



Alexander Calder with *Eucalyptus*, 1940

"As truly serious art must follow the greater laws, and not only appearances. I try to put all the elements in motion in my mobile sculptures."¹
Alexander Calder

"If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all."²
Pablo Picasso

The Mobile Line

by Robert Slifkin

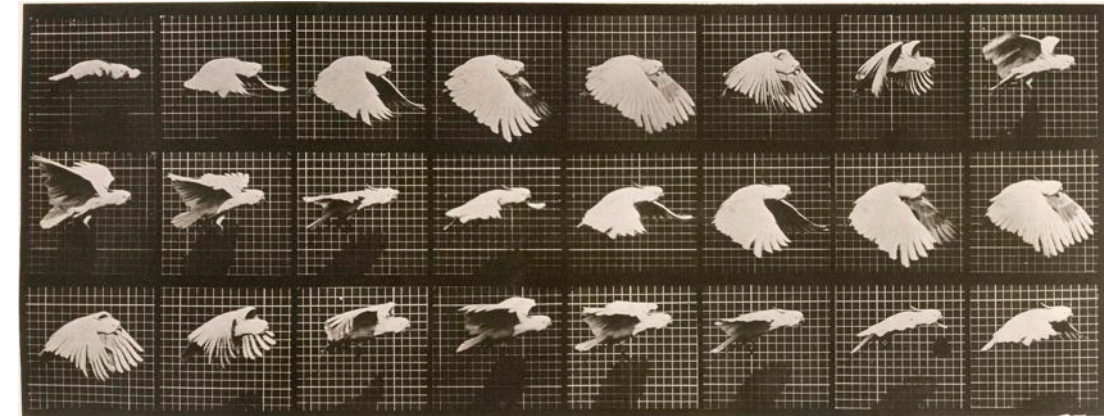
One of the most prevalent themes in the history of Western art is the work of art's capacity to take on the semblance if not the very qualities of life itself. This mimetic impulse is conventionally associated with the illusionistic rendering of objects, a practice that is epitomized in Pliny the Elder's account of the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, whose respective depictions of grapes and curtains correspondingly deceived birds and people. But what might be called a non-representational model of mimesis has equally influenced a significant strand of artistic production, and what is commonly understood as modern art in particular. As the art historian E. H. Gombrich notes in his foundational study of the subject, "the power of art to create rather than portray" has driven a great deal of artistic production through the ages and across many cultures. For Gombrich, this version of aesthetic illusionism, in which "the artist did not aim at making a 'likeness' but at rivaling creation itself," is most vividly portrayed in the myth of Pygmalion, in which the desire of the artist induces the divine transmutation of his sculpture into a human being.³ Art-historical origin stories such as those of Pygmalion, Zeuxis, and Parrhasius suggest that the principle of blurring the boundaries between art and life has a history that extends far beyond the avant-garde revolutions of the twentieth century, and that artists have long explored various means to invest their creations with a sense of vibrant immediacy if not vital animation.

While the development of modern art has typically been understood as being predicated on a stark refutation of mimetic illusionism (and studies like Gombrich's have little of value to say about works produced by artists such as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock, who pursued ostensibly non-representational, or at least non-realist modes of image making), it is nonetheless possible to recognize modern art's embrace of abstraction as an extension rather than a renunciation of the mimetic impulse in Western art. In fact, one might argue that a significant strand of modern art has adopted what could be called a vitalist aesthetic as a guiding principle, seeking to produce works that have the same immediacy and presence as natural objects and even living entities. If earlier forms of artistic realism focused on the visual

simulation of the external world, a distinctly modern version of realism located its correlation to reality in the work's overt acknowledgement of its materiality and means of production. Such foundational modernist techniques as the visible registration of a brushstroke or graphic mark, the inclusion of everyday objects into the picture as in collage, or—as in Calder's wire sculptures—the use of unconventional materials in a remarkably unchanged state made the means of creation unprecedentedly explicit, enhancing the work's status as a physical entity residing in actual space and consequently inhibiting its visual illusionism. Paradoxically, as the work of art became less realistic in the traditional sense of mimetic visual illusionism, it became more real in a literal sense of being a material object like any other material thing in the world, whether living or inanimate.

