

# George Rickey

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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## ‘ViewEscapes: George Rickey Kinetic Sculpture’ Review: Sculpture in Motion

The abstract artist’s creations, 12 large-scale outdoor works and eight smaller indoor pieces, enliven Naumkeag House & Gardens in the Berkshires with their hypnotic grace.

LANCE ESPLUND  
AUGUST 2, 2022



George Rickey’s “Two Conical Segments Gyrotory Gyrotory IV—Seven Axes” (1980) Photo: David Lee

The term “kinetic art” (meaning art, usually sculpture, that incorporates movement) was first used by Bauhaus artists, including Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner and László Moholy-Nagy, to describe their own works in the genre. But some cite Marcel Duchamp’s readymade sculpture “Bicycle Wheel” (1913)—mounted (like a Ferris wheel) upside down on a wooden stool—as the first kinetic artwork because, though static, its wheel can spin. Others convincingly argue that Leonardo’s mechanical inventions first set art in motion.

Its origins aside, very few artists have made careers creating kinetic art. Among them, of course, is the innovative American abstract sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976), the inventor of the “mobile” (a term coined by Duchamp). Another is the American sculptor and educator George Rickey, whose marvelous retrospective, “ViewEscapes: George Rickey Kinetic Sculpture,” animates the former Joseph and Caroline Choate family’s gardens and summer cottage at Naumkeag House & Gardens—a Gilded-Age Berkshires estate ensconced on an idyllic hillside in Stockbridge, Mass.



George Rickey's 'Ten Rotors Ten Cubes II' (1971) Photo: David Lee

Born in South Bend, Ind., Rickey (1907-2002) moved with his family to Scotland when he was 6 years old. The grandson of a clockmaker, he was first captivated by automated movement as a child during visits to Glasgow's Singer Sewing Machines factory, where his father, a mechanical engineer, was managing director. Though trained as a painter, Rickey was inspired by Calder's abstract mobiles and David Smith's abstract brushed-stainless-steel sculptures. Influential, too, were Stanley William Hayter's Surrealist abstractions, Gabo's kinetic constructions and the streamlined Cubist paintings of Rickey's teacher, Fernand Léger. In 1950, Rickey devoted himself full time to making kinetic sculpture.

Organized by Mark Wilson, associate curator of the Trustees of Reservations at Naumkeag, "ViewEscapes" includes two paintings and a portrait drawing, but its main attractions are the 12 large-scale outdoor and eight smaller interior sculptures. Most of these abstract works—whose dancing movements are graceful, playful, absolutely hypnotic—are kinetic (or gyratory) and move through a precise balance among counterweights, ball bearings, gimbal attachments and wind power.

Industrial yet organic (sometimes anthropomorphic), they blend and interact with nature. The sculptures open and close like fan dancers and origami. And they feel alive but are as unassuming as weather vanes. Most, also, are made of simple geometric forms in brushed stainless steel—a reflective surface that mirrors and refracts surrounding sky, clouds, foliage, water and sunlight, and which creates an illusionistic transparency suggesting, like a magic trick, animated, levitating pools of liquid silver.

“Ten Rotors Ten Cubes II” (1971), as delicate as a tiara, swings lazily, like legs dangling over a pond. “Two Conical Segments Gyrotory Gyrotory IV—Seven Axes” (1980) conflates flower petals, satellite dish and whirligig. Standing nearly 24 feet tall is the regal, monumental “Double L Excentric Gyrotory III” (1991-92). Two gyrating L-shapes mounted to a central post, it evokes signal flags, hands doing sign language, butterfly and altarpiece wings. Unusual here is “One Line Horizontal Floating” (1994), a 30-foot-long stainless-steel spear suspended, like a tightrope, between two trees. It evokes jousting pole, jet stream, helicopter blade, horizon line, bird of prey. Subtle, hanging 30 feet up, it announces itself when it goes suddenly vertical or rises and falls like a teeter-totter or catches the sun, flashing like lightning.



George Rickey's 'Unfolding Square III' (1994) Photo: David Lee

“Unfolding Square III” (1994) comprises four equal-sized jointed, gyrating rectangular stainless-steel boxes that, when vertical (like a periscope or a soldier at attention), extends to 18 feet tall. Turning, pirouetting, folding and unfolding (besides transforming itself at times into a square), it spins like a windmill; leans over and bobs like waterfowl; seemingly waves at passersby; and dances with nearby fruit trees. Rickey’s sculpture moves as fluidly and gracefully as a tai chi master. Quickly changing speed and direction, however, it’s also unpredictably goofy, like one of those giant inflatable tube figures gesticulating wildly at a car lot.

Seen outside, Rickey’s large-scale sculptures—whirling, gliding, rising and falling as naturally as drifting clouds, swooping birds and windswept foliage—can mesmerize for hours. But don’t miss one of the masterpieces here, the



stainless-steel mobile “Nuages VI” (1966-68), which hangs above the dining table inside Naumkeag’s summer cottage. “Nuages VI,” perhaps the most Calderesque work here, comprises eight mobiles with dozens of dangling, crowded, tiny geometric forms—like Christmas ornaments—reminiscent of petals, ripples, leaves and rowing oars. Combined, they create a silvery shallow sea, roughly 4 feet square—fluttering as if ruffled by a breeze. Created as a (fixtureless) chandelier for Rickey’s own dining room, the sculpture was designed to reflect the sunset and to throw a twinkling field of light onto the table and its diners. It’s sublime.



George Rickey’s ‘Nuages VI’ (1966-68) Photo: David Lee

Kinetic sculpture fascinates because it infinitely changes, constantly reinventing itself and your relationship to it—making you feel that you’re witnessing something for the first and last (the only) time. Rickey understood this as well as anyone. While not among the first kinetic practitioners, he ranks among the best. Rickey said that he took up kinetic sculpture because he had wondered “if Calder had said it all.” Obviously, as “ViewEscapes” beautifully demonstrates, Calder hadn’t.

# The Berkshire Eagle

## 'ViewEscapes' at Naumkeag shows one of the largest retrospectives of George Rickey's work in the Northeast in 40 years

12 large-scale sculptures, six smaller sculptures and three paintings are on display

JENNIFER HUBERDEAU

APRIL 21, 2022



The George Rickey sculpture Unfolding Square III is part of Naumkeag's exhibit "ViewEscapes: George Rickey Kinetic Sculpture." All photos: Ben Garver.

George Rickey was hailed in his 2002 obituary by the New York Times "as one of two major 20th-century artists to make movement a central interest in sculpture."

The other artist, Alexander Calder, whose works Rickey encountered in the 1930s, was also from the Berkshires. Calder, who died in 1976, spent his youth in Richmond, where his father owned a home. Rickey would arrive later in life, in 1957, purchasing a house in East Chatham, N.Y., where he'd establish his studio, just 30 miles from the Stockbridge border. There, in the second career he came to later in life, he and a team of assistants would craft gigantic kinetic sculptures that can be found across the United States and internationally in 13 countries, including Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and South Korea. His work is included in the permanent collections of 150 museums.

Now, beginning with the annual Daffodil and Tulip Festival on Friday, April 22, "ViewEscapes," one of the largest retrospectives of Rickey's work in the Northeast in 40 years — 12 large-scale sculptures, along with six smaller sculptures and three paintings — is on display at Naumkeag. The solo exhibition, curated by Mark Wilson, associate curator for The Trustees of Reservations, is on view through Nov. 1.

"Naumkeag really is a very ideal place for this type of exhibit," said Brian Cruvey, director of The Trustee's Southern Berkshire properties. "It's going to be the biggest art exhibit we've ever had. It's something new for us, something that I think is going to really work well in this garden."

"ViewEscapes" explores Rickey's life, design process and artistic intent, highlighting works spanning from the 1950s as Rickey was gaining prominence and up to the 1990s at the end of his long and prolific career. The show follows a national exhibition of Rickey's large-scale sculptures currently on display along Park Avenue and The High Line in New York City through April 2022.



George Rickey's sculpture *Double L Excentric Gyrotory III* is on view as part of the exhibit, which includes 12 large-scale sculptures, along with six smaller sculptures and three paintings.

"It all started out kind of modestly, about a year ago. We were thinking, maybe six or seven pieces," Wilson said, speaking of how the show grew to 23 pieces that span the length of the artist's career, from the 1950s to 2002. "We're working with the George Rickey Foundation and the George Rickey Estate, which have been so helpful. And because they're so close and they have these pieces available, we were able to expand the show to include more pieces, including artwork in the house."

And while there are 12 outdoor sculptures — all of which have movement as part of their design — on display, Wilson said the experience is not overwhelming due to Naumkeag's garden design.

"Fletcher Steele created these outdoor garden rooms. The pieces are somewhat separated; you can see them, see them interact with the landscape; see them interact with the house," Wilson said.



Cruey added, "Naumkeag itself is a garden of many mini garden rooms and discovery. These pieces are placed in a way that it still really embodies that feeling. You walk through the garden and you really come upon these pieces, discover them in a way that you don't see it all at once. You're kind of led from one place to the next and you find these pieces just kind of framed in the landscape."



Rickey's *Unfolding Square III* shows how the sculptures interact with Naumkeag's landscape.

The consistent breeze along the hilltop on which Naumkeag sits allows for the sculptures to remain in almost constant motion, he said. Each of the large-scale sculptures has been placed in a way that complements the landscape and architecture nearby, the shapes of the sculptures mimicking the shapes of the view or building nearby.

The smaller works, miniatures Rickey created as reference for his works, many of which have three to five variations, are displayed similarly within Naumkeag, the historic Gilded Age cottage of the Choate family. The 44-room house served as the summer home of diplomat Joseph Choate and his wife, Caroline Dutcher Sterling Choate, and later, their daughter, Mable Choate, who improved upon the 48-acre estates gardens and later left the property in the care of The Trustees.

"We've been limited to only having the first floor of the house open these last two years because of COVID-19. With this show, we're reopening the house in a way that we haven't been able to for some time. We're reopening the second floor with new interpretations and a new self-guided tour," Cruey said. "We've been open the whole time,



during the pandemic, but we had to scale so many things back. We tried to find a way and make it work. We're happy to be able to welcome people back into the house."

Events around the exhibition, including a talk in the fall by Belinda Rathbone, author of "George Rickey: A Life in Balance," as well as interactive and kid-friendly activities, will be announced in the coming weeks.



George Rickey's *Two Conical Segments Gyratory Gyratory IV*. The sculptures are almost in constant motion thanks to wind.

