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Oral history interview with Alexander Calder,
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Transcript

Preface

This transcript has been corrected and edited at the Calder Foundation by Alexander S.C. Rower, with additional notes in brackets []. Parts underlined are uncertain transcriptions. Room noises and distractions have been omitted from this transcription.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is the 26th of October 1971, Paul Cummings talking to Alexander Calder at the Perls Galleries [New York]. Could we talk for a minute about Stevens Institute--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: and how did you decide to go to that particular school?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, we were in San Francisco, my father was head of the sculpture out at the Exposition in 1915. He was coming back to New York and...cause he had to do something there...I wanted to be an engineer because some guy I rather liked was going to be a mechanical engineer, that's all there is to that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ALEXANDER CALDER: So my father asked the chief engineer of construction what would be a good school and he said Stevens right near New York, so that's the way we got there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's how you got to Stevens. Were there any instructors there, professors that were particularly important or that you remember at this point?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I remember them. Well, most of them had some sort of private practice, too. There was a guy named Hazelstein who was primarily in the early stages of radio...but ah...he made a machine. Whatever the guy's name, Karn, he was a chemist and he had been in explosions so every time he got irritated he started to weep (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, dear.

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, but he'd get up and walk around his desk with *agita* to bad. Oh, there was a student there in the chemistry class, he was way up back about fifteen rows of seats, everybody took chemistry lecture at the same time. So Karn would lean over some bubbling retort and do this, and say "Yes, that's chloroform" or something, and the guy in the back seat said "Well, how the hell do we know whether it's chloroform or not?" Well, various things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was there about engineering that attracted you at that point?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I always liked to make objects. I had made them for my sister's dolls and so on. I liked working and I thought engineering was a line to that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A way to make things and do things. But you didn't have interest in traditional sculpture the way your family had though, did you?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, no except that I was in my father's atelier with him as a boy. Well, I can't remember whether I had any interest in them or not but I don't think so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, after Stevens you worked as an engineer then for various people?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, yeah, for four years at very modest jobs most of the time (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: You decided to leave that. Why? Did you find it not as interesting as you had thought?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I ended up after about four years in a logging camp in Washington, the state of Washington. We were up on a hilltop, well not quite on a hilltop but well, I saw three snow capped mountains, here, here and here. I asked my mother to send me some paints, so I painted that. I don't know how I got three point drawing (laugh). My mother didn't like it [the painting] very much, and I think she kept a goldfish bowl on top of it, I haven't been able to find it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, so then you came back to New York and started going to the Art Student's League, right?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there any reason why you picked the Art Student's League?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, I don't remember. I don't think there would be any reason. Oh my father had taught there but he had taught several places, ah...oh, I wanted to study with [George] Luks, so I moved on there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've talked in some of the interviews about, about the League and Luks, how were they, how was he as a teacher?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, well he was such a...well, you see I went first and Luks was full so they put me in another class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh I see.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh yeah well I did Hayes Miller.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Kenneth Hayes Miller.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, and I think he came up once when...I was only there a week or two. But ah...everybody would draw a nude and then they put windows in behind (laughing)...it attracted. Well, instead of that I drew the backside of a guy who turned out to be John McTrube, a painter. He had a very funny rear end of his pants (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fun, well did you like the League?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well see I was, I don't know I suppose I was average age, I was about 25 and I liked to talk, liked to _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Boardman Robinson, who's also someone you knew there?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well he and [John] Sloan were the real guys, I studied with Sloan and I even went to [Guy Pène] du Bois, but I didn't like him much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was Robinson as an instructor?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, he was very good, he didn't, he didn't touch your apparatus, or handle your drawings...he was way ah...Dolly [Perls] just ask me how I got going on thin line drawing and I think it was there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really with him?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, no, with a...Jean Lipman has an idea...long ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was the line drawing developed because of the work on the Police Gazette--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, no--

PAUL CUMMINGS: cause I know you did lots of them?

