude Debussy and choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, about a ménage à trois. In *Jeux* play is athletic play and sexual play—and mind games as well.

When Calder, in an unpublished autobiographical manuscript, observed, "I seem to have always liked and had toys," I think we can feel fairly certain that he was also speaking about the pleasures of play.⁷ From an early age Calder had not only liked toys but had also made toys and games, sometimes as gifts for his parents and his sister. Calder remembered, at the age of eight or so, how an "old man showed me how to pin gunny sacks together with nails—to make a wigwam"—and thus how to play Indians.⁸ Not too much later, when the Calder family was living in Pasadena, California, Calder and his sister, Peggy, created an elaborate game around a character named Princess Thomasine, with Calder making a castle out of a packing crate. As Calder's sister recalled in her memoir, "We all helped Sandy make the thrones and all the other paraphernalia of royalty, including standards for the royal flags."⁹ Perhaps even more significant during the time in Pasadena was the opportunity to be a spectator at the Tournament of Roses, an event with overtones of ancient games and medieval fairs, which was founded in 1890 and featured chariot racing, jousting, foot races, polo, and a tug-of-war. Calder remembered in his autobiography the chariots being pulled by horses and donkeys, and the neighborhood boys concocting their own vehicle out of a tall box in imitation. In a parenthetical remark, his son-in-law, Jean Davidson, who put together Calder's reminiscences, suggested that Calder's memories of the chariot race at the Tournament of Roses might lie behind the chariot race that concluded performances of *Cirque Calder* in the 1930s.¹⁰

Is it any wonder that Calder found himself musing, in a manuscript he was working on in the mid-1950s,

that he was “still trying to get at ‘evolution’ [from] toys to sculpture?”¹¹ In the 1920s he had actually been involved in designing children’s toys for commercial production. And *Cirque Calder*, which he developed in the late 1920s, was a theatrical event, a game that he played in public, for the delight of audiences in Europe and the United States. The relationship between Calder’s mature work and this fascination with toys, games, and play must have seemed, to the artist and also to his friends, both entirely self-evident and rather difficult to pin down, a mystery hidden in plain sight. Perhaps the first thing to be said by way of clarification is that the modern infatuation with toys, games, and play extends far beyond the work of the Dadaists and Surrealists, who are often the first to be associated with this cluster of activities and ideas. The critic Clement Greenberg, writing about Calder’s friend Miró in 1948, observed that “Miró’s hedonism... has no confidence in man’s ability to control for the sake of happiness and it escapes into play, the kind of play of which the Surrealists made their program—play with ‘mystery’ and danger and absurdities.”¹² For Calder, play was an entirely different matter, not an escape from life so much as it was an embrace of life, an affirmation. When Calder made a mobile he was exercising a certain kind of control over his environment.

054 — Although Calder was friends with many of the key figures in the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, he took
 055 the idea of play in an entirely different direction. But then play could mean many different things to many
 different artists and musicians and writers in the twentieth century. As much as play was an animating force
 in the art of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, it was equally a factor in the experiments going on at the
 Bauhaus, and in the work of various artists we might term Constructivists and Classicists of a sort. Paul Klee,
 Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Alexandra Exter were at one time or another immersed in the creation of puppets
 and marionettes. Walter Benjamin, the pioneering German critic whose interests included photography and
 Surrealism, wrote three essays on toys and games in 1928, at the time Calder was working on the circus. He
 observed, “The desire to make light of an unbearable life has been a major factor in the growing interest
 in children’s games and children’s books since the end of the war.”¹³ Play, toys, and games are a central
 theme in some of the legendary ballets of the century: the aforementioned *Jeux; La Boutique fantasque*
 (1919), choreographed by Léonide Massine to music by Gioachino Rossini, with sets and costumes by
 André Derain; *Jeux d’Enfants* (1932), also by Massine, with music by Georges Bizet and sets and costumes
 by Miró; and what is probably the grandest of them all, the collaboration of Igor Stravinsky and George
 Balanchine in 1957 on *Agon*, the Greek title evoking the ancient spirit of competitive games.

There are games and there are games, and one needs to determine what kind of games, what
 kind of play, meant the most to Calder. Duchamp remarked in an interview in 1956 that he “found some
 common points between chess and painting. Actually when you play a game of chess it is like designing
 something or constructing a mechanism of some kind by which you win or lose.

The competitive side of it has no importance, but the thing itself is very, very plastic, and that is probably
 what attracted me in the game.”¹⁴ There is surely some analogy in Calder’s fondness for billiards, a game

he played a great deal during his last twenty years, when he mostly lived in France—although there is disagreement as to how well he actually played. Billiards, with its vectors and velocities, has to have suggested to Calder a number of “common points” with the work that he did in his studio. For Calder, the games that held the greatest fascination were probably not the indoor card games or board games or chess games that held the attention of the Dadaists and Surrealists—although he did from time to time represent or at least allude to all those games in his drawings and gouaches—but instead games of physical prowess that most often take place in open spaces in bright sunshine. Even billiards, although generally played indoors, involves the whole body, the whole man, in a way remote from the essentially cerebral discipline of chess or bridge.