"I think one of the things that is going to make this show so unique is the length of time that it will be up," Cruvey said. "What you see in the spring is going to be very different from what you see in the summer, what you see in the fall. What we've planted will grow in and change, but so will the environment around us. Much like our different programming and things that we do in the gardens, this is a chance to come back and see it fresh."

"George Rickey is one of those artists that probably everyone knows his work, without knowing it's his work," he said.

Throughout his career as a sculptor, Rickey created over 3,000 works, Wilson said, noting that many of the pieces in "ViewEscapes," are unique pieces, ones that were kept at his East Chatham studio.

Rickey's work was last seen at Naumkeag in 1994, when two pieces were included in the show "Sculpture at Naumkeag: A Celebration of Great American Sculpture" and in 1997's "Sculpture at Naumkeag." His work has also

been displayed at Chesterwood on numerous occasions, including two pieces, *Open Trapezoids Excentric One Up One Down Variation V*, and *Rectangle and Square, Unfolding and Gyrotory*, in 2018's "Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood: 40 YRS." Rickey's *Double L Excentric Gyrotory II* (1981), can be seen outside of the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, on the Williams College campus in Williamstown. *Eight Lines III (Sketch for Twenty Four Lines)* (1963), on permanent loan from Williams College, can be seen at Field Farm, another Trustee's property in Williamstown.

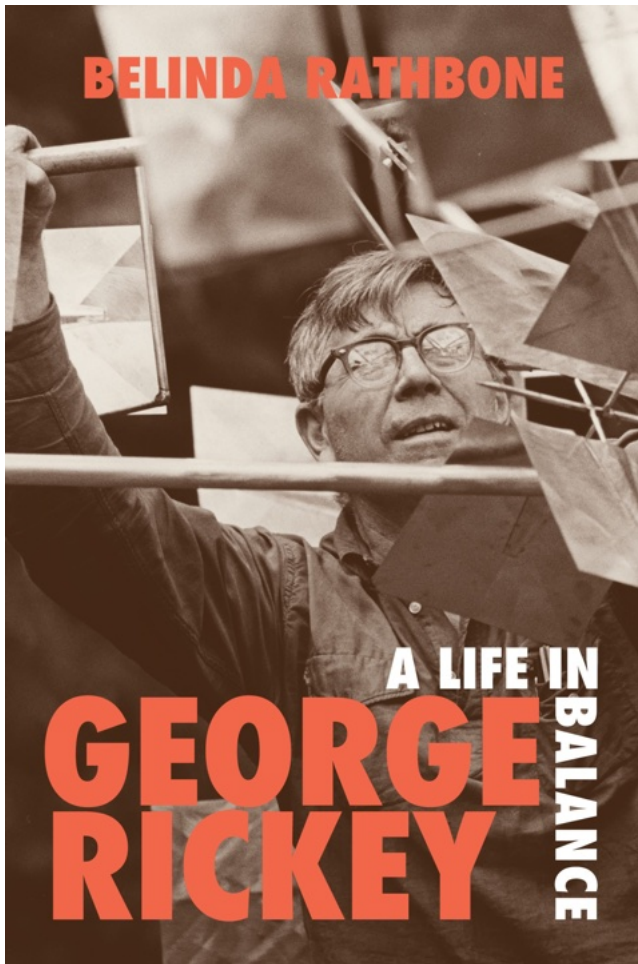
Funding for this exhibition has been provided by a challenge grant from Kate and Hans Morris, which raised additional support from the Claudia K. Perles Family Foundation, Joseph McNay and Paula Moats McNay, Luca Borghese and Michael Pierson, Mr. Randolph G. Hawthorne and Ms. Carliss Y. Baldwin, Mr. Stephen Oristaglio and Mrs. Jeryl Oristaglio, and Douglas Molin and Melanie Mowinski.

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Machine Aesthetic in George Rickey's Sculptures

Belinda Rathbone's biography traces the sculptor's embrace of kinetic mechanisms to his work in the Singer Sewing Machine factory.

CARL LITTLE  
JANUARY 20, 2022



Belinda Rathbone, *George Rathbone: A Life in Balance*, Godine, 2021 (image courtesy Godine)

In the second half of the 20th century, George Rickey (1907-2002) stands out as one of America's preeminent sculptors, known for his mesmerizing kinetic creations that move in the wind. Following in Alexander Calder's footsteps, he constructed small- and large-scale sculptures that found their way into collections, museums, and public spaces across the country and around the world.



That said, as Belinda Rathbone notes early on in her cradle-to-grave biography, Rickey's reputation has faded over time. "While his work enjoyed many years in the limelight," she writes, "his unique contribution to the vocabulary of modern abstract sculpture has dwelled in the shadier groves of modern art history." She sets out not so much to correct an oversight but to bring to light Rickey's significant achievements. In the process she presents a full-bodied portrait of an artist driven as much by a quest for fame as by artistic vision.

*George Rickey: A Life in Balance* provides a detailed biography of the artist, starting with his family's move from South Bend, Indiana, to Scotland when he was five. Rathbone traces Rickey's embrace of kinetic mechanisms to various experiences in his earlier life, including visiting and briefly working in the Singer Sewing Machine factory his father managed in Clydebank.

After returning to the United States as an adult Rickey worked as a teacher for nearly 30 years around the country, beginning with a job teaching history at Groton, an elite school for boys near Boston, in the 1930s, and followed by positions at several colleges and universities.

While following a rigorous teaching schedule, Rickey managed to make and show art—paintings and drawings—and study it. During the Depression, the Carnegie Corporation supported several of his artist residencies, first at Olivet College. He attended the Académie André Lhote in Paris, the Institute of Fine Arts in New York City (on the GI Bill), and the Art Institute of Chicago where he embraced what Rathbone calls the "machine aesthetic" that "had infiltrated art and design teaching at the Bauhaus and beyond." He would later write the groundbreaking *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (1967) and curate the traveling show *Constructivist Tendencies*.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Rickey registered for the draft. In August 1942, he entered the Army Air Corps in Denver to attend gunnery school. He became private first-class, assigned to the instruction and maintenance of aircraft guns, and later worked as a computer technician on the B29 Superfortress, the plane that would deliver the atomic bombs to Japan.

During the war Rickey began to consider whether he had a talent he "could not exploit as a painter." Later, stationed in Laredo, Texas, he made his first mobile sculptures: "In the army machine shop," Rathbone relates, "he began to experiment with bits of scrap metal and glass he found around the base, constructing little sculptures with moving parts."

While teaching at the University of Indiana in Bloomington in 1949, Rickey began to sculpt in earnest. He had help: a "career-changing tutorial" from sculptor David Smith, a fellow faculty member who taught him how to cut and weld with oxy-acetylene.

Following a visit to Calder's studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, in 1951, Rickey's mobiles became "looser, more curvaceous, and more playful" according to Rathbone. His work began to gain attention when it was included in the Metropolitan Museum's survey show *American Sculpture, 1951*, and featured in exhibitions at the Kraushaar Galleries in New York City. In 1958 he started to refer to his work as kinetic "to distance himself from the word *mobile*," writes Rathbone, "and he wanted that difference to be noticed."

Rickey's indebtedness to Calder is evident but the author succinctly distinguishes their work. "While Calder's colorful mobiles bobbed and turned," she explains, "Rickey's kinetic sculptures achieved complete rotation, multiple

variations of the pendulum, and the disturbing, joyride effects of conical movement.” His pieces “flirted with instability but always returned to equilibrium.”

In a review of a major Calder show at the Tate in London for *Arts Magazine*, Rickey took his fellow artist apart “limb by limb.” He criticized the lack of engineering and the minimal movement in the work. “The Master of the Catenaries has become the prisoner of the chain he forged,” Rickey wrote. He would later do a similar number on Jean Tinguely, another competitor in the world of moving sculpture.

Demand for Rickey’s work grew as he became a favorite of big-time collectors like Joseph Hirshhorn and was featured in major shows, including Documenta and Japan Expo ’70 and retrospectives at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Guggenheim in New York City. Needing a bigger place to produce, he found it in East Chatham, “a sleepy, hilly hamlet” about 130 miles north of New York City. The purchase of a ramshackle house led to acquisitions of neighboring land and structures. “In its heyday,” Rathbone notes, “the Rickey workshop was its own little empire in the woods.”

The sculptor seemed to be constantly on the move, spending time in Europe (Paris and Berlin), New Orleans, California, and other places. He received important commissions; Rathbone notes the growing trend in the 1970s for siting modern art in public and corporate spaces, both in the United States and abroad.

To a certain degree, Rickey was a hustler, often managing the sales of his work, cultivating collectors, and building on art-world connections whenever and wherever he could. He continually strategized ways in which to strengthen his legacy, aware of the fickleness of fame.

Rathbone’s narrative is strewn with intimate details, an effective way to keep the reader’s interest while navigating more art-historical material. When she gets to Rickey’s two marriages, to Susan Luhrs and Edith Leighton, respectively, she lays on the private detail, from the former’s fake pregnancy to the latter’s affairs.

Cameos by cultural and art-world figures abound, from Jean-Paul Sartre and Naum Gabo to Max Beckmann and Ellsworth Kelly. Rathbone takes every occasion to connect the aesthetic dots, at times leading the reader into rarefied art-historical territory.

As she did with her biography of Walker Evans, Rathbone proves the consummate portraitist even if she includes a plethora of incidental material. She gives Rickey his due without overstating his place in the pantheon. At one point she wonders if Rickey’s work remains relevant, calling it “too delightful to be demanding in the ways of minimalism as it was then being defined” in the late 1970s. While she addresses the ups and downs of his reputation, Rathbone underscores Rickey’s renown in his day without spending too much time parsing the decline in his fame compared to Calder’s, which remains strong to this day.

Like one of his sculptures, *George Rickey: A Life in Balance* has many moving parts that more often than not gracefully twist and turn to tell a very personal and public story. It feels like a Rickey revival.

## George Rickey: Monumental Sculpture on Park Avenue

IRENE LYLA LEE  
DECEMBER 2021–JANUARY 2022



George Rickey, *Space Churn with Octagon*, 1971. Stainless steel, 233 x 108 x 40 inches.  
© George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Kasmin, New York.