ALEXANDER CALDER: I got the job because I had some of the drawings of single line. When I started doing drawing I use to patch them up a little (laugh). Well, the editor at that time was named Robinson. As I understood he had a very elegant mother who's name was Fox, widow of the proprietor of the Police Gazette. She had a portrait done by some guy, and he put an oak tree in the side and I said "What's that tree for?" and Robinson said "Well, that's tradition" (laugh). He used to like to paint himself so he picked me up one Sunday and we went off in the sticks in Long Island, it was not a very nice day but we finally set up to take a bead on a farmhouse at some distance and he was in front with an easel and so on, and I was behind...I always liked to nail my things [canvases] to a tree. At the League they used to sell old canvases that had been used quite a lot, but they'd be shiny or have naked ladies on them, well, the one I had for him, I had painted his back and what was beyond him and I had a naked lady on my canvas, when he took a look at it he was frightened stiff (laugh) and he couldn't wait till I blacked her out (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fun. Were there any students you met at the League who became friends or remained friends or people that were interesting?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well...yeah, some girls, some boys. No, no, well I didn't get to be friends with everybody. There was a guy named John Graham, well his name was Debrowsky at that time and he was Russian and he was a monitor of class at Sloan's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, was he? I didn't know that.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah and a guy named Brodsky, I don't know who else but about five of us would draw very fast and I was happy (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you get to know John Graham very well?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I thought I did...we were very close buddies for a year or so and then...oh, he married one of the girls from the League and they got along for a while...but he died two or three years ago at the age of ninety in London and that was a surprise, I hadn't thought of him as being so old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know it kind of surprised everybody, you know, that he was so old. But, you know, considering the people you studied with, it's interesting to know that he was there. Was he as involved with modern European art as...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Who?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Graham.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I don't know he...I think he took a black pencil here and a red pencil there and he did that (gesture) and that was a lady (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fun.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, he was, oh I don't know I don't remember, I guess, like everybody. He tried very hard to earn a living doing fashion drawings. He'd get a good fashion drawing but there's something out of kilt somewhere, so he never did do that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work for any other publications besides the National Police Gazette?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, I don't think so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the only one?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a particular reason why you went off to Paris, or was that just like the place to go?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I'd heard of Paris since the year one from my parents, and well, they spent two or three years a piece there. But ah...I just thought of it as the place to go. A friend, Arthur Frank, told me about Paris; Montmartre, Montparnasse. He was a very nice guy, he was a painter, I don't know what he painted, Arthur Frank, he was a bit older than I...well he had been divorced sometime pretty recent, and they put their furniture in storage and he had lost the ticket and he didn't know how (laugh)...[to get it out]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible. Well, how did you find Paris after New York, as a place to live and work?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I liked it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it easier or more difficult?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, I found a place to live, on the rue Daguerre.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you were there quite a period of time the first time you went over, quite a number of years?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I don't think I've ever been there two years straight.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know you're always going back and forth, back and forth...

ALEXANDER CALDER: I went over in '26 and then I met some American who wanted some posters made [Student Third Class Association] and I made them for him but for that I took a trip on the Holland American line, two directions. [Europe, USA, Europe]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you find it easy to meet artists in Paris and people were there lots of--?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I don't know I just didn't think about it--

PAUL CUMMINGS: It just happened.

ALEXANDER CALDER: people who came along...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well you didn't study in Paris or anything, you really went there to work didn't you?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah well, I went to...what the hell is it?...behind the [Café] Dôme...big...I don't think it was called a _____ ...académie...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Chaumière.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Grande Chaumière.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Grande Chaumière, right, right. What, just for drawing?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well did you, cause you weren't making sculpture objects at this point were you? you were what, painting and drawing--?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I've always made objects of some sort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, what is "of some sort" do you mean?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, usually they're made of wire...and ah...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, when did you start using wire?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I used wire since I was a kid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you did.