Although Calder was by his own testimony a worse than indifferent athlete, he took considerable pleasure in competitive sports in high school and college. He savored the sense of comradeship and community that competitive games inspire and depend upon. Early on he painted a bike race, and among the wire sculptures from the late 1920s there are impressions of a tennis player, a golfer, a ballplayer, and a shotputter.^{p.083} These works of extraordinary, calligraphic austerity define a fresh, contemporary heroicism—the heroicism of modern sport. The strong linear style suggests the silhouettes on Greek vase paintings, while the subject matter is related to a new feeling for the importance of competitive sports that had developed in the wake of the revival of the Olympic Games in the 1890s. Calder’s circus drawings of the early 1930s, at once so severe and so sensuous, can bring to mind the cosmological juggling acts in John Flaxman’s neoclassical illustrations for the works of Hesiod and Homer, published in the years just before and after 1800. And Calder himself made his interest in Graeco-Roman experience quite specific, by creating, around the same time as the wire sculptures of a tennis player and a golfer, his most overtly classicizing works in wire, *Romulus and Remus* (1928) and *Hercules and Lion* (1928), the latter illustrating a Greek legend of heroic challenge, a play of forces, man against beast. ^{fig. 2}



fig. 2
Hercules and Lion
 1928
 Wire, 152.4 x 121.9 x 60.9 cm (60" x 48" x 24")
 Calder Foundation, New York

Calder’s feeling for games and play is fundamentally classical in spirit. And what do I mean by this? This is a vision of games not as psychological and inward turning but as physical and outward flowing—play, in short, not as a critique of reality but as an engagement with reality. Play, for Calder, has nothing to do with the trickster or the con artist. Play is something strong, clear, forceful—a joyful responsibility. This vision of play, whether Calder knew it specifically or not, has deep roots in a famous statement of Plato’s, which Huizinga included in *Homo Ludens*, published the year after Calder made *Mercury Fountain*. And if one initially wonders what Plato might have to tell us about Calder, let us not forget that the philosopher and the artist do intersect at least twice during Calder’s career. In 1936, Calder designed sets for a production in Hartford of Erik Satie’s setting of Platonic dialogues, *Socrate*. And Duchamp, in writing about Calder for the catalogue of the Société Anonyme in 1949, invoked Plato’s *Philebus*. Here is what Huizinga cites Plato as writing about play: “God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made God’s

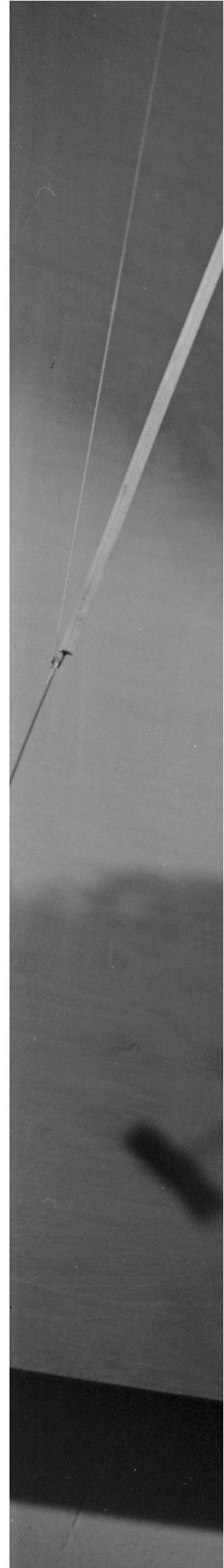
plaything, and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present."¹⁵ To offer visitors to the Spanish Pavilion, in the midst of the catastrophes of Civil War, the sheer delight of *Mercury Fountain* was to play a very serious game.

When Sweeney, writing about Calder, invoked the seriousness and even the necessity of play, he was relating Calder to a tradition that went all the way back to Plato. This tradition was embraced by Friedrich Schiller in his 1794 book, *Letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, and by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*. For both Schiller and Huizinga, in their very different ways, play was an affirmation and indeed a realization of the best that man was capable of in society, rather than the critique of society that play frequently seemed to be for the Dadaists, whom Duchamp said were involved with "a sort of nihilism."¹⁶ Schiller, writing with an awareness of the turmoil of the French Revolution, believes that the play involved in creating a complete work of art offers a way for mankind to achieve wholeness, for "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays."¹⁷ As for Huizinga, writing as Fascism was overtaking Europe, the play-instinct is nothing less than the last stand against barbarism, for "in the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression."¹⁸ Play, in other words, is an order that stands apart from ordinary life and transcends ordinary life. One can easily find oneself thinking about *Cirque Calder* when Huizinga writes of the playground, which is "isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain... An absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection."¹⁹