The British critic Roger Fry lucidly described this vitalist impulse in a review of an exhibition featuring the work of Picasso and Georges Braque in 1912, writing that the two artists “do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life... they aim not at illusion but at reality.”⁴ Whether manifested in such examples as Cubism's analyses of the effects of light and shadow, which emphasized the two-dimensional flatness of the pictorial support, the biomorphism of Surrealism (as well as the Surrealists' embrace of chance procedures), or, in the case of Alexander Calder's mobiles, the dynamic arrangement of non-representational objects in space, these crucial modern artistic strategies aspired to *present* rather than *represent* natural—as well as cultural—phenomena, investing the work of art with a sense of immediacy and even animation.

Indeed, it could be argued that this modernist tradition of aesthetic vitalism through decidedly abstract means was epitomized and most fully materialized in Calder's innovation of the mobile in the early 1930s. This epiphany has been frequently associated with the artist's visit in 1930 the studio of Piet Mondrian, where he had a vision of making the colorful geometric shapes that he saw tacked upon the painter's wall “oscillate.”⁵ While this oft-repeated story suggests that Calder's shift towards abstraction was instigated by a heightened interest in the sort of pure, non-representational forms of an artist like Mondrian, the coupling of abstraction and animation recounted in the story was in fact equally crucial to many of the artist's earlier wire sculptures, which were ostensibly neither kinetic nor abstract. In Calder's *Bird* (fig. 2) from 1927, for instance, the bird's spare delineation in wire appears to increasingly dissolve into a congeries of wavering lines when the viewer moves away from the planar side view and circulates around the sculpture. If one stays within the representational logic of the work, this gradual transformation from relative intelligibility to blurred indeterminacy approximates the sudden motion of a bird as it dunks its beak into the water or ruffles its feathers in preparation for taking flight. This multifaceted aspect of the work recalls Eadward Muybridge's proto-cinematic studies of animal locomotion in the late nineteenth century, in which the movement of a subject is divided into discrete photographic images. Some appear quite familiar, while in others the camera's capacity to arrest time and movement reveal poses invisible to the naked eye, which render the frozen gestures nearly unrecognizable (fig. 1).