ALEXANDER CALDER: I used to get the...when they'd splice a cable in the street, there'd be a lot of crop ends of copper wire.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you'd make little bits and things out of them. I suppose Jean Lipman has talked endlessly about the circus and everything, cause she is doing something on that hasn't she?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh well, I don't think she's talked endlessly, cause I expect to see her again (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I was looking at it [circus] the other day in the Whitney and there's an extraordinary number of pieces. Is that all of the pieces or were there more?

ALEXANDER CALDER: That's about all. I had several that I made when they were used together. I had a guy who had a, he was a strong act, flame goes up from the top of his head, that was too much bother.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I noticed that one of the things that I found interesting in looking at it is that there's so much use of balance and counter balance and things in making the various people or animals stand up or move and things like that.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well I guess most of it was simple mechanics and some of it was just luck, pure luck. The trapeze where the lady swings on, then all of a sudden she goes that way and grabs the guy. Well, I just tried to do modifications and then she did it. When I made the film [*Cirque Calder*, 1961] where she did it the first time...some guy and she never had before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It seems that from what I read anyway, that you gave many, many performances of that?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, I used to drag the five valises and a gramophone of some sort...I even did it for hire once or twice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really, that must have been fun doing it all the time.

ALEXANDER CALDER: I did it once for a lady named Brewster in Chicago, she had a very strange house with black and white paving in the main room. So I got her to put a storm door down so I could nail into it and then I put boards out in four corners to make it farther...and then I put a log of firewood on it to increase the tension [of the *Circus* guy wires]. Then the lady brought in all of her cyclamens and hid the logs (laughing). So then I said take those right out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you go to the circus in Paris ever?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because there's the famous circus.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well we, ah...I had some friends who worked for Dorland, a publicity agency. They brought some more people, and finally they brought the old Fratellini, the one with the top hat. He came to see my circus. Then there's a little dog that trots along...and he asked me to make one for Albert. Albert used to drag a duck every place. I made this dog for him, that was about `29 or `30 and they used it in the *Cirque Divers* and...oh, just falling to pieces all the time, the rubber wasn't so bad but the frame was wrong. See I only ran mine once or twice a month, but they had it every night (laugh). So...I used to go to see then once in a while, Fratellini...He's [dog] always being welded and new parts being put on. We tried to find it [dog] recently and couldn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was sort of life like generally in Paris in the late twenties and how would you kind of describe the typical activities you were involved with?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Working was usually in the morning and early afternoon, cause every body headed for the [Café] Dôme in the late afternoon and you would meet people that way. I knew [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi slightly and he came along one day and said "hello" and the guy with him said "who's that?" and this guy was [Jules] Pascin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pascin wrote something for you at one time didn't he?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah he wrote a preface to a show I had in `29 in the, R.S.V. [Paris, Galerie Billiet-Pierre Vorms, Jan. 25-Feb. 7, 1929]. Well, he ended it with about his having lived in New York and made a member of an artists group and my father was a member, and my father was very good looking and I was much less good looking errr my salgo I got him to say and then he ended up saying *g u d m e r d e* with five dots and then they changed the reading to *que lo par*, so they didn't understand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you met José de Creeft at one point there too?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, I met him quite early in Paris the first year [1926]. Well, I met [William Stanley] Hayter, he was married to a girl named Rosalie.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you seem to have met everybody at one point or another though?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well, I was on the tag end of the group that floated around [rue] Broca... [Tsugouharu] Fujita and various people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You met Miró, what the first time when you were there, in?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, in `29, a friend of ours [Elizabeth Hawes] from here sent me to see him. I went up to see him, he lived in a sort of a small Quonset hut and all his works but one had been sent to Brussels. So I saw one, a big piece of cardboard with a postcard or a picture postcard and a feather and a cork and some line. Well I didn't quite see that but I came on to it later. He came to see me once and I was running the circus show...in this show how the little birds pieces of paper that twirl. I ran it once in his town Montroig in Spain and he finally said he liked best those little bits of paper (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what were you doing at this point, were you painting or just drawing or running the circus, what to come back to?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, well a little bit of each.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, did you have any particular direction or were you just testing out things?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I didn't think about it. Every direction was forward.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you'd had a show with [Erhardt] Weyhe in New York. [New York, Weyhe Gallery, Feb. 20-March 3, 1928]