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If play is, for Calder, the creation of order, then the mobile, his most extraordinary invention, is a doubling of the play principle, an artistic order that harnesses the play of forces in nature. This idea of nature as a play of forces goes back to ancient times, and finds a place in the creation myths of nearly every civilization. Mihai I. Spariosu, in *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, writes, "In Presocratic thought the prerational notion of agon is used to describe the natural world as a ceaseless play of forces or Becoming."²⁰ "Lifetime," Heraclitus says in a famous fragment, "is a child at play, moving pieces in a game, the kingship belongs to the child."²¹ The world is at play, a perpetual movement and clash of forces. In Hesiod's *Theogony* and Homer's epics, the gods and demi-gods are always competing with one another, challenging one another. Simone Weil, in her famous essay *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, published in 1940, when all of Europe was at war, argues, "The true hero, the true subject, the center of *the Iliad* is force."²² As much as any artist of his time, Calder plunged headlong into life's play of forces. Although the nature of his engagement is rarely tragic in the sense of Weil's essay on the *Iliad* or Picasso's *Guernica*, there is something equally heroic about Calder's feeling for

뉴욕 작업실에서 〈음료 막대〉(1936)를 제작 중인 칼더, 1936년
Calder with *Swizzle Sticks* (1936) in his New York City storefront studio, 1936
Photo by Herbert Matter





nature's unpredictability. When he incorporates images of planets or the sun or the moon in his sculptures and gouaches, he echoes the mythological impulse that fueled the Greek stories of gods and heroes, responding to all the tumult that animates the universe with a spirit at once awestruck and somehow genial.

Calder, creating his sculptures, is a man at play in the world. There is much about Calder's behavior in the studio that echoes Schiller's vision of the artist at play, a dialectician mediating between the pressures of the self and the pressures of the world. For Schiller, play offers a resolution of man's essential predicament. Man is divided against himself, torn between, on the one hand, "the eternal unity of his own Self," and, on the other hand, sensuous experience, which "merely feels, merely desires and acts upon mere desire."²³ Man becomes complete, so Schiller explains, "when he confronts changelessness with change, the eternal unity of his own Self with the manifold variety of the World" and "subjugates the manifold variety of the World to the unity of his own Self."²⁴ In his dense, intricate meditations on the spirit of play, Schiller is describing a process that sounds very much like the process Calder undertakes when he makes a mobile. The elements arrayed in the mobile are "the manifold variety of the World," always free to act to some degree, only now organized through Calder's ideas of shape and movement and balance, which reflect "the unity of his own Self." Something in the spirit of Schiller's vision, in its mingling of unity and variety at play, is also echoed in the essay that Jean-Paul Sartre wrote after World War II about Calder's mobiles, where they are seen as "at once lyrical inventions, technical, almost mathematical combinations and the tangible symbol of Nature, of that great, vague Nature that squanders pollen and suddenly causes a thousand butterflies to take wing." Sartre wonders at nature, "which we shall never know whether it is the blind sequence of causes and effects or the timid, endlessly deferred, rumpled and ruffled unfolding of an Idea."²⁵ And it is Calder who makes sense of that development through the mobile's play of forces.

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Calder grew up in a family where the division between work and play was not especially clearly drawn. His parents were both artists, so the main business of their lives was the imaginative play involved in making sculptures and paintings. In the first article published about Calder's father, the sculptor Alexander Stirling Calder, he is said to have a special feeling for works that are "playful, lively, fantastic."²⁶ And when Calder's sister recalled in her memoir the family's time in Pasadena, her discussion of their economical interior décor, with orange crates made into cupboards, sounds a little like grown-ups playing house, which may well be how it seemed to the children. John Dewey, the philosopher whose ideas about progressive education were very much in the air in the circles where the Calders moved, observed that "play and work... are by no means so antithetical to one another as is often assumed," since "both involve ends consciously entertained and the selection and adaptations of materials and processes designed to effect the desired ends."²⁷ Calder's lifelong engagement with the making of practical things for his home and the homes of friends—kitchen utensils, hardware, light fixtures, just about anything—was a constant transformation of work

into play, the engineering of practical objects as a kind of play.

