

By Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialist on mobilist

Calder's newest works
judged by France's newest philosopher

If it is true that in sculpture movement must be cut into the motionless, then it would be an error to relate Calder's art to sculpture. It does not suggest movement but subtly conquers it; it does not dream of enslaving movement for all time in bronze or gold, those glorious, stupid materials, dedicated by nature to immobility. With a mixture of commonplace materials, with little bones, tin, or zinc, Calder builds strange constructions of stems, palms, quoits, feathers, and petals. They are both sounding boards and traps. Some, like a spider, dangle from threads; others huddle dully on their bases, settled, seemingly asleep. A little breeze comes by, tangles in them, awakens them. They channel it and give it a transitory shape: a mobile is born.

A mobile: a little local festival; an object which exists only in, and which is defined by its motion; a flower which dies as soon as motion stops; a spectacle of pure movement just as there are spectacles of pure light. Sometimes Calder amuses himself by imitating natural forms—he has given me a bird of paradise with wings of iron. All that is needed is a little warm air, rising out the window, rubbing against it. Clanking, the bird straightens out, spreads its tail, bobs its crested head. It weaves and rocks and then, suddenly, as if obeying some invisible order, it wheels slowly, spread-eagled, on its axis. But Calder usually does not imitate, and I know of no art which is less deceitful than his. Sculpture suggests motion, painting suggests light or space. Calder suggests nothing, he fashions real, living motions which he has captured. His mobiles signify nothing, refer to nothing but themselves: they *are*, that is all; they are absolutes. Chance, "the devil's share," is perhaps more important in them than in any other of man's creations. They have too many possibilities and are too complex for the human mind, even their creator's, to predict their combinations. Calder establishes a general destiny of motion for each mobile, then he leaves it on its own. It is the time of day, the sun, the heat, the wind which calls each individual dance. Thus the objects always inhabit a half-way station between the servility of a statue and the independence of nature. Each of its evolutions is the inspiration of a split-second. One sees the artist's main theme, but the mobile embroiders it with a thousand variations. It is a little swing tune, as unique and as ephemeral as the sky or the morning. If you have missed it, you have missed it forever. Valéry said that the sea is continually reborn. Calder's objects are like the sea and they cast its same spell—always beginning again,

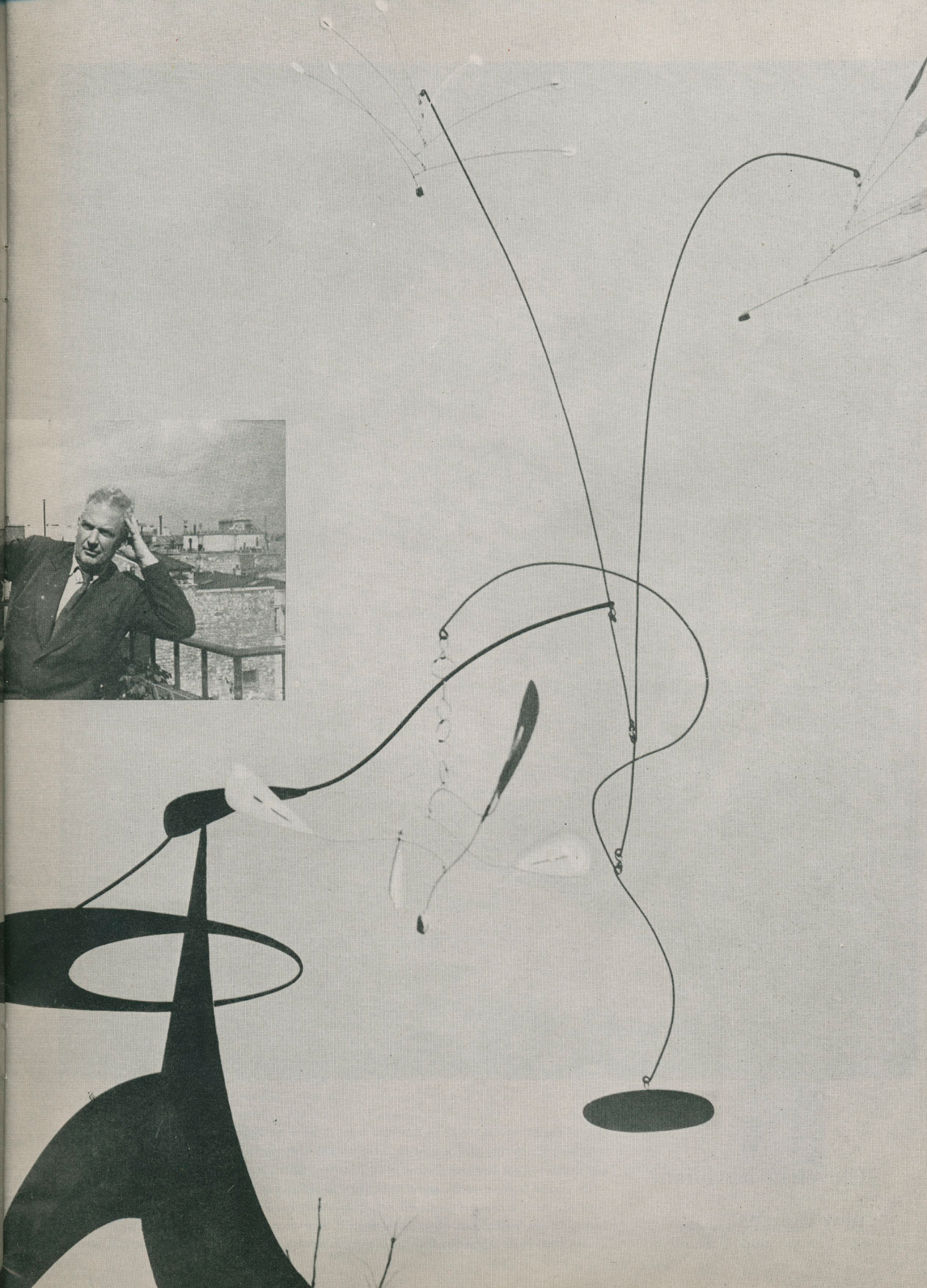
always new. A passing glance is not enough to understand them. One must live their lives, become fascinated by them. Then the imagination rejoices in these pure forms which are both free and regulated.