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And that was what? wire sculpture and...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, and some pieces, Josephine Baker, one or two that they have at the Museum of Modern Art, the smallest figures they have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was your first show in this country wasn't it?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah that was the first show, and I had one next year in '29 and I was abroad. [New York, Weyhe Gallery, Feb. 4-23, 1929]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was that received, were you pleased with the...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: That was in New York, the first one. Well yeah, well, then the one I had where Pascin wrote the preface, that was on rue de Boétie, guy by the name of [Pierre] Vorms...

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting because, you know, the traveling back and forth all the time.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well I didn't have much of a way to making a living in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about all the traveling back and forth, was there a reason for that or did you just like to keep moving?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I went to Paris when I had the money and when I didn't have any more I came back...or just enough for a ride (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: In 1930 I guess it was, you met [Piet] Mondrian.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How'd you come to meet him because...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well there was a guy who lived here, Frederick Keisler. He was an architect and he turned out to be a painter and sculptor at the end and he came over...I don't know how I met him, maybe it was through [Edgar] Varèse or someone, but he, he thought I was an American product and he wanted to show how well he was doing by showing him myself. So, one night...oh I ran the circus, well I put it up briefly with lots of planks...well one night we had [Le] Corbusier and [Fernand] Léger and Carl Einstein in one room and then I also invited [Theo] van Doesberg, and we had to send van Doesberg telling him, saying it was the next day because he would've had a row with all these guys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really, why?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well, yeah they were, they were very irritated with each other. He was very abstract and he had that publication *de Stijl*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes, right, right. Well how did you find Mondrian because I...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, he...it was his work not him that I was attracted to (laugh). No, he was alright, he never seemed to be, he never seemed to smile very much. I suppose that's the American in me (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what were the qualities of his work at that time, that interested you the most?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I went to his studio with a guy, he had rectangles of different colors tacked on the wall. It was a very nice studio, old fashioned but it had light here and light here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was the color that you liked?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well I don't know, I just thought he had something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you spend most of the thirties, cause all I have is you'd kind of gone back and forth and back and forth?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, well...let's see I came back in June of '29, met Louisa and then in the beginning of '30 I went abroad again. Then I came back and we got married in '31. Then we went back there and now we...I don't know, we came over to see our families and we always seemed to do something.

LOUISE CALDER: Well we bought the house in Connecticut in '33.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a reason you moved to Connecticut, or picked Connecticut or was it just, did it just kind of happen?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, well, I had done house searching two or three years before we met. Father wanted to get out of New York and he went to Pittsfield but in the meantime we had done the Hoositonic Valley once or twice and so I liked that sort of country and we...well we started out, we came down the west, down the Hudson River and over into the city, through New York, Cold Spring Harbor and now we were running short of cash so we borrowed ten dollars and that was the day we bought the house (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a long time to live in one place, isn't it?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

LOUISA CALDER: Well we haven't lived there...that was years ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean on and off.

LOUISA CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: James [Johnson] Sweeney did an exhibition at the Modern [New York, Museum of Modern Art, Sept. 29, 1943-Jan. 16, 1944]. When did you first meet him?

ALEXANDER CALDER: I met him in '33, at Pierre Loeb's in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you've known him really quite a long time then?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well Léger told me about him about him before I met him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the marvelous jewelry because have you made that for a long, long time or is that--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah I've made a lot of jewelry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, you see them constantly, when, how did that start though?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I was in Berlin for a little while [1929] and there was a girl I knew, Chantal Quenneville, and she was a painter. She looked like a pug boxer but she painted dinky little portraits. I made a fly out of brass wire, about that big and then it had a collar, simple wire, and then a beam out here and the fly stuck out in front and wobbled (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that was the beginning of it.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have any idea how many pieces of jewelry you've made over the years, or is that endless?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No.