In the 1930s, when Calder turned from sculptures propelled by motors to the mobile, the process of making these constructions of balanced, fluid elements became an ongoing affirmation of the deep classical spirit of play—play as a vision of man working in concert with the forces of the natural world. During his college years at the Stevens Institute of Technology, Calder had studied engineering, which gave him a strong background in the laws of physics and the properties of materials. His senior thesis was on turbines, the transformation of one kind of energy into another. Arnauld Pierre, in writing about Calder's mobiles, has emphasized the conquest of movement as achieving a new kind of realism—a realism of natural forces. For Calder, making a mobile became a way of engaging with the play of forces in the universe, but without entirely subjugating those forces. There is a philosophical idea about man's relationship with the universe encoded in these captivating works. Calder intervenes in nature, he creates out of nature, but he does not negate the force of nature. Indeed the force of nature remains in play even after the act of creation is complete. Although the possibilities for movement are determined by the maker, the sequence of movements and their particular quality at a particular time are controlled by particular air currents, by the particular tap or touch of a finger—by unpredictable occurrences. The spirit of play, as Calder conceives it, is essentially dialectical, beginning with the dynamic relationship between the artist's imagination and the physics of nature. The mobile offers a temporary, provisional resolution of that dialectical tension. The fundamentally dialectical spirit of Calder's work brings us back to Schiller's ideas about play and more generally to the classical liberal idea of experience as a negotiation between conflicting forces.

In the dark summer days of 1937, with the fate of the Spanish Republic hanging in the balance, Calder invited visitors to the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition to contemplate mercury not as a metal essential to the making of armaments, although it was surely that, but as a fantastical natural force, which he unleashed so that it might play across curiously shaped iron forms. In *Mercury Fountain* nature looks benign. In many respects nature is. If the whole question of man's ability to play with nature, whether wisely or unwisely, whether for good or for ill, was mixed up in the delightful caprice of Calder's fountain, how much more urgent those questions would become in the following decade, with the world engulfed in a total war that only ended after the United States dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. It is not incidental that the mid-twentieth-century years that we have come to think of as the atomic age were also the years when the fame of Calder's mobiles was spreading farther and farther. At a time when scientists and engineers had played with nature and created forces that were clearly beyond man's control, there was quite understandably a growing suspicion that men were losing all respect for the natural world. In that context, Calder's mobiles looked like a reassertion of man's rightly place as a creator in the universe, a creator who knows the limits of the games he is privileged to play.

Calder's mobiles have frequently been admired for their champagne elegance and exuberance. And why not? They are preternaturally delightful creations. But those eloquently balanced Calder's of the late 1940s and 1950s, with their streamlined black or red forms silhouetted against the white walls so popular at the time, are a great deal more than escapist amusements. While Calder's greatest mobiles are surely among the crowning glories of a formalist aesthetic, once we have acknowledged that fact we have only gone a small part of the way toward explaining the deep impact they have made on generations of gallerygoers and museumgoers. In the atomic age, when man's ability to play with nature has brought mankind to the brink of annihilation, there can be something not only beguiling but also downright inspiring about contemplating the work that Alexander Calder did in his studio. Here is the artist-engineer, balancing heavier and lighter and longer and shorter elements, and then setting all these elements in an altogether unexpected and altogether congenial relationship with the natural world. "They carry pleasures peculiar to themselves," Duchamp said of the mobiles, quoting Plato.²⁸ Those peculiar pleasures are also very deep pleasures. Which brings us back to Plato's observation that man "is made God's plaything" and should "play the noblest games." Calder's mobiles are the noblest of games.

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- 1 Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), 140.
- 2 André Beucler quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, *Alexander Calder* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 50.
- 3 Sweeney, *Calder*, 50.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 5 James Johnson Sweeney, "Alexander Calder...Work and Play," *Art in America* (Winter 1956-57), 9.
- 6 Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, 139.
- 7 Alexander Calder, "The Evolution" (manuscript, Calder Foundation archives, 1955-56), 1.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Margaret Calder Hayes, *Three Alexander Calder: A Family Memoir* (Middlebury, VT: Paul S. Ericksson, 1977), 33.
- 10 Calder and Jean Davidson, *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 21-22.
- 11 Calder, "The Evolution," 27.
- 12 Clement Greenberg, *Miró* (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1948), 42.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, "Old Toys," in *Selected Writings: Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 100.
- 14 Marcel Duchamp, *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, edited by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 136.
- 15 Plato quoted in Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 18-19.
- 16 Duchamp, 125.
- 17 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, edited by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 107.
- 18 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 17.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 20 Mihai I. Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 13.
- 21 Heraclitus quoted in Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, 13.
- 22 Simone Weil, *The Iliad or The Poem of Force* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1957), 3.
- 23 Schiller, 77.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les Mobiles des Calder," from *Alexander Calder: Mobiles, Stables, Constellations*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Louis Carré, 1946), 9-19. Translation by Chris Turner, from *The Aftermath of War* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008).
- 26 I. R. E. Paulin, "Alex. Stirling Calder: A Young Philadelphia Sculptor," *House and Garden* (June 1903), 320.
- 27 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930), 237.
- 28 Duchamp, 145.