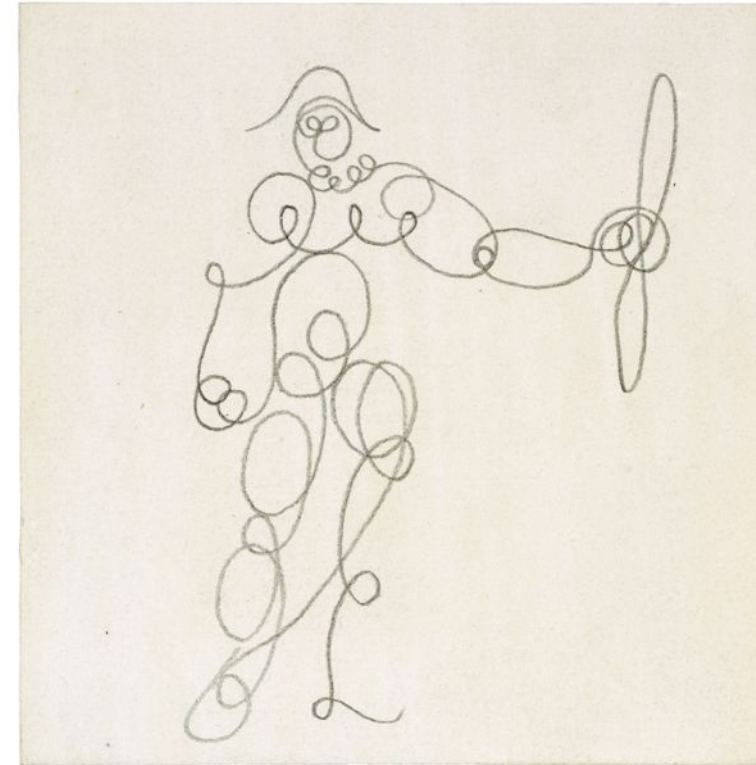


1. Eadward Muybridge, *Animal locomotion: parrot flying*, 1887
 2. Alexander Calder, *Bird*, 1927

Bird, in fact, exhibits numerous signs of imminent motion, both representational and abstract (and often at the same time). Most notable perhaps is the dense spiral of wire that, when the work is seen in profile, denotes the bird's head and, in the small, circular, negative space at its center, its eye. This compact coil produces a dense, nearly opaque plane that stands out from the airy openness of the rest of the sculpture, and is echoed by the triangular network of wire at the opposite end of the sculpture that indicates the bird's tail feathers. These two coiled shapes serve as dynamic nodes within the circuit of wire that establishes the contours of the bird, investing the scalloped curves on the bottom of the wings—and the even more tightly wound coil that spirals around the single leg upon which the bird perches—with a sense of dynamic energy. This sense of a continuous circuit is cleverly expressed in the way Calder hides the two ends of the wire in the tightly wound coil in the bird's leg. Indeed the bird's posture, which seems to portray the bird poised at the water's edge and about to lower its open beak to seize its prey, can be seen to dramatize these material signs of elastic tension, no doubt reiterated by the industrial materials used by Calder, which call to mind, especially for the work's earliest viewers, dynamic machines more than fine art.

The curator James Johnson Sweeney described how the sort of “uncertainty” produced by the literal mobility of Calder's sculpture—as well as the mobility they prompted in the viewers—invested them with what he called a “living quality.”⁶ Calder himself noted that the presence of divergent perspectives in a single sculpture like *Bird* could invest the work with a sense of vitality, stating that he found it “desirable that one face [of a work] be of finer quality than the others, for this gives a head and a tail to the object and makes it more alive.”⁷ If Calder's statement implied that a work of art should contain a degree of “facingness” inherent in most forms of animal life, the multi-axial alignment—the way in which the two perspectives seemingly transformed the work from a representation of a recognizable thing to an abstract entity that has no referent in the external world—emphasized the sculptures' physical existence as an object among other objects in the world, as tangibly real as any other thing.⁸ Abstraction in this regard was a potent means of presentation rather than representation or, to borrow Gombrich's terms, of creation rather than portrayal. And yet the abstract—or partially abstract—work of art rarely relinquished a commitment to simulation in one form or another. For Calder, and as it will be shown shortly, for Picasso, abstraction was never a purely formal endeavor but instead was frequently marshaled to invest the work of art with a degree of immediacy and animation. Indeed, the work of both artists complicates staid notions concerning the role of abstraction in the history modernism, suggesting how, for many artists, the prevailing imperative towards abstraction was rarely absolute or wholly autonomous but rather an effective means to connect the work of art to the world in which it was created.

Calder and Picasso were key figures among a broad array of modern artists who drew upon the innovations of abstraction to render, as the American art critic Clement Greenberg put it in 1949, “not the appearance of nature, however, but its logic.”⁹ In a statement written almost twenty years before Greenberg's assessment, Calder declared his ambition to produce “abstractions



3. Pablo Picasso, *Arlequin*, 1918

that are like nothing in life except in their manner of reacting.”¹⁰ In other words, by responding to the wind or the ambient light of their surroundings, Calder's works would be—and notably, not merely seem—as conditional and unpredictable as the living entities who would react to them. One might say that Calder's mobiles internalize and enact the motion that viewers of earlier works like *Bird* had to perform themselves and, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested in his important essay on the mobiles, can be seen to “take their life from the indistinct life of the atmosphere,” so that they take on the contingency and agency associated with the works' equally mobile viewers.¹¹

For Calder and Picasso, the use of a simple, single, continuous line provided a surprisingly potent means to animate and, as it will be argued, abstract their art. If, in Calder's wire sculptures—which he once described as a form of “three-dimensional line drawing,”—an unbroken and strikingly substantial line was something of a structural precondition for his chosen medium, it also signaled a remarkable affinity with certain drawings by Picasso.¹² Among them is *Arlequin* from 1918 (fig. 3), in which the use of a fluid, unbroken line creates an image without recourse to the conventions of graphic delineation, which emphasize line's capacity to establish contour and circumscribed forms. While certain art historians have seen works like *Arlequin*—and Picasso's broader reengagement with overtly representational imagery following the radical innovations of Analytic Cubism and collage—as an act of retrenchment, possibly spurred by the traumas of the First World War, such spare and seemingly offhand drawings may also be understood as

continuing and even expanding the artist's investigations into the protocols of pictorial representation that were inaugurated in his earlier Cubist works. They arguably allowed him to implement these formal discoveries within a representational lexicon and, like Calder, to create works of art that could dynamically vacillate between the poles of abstraction and representation.