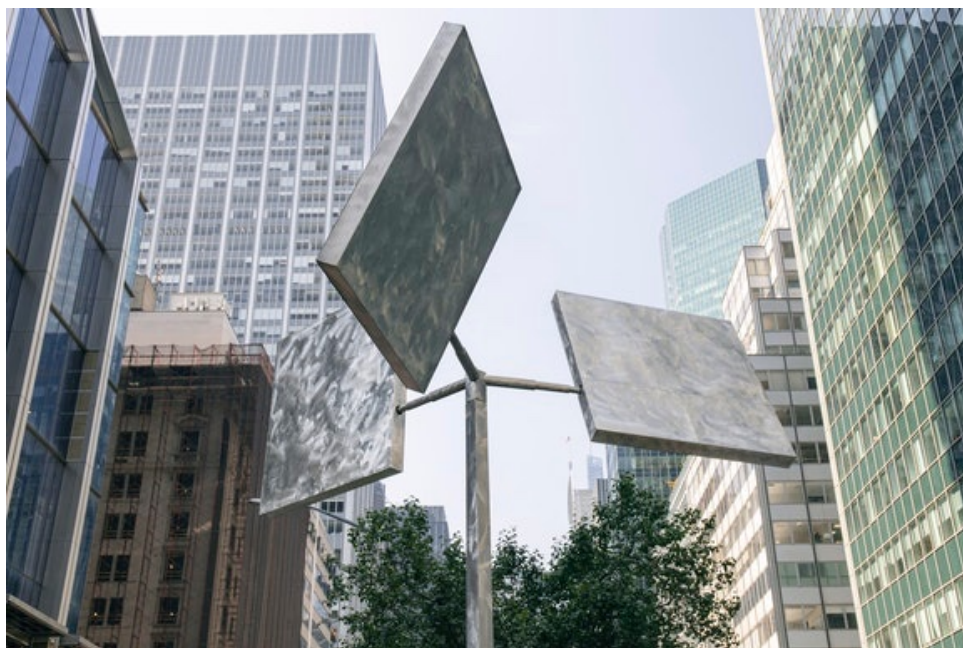
A total of 12 sculptures soar some 30 feet over Park Avenue and the High Line on the Kasmin Gallery roof. They swoop in the garden medians between iconic modernist and delicate contemporary architecture. When they catch the light, they become silver linings: more ideas than objects. This selection of George Rickey sculptures dates from 1964 to 2002. Rickey's son, Philip Rickey, and the Kasmin Gallery, which represents Rickey's work, collaborated to select pieces from the George Rickey Estate and Foundation. This is the largest exhibit of Rickey's monumental pieces ever shown in New York City.

George Rickey's sculptures are geometric shapes of brushed stainless steel. They move deliberately, yet unpredictably, able to trace the slightest passing breeze. Gimbals, and knife edge bearings, used in technologies like compasses, ships, scales, and wind chimes, helped Rickey experiment with balance points and facilitate a range of movements. Rickey was a serious, meticulous man. His biographer, Belinda Rathbone, said "he positioned himself as a careful student of the history of art." Whether invoking classical Greek architecture, Cubism, or Enlightenment-age engineering, the sculptures manifest his studies: fabricated with the same poetic care as their layered historical references.



Rickey was born in 1907 in South Bend, Indiana. At six years old, his father was promoted at the Singer Sewing Machine Company, and the Rickey family moved to Glasgow. Intending to become a history teacher, Rickey graduated from Oxford in 1929, but shifted his attention to the Academie Moderne in Paris where he studied Cubism. However, once stationed in the Army Air Corps in Colorado during World War II, designing turret guns, he rediscovered a latent love of machinery. With new technical skill and fresh motivation, he started fabricating small sculptures, developing an initial vocabulary of movements.

Rickey became drawn to gestures in nature, studying the engineering of plants, water, and planetary movements. In his essay titled "The Metier," Rickey insists, "If my sculptures sometimes look like plants or clouds or waves in the sea it is because they respond to the same laws of motion and follow the same mechanical principle." In 1960 he and his wife, Edie, moved to a farmhouse in East Chatham, New York, where his studio remains as the George Rickey Foundation and Estate that archives, stores, and repairs his sculptures.



George Rickey, *Three Squares Gyrotory I*, 1975. Stainless steel, 174 x 168 inches.

© George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Kasmin, New York.

Despite his interest in the natural world, Rickey's sculptures refuse a likeness to the woodlands where they were created. Their hewn shapes reflect light. They have sharp tips, abrupt angles, and visible mechanics. Even his largest sculpture, the ostentatious crimson, *Three Red Lines* (1966), is a rare exception to the brushed surface he perfected. Rickey attempted to make inflexible shapes appear pliable. "Blades" he called them, and they do look like swords. While some blades were positioned horizontally, *Peristyle II* (1966) and *Two Red Lines* (1963–75), both featured on the Kasmin gallery roof, stand. *Peristyle* is a term referring to classic Greek colonnades. He creates the illusion of distance as the groups of swaying blades multiply along the High Line, perhaps referring to the ritual of the Caryatids in ancient Greece, who danced with grasses on their heads. That the term, "blade" might suggest weaponry, he insisted, "spears, shoots, and blades are ancient botanical terms. I cannot control evocations."

Inventors have aspired to make machines in perpetual motion since the Renaissance, working with gravity to link into the planet's rotation. Space Churn with Octagon, at 55th Street, is reminiscent of these elusive technologies. Space Churn spirals in the breeze in interlinked semicircular trajectories, creating internal momentum. Its steady orbital movement strikingly resembles the solar system. This Space Churn was made in 1971, not two years after the moon landing. Rickey worked with scale and perspective, but this is a unique example of a form that the eye cannot see.



George Rickey, *Breaking Column II*, 1989. Stainless steel, height 226 inches.  
© George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Kasmin, New York.

Rickey's sculptures operate slowly, nearly to the point of frustration or boredom. While they were built to move in the slightest breeze, minutes can pass before a gesture is complete even on a windy day. It can feel excruciating to watch, but this incremental movement is the essence of the art: resisting performance. Sometimes it even disappears, the burnished steel falls into the environment, opening awareness from the sculpture and into the world. Rickey is not showing the work, but the way the work moves. *Breaking Column II* (1989), at 53rd Street, is deceptively simple, using a progressively weighted balance system: like the weight distribution of a whip, the column resets and breaks with the wind.

Rickey is often compared to Alexander Calder, who inspired his interest in mobiles. While Calder expanded, using found objects, wood, and color, Rickey simplified his practice, and so it grew huge, in scale and ambition. Rickey was militantly intentional, culling from the history of art and machinery to grasp at understanding the ever mysterious mechanics of nature.

Rickey's concept of the natural world is one that rips it from Romanticism, strips it of any pleasing or comforting themes that burden it, and so reveals its grace. Nature is not beautiful because of what it looks like, or how it gives refuge. It is a machine, into which we are inextricably linked. Early in his career, George Rickey called his sculptures "useless machines." These are not machines of industry. These are machines that reveal the world to us, if we can stand to look, and to wait.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

# Art on the move: Kasmin brings kinetic artist George Rickey's monumental sculptures to Manhattan

Rickey's moving sculptures will be on view along the Park Avenue Mall and the gallery's rooftop garden

DANIEL CASSADY  
SEPTEMBER 7, 2021



George Rickey, *Breaking Column II*, 1989, stainless steel, height 226 inches; 574 cm. © George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery

On the Park Avenue Mall in Manhattan, between 53rd and 54th streets, a 25-foot-tall, segmented column stands on the strip of manicured greenery that separates lanes of traffic. Each section of the column looks to be gingerly balanced on the one below. The slightest breeze can tip a section awkwardly forward or to the side, like someone who has missed a step and lurches forward. The kinetic sculpture, George Rickey's *Breaking Column II* (1989), does exactly what Rickey wanted all his work to do. "It's activated by, and activates the surrounding environment," says Eric Gleason, a director at Kasmin, which is putting on the exhibition with the George Rickey Foundation and the artist's estate.

The sculpture is also perfectly placed. In the distance, two of the city's tallest skyscrapers loom over Park Avenue, seemingly indestructible and out of reach, are made of the same stuff as *Breaking Column II* and subject to the same



winds that move the sculpture's sections around. "It really brings down to earth and humanises the race to build higher and higher," Gleason says of the Rickey's work. "Things don't have to be tall to be architecturally stunning."

In total, nine of Rickey's monumental sculptures, spanning from 1964 to 2002 (the year the artist died), are installed on the Park Avenue Mall, coinciding with the publication of Rickey's biography by the author Belinda Rathbone, *George Rickey: A Life in Balance*. "I think it will be a revelation for a lot of people," Rathbone says. "I'm always surprised how relatively unknown Rickey is, especially now."

Though Rickey's work was well known during his lifetime, according to Rathbone, some would say he did not spend enough time promoting himself in New York, which in the 1960s was dominated by the Pop Art movement. Instead, Rickey spent a great deal of time in Germany and the Netherlands, where he felt a camaraderie with young artists who were part of the Zero Group and the New Tendency movements, which are less recognised in the US. "Rickey's work deserves fresh eyes, and this exhibition is a wonderful introduction to his broad intelligence and character," Rathbone says. "As cool and abstract as the work seems, it's also risky. It's meant to move randomly, unpredictably and to factors outside his control. It's an expression of the way his mind works."

Three other sculptures from the 1960s are on view at Kasmin's rooftop garden, giving a pastoral counterpoint to the metropolitan setting of the works on Park Avenue, and resembling how Rickey displayed his sculptures on the grounds of his studio in East Chatham, New York. The rooftop garden is also visible from the High Line, so passersby can see the group of sculptures interacting with the environment, just as Rickey would have wanted.

"He was a public artist before he was a sculptor," says Philip Rickey, the artist's son and president of his foundation. "From the 1930s through the 1950s, he was a painter and did a lot of big commissioned work at colleges, and worked with the Works Progress Administration. So from beginning he was very interested in making art that connected with a broad audience. He had an expansive, broad idea of engagement, of connecting to people, and made things that caused people to pause, to take time to see how the elements interact with each other and with their surroundings."

# The New Criterion

## A Rickey Renaissance

On the life and work of the twentieth-century American sculptor.

ERIC GIBSON  
NOVEMBER 2021



George Rickey, *Space Churn with Octagon*, 1971, Stainless steel, on view at Park Avenue. © George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY, Courtesy of Kasmin. Photo: Diego Flores.

Along with his contemporary Alexander Calder, George Rickey (1907–2002) is the artist most associated with motion in sculpture. Only of late has he not been much in the public eye. His nearly forty-foot-tall *Three Red Lines* (1966)—so many upright, painted needles swaying gently from side to side—that had stood like a beacon in front of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden since its opening in 1974 has not been seen there since 2003. And while Rickey’s work has been shown in galleries, the last retrospective was in 2007, and it bypassed the major institutions on both coasts—institutions, it should be said, that had at one time been avid supporters of his work.