LOUISA CALDER: Suitcases of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was lots and lots of...Well, one of the things I've always kind of felt about your work, is that you're very involved with the qualities of the material, I mean one gets a feeling you know, you liked, bend the wire and cut metal and...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think the materials have an effect on the making of a particular mobile or stabile?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah well, of course metal, iron particularly, you can draw it out and tie it together and...wood or anything like that, wood is very nice but you have to keep going.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about Sweeney because he's had, you know he's done a number of exhibitions of your work--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: and a great kind of association with you for a long time. Was he ever involved in, you know, well he's obviously discussed your work and things with you, hasn't he?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Was he involved?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean has he talked about your work with you and...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, no I never talk about my work (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, but he's written all kinds of pieces about it and things, do you like his writing, his content?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well he's very, desires a million perfect. Well, the book he wrote was the catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art, that seemed to be very terse and to the point.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there other writers who you like, I mean, [H. Harvard] Arnason has written a book, and various people?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, no, well I...Sartre once wrote an article for me, a show in Paris with Carré [Galerie Louis Carré, Oct. 25-Nov. 16, 1946]. Oh, I don't know, I don't really read them (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know one thing that I've noticed about them is that the range of colors that you use always tend to be rather bright--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: and there's always a lot of red or black or sometimes blue or white--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is there a reason you like those colors or are they just the ones that work for you?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I try to make it full of color and sometimes I just make one red or black...always just happens. You know you work in a direction to make four or five little objects like that and then you go off in another direction, that's suppose to be the secret of success or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you have any kind of theory or any idea about...what was I going to say? You know you've never developed any kind of aesthetic theory--

ALEXANDER CALDER: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: or something about the work, you just keep making things?

ALEXANDER CALDER: I...yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the large mobiles and the commissions, you know like the one for Spoleto [*Teodelapio*, 1962], which is so enormous, the big stabile?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Have you seen it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I've seen pictures of it, I haven't been there...but how do you do that do you make a maquette first or drawings?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I had a thing this big [24"] in my shop before I ever heard anything about it, something like that, and well a guy from the Waterbury Iron Works came to visit me one evening after a while, he said that would be very good for the entrance to a city (laugh). So not very long after that [Giovanni] Carandente wrote me from Rome. I don't know weather I...I guess I hadn't met him before...I can't, I'm not sure...but he asked me to propose a model for a cross-roads, he was going to put it somewhere else first where the main road goes up through Spoleto, I don't understand it but he...I found a photograph with a cross in wax crayon on it. But well, I tend to think that Italsider, the shipyards in Genoa and they made it, and they made it a little bit too big for this crossroads, so we put it in front of the [train] station and the autobuses come under it when they come away from the station.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you like the idea of the traffic going through?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, very much. I was all for painting a red disc on the side where you're not suppose to go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. When you were making large things like that, do you make drawings first or just maquettes?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, it's the drawings for me. I mean I make a sort of perspective, a transparent thing, it ain't a drawing, but it's just a sketch and then I make a maquette and a thing like that and then I take that to the boiler works and they enlarge it, the object will go into the drafting room. If you have an object and you want to find the center of gravity, they don't hang it up and draw a line, and hang it up again and draw another line, they calculate it (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, well you figured out some devise once, didn't you, to find the center of gravity?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, well it's very easy, you put a sheet, you hang it up on one edge from one edge with a clamp and draw a line vertically, then you hang it on, more or less 90 degrees and hang it again and draw another line and then you've got it. Well, then if you have a thing horizontally and you want to find the center of gravity you put a sort of a blunt center punch in the vice and balance it on the point, now you whack it with a hammer on the other side.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about the kind of cantilevered balance that you seem to do in some of the mobiles, did that happen or was that, were you kind of aware of what was going on?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, why I guess a combination (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cause the engineering seems to flow in and out--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: and in and out through all of them.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, most of my things seem so obvious to me now that I don't know whether it was my training or just what I would have done anyway (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, well it's just well, keeping doing them over and over and over.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well you _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the, you know, going back to the thirties, the abstraction--

ALEXANDER CALDER: *Abstraction-Création*

PAUL CUMMINGS: creation group? Were you very involved with all of those people?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Not very much. I showed with them several times, and we put out a little booklet of like biography and...well, there was some very good guys. I didn't know it at the time but I liked [Robert] Delaunay and he was a member of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you find being, you know being an American artist, so involved with the European art scene?