One of Picasso's so-called "one-liners," *Arlequin* is a graphic tour-de-force, rendering its subject in an fluent, uninterrupted line whose folds and curves suggest three-dimensional volume without recourse to shading or hatch marks.¹³ Constituted out of a gently descending swarm of graphic loop-de-loops, the drawing displays an abbreviated but immediately recognizable portrayal of a harlequin twirling a baton. Despite its radical economy of means, the picture contains a wealth of pictorial information. A bell-shaped curve at the top (and presumably beginning) of the line denotes the Arlequin's hat and serves as a sort of preface for work, the rise and fall of its curvilinear trajectory heralding the course of Picasso's line throughout the drawing as it gradually spirals down the page, thus thematizing the force of gravity that figures like acrobats—and Birds, for that matter—are able to defy. This simple inaugural arc leads into a horizontal figure-eight within a circle, suggesting a pair of eyes that appear to meet the viewer's gaze. The acrobat's ruffled collar is briskly yet proficiently designated by a slight catenary of four small, gently arching loops below the acrobat's head, which are subsequently echoed by four slightly larger and darker loops that constitute the lower contours of an extended arm. Just as the spring-like coils of this passage intensify the sense of extension expressed in the outreached arm, the three superimposed loops that represent the figure's hand indicate the imminent twirling of the baton. Traversing away from this crucial point of dynamic energy in the drawing, Picasso's mobile line then delineates an even more abstracted right arm and hand, spun from an increasingly expansive series of coils that plunge into a chain of six ovoid loops, whose enfolded curves register an almost volumetrically substantial leg. That leg appears to stand perpendicular to the picture plane and is echoed by an increasingly calligraphic arabesque denoting a foot, which concludes the line's serpentine path like a flourish at the end of a signature.

In its patently graphic configuration, *Arlequin* epitomizes what art historian Robert Rosenblum described as a tradition of "linear abstraction" that reaches back to antiquity and underwent a series of modern revivals, first in the works of eighteenth-century artists like John Flaxman and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and later (figs. 4-5), inspired by these neoclassical examples, in the work of a variety of European artists in the first decades of the twentieth century, central among them Picasso.¹⁴ Characterized by "extreme two-dimensionality and purity of outline," the seemingly offhand simplicity of the modern revivals of this tradition of linear abstraction expressed, according to Rosenblum, a romantic longing for a more direct, and possibly even primal, means of representation.¹⁵ Yet even as the drastic purification of means in drawings like *Arlequin*, as well as in Calder's wire sculptures, convey a sense of immediacy and spontaneity, these very characteristics emphasize the inherent abstraction that any instance of graphic or purely linear depiction entails.

In an essay accounting for the "revival of the art of drawing" among modern artists like Matisse and Picasso, published in 1918 (the same year



4. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Madame Charles Gounod*, 1859



5. John Flaxman, *Early study for Ulysses Giving Wine to Polyphemus*, c. 1792-1805

Picasso created *Arlequin*), Roger Fry considered the unavoidable selection and exclusion of content that occurs when "the infinite complexity and fullness of matter" is translated into "the bare geometric abstraction of mind" demanded by the act of drawing.¹⁶ For Fry, drawings like Picasso's brought to the fore the motivating tension between what he described as the "structural" and "calligraphic" qualities of line—the way a linear rendering of a subject, in its inevitable and almost diagrammatic condensation of material reality, can be viewed as both representational and abstract. In Picasso's *Arlequin* and Calder's *Bird*, the various curves, spirals, and loops are able to refer to various identifiable aspects of their respective subjects (eyes, wings, batons, etc.) while retaining their identities as autonomous graphic gestures rendered from pencil and wire, respectively.

While the duality between the acknowledgment of the materiality of the artistic medium and the manifest content of the work of art is far from exclusive to the realm of drawing, one might say that in drawings this duality is crucial, serving as what art historian David Rosand called the "poles of graphic signification."¹⁷ Like many of Picasso's earlier Cubist paintings, *papier collés*, and collages, *Arlequin* investigates the codes of pictorial representation through a forthright yet playful demonstration of the conventions of his chosen medium. The sparse, linear trajectories of *Arlequin* and *Bird* emphasize not only their materiality but their means of creation, perpetually inviting viewers to re-experience the artists' manifold creative decisions and manual procedures (i.e., the actual movements of the artists' hands). This aspect of

the works was clearly recognized in one of the earliest critical accounts of Calder's wire sculpture, in which the writer noted how "One can imagine the patience of the sculptor armed with pincers and pliers and uncoiling around his stele the spool of copper wire that he will twist and untwist to give birth to figures."¹⁸ Line, in these instances, appears as what Rosand called "the indexical trace of its own creator," endowing the already animated imagery with the artists' surrogate presences, consequently investing the works with a degree of agency and animation that transcends any sort of literal or depicted movement also displayed in their form.¹⁹