These motions, which are meant only to please, to enchant the eye, have nevertheless a profound meaning, almost a metaphysical one. Motion must come to the mobile from some source. Once Calder supplied them with electric motors. Today he abandons them to nature, in a garden or near an open window. He lets them flutter in the wind like aeolian harps. They breathe, they are nourished by the air. They take their lives from the mysterious life of the atmosphere. Their motion is, also, of a very special nature. Even though they are man-made, they never show the precise, efficient gestures of Vaucanson's mechanical man, for the charm of the mechanical man is only that it plays with a fan or on a guitar like a human, and, at the same time, the motion of its hand has the blind, pitiless precision of the machine.

A Calder mobile sways, hesitates. One might say that it makes some mistake and then starts over again. Once in his studio I saw a mallet and a gong hung from the ceiling. At the slightest gust, the mallet would chase the spinning gong. Like an awkward hand it would attack, throwing itself forward, only to veer off to the side. Then, just when one least expected it, it would bang the gong squarely in the center with a terrible noise. A mobile's motions, on the other hand, are ordered with so much art that one could never classify them with the marble rolling on an uneven surface where all direction comes from the accident of terrain. Mobiles have lives of their own. One day when I was talking to Calder in his studio, a mobile which [Continued on page 55]

Mobilist on mobile

Alexander ("Sandy") Calder's latest one man show, at Buchholz, Dec. 9-27, again fills two rooms with intricately weaving tendrils and smooth abstract shapes. He is seen (above right), juxtaposed with one of his latest mobiles (about six feet high), during a recent trip to Paris—his exhibition there prompting this article by Jean-Paul Sartre. Calder himself drew, especially for ARTNEWS, his own version of the leader of the Existentialists (top left) who also finds time to be a journalist, novelist, playwright, and critic as well as philosopher. In addition to twenty-two mobiles, "spectacles of pure movement . . . existing between matter and life," this exhibition includes seven of Calder's bright new abstract oil paintings and three of his stables.



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had been at rest became violently agitated and came at me. I stepped backwards and thought I was out of reach. But suddenly when this violent agitation had gone, and the mobile seemed to have recoiled into rest, its long majestic tail, which had not yet moved, lazily, almost reluctantly came to life. It turned in the air, and then swung right under my nose. These hesitations, renewals, gropings, blunders, brusque decisions, and, above all, this marvellous swan-like nobility make Calder's mobiles strange crea-

tures existing between matter and life. Sometimes their motions seem motivated, sometimes they seem to have lost their ideas in the midst of their actions and become bewildered—bouncing like idiots. Like a swan, like a frigate, my bird flies, swims, floats. He is one, one specific bird. Then, all of a sudden, he breaks apart and there is nothing left but metal stems filled with ineffectual little quivers. These mobiles have been made neither wholly living nor wholly mechanical, they fly apart at every instant, and yet they always

return to their initial position. When they are caught in the rising air they are like aquatic vegetation swayed by the current, like petals of the sensitive plant, like legs of a frog when the brain has been removed.

Although Calder has tried to imitate nothing—he has wanted to create only scales and harmonies of unknown motions—his works are both lyrical inventions and almost mathematical, technical combinations.

They are symbols of nature—that great vague nature which wastes pollen or which suddenly produces the flight of a thousand butterflies, that unknown nature which might be a blind chain of cause and effect or a timid development, always delayed, always disturbed, inspired by an Idea.

This article was originally published, on the occasion of Alexander Calder's recent Paris show, by Louis Carré whose permission to publish this translation we wish to acknowledge.