So it is cause for celebration that a flurry of events now brings Rickey and his art once again front and center. In September the art historian and biographer Belinda Rathbone published *George Rickey: A Life in Balance*, the first biography of the sculptor.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before, an outdoor installation, “George Rickey: Monumental Sculpture on Park Avenue,” went up featuring nine of the artist’s stainless steel constructions on the median between Fifty-second and Fifty-sixth Streets.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, his gallery, Kasmin in Chelsea, installed three works—one comprising six individual sculptures—on the High Line directly above its gallery space, within which it is also showing seven smaller-scaled works.<sup>3</sup> As it happens, all this has taken place against the backdrop of moma’s “Alexander Calder:

Modern from the Start,” a show of works drawn mainly from its permanent collection that has afforded the opportunity to compare the two artists even as we have reacquainted ourselves with Rickey’s singular achievement.<sup>4</sup> He enlarged and extended Calder’s innovation of the mobile and invented what I’ve long felt to be a perfect public art: intellectually rigorous yet warmly, even wittily, ingratiating; striking yet unobtrusive; at one with its surroundings even as it sets itself off from them.



George Rickey, *Two Red Lines*, 1963–75, on view at Kasmin Sculpture Garden, New York. © George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY, Courtesy of Kasmin. Photo: Diego Flores.

Rickey was born in South Bend, Indiana, the third of six children and the only boy. When he was six his engineer father, who worked for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, was transferred to Scotland to run its factory just outside Glasgow. There George received a British education, eventually graduating from Oxford University in 1929. His father’s plans for him to follow as an engineer were thwarted by his son’s nascent interest in fine art, which led him to Paris that year and tutelage under André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Amédée Ozenfant. He was at this time a painter and, despite his exposure to modernism, remained a committed realist, maintaining this position well into his thirties.

By this time familiar with Calder, Rickey turned to sculpture in 1945, with rough-and-ready mobiles made from scavenged bits of wire and broken glass. He was sure he was on to something but worried that it was not as serious an avenue as had been his socially committed art. (He’d been a New Deal muralist during the Depression.) He also wondered if it was possible to be more than a Calder imitator. It took him nearly a decade to answer both questions

in the affirmative. Calder's works are suspended from the ceiling; Rickey's are upright and mostly anchored to the ground. Technically speaking, Calder's works are relatively simple. He constructed them using a catenary system. Rickey's process was far more complex, involving hidden elements such as ball bearings, lead weights, gimbals, and rotors. As Rathbone writes in her book, "Experimenting with a variety of balancing acts, he was combining swings with pivots, rocking parts with fluttering parts, circles churning within circles, towers of pins upon pins." In terms of technique, Rickey's work stands midway between David Smith's welded constructions and Richard Serra's prop pieces, where the elements are held together by gravity alone.

Though both Rickey's and Calder's work is dependent for its actions on the pressure exerted by currents of air, Calder's movements are governed by chance; Rickey's are carefully calculated, calibrated, and governed by the laws of mechanics, the ultimate goal being to achieve a state of equilibrium and balance. No part moves more than it should in any direction, and no matter how far from the center of gravity it travels, it always makes its way back. In its cultivation of randomness and chance—as well as in some of its iconography—Calder's work is, in spirit, fundamentally Surrealist. This much was clear from MoMA's show, where one became aware of the imprint of his friend and early mentor Joan Miró as never before. By contrast, Rickey's art is fundamentally Constructivist in spirit. Its rationalist roots track right back to the Bauhaus and De Stijl, and one feels that he found a way to express in sculpture—in moving sculpture, no less—the harmony, balance, and distillation of nature one finds in a classic Mondrian painting. To separate himself thoroughly from Calder and the idea of mobiles, Rickey used the word "kinetic" to describe his sculptures.

Though most familiar as a public artist, Rickey started small and continued to work in modest scale throughout his life. One of the gems of the Kasmin show is *Crucifera—Pillar of Light* (1994), a glittering, eight-foot-tall pointillist work consisting of a column attached to a wall aflutter with dozens of tiny stainless steel squares on rods that spin in the breeze. His signature works are his "blade" sculptures—the Hirshhorn's *Three Red Lines* is one—in which two or more needle-like forms are mounted on a vertical support where they move in the breeze. (The works on the High Line are also blades.)

That the range of his invention was not limited to those typical blades is evident in the Park Avenue installation. (*Annular Eclipse*, made in 1998 of two large, rotating circles atop a pylon, has been on permanent view outside the News Corp building in Manhattan since 2017.) *Breaking Column II* (1989) is a tall, skinny sculpture of five superimposed rectangular boxes, the top three of which move independently off-axis, often it seems precariously (Rickey loved to challenge our expectations), before returning to the vertical. It is both anthropomorphic, suggesting a circus stilt walker and, in this context, a witty commentary on the skyscrapers that surround it. *Four L's Excentric II* (1987–90) exemplifies a recurring theme in Rickey's work, perhaps derived from his background as a painter, of playing off the idea of a two-dimensional plane and a three-dimensional sculpture. Seen face-on and at rest, it appears to be a flat rectangle formed by four L-shaped sheets of stainless steel. But in the breeze, however, everything changes. Each L is attached to its own rod and, as it angles away from the vertical, reveals itself to be a three-dimensional volume. Two other Park Avenue works partake of a similarly playful impulse. And in *Six Lines in a T II* (1979) Rickey shows how his signature blades can be endowed with an entirely new expressive effect through the simple device of shifting them from the vertical to the horizontal. Six of them sway gently up and down, and again the associations are multiple: with the landscape, with the swells and eddies of a body of water, with birds seeking to take flight. Besides beauty, the unifying element to all these works is calm. Rickey calibrated the movements of his works so they would be slow. This may be his greatest gift. For while in their constant motion they echo the noise and bustle of their Park Avenue setting, in their pacing they are also an antidote to it, the perfect balm for our harried, frenzied age.





George Rickey, *Breaking Column II*, 1989, Stainless steel, on view at Park Avenue, New York. © George Rickey Foundation, Inc./Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY, Courtesy of Kasmin. Photo: Diego Flores.

Rathbone has written a model artist's biography. She chronicles her subject's life, offering illuminating insights into his character, personality, and motivations, while not whitewashing his faults. She deftly interweaves life and art, showing how Rickey's real-world experiences shaped his evolving aesthetic. In her limning of his youthful formation, for example, the expression "the child is father of the man" has never been more appropriate. We see Rickey sitting with his clockmaker grandfather at his workbench, assembling Singer sewing machines during a summer job, and sailing with his family. With these outings, she writes, "George became intimate with the water and the wind and the movements of the boat—pitch, roll and yaw—that would inform his art in years to come." She discusses the work with authority and insight (although a section speculating on the influence of Rickey and David Smith on each other's work seems forced) and places both art and artist in the broadest possible aesthetic and historical contexts.

In writing about Rickey, Rathbone faced two challenges. First, he led a relatively uneventful life, at least by the tabloid standards we have come to expect from certain art-world figures. A man, as she puts it, "of rigorous self-discipline and constant preoccupation with his work," he knew what he wanted to do early and pursued it with no salacious detours. Yet while uneventful, his life was not unperturbed. His father died early, leaving him in charge of his family. Two sisters were deeply troubled, with one dying by suicide. And he was married twice, the second union being marred by two miscarriages and a difficult, contentious end.

The larger problem is that Rickey spent the first third of his professional life as a teacher, making work in his spare time. So his career didn't fully blossom until he was in his forties. This might have made for a few hundred tedious pages of curriculum discussions and faculty-lounge gossip—and through no fault of Rathbone's there are a few such longueurs—but some discussion of his classroom career is necessary, given that much of Rickey's teaching proved crucial to his formation as an artist. In the late 1940s, in part to broaden his horizons in his job at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, he enrolled in Chicago's Institute of Design and signed up for its foundation course, which was based on the Bauhaus's *Vorkurs*. "The pedagogical goal was essentially to offer students an approach to problem solving rather than rote vocational skills," writes Rathbone; "The program offered him a new approach to teaching

but just as important, a reassessment of his own direction as an artist.” It also exposed him to advanced thinkers like the faculty member Buckminster Fuller and, as a visiting speaker, the sculptor Naum Gabo, whose concern with what he called “movement itself” in sculpture had a decisive impact on Rickey. Four years later, now at Indiana University in Bloomington, he reconnected with Smith, whom he had previously met and who was now joining the faculty. Smith taught him oxy-acetylene welding and converted him to the virtues of using stainless, rather than mild, steel. Though much more expensive, it was lighter and stronger and, when burnished, reflected light off its surfaces. This play of light is one of the most distinctive aspects of the Park Avenue installation and of Rickey’s work as a whole.

One notable feature of this book, and one for which Rathbone deserves much credit, is the attention she gives to the role played by Rickey’s wife, Edith, in his career. She functioned as his executive secretary and business manager, chairing morning strategy meetings every day and typing his correspondence. So indispensable was she that Rickey began paying her a salary. As Rathbone writes:

Long before the advent of interactive digitized spreadsheets, which would have served her well, she created a work plan on paper of all the sculptures George expected to produce over the next year to fulfill his obligations to galleries, private collectors, museums, and public spaces. She calculated the time it took to pack and assemble sculptures, included contingencies such as if a work should sell, and reserved about eight weeks of his time under a special category called “new experimental work” that she knew he would count on. . . . Far beyond the duties of wife and mother, Edie was proving herself to be a *secrétaire extraordinaire* with a unique style and inside knowledge of every facet of her husband’s operation.

In addition, her ebullient personality—so different from Rickey’s more rational, sober nature—proved indispensable when it came to wooing collectors and other influential individuals. Sadly, a lifelong sense of insecurity got the better of her late in life, and she spiraled into a mental and physical decline, predeceasing Rickey by seven years. Artists’ wives are often off-screen presences in the biographies of their spouses. Edith Rickey was anything but, and, thanks to Rathbone, she gets her due.

There is one serious flaw to this book and it is not of the author’s making: It is woefully—indeed shamefully—short of reproductions of Rickey’s work. Of the two dozen photographs in the book, only a quarter are of Rickey’s sculpture. For a publisher of art and photography books of Godine’s stature to have scanted images here is a grave disservice to author, subject, and reader. That aside, Rathbone has written a very important book, one remarkably like the creations of her subject, where all connections are made clearly and cleanly and the whole structure is well-balanced and completely transparent.

