ALEXANDER CALDER

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Whitney Museum of American Art
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Introduction by

Tom Armstrong, Director
Whitney Museum of American Art

Chaconne Johann Sebastian Bach
Alexander Schneider, *violin*

Remarks by

James Johnson Sweeney

Saul Steinberg

Robert Osborn

Arthur Miller

Tom Armstrong

Ladies and gentlemen. I'm Tom Armstrong, Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Alexander Calder's family and friends are gathered here, surrounded by his work, to share a simple tribute to this great man. Five special friends will represent us all through their personal memories. I will introduce the first and each will follow as indicated on the program. We will begin with Mr. Alexander Schneider who will play *Chaconne* for violin by J. S. Bach.

James Johnson Sweeney

Though the dancer has gone, the dance remains. Stubborn as a tree, but responsive as a tree to the wind's motion. Warm as the friendly bear that walked within him.

It is difficult for anyone who knew Sandy Calder as the vital human being he was to accept the fact that he is no longer with us. But in a deeper sense he remains, and will remain. The French poet Pierre Reverdy referred to Sandy's old friend Fernand Léger, at the time of his death, as "one of those men who in disappearing impose on you a permanent presence." The same holds true for Sandy. We will miss his dancing and his gruff, sleepy-bear character, as well as his eternal red shirt so

symbolic of his personal warmth; but the sense of rhythm, the sense of fun and the capacity for enjoyment (which were essential elements of his life as well as his art) and his generous, sympathetic humanity will remain always, for us who knew him.

In Sandy Calder we have had the most vital visual artist this country has produced. For all the intimacy and playfulness his art communicates, there is nothing parochial or limited about it. No other contemporary sculptor in this country, or abroad, has contributed a vision so new, naive and fresh. — Nor so personal. This was probably due to his formation as engineer and craftsman, combined with a fundamentally poetic approach to the materials in which he worked: his readiness to welcome the collaboration of his materials in what he was doing, his courage to play creatively with his materials in the exploration of their potentialities. — Enjoyment was the primary approach Sandy took to his work and the primary demand he made on anyone who would approach it.

Though the dancer has gone, the dance remains.

You have left us happiness not sadness, Sandy; — miss you as we must.

Saul Steinberg

Like Jim, I think of Sandy as a dancing man. There was always a dancing occasion since the first time I met him in 1942 in the Second Avenue store-front studio. Many *bals musettes,* a memorable *quatorze juillet* in forty-six in Paris, and so many dancing parties in the Roxbury kitchen surrounded by circling mobiles on the ceiling and jumping and vibrating small mobiles on tables and shelves, as the dancers became the the largest mobile; couples turning around themselves, circling the room, occasionally hitting a mobile that hit right back the way they do. Sandy's dancing told us how pleasant life was and his dancing, like his work, was intelligent and poetic and of course disguised as comical. Dancing was also a way of embracing us. He made people dance who didn't know they could dance or people who had not danced in years. He danced with everybody—women, men, children, chairs and once he danced with a Roxbury Labrador. Dancing was embracing us and asking us to come out of our shells and be as tender and generous as he was. At the end of a dancing evening, we were panting and happy for the innocence of our pastime and for having lost all traces of vanity or dignity or whatever makes life tiresome. I spent many

Christmases dancing with Sandy and Louisa in Connecticut, and like so many of our friends I became part of the family; with Sandra and Mary, as they grew up, and then their husbands and children and their cats and parrots, and where I received so many gifts including a nose garment that Sandy made for my freezing nose after a very cold drive in the homemade La Salle, a convertible. One evening some time ago, during a noisy afterdinner, Sandy said something I couldn't hear. He was seated and I was standing. I bent nearer and then comfortably and naturally sat on his lap, I sat on his knee to hear him better. I thought afterwards that I hadn't sat on a man's knee in sixty years, and this was the only man so happy and so innocent as to give me and everybody this simple and loving familiarity.

Robert Osborn

To speak of Sandy Calder is easy; it is easy to *celebrate* such a rare human being.

There are so many facets to his character that we could be here until dawn trying to describe them.

So I will speak of three or four that one particularly liked about him.

There was an incredible integrity about the way he put his works together. The joining of the parts was always so masterly and well conceived and now gives such pleasure. Study any joint and it is almost mysterious in its solidity. This engineering care and assurance is like that of the Wright brothers.