ALEXANDER CALDER: I was sure I learned to speak French eventually...it never seems to come over (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what 1950 you went with what the French dealer [Aimé] Maeght, right?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Maeght.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maeght, yeah. How did you get to join that gallery because he'd not represented an American before that, had he?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, well he may have, a guy named Kelly showed there once.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ellsworth Kelly, but was it that, I thought that was a little bit later.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, maybe but...well, somehow or other I knew [Christian] Zervos at Cahiers d'Art and somehow or other Zervos sent me to see him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of fellow was Zervos, because he seems to float through so many different lives.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah. Well he published a very fine volume *Cahiers d'Art* and it was very exciting to have something in there. I managed one or two articles...and then...well I don't know I guess he made a living out of selling things that people gave him. If you didn't understand that you weren't worth the trouble. But I think I understood that. I gave him a thing, but I really wanted to keep it (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well there is an awful lot of that amongst French writers and critics, isn't there?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, yeah, well they make a living that way and they should do it easily and then you give them some once in awhile. Then they have it and they can let it out piecemeal if they're hard up. I mean have a whole row of different guys' objects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Before that, you had exhibitions with just various dealers, didn't you, I mean you didn't have one kind of special Paris dealer?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No...no I hadn't...I only had a couple of specific shows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that that's made any difference for you being with a big dealer like that in France?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well it's nice because he sends a car for us to go over and take a painting (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's nice. They don't seem to do that in this country very much, do they?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, they...ah well...no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going back to the large project for the Los Angeles County Museum--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: you did what, tall girls [Three Quintains, 1964], the one with the water. Is that the first time you used water in conjunction with something?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, a long time ago...oh in the first New York World's Fair [1939], Wally Harrison [Wallace K. Harrison, architect] was going to put up a water ballet of mine in front of the New York Edison building, but the guy who controlled the manufacturer of the pumps never did come through so when we had there wasn't anything...finally nothing happening. So much later, I did that for [Eero] Saarinen who did General Motors in Birmingham [*Water Ballet*, 1956, General Motors Technical Center, Warren, Michigan].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes, do you like to do special commissions, special projects like that or...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah well, nice to get a job once in a while (laugh). Yeah, well it's amusing to try and fit something in...space.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you often have the problem of, well in Los Angeles it's kind of between two buildings?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well I didn't like that place very much, but it wasn't bad cause I had three posts or derricks or something, with things swinging around on each, one more complicated than the other. Then after a while they saw that the oil was coming up there in the water. So they had to put a derrick instead (laugh) and move me [the sculpture].

PAUL CUMMINGS: They moved you, oh, I see.

ALEXANDER CALDER: And then the thing got awfully battered by the water, it broke like celotex or something. It had been aluminum with that anodized color...

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know this large piece at Lincoln Center which is just a large stabile, I mean that wasn't specifically built for the place was it?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, I made eight objects in Tours [Etablissements Biéumont ironworks in Tours, France], I don't know, it took a year or so for them to come through. I was looking for a place to show them in Paris, in France. So I tried to get into the *Court Carré de Louvre*, you know the Louvre has a...you drive across outside, but behind the wall there's a square of rather sinister asphalt where they were putting posies in when I was outside (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you like having sculpture in public places like that?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's kind of fun to...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well that seems to be the reason for, the real reason for sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you've made very few motorized pieces of sculpture, you've...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, the first show [of motorized sculpture] I had in '32 in Paris I had fifteen objects [Galerie Vignon, Feb.12-20, 1932]. No, I guess there were fifteen little motors, but they were only posts sticking out of a box with thin wire and a red ball on the end of it going around and around (laugh) something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that finally didn't keep you interested did it? I mean the motors and interest in...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, there's too much tinkering involved. You make a thing and then you have to patch it and patch it (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's no fun. The only recent motorized one is that large one in Europe with the three, the signals that move, I can't remember what that one is.