# sculpture

## George Rickey

### Park Avenue and Kasmin Sculpture Garden

JAN GARDEN CASTRO

OCTOBER 12, 2021



George Rickey, *Four Ls Excentric II*, 1987–90. Stainless steel, 212 x 83 in. Photo: Diego Flores, Courtesy Kasmin and the George Rickey Foundation

New York is currently celebrating George Rickey's wind-driven, slow-moving sculptures with exhibitions at two different venues. Nine works stroll the Park Avenue mall, and three dance in the Kasmin Sculpture Garden next to Chelsea's High Line, along with smaller works enlivening the indoor gallery. Each presentation (both on view through November 30, 2021) slows time in its own way, reminding us to pay closer attention to the attitudes suggested by various kinds of movement.

Rickey's work explores balancing acts that intermix nature, movement, signs, and symbols. As his son, Philip Rickey, who manages the George Rickey Estate and the George Rickey Foundation and who worked with the Sculpture Committee of the Fund for Park Avenue, the New York City Art in the Parks program, and the Kasmin gallery directors to realize these exhibitions, explains, the artist's construction techniques rely on shipbuilding, clockmaking, and traditional engineering methods: "Getting the weights on either side of the pivot point allows [the branches] to move more easily, to be sensitive to the slightest air movement. For example, in a simple clock pendulum, the weight would be centered between two pivot points. My father realized that he would have more opportunity for movement



if he moved elements outside the point of pivot. That's when he developed his opposing knife-edge bearing. Some pieces have a gimble, like what a compass sits on. So, my father just modified ancient technologies in some ways."

The nine monumental sculptures along the Park Avenue mall between 52nd and 56th Streets—dating from 1964 to 2002, when Rickey died—demonstrate his original approach to making lines, crescents, circles, and other forms that interact with their surroundings. *Breaking Column II* (1989), a 25-foot-tall column, sways in the wind like a pliant giant with a tilting head. In *Space Churn with Octagon* (1971), which is related to a project that Rickey did for Documenta III, swirls of angled, circular forms with polished surfaces deflect sunlight. This work and the palm-shaped *Two Conical Segments Gyrotory Gyrotory II* (1979) are among Rickey's most complex works. The latter features a horizontal beam that moves 360 degrees and two types of gyration.

The stainless steel ring of *Untitled Circle* (2002), the most Minimalist work on Park Avenue, interacts with the grid structure of Lever House and the honey locust trees on the green. *Chevron Theme* (1990) offers three hollow chevron outlines, which harken, as Philip Rickey explains, to when the artist was a sergeant in the army. *Four Ls Excentric II* (1987–90) consists of four L shapes that sometimes align into an abstract, off-center Scottish Presbyterian cross. The unusual spelling of the title plays with various meanings of "out of the center," or it could mean formerly (religious). Is the suggested cross present or absent? It's in the space between the L forms. Viewers will find their own readings of Rickey's symbols and signs.

In the Kasmin rooftop garden, *Two Red Lines* (1963–75), *Five Lines in Parallel Planes* (1966), and *Peristyle II* (1966) all balance lines that move in individual ways. Each line has a pivot point and is engineered so that the lines "talk to each other" but do not collide. These early works owe something to the Bauhaus and Constructivist movements. The smaller indoor works range in date from 1968 to 1995. Their vocabulary shifts from a moving double circle to a series of tiny cubes arranged in a tree-like vertical configuration that seems doubled by its moving shadows.

Rickey was born in South Bend, Indiana, and died in St. Paul, Minnesota. His background is relevant to his stature as an innovative pioneer applying engineering and design skills to sculpture. Philip Rickey explains, "He grew up in Glasgow, where my grandfather was an engineer, and the family sailed every summer, so he had direct experience with wind and what made the compass or stove stay level. In a movie I saw recently, he mentions that seeing Japanese wind chimes as a child developed his interest in movement." Rickey studied at Oxford and spent a year in Paris. After a solid career as a painter and art teacher, in 1945, while serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps (before it became the Air Force) in Laredo, Texas, he made his first sculpture.

By the beginning of the 1950s, Rickey started to prioritize sculpture. He marketed a Calder-like, do-it-yourself mobile kit (*Mobikit*, 1952). His eureka moment came when he realized that he could build kinetic sculptures unlike Calder's works, and mobile in more controlled ways, by applying engineering skills learned from his father and grandfather and practiced during his military stint. He also gleaned lessons from other artists, including Naum Gabo, Mark Tobey, Ellsworth Kelly, and David Smith. In 1954, when Rickey was teaching in Bloomington, he invited Smith to join him as artist-in-residence for a year. Their exchanges helped to improve Rickey's welding and finishing techniques.

By the late 1950s, his work began to enter top public and private collections. In 1964, he participated in Documenta III in Kassel, Germany. Rickey taught art until he began working full time as a sculptor around 1966. He exhibited at galleries and museums across the U.S. and Europe and received many prestigious awards. His largest work, *Annular Eclipse, Sixteen Feet Variation I* (1998), is a permanent circular sculpture at Rockefeller Center. According to Belinda



Rathbone in *George Rickey: A Life in Balance* (Godine, 2021), Rupert Murdoch bought the work and located it there to “stop traffic” (and draw attention to the vertical expanse of glass in front of Fox News).

Rickey’s deceptively simple geometric forms contain more nuances than revealed by a quick glance. Every surface is animated with different grinding and polishing effects that, in turn, respond uniquely to light and shadow. Each form, carefully calibrated and weighted for balance and movement, also reflects a multivalent symbolism; the cross, chevron, palm, cube, and circle are images and symbols in art, life, and nature. The multiple readings of each sculpture are, literally, “blowing in the wind.”

## George Rickey, Sculptor Whose Works Moved, Dies at 95

KEN JOHNSON  
JULY 21, 2002

George Rickey, a sculptor widely known for his abstract kinetic sculptures, died on Wednesday at his home in St. Paul, Minn. He was 95.

Mr. Rickey was one of two major 20th-century artists to make movement a central interest in sculpture. Alexander Calder, whose mobiles Mr. Rickey encountered in the 1930's, was the other. After starting out as a painter, Mr. Rickey began to produce sculptures with moving parts in the early 50's, but it was not until a decade later that he achieved the kind of simplicity and scale that would make him an important figure in contemporary art. At that point, he began to produce tall stainless-steel sculptures with long, spearlike arms attached to central posts. Rotating on precision bearings devised by the artist, the arms were balanced so that slight breezes would cause them to sweep like giant scissor blades, tracing graceful arcs or circles against the sky.

In the ensuing years, Mr. Rickey set in motion all kinds of geometric configurations -- wavering stacks or grids of flat squares, shifting open rectangles, zigzagging beams, spinning shell-like forms. His work was often compared with Calder's, but while Calder's abstract mobiles had playful, organic qualities related to Surrealism, Mr. Rickey's geometric forms and machinelike engineering harked back to Constructivism. That was the early-20th-century Russian movement about which Mr. Rickey wrote a scholarly book ("Constructivism: Origins and Evolution," George Barziller, 1967).

His work was also in step with new sculpture trends toward abstract simplification. Unlike the Minimalists, however, whose elementary structures tended to bore or mystify many viewers, the fascinating movements of Mr. Rickey's sculptures appealed to a wide audience, and he received commissions from all over the world to create public works.

Mr. Rickey was born on June 6, 1907, in South Bend, Ind. In 1913 the family moved to Scotland, where his father, an engineer for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, had been transferred. While studying modern history at Oxford, Mr. Rickey also took courses in painting and drawing at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. After graduation, he went to Paris to study art at the Académie Lhote and at the Académie Moderne, where he worked under the Modernist painters Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant.

After teaching history briefly at Groton School in Massachusetts, Mr. Rickey devoted himself to painting full time. He had his first solo exhibition at the Caz-Delbo Gallery in New York in 1933, and a year later he moved to New York and set up a studio. His early paintings reflected the influences of Cézanne and Social Realism. During the late 30's, Mr. Rickey taught art at several schools, including Olivet College and Kalamazoo College in Michigan, Knox College in Illinois and Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Rickey served in the Army Air Corps in World War II. He was assigned to work with engineers in a machine shop to improve aircraft weaponry, an experience that reawakened earlier interests in science and technology. After the war, he resumed his peripatetic teaching career. A year studying Bauhaus teaching methods at the Chicago Institute of Design in the late 1940's was decisive, for it was there that he seriously began to consider the idea of bringing together geometric form and movement. In 1949, while working as an associate professor at Indiana University, he made his first kinetic sculpture using window glass.

In 1960 Mr. Rickey moved to East Chatham, N.Y., which remained his home base until the end of his life. He retired from teaching in 1966 after five years at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., but continued to make sculpture and to travel incessantly. To keep up with his public commissions and exhibitions, he maintained studios in Berlin and in Santa Barbara, Calif. His last sculpture -- his tallest, at 57 feet 1 inch -- was installed at the Hyogo Museum in Japan on March 30.

Mr. Rickey's wife, the former Edith Leighton, whom he married in 1947, died in 1995. He is survived by his sons, Philip, of St. Paul, Minn., and Stuart, of San Francisco.

It is a curious fact of contemporary art history that Mr. Rickey left no significant artistic heirs. Perhaps because movement in art is now found mainly on video screens, no sculptor has adopted his innovations with comparably persuasive ambition or elegance.

# Los Angeles Times

## Artist in Motion

George Rickey, fast approaching 90, is still creating fanciful, lustrous metallic sculptures

ROBIN RAUZI

MAY 15, 1997

Delight registers on the face of George Rickey as he steps into a garden full of his sculptures, and it doesn't stem from vanity. There's something about these metal structures--the way light dances on the surfaces, the way they move in the slightest breeze--that evokes a pure, childlike sense of wonder. Not even their creator is immune.

The garden--the backyard of Carl Schlosberg's home/gallery in Sherman Oaks--has been transformed into this stainless-steel forest for an exhibit in honor of Rickey's 90th birthday.

The show is not so much a retrospective as an exhibit by a working artist. Though Rickey will turn 90 on June 6--five days after the show closes--he is still hard at work in his studio in East Chatham, N.Y. Several of the works on display, such as "Two Open Rectangles Gyrotory," were constructed earlier this year.

Rickey was born in Indiana in 1907 but grew up in Scotland, where his father was manager of the Singer sewing machine company's British branch. His grandfather was a clockmaker, so it seems that tinkering was in Rickey's genetic code.

When Rickey went to college at Oxford, though, he studied history, and later he studied drawing and painting. It wasn't until he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II that he began to toy with kinetic sculpture. Interested particularly in the work of Alexander Calder, Rickey began making crude mobiles imitating Calder's style.