I always feel, as I read their letters, as they experimented and then FLEW, that they and Calder would have understood one another... Sandy a bit more than they, for they were somewhat lacking in humor but the approach was quite the same and very American. Another part of this engineering integrity was his willingness to explain his invention, how it came about, (say on a bracing) how it worked...and even the exact place and date that it started...if you wanted to know these things. He was a very exact man...and he was very satisfying as a result.

His Humor

As we all know he was funny—a true clown—the way the 3 Fratellinis were true clowns, distilling ideas into laughter.

Sweeny is funny, and so is Arthur...and Saul isn't exactly UN-funny but it was Sandy who was the true clown because of an inborn capacity to transpose comedy into an abstraction.

Think of the small "cucaracha" stabile/mobile upstairs...4″ long and it nearly boggles the mind with its joyful wit and HUMOR. And, of course the lovely laughter which rings through this Museum all day long was his considered doing. He understood *fun.*

His continual word twisting or plain joking was icing on the cake. He might phone to say, "Louisa has squashed her hand again in the left door of the La Salle, can't you make *some* drawing that I can fasten to the door hinge to remind her about the BIG squeeze?" and then I could hear that gurgling laugh and imagine his mouth cracking open like a broken Spanish melon and then closing and being dried by the backs of his two hands.

I'd try—and some pictures were pretty macabre—but we finally stopped her...and back from him would come a truly preposterous drawing about: it takes two to tangle.

I think that the word I want here is MORALITY.

In his bones Sandy always knew right from wrong—I suspect that his parents—as with Louisa's parents—gave the two of them that clear sense of what was moral and what was not. And most important...whenever it came time to make a choice and to speak out against evil-doing they never flinched, they were always staunch and they were like a bulwark for the rest of us.

Against the American cruelty in Vietnam they spoke out, they worked against it, they gave to expose it, and they marched against that historic disgrace.

It is good to have known such human beings. For them Morality was about like breathing.

So now he naps or even sleeps, his hard work is over and having done it he takes his rest—and what an incredible outpouring of the human spirit it was.

I like to imagine Sandy on the southern slopes of Parnassus with his peers and old friends...gazing out to the wine-red sea and the myriad small white sails. Seeing all culture and his place in it...glancing occasionally northward to Mt. Olympus where live the Gods.

Arthur Miller

I suppose we have come together like this in order to find some reply rather than to stand silent, separately and alone. Sandy disarmed us. When we were with him we tended to see life as he saw it. Of course, he never had pretensions to any sort of leadership in the sense of seeking followers. It was rather that his spirit tended toward light rather than darkness, the joys of creation rather than laboriousness. And so he was a temptation to believe that life was not necessarily more profoundly lived in grief and disillusion.

When I think of him now, I can't help smiling. The sun shone on his life. What he seemed to want most was to see or hear something delightful. I wish I could think of some great remarks he made. There were marvelously suprising one-liners. But for the most part, his image for me is in wordless motion. He did not need many words to be wise. When I think of it, he spoke to me mostly to ask questions, asking for details, trying to figure the operating forces in whatever we were talking about. The first time we met was in 1949, on a bitter cold winter's day, out in front of Carl and Walt's garage in Woodbury. This tremendous La Salle open touring car drove up. It was already about

fifteen years old, its blown muffler sounding like one of the bigger fire engines, and the driver was this large hatless pink-faced man in a stiff sheepskin coat wearing powerful long gauntlets on his hands. The car had no top at all, that having caught fire along with the upholstery some time before, as I later learned. Instead of knobs and switches on the dashboard, there were protruding loops of wire. The thing about the vehicle was a creaking and a groaning which a rear wheel emitted with each revolution. With an ultimate dramatic groan of pain, the car came to a halt and the unmuffled explosions of the engine drew Walt outside at once, and the garage man went over and conferred with the driver who turned and pointed over the side at the rear wheel of the car, meanwhile making some sort of verbal explanation which sounded to me like a phonograph record played at half speed. Walt went over to the wheel and stood staring at its thick wooden spokes. Then the driver moved the car backward and forward to demonstrate the creaking, and Walt bent over, moving with the wheel, his ear close to the hub. And then he returned to the driver, and I could tell from the latter's face that he was being told the saddening truth—namely, that for wooden wheels that groan