While the wily linearity of such works certainly signals the virtuosity of their absent creators, it also invites present viewers to recreate their respective linear trajectories across the page and through space. This participatory dynamic was in many ways central to one of the earliest and most influential theorizations of Cubism, in which Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler described how the ambiguous and seemingly fragmented forms of such works "construct the finished object in the mind" of the beholder. According to Kahnweiler, this virtual and perpetually incomplete fabrication of the image in the viewer's mind invested the work with an unprecedented sense of reality, so that it could be "seen" with a perspicuity of which no illusionistic art is capable."²⁰ Abstraction in this sense operates a means of internalizing art into life, making the image's ultimate significance dependent on its perceptual incorporation in a sentient viewer. This, one imagines, is what Picasso meant when he famously stated that "A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day."²¹ This is a vision of works of art as being as contingent, animated, and perhaps even as mortal as the bodies that created them, and that continually re-create them with each new encounter. It is a vision of the work of art, moreover, that in many ways goes against the foremost institutions of art, such as the museum, the market, and the discipline of art history itself—all of which tend to stabilize the art object in time and space, the better to classify, commodify, and analyze it. And yet this vision of art, with its promise of a deeper, more authentic relationship to the world, has fundamentally motivated the actions of countless artists and, one may argue, will continue to remain a significant aspect of aesthetic experience as long as we expect art to move us, whether in body or in mind.

1. Alexander Calder, "Que Ça bouge—à propos des sculptures mobiles," manuscript, Calder Foundation archives, 1932. Translation courtesy Calder Foundation, New York.
2. "Picasso Speaks," *The Arts* (May 1923); reprinted in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 270–1.
3. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 93.
4. Roger Fry, "The French Post-Impressionists," in *Vision and Design* (New York: Brentano's, 1924), 157; cited in Leah Dickerman, "Inventing Abstraction," in Leah Dickerman, *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 28.
5. Calder, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin 18* (Spring 1951): 9; reprinted in Alexander S. C. Rower, ed., *Calder: Sculptor of Air*, exh. cat. (Rome: Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 2009), 223.
6. James Johnson Sweeney, *Alexander Calder* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1951), 18.
7. Calder, "A Propos of Measuring a Mobile," manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1943, reprinted in Rower, 223.
8. For the concept of *facingness*, particularly as it occurs in modern painting, see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: Or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
9. Clement Greenberg, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," *Partisan Review* (January 1949), reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 272.
10. Calder, "Comment realizer l'art?" in *Abstraction-Création, Art Non Figuratif no. 1* (1932): 6. Translation courtesy Calder Foundation, New York.
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les Mobiles des Calder," in *Alexander Calder: Mobiles, Stables, Constellations*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Louis Carré, 1946). Trans. Chris Turner, in *The Aftermath of War: Jean-Paul Sartre* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008).
12. Calder, statement on wire sculpture, January–February 1929, Calder Foundation archives.
13. See, Susan Galassi, *Picasso's One-Liners* (New York: Artisan Sales, 1997).
14. For a discussion of this classical revival in the twentieth century, see Kenneth Silver, *Chaos & Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany 1918–1936*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010).
15. Robert Rosenblum, *The International style of 1800: A*

- Study in Linear Abstraction* (New York: Garland: 1976), 223.
16. Roger Fry, "Line As a Means of Expression in Modern Art," *Burlington Magazine* (December 1918); reprinted in Christopher Reed, ed., *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 327, 329–30.
17. David Rosand, *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxii.
18. "On imagine la patience du sculpteur armé de tenailles, de pinces et déroulant autour de sa stèle la bobine de fils de cuivre qu'il va tordre et détordre pour enfanter des silhouettes." Gros, "Sculpture sur fil de fer," *Paris-Midi*, 2 February 1929. Translation courtesy Calder Foundation, New York.
19. Rosand, xxii.
20. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, "The Rise of Cubism," (1915); reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 256.
21. Pablo Picasso, "Statement by Picasso: 1935," in Alfred H. Barr, *Picasso, Fifty Years of His Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946); reprinted in Dore Ashton, ed., *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (New York: De Capo, 1972), 27.