Later, around 1950, he started using stainless steel. He was teaching art at Indiana University and would pick up pieces of scrap metal from the local dump to fashion into little sculptures. He stuck with stainless steel because of its luster. Roughed up a bit, the surface reflects light from almost any angle. And, of course, it doesn't rust--a very important attribute, especially for his large, outdoor works.

"I think in the beginning I wanted to be as simple as possible," Rickey says of the angular, geometric parts that comprise his sculptures. Later, though, that became part of his style, differentiating his work from Calder's irregular designs. "It is the shape of the movement, not the shape of the parts, that interests me," he says.

It is the motion--unpredictable in direction or speed--that most everyone who peers at Rickey's work finds riveting. That's what attracted Carl and Judy Schlosberg, who discovered the artist's work in the Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden at UCLA in 1970. The couple have bought--and sold--dozens of Rickey's sculptures since opening their gallery in the early '70s.



Paintings, photographs and sculptures are integrated throughout the Schlosbergs' 5,000-square-foot home. On a table next to an easy chair in their bedroom is one of Rickey's foot-high mobiles. Walking past it, Schlosberg mentions that it distracts him when he sits there to read.

"Then I'd say it's doing exactly what it's supposed to do," Rickey replies with a pleased look. "It's well-trained."

Despite their modern appearance, Rickey's sculptures are very simply designed, the parts connected with simple hinges or ball-bearing joints that control the angle and range of movement. Each piece is like a compound pendulum, swinging on that joint, its speed determined by how the weight is distributed.

The sculptures also gaily toy with the notion of what is aerodynamic. "Four Cubes Excentric," the size of a small tree, has large steel cubes on the end of branches. Their size and material imply substantial weight, but in fact the cubes are filled with foam. They spin in even the slightest wind.

Almost all Rickey's sculptures--despite their hard surfaces and sharp edges--have a whimsical feel that has made them popular as public art all over the world.

Locally, he has pieces on display at UCLA, in the courtyard of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in the Smalley Sculpture Garden at the University of Judaism. Other pieces are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

"I don't worry a lot about what sort of reaction they have," he says of the countless people who have passed time gazing at his creations. "I'm happy if they pay attention."

# ARTFORUM

## George Rickey

Staempfli Gallery and Fordham University Plaza

HAYDEN HERRERA  
SEPTEMBER 1975

George Rickey's kinetic sculptures are composed almost entirely of straight-edged shapes—long tapering blades and rectangular or square planes of stainless steel. But the trajectories that these rectilinear shapes draw in space are curved. The distinction is important; for Rickey, the movements of forms shaping space are of greater interest than the forms themselves. Motion, speed, and duration are the materials of sculptural form. He explores a counterpoint of visible and invisible geometry in constructions that are simple and straightforward as Shaker tools, but as mysterious in their implications as God's compass in medieval images of Genesis.

Though Rickey's sculptures move simply along certain paths, the variables of their activity, determined by the whims of wind, are complex, random and endlessly intriguing. Two Red Lines, for example, intersect, scissor open and slow increasingly as they near the horizontal, as if they were summoning energy for the return voyage. The blades of Four Lines Oblique Gyration, Variation II cut the sky like swinging branches and Two Open Rectangles, Variation III whirl like a pair of trapeze artists through cone-shaped paths, just missing collision. The most important variables are tempo, the changing relationships of parts, the unpredictable shaping of space and the fluctuation of light and shadow on moving steel that has been patterned by grinding to catch and enliven light. Because there is an inverse ratio between speed and size, the large outdoor sculptures (exhibited at Fordham University Plaza) tend to move with stately grace while the smaller works (at the Staempfli Gallery) are quicker and more excitable. The same sculpture can, depending on the strength of the wind, move with wild abandon, august decorum, or as tentatively as the last notes of a lullaby.

He calls his sculptures machines, but, preferring the variety and chance effects of wind-blown motion, he never uses machines to make them move. Rather he calculates the perfect balance, with the least amount of friction on the pivot so that his forms will have the greatest potential for movement. Paradoxically, it is the exactitude of his engineering and the disciplined persistence of his analytical mind that makes possible the unpredictable and freely lyrical movements of form. "My work must be precise or it fails," the sculptor has said, but precise engineering is not always mechanical in its associations. The sculptures with tapered blades counterweighted at the wide end and set nodding on knife-edge bearings are as elegant in the logic of their construction as egrets standing on one leg.

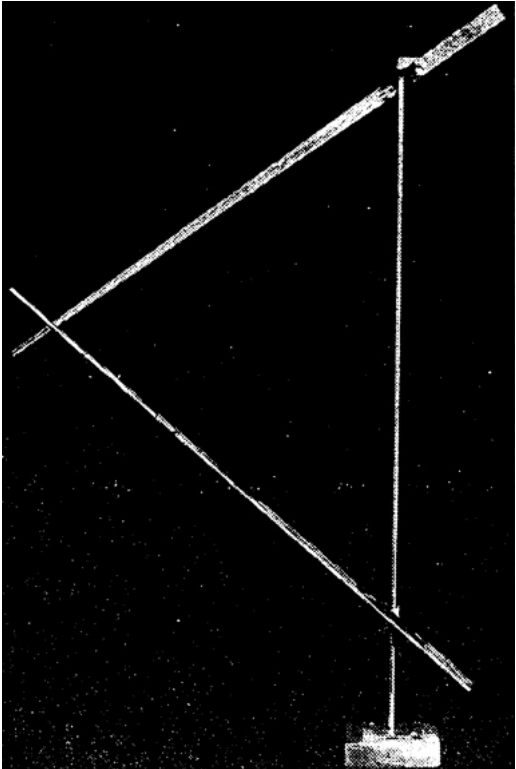
Rickey's works do not celebrate the usefulness of scientific ingenuity. Quite the opposite: Rickey delights in inutility. He recognizes the analogies between his sculptures and forms in nature, but, except for earlier works like Vine, 1962, the mobiles exhibited last spring explored nature's laws rather than its appearances.

Oscillating lines of steel focus our attention as if, like clock hands or the arrows on gauges in instrument panels, they were signaling some meaning. They are mute indicators of import that can only be sensed, not diagrammed or seen.

Rickey's sculptures are thus a meeting of man's imagination and knowledge with the workings of nature. Because their rigorously ordered design incorporates physical laws, the sculptures are prepared to cooperate with nature, accepting the chance effects of wind as part of their form. Following in the Constructivist tradition (a movement for which he is one of the major contemporary spokesmen), Rickey does not sculpt to express his subjective emotion, but aims at a broader content. Nevertheless, to see his lucid yet mysterious sculptures flailing and swaying, pointing and spinning in wind and space is to be convinced that they express Rickey's own poetic awe at the rhythms and order of the universe and, perhaps also, his sense of triumph at the participation of human intelligence in that universe.

## Art: The Mobiles of George Rickey

HILTON KRAMER  
APRIL 26, 1975



“One Up One Down Oblique Closed” is one of the mobiles by George Rickey at the Staempfli Gallery.

In the history of constructivist sculpture, the mobile—a construction engineered in such a way that its separate parts are set in motion by natural air currents to form a pattern of kinetic imagery—has long been identified with a single figure: Alexander Calder. To venture into Mr. Calder's preserve has apparently required a courage and a confidence that few artists have been able to muster, but at least one sculptor—George Rickey—has faced this daunting task with remarkable equanimity. The result is a body of work that boasts a distinct—and distinctly appealing—esthetic profile of its own.

Mr. Rickey's recent work is currently the subject of two exhibitions: one of small, indoor pieces at the Staempfli Gallery, 47 East 77th Street, and another of large, outdoor pieces at the Fordham University Plaza at Lincoln Center, Columbus Avenue at West 61st Street. Working in a style that is closer to the geometrical traditions of constructivism than anything Mr. Calder has attempted since the thirties, Mr. Rickey has, in effect, fulfilled one of the promises implicit in the constructivist esthetic since, its 60 years ago.

This was the promise of an art that employed space itself—the so-called “empty” space occupied by the art object—as one of the sculptor's essential materials. The dream of constructivism has always been to create forms that would



articulate this space with an eloquence and vivacity equal to that traditionally achieved by more monolithic sculptural materials.

The forms Mr. Rickey employs in this task differ from Mr. Calder's in adhering, for the most part, to straight edges and geometrical shapes. When observed at rest, the flat rectangular planes and open-form "lines" of Mr. Rickey's stainless-steel constructions have an aura of forbidding rationality, and thus define a world of feeling from which the lyric impulse seems to be excluded.

But to see these works at rest is to see them only halfrealized. They are designed to move, and once they are in motion—as they are, in their various ways, in both these exhibitions—the image of something fixed and completely rationalized dissolves into the beguiling rhythms of a gentle lyricism. This is the source, I think, of Mr. Rickey's appeal: the success with which austere geometrical form is made to serve an essentially lyric impulse.

I must hasten to add that this gentle, lyrical side of his work is more clearly observable in the work at the Staempfli Gallery than it is, to this observer's eye, in the outdoor works at Lincoln Center. This is less the artist's fault than it is the terrible setting in which the outdoor works have been placed. The Fordham University Plaza is a charmless environment in which Mr. Rickey's constructions are obliged to compete with ugly light fixtures, a brutal, ill-defined space and a multitude of buildings in the distance that are among the worst that Manhattan imposes on the innocent eye. It is all too much for Mr. Rickey's esthetic delicacy to cope with.

His work actually calls for a more pastoral setting for its full realization. Central Park would have offered a more sympathetic environment—an environment in which the poetry of this sculpture would have communicated itself with greater force and greater pleasure.

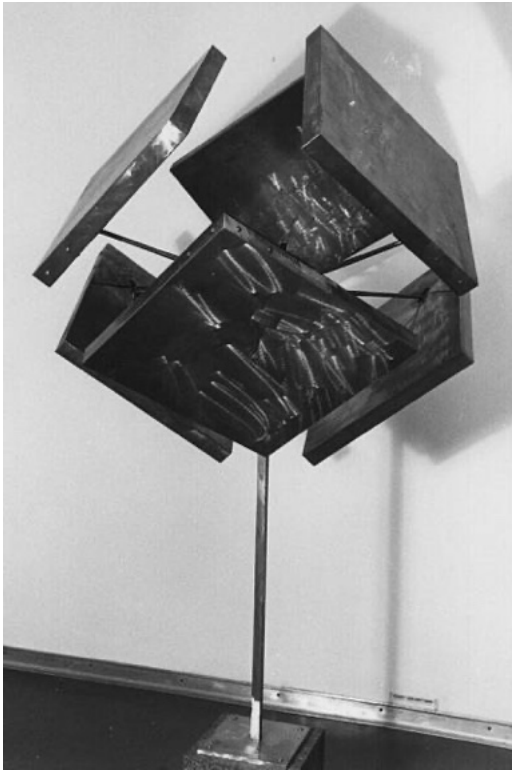
Both exhibitions remain on view through May 24.