there is no cure. But I couldn't help telling about a temporary cure which I happened to know about and I walked over and said to this stranger, "Excuse me but, if you take off that wheel, keep it under water for about a day and a night, it will swell up and stop creaking." Sandy looked down at me and I thought I saw some alarm in his eyes. He certainly looked sceptical. As the conversation or rather my monologue, continued, it became, as I later realized, a prototype of most of our confrontations over the next thirty years. I proceeded to admit that my remedy was not only temporary but might even be dangerous. I had once had a Model T Ford, I explained, with a creaking wooden wheel, which I had been advised to drown. And it did run silently. But several days later, while driving along on a cobblestone street, I looked out my window and saw a Model T tire and rim rolling along beside me keeping pace with my car. I had turned to my buddy, who owned a half interest in the vehicle for which we had paid twelve dollars, and said that somebody had lost a Model T tire and a rim. He also thought this was remarkable. I then slowed down for a light, and the car sat back on its axle with a thump, the swollen spokes of the wheel having flown out of its hub.

Through all this, Sandy observed me as though trying to decide whether or not I was dangerous. By the end of my story, I found myself explaining to him, not only why it was not a really good idea to submerge his wheel in water but for safety's sake it ought to be avoided altogether.

And so it went for thirty years thereafter. Sometime in the early fifties there is another wordless image. Louisa and he had had one of their parties, and as sometimes happened around ten or eleven o'clock leftover people would gather, sometimes to her surprise, apparently waiting for lunch. People had difficulties about agreeing to leave a Calder party. On this particular morning, I was in my house about a half mile from theirs when I heard Sandy's nasal tones which seemed to be coming from a fair distance. I went outside and looked up the road. There he was slowly walking along and talking to his friend Oscar Nitschky. This was a surprise since Nitschky was normally stone deaf, but Sandy was talking into a funnel attached to a short length of garden hose which Nitschky held to his ear. I saw them before they saw me. Hanging from Nitschky's neck was a piece of cardboard on a string with a sort of warning in Sandy's orthography reading, "I am deaf."

For me the best speeches Sandy made were in his later years, when he would sit at the table after dinner, his eyes closed in sleep or apparent sleep. One of his most memorable addresses occurred only a few months ago when we had finished dinner at Andi Schiltz's house. For no reason, we were talking about people's backgrounds. This one was Jewish, that one Irish, the other Italian, or whatever. Then one of us turned to Andi and asked him what he was, and he said he didn't know and I said "What do you mean—you don't know you're Dutch?" "Well yes," Andi said, "as a matter of fact I am Dutch." With which Sandy's eyes opened a slit and he growled, "Can't do a thing without a canal."

In the present company, I dare not speak about his art except to admit that I couldn't make head or tail of it for a year or more after I first entered his studio in Roxbury. And it made things worse to sit there watching him work. His hands were so deft and unhesitantly sure. He seemed more like someone at play than an artist. It only slowly dawned on me that this work of cold wire and sheet metal was sensuous, that the ever-shifting relationships within a mobile were refracting the same elemental and paradoxical forces in physics and human relations. Then I could begin to grasp what he

seemed to be about. And of course when I told him my discoveries he looked up from his anvil and said, "Ercaberk." Still, it is from the spaces, the silences in his works that life springs out at us.

Sandy would not want moralizing about his life. But there is no way to avoid mentioning one aspect of his character. He was not a judgmental man—not at all. I do not know of a couple who had friends of such a wide variety of opinion and conviction. He, like Louisa, was nevertheless committed and it expressed itself sometimes in their public statements on the Vietnam War and other issues. But important as these were, they symbolized the real commitment that I have always thought was to simple decency. There was something noble in them and in their house. Is it not a great thing for us all, his gifts to us in a way that his personal qualities of directness, cheerfulness, his wit, and his joy in being alive should also have been so infused in his art? Like some playful Pantagruel he has dropped his monuments into the center of a hundred cities and his mobiles float above our heads like flocks of birds, things to catch light, to flutter with the wind, to arrest the rain and they are all Sandy saying in a thousand ways, "Yes and Yes and Yes."

Tom Armstrong

And now, I ask each of you to take a moment for your own private thoughts of Alexander Calder.

Before we say good evening, Louisa and Sandy's family invite all of us to join them for a glass of wine in the Museum Restaurant before we leave.

"The underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the universe, or part thereof. For that is a rather large model to work from." *Alexander Calder* 1951