# The Washington Post

## George Rickey's moving sculptures display elegance and strength

JACOB KAINEN

JUNE 13, 1971



George Rickey's *Unstable Cube VI*.

George Rickey is one of America's leading sculptors, but his products are so original that they can't be described in traditional terms. Rickey's sculpture involves the use of weights, balances, lines, planes and mathematical relationships. These elements are formidable enough, but an added component, physical movement, gives the artist's work its special quality.

Have no fear: I won't go into the technical principles that govern the sculpture, not only because I'm not qualified, but also because the work can be appreciated as art without a full understanding of Rickey's fine calculations. It's enough to know that a high degree of engineering skill is required, and with this preliminary realization out of the way, we can relax and enjoy the sculpture.

The typical Rickey piece is an austere structure of stainless steel. Firmly hooked to a vertical rod are a series of long blades, or rectangular planks, balanced so exquisitely near their ends that the slightest breeze can set the blades or planks into pendulum-like motion.

“Why,” you may ask, “is Rickey so concerned with physical motion in sculpture?” Certainly the feeling of permanence is important in earlier sculpture, and in most modern works as well, which are conceived in terms of volumes and stable relationships.

But modern science has shown that apparently stable forms are in constant motion. Taking off from this view of reality, the Cubist painters tried to imply a three-dimensional world through the use of shifting planes. Their contribution was epochal, and art was never the same again.

When Rickey’s blades and rectangles are set in motion by a breeze, they fill a definite portion of space in their progress and create the illusion of volume. The elegance and strength of the moving components, and the space they describe, make up Rickey’s art.

And why shouldn’t works of art move through the action of the wind? The wind is a natural force that moves man-made constructions such as windmills, weather vanes, sailing vessels and kites, to say nothing of biological and botanical phenomena such as birds, insects, bushes, leaves, etc. Certainly all of these depend upon air currents and articulated parts to achieve the beauty of motion we admire so much.

The sculpture reproduced here, *Unstable Cube VI*, is 80 inches high. It is composed of six hollow, rectangular planks of stainless steel attached at their ends to immovable arms fixed to a central, vertical pipe. The metal is roughly scoured to catch the light irregularly and to add a subtle free-hand touch to the geometric structure. When stationary, the piece appears to be a loose, open cube; but when activated by a breeze, the rectangles move gently on their fulcrums and describe opening and closing movements. The rectangles are nicely weighted and balanced that, once set into motion, they continue gently to open and close for a surprisingly long period. Thus the whole construction, as its title indicates, acts as an unstable, shifting cube, a fundamental timeless form that palpitates with a secret life.

Two of George Rickey’s larger pieces can be seen in Washington, one in the central court of the National Collection of Fine Arts and the other on the patio outside the eastern wing of the Museum of History and Technology.

# The New York Times

## George Rickey

Being Constructive at 63

JAMES R. MELLOW  
SEPTEMBER 27, 1970

### George Rickey: Being Constructive at 63

By JAMES R. MELLOW

**C**ONSTRUCTIVISM, according to veteran sculptor George Rickey, remains the most continuously unexamined and undervalued of the generally well-publicized modern movements. At 63, Rickey—hale and hearty, beaming, bespectacled—is Constructivism's most energetic practitioner and spokesman. He has just completed work on a giant 60-foot-tall wind-motivated sculpture commissioned for the Albany Mall. In the meadow next to his East Chatham home, he and his sailor-nephew, Norman, hoisted its 30-foot steel blades into place with their own rigging system. (Rickey's wife Edith claims that whenever she looked out the window, she saw either her husband or her nephew dangling in mid-air.) And Rickey's book, "Constructivism, Origins and Evolution," published three years ago by Braziller, is still doing valuable service for the cause; it remains the only authoritative general history on the subject.

Rickey maintains his book was intended only to fill a serious gap in art history, to provide a general outline of the movement. What Constructivism needs now, he claims, is what he hasn't the time to do—a thoroughly detailed, documentary history. It also needs what only a major museum could undertake: a properly comprehensive exhibition tracing the development of the movement from its beginnings with the van-

guard Russian artists Rodchenko, Malevich, El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin—who supposedly coined the term in 1913—to its present-day practitioners like Vasarely, Bridget Riley and a host of younger contemporaries.

The project, he recognizes, has its difficulties: much of the Russian work, for example, has disappeared or was presumably hidden away in storage in the mid-twenties when Socialist Realism became the prevailing esthetic doctrine of the Soviet Government. Still, he feels major museums have been overly reluctant to take on the subject. He has the satisfaction of noting, however, that when he began his book five years ago, he knew virtually all of the contemporary Constructivists personally. Today, in Europe and America, there are far too many artists who fit within the category for him to keep track of. Constructivism, evidently, is alive and flourishing.

Rickey is now sending his personal view of Constructivism on the road. The exhibition, called "Constructivist Tendencies," has been drawing interested crowds with its handsome installation at its first stop—the State Uni-

Lawrence Fried

Collector George Rickey stands behind a 1918 Constructivist chair "Like a Mondrian painting translated into the third dimension"





versity Art Gallery in Albany where it closes next Wednesday. From here, it moves on to the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque (opening Oct. 20), then to the University of California at Santa Barbara (opening Jan. 6)—the first stops of a two-year tour. The exhibition is comprised of 84 paintings, sculptures, prints and mixed-media objects, all drawn from the collection of Constructivist works Rickey and his wife have been assembling during the past 20 years of his longer career as a teacher, sculptor and inveterate traveler. For the Albany showing the exhibition has been enlarged by an additional 28 works—a few of them Rickey's own sculptures requested by gallery director Donald Mochon, as well as works that Rickey deems too valuable, too awkward or too fragile for crating.

Several of the pieces in the Rickey collection are gifts from friendly artists; many more were acquired by trading his own sculptures for works by artists he especially admired. This method of acquisition accounts for the modest scale of the items in the show. Ranging from a 1944 Auguste Herbin gouache to a sleek, small, gilded brass sculpture by Max Bill, these are works which Rickey says have "stuck to him" in the course of his travels and visits with colleagues. Their selection has often been determined by the conditions of airplane travel. He has learned, he says, what he can possibly "stow under the seat in front, behind (Continued on Page 33)

# About Rickey

Continued from Page 23  
or between my knees, or on my lap, and still get a drink or dinner and some sleep."

Rickey's definition of the term Constructivism is characteristically broad and inclusive. Beginning with the Russians, Rickey views a Constructivist work as one that is totally nonobjective and usually determined by geometric forms—in general, a work that is conceptually structured and built rather than one issuing from an artist's expressive tendencies. Within his definition, Constructivism subsumes a number of major historical developments, like the Dutch De Stijl movement and the German Bauhaus as well as several highly volatile recent groups—the German Zero artists (Piene, Haacke, Mack) and the Spanish group Equipo 57 (Duart, Duarte, Serrano), most of whom are included in the present show.

"Constructivist Tendencies" is chiefly an exhibition of recent and current work, intended to display the continuing vitality of the movement and the bewildering variety of techniques now employed by its artists, from the white nail-studded sculptures of Gunther Uecker to the motorized constructions of Hartmut Boehm, one of Rickey's recent German discoveries, whose "HF 8" consists of crisp red plastic planes jiggling in a constant magnetized dance within a series of plexiglass compartments.

The Albany exhibition, however, includes several intriguing historic examples which will not travel—among them a 1918 Constructivist chair designed by the Dutch architect-designer, Gerrit Rietveld, and a panel of nonobjective stained glass designed by the propagandizing theorist of the De Stijl group, Theo van Doesburg. The Rietveld chair, with its boxy structure of planes and struts in red, blue, black and yellow—rather like a Mondrian painting translated into the third dimension—looks back-breaking as an article of furniture. But Rickey maintains it is extremely comfortable and uses it all the time.

Rickey acknowledges that his Constructivist show is a limited, highly personal af-

fair—a current, one-man's-family view of the movement, so to speak. He is sending it on the road, however, to acquaint a broader public with the movement and in the hopes that it will encourage further studies. Who knows, that major historical exhibition may one day be forthcoming.

In the meantime, what will Rickey be looking at while his Constructivist works are traveling? Well, there is a modest collection of German Expressionist prints and paintings—Kokoschka, Kirchner, Corinth, Max Beckmann—which he has been gathering over the years. There is an early Picasso landscape



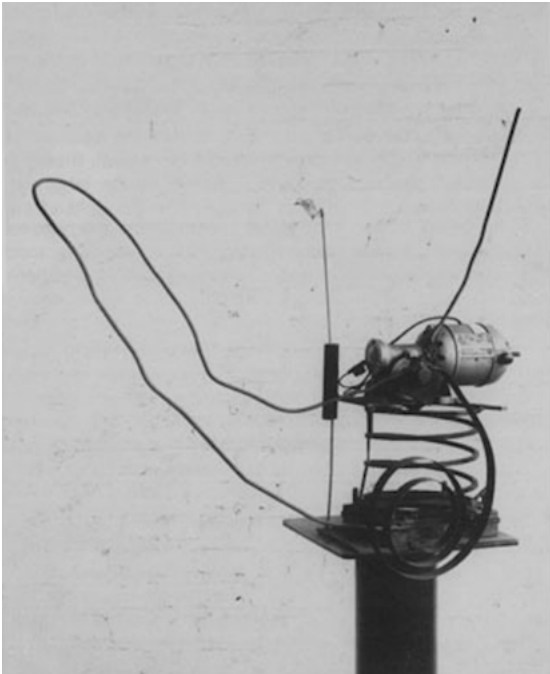
**"RENDEZVOUS CONCERTS"** — **Ciro and his Ballet Flamenco** will lead off a series of eight Saturday night music and dance programs, starting this week, at Tully Hall.

drawing, one of his first purchases made 40 years ago in Paris. There are several Northwest Coast Indian sculptures he picked up during a teaching stint at the University of Washington in Seattle—before such objects had become fashionable and expensive. And there is a growing collection of Shaker tools and artifacts of which he is especially fond. "This is Shaker country, you know," he says enthusiastically.

## Two Motion Sculptors

Tinguely and Rickey

FANNY SINGER  
JUNE 23, 2021



Untitled – Tinguely

Aside from the fact that Jean Tinguely and George Rickey are contemporaries and both make activated sculpture, they share little in common. Tinguely is a confirmed tinkerer, full of mischievous abandon and a Rabalaisian sense of humor. He is a loner who can create or destroy with the same objective love. His creations are as absurd as they are irresistible and he is as dead serious about these volatile contraptions as if he were painting the Sistine Chapel.

This Swiss enfant terrible is an anxious renegade. The endless source of his frenetic energy is religiously devoted to sophisticated burlesque. He is dramatically engaged in a simultaneous appeal to all of one's senses. Tinguely is an "action-sculptor," a Pollock or Mathieu in space and sound. A significant and distinctive feature of his work is that elements of its plastic make-up may be likened to the spontaneity of squished or dropped pigment.

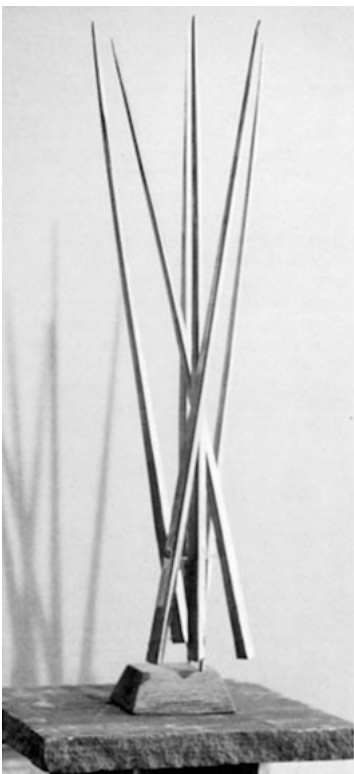
By comparison Rickey sings like a Whitman or Thoreau. He is concerned with questions of nature; his subject matter is air and the source of its flow. He enmeshes his glistening blades and foils in it and pays it homage by improvising fugues in its currents.

The vision of his work is American in its frugality, its unpretentiousness and its pursuit of technical perfection. It is Eastern, however, in its affirmation of infinity, its constant referral to symbolic essences, and its subtle yet everpresent characteristic of evoking contemplation.

Embracing the natural attributes of gravity, the slow, silent motions of Rickey's works are ingratiating and rarely disturbing on any level because they are not made of the stuff that imposes itself on the viewer. Indeed, they never really enter our lives in the sense of letting us participate actively (except as an awesome observer) in their divine Odysseys. There is a psychological wall between the sculpture and the observer which implies an absolute quality of Separateness between the two. "I want my art to be boring–," says Rickey, "–like Poussin." He voids his work of rhetoric or ego and concentrates on formal possibilities as they relate to the inevitability of motion activated by natural forces. Hence, the human identification with these works is in a mystical or symbolic yearning – something which is the antithesis of Tinguely's earthly passions.

Tinguely thumbs his nose at artistic formality, regulation, temerity and inhibition. His assemblages choreograph sound, motion, touch, chance, and wit. They not only provoke but demand the initiative of an intruder to physically switch them on and activate them. They rely on it for their very lives.

At the core of these two artists' styles, their mediums and their essential diversity, is their own personal view of the nature of motion. Both the pure consonance of Rickey and the dissonant expressionism of Tinguely must answer to and subject themselves to its whims.



Marsh Plant – Rickey

As a phenomenon expressing the properties of change, motion is symbolic of life. In the make-believe world of esthetics it is a tool, a prop, a God-given means to lend validity and "reality" to illusion. Where Tinguely defies its

natural attributes by utilizing man-made machines in attempting to challenge our accepted conception of it, Rickey willingly finds inspiration and acknowledges its deity.

Man discovers pleasurable and significant meaning in the varied rhythmic elements basic to motion. Our pulse and our heartbeats, the cyclical nature of time and the harmony of the universe are reflected in it. When Tinguely's machine-constructions approximate one gesture after another in the process of repeating a cycle, he is, like the strong, steady beat of the boogie-woogie, emphasizing the sameness of the particular. When Rickey's kinetic sculpture bobs and ebbs in a variety of time-rhythm phases, he is, like Debussy in his G minor Quartet, paying tribute to the infinite possibilities inherent in the cycle, or life, of the particular.

As a commentator on life, Tinguely, who likes Los Angeles "—because there is so much junk around to use," transforms discarded objects of this world into animated machines which satirize and sometimes mirror industrial life. When one closes one's eyes and listens to them even their cacophony is unbelievably similar to the production lines of Detroit.

If he is a humanist, it is in his acceptance of man's mechanistic environment as a sympathetic source of inspiration and optimism. His unequivocal commitment is that man should remain master of the machine, or to put it another way, that the machine is the child of man.

Rickey, it appears, is not so much opposed to this point of view as he is neutral to it. He perceives the motion of his forms by relying on the laws of equilibrium and the potential energy in air. His works move (as if by providence) in the character of visible extensions of invisible air currents. The result is a space-time symbol of the working of the laws of nature.

In the long tradition of art that falls into the loose categories of geometric and biomorphic modes of expression, Rickey generally belongs to the former and Tinguely to the latter. Strictly speaking however, both must be viewed in the light of cultural (in the broad sense) happenings: neon lights, merry-go-rounds, ferris wheels, oil-well pumps, yo-yos, clocks, see-saws, mechanical toys, juke-boxes, elevated subways, windmills, weather-vanes and all kinds of machinery must certainly have made their influences felt.

In addition, in the case of Rickey, one can't help wondering with astonishment at his profound sensitivity to and metamorphosis of a fluttering lead caught in breezes, or the limitless flow of reeds in the marshlands, or the never-ending twinkling of stars or patterns of ripples in a stream. By contrast, Tinguely's created "life" by its very nature ambiguously predicts, accepts, and sometimes even includes death.

Both contributions are valid. They are interpretations and expositions of candid clarity. We need not take sides for there is at least a little bit of each of them in all of us. It is not a question of mechanism versus nature which separates the two, but simply a matter of which aspects of one or the other the artist has selected for emphasis. And it is this psychic editing that gives each artist's work a meaning particular to itself.



# Rickey's Blades Swaying at Staempfli

## Kinetic Sculptures Are Elegantly Simple

By GRACE GLUECK

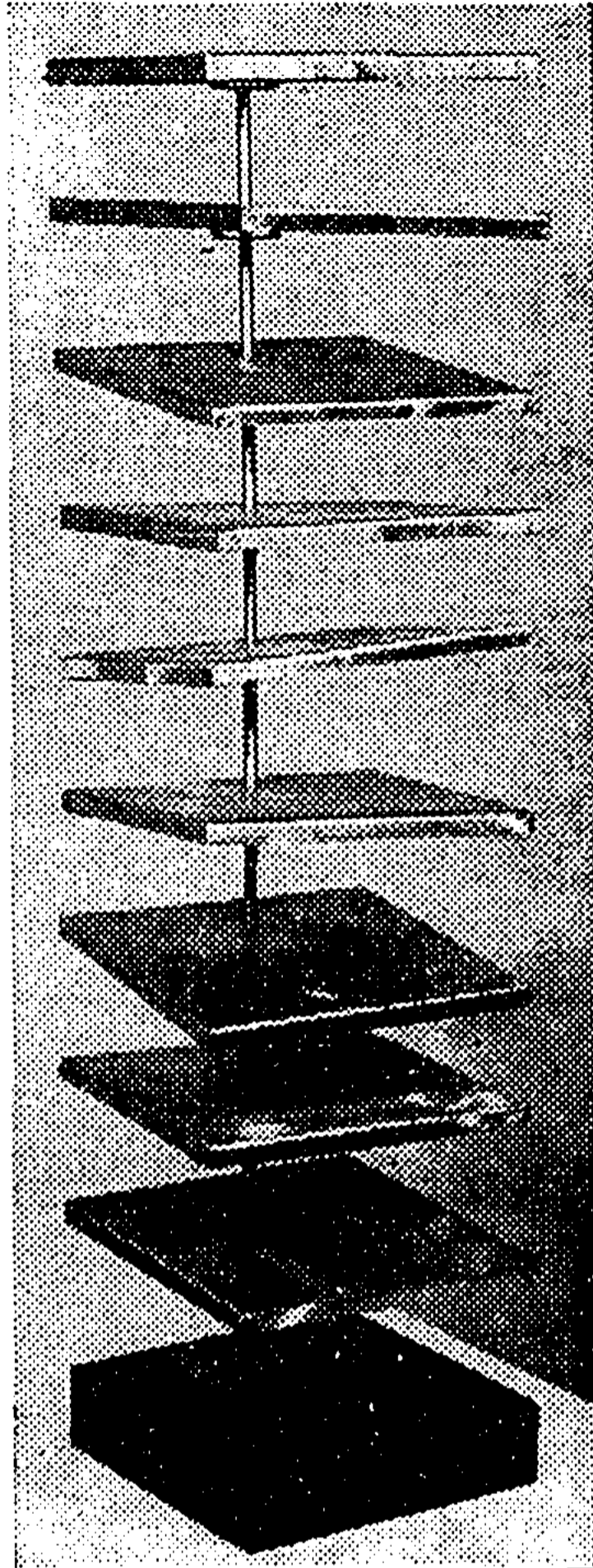
AT A TIME when kinetic art makes more and more strident claims on the viewer's attention, it takes a while to adjust to the spare, austere work of George Rickey. No flashing lights. No noisy, exhibitionistic forms. No electronic razzle-dazzle. Instead, an oeuvre of the most elegant simplicity, its effect achieved by slow, quiet movements that suggest far less the forces of technology than the elemental energy of nature.

In his new show at the Staempfli Gallery, 47 East 77th Street, Mr. Rickey continues his long-term exploration of motion by means of the thin blades (he calls them "lines") and planes of burnished stainless steel that have become the most characteristic motifs of his work.

Astonishingly, their movements—the blades crisscrossing in free counterpoint, the planes shifting and heaving as they seem to juggle air—are activated entirely by atmospheric currents (created in the gallery by electric fans). The paper-light forms are fixed on steel shafts by ingeniously crafted tracks that control precisely their small paths.

To this viewer, Mr. Rickey's linear pieces (rather than the planar) are of greater interest, evoking more immediately the movement of forms in nature. Of the many (actually too many) works on display, two stand out: "N Lines Vertical," a tree of swaying blades whose thrust is lengthwise, and "N Lines Horizontal," a forest of blades in horizontal balance.

The current show is a small sampling of the comprehensive Rickey exhibition planned for July and August at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.



George Rickey's "Column of Nine Planes," a stainless steel work at Staempfli's.