ALEXANDER CALDER: I don't remember it. Where is it?. You know where it is?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I'm just trying to, I don't have a note about it. I just remember it's got the one with the arm that goes around like that and the ball on the end.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, it's in Stockholm [*Four Elements*, 1961].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, right, right. I mean, that's the only recent kind of motorized one.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, well that was the...I made several projects in '39 that same year, various things as they were completed there in Stockholm. I made those for the World's Fair in New York. Nobody ever looked at them (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really?

ALEXANDER CALDER: So I had these when the guy from Stockholm came around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so that's really an older kind of idea--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: that was built later?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. You know, in going back to the traveling again, cause you've traveled so much around Europe and everywhere, has this influenced you, or do you just like it as enjoyment, or do you look at nature or buildings or the city for ideas or do they come from...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: I don't know, well I suppose...I got a job now that...to build a...Hannover in Germany...collection...but I don't know whether it will still be open or not...I let it go so long...but I think it'll be alright. I'll go there and see what it looks like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happens, yeah. You showed with Curt Valentin [Buchholz Gallery, New York] here--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: for a while [1944-1955]. What kind of fellow was he as a dealer? Was he a, you know, an interesting dealer or..."

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh well...we got along very well, I liked him personally but a little Russian Roulette sometimes (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: That happens...ah, what about Marcel Duchamp? Cause you met him somewhere early on...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, I met him...well I knew his girlfriend [Mary Reynolds]. I met her in the Midi [south of France] and then it's really through her I met him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you ever interested in his ideas which are so...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Ah, yes and no. Some of his things are quite fine...but he always had a ready-made (laugh). Funny, we have several wine racks, bottle racks you know, *égouttoir*. He went out and he was interested in used commercially.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh that's fun. Have there been any museum exhibitions that you especially liked? The one at the Guggenheim [Nov. 6, 1964-Jan. 31, 1965] or the Museum of Modern Art [Sept. 29, 1943-Jan. 16, 1944], recently, some years ago? Is there any one that you've been particularly been satisfied or dissatisfied with?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I think you...you were satisfied...I quite like the Guggenheim, you see I was made for it (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you like the installation though?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, but Tom [Messer] had some little bits of plants hanging around (laugh). I further knocked them out, or hid them or...just one or two.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the large mobile? The white one, *The Ghost* [1964]? Was that made for the installation?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, that was made for that show, but it was bought by Philadelphia [Philadelphia Museum of Art].

PAUL CUMMINGS: You once said somewhere that you're interested in forms - forms which have meaning--

ALEXANDER CALDER: What?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Forms which have meaning or are worthwhile.

ALEXANDER CALDER: I said that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, and I was curious, what do you mean by that?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I don't remember saying it (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's somewhere in one of the...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Forms that have meaning...?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that you're interested in shapes and things...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah, I like shapes but...round or...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about shapes that have meaning?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, you've got me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know. It is just kind of an odd line in an interview I was curious about that. Well, how'd you like getting a doctorate of arts from Harvard in 1966?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, it was alright. They offered it the year before but I was having a show in Paris [Musée National d'Art Moderne, July 8-Oct. 15, 1965] and couldn't make it, so they gave it to me the next year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does it have any particular relevance or value or meaning to you?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, I was a little afraid I would get a delivery...demands for money (laugh) every year...the graduate. It hasn't transpired.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the ones with sound, cause there's some that have?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Gongs in it and all. Well, sometimes they make a noise sometimes they don't (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that a recent development or...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No. I had one once in Buchholz, Curt Valentin, I called it Trolley Car [*Streetcar*, 1951], because it had three branches of leaves and in the middle was a big brass gong that sounded just like a trolley car.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's terrific. So they've been going on then for--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: twenty odd years or so? Well, are there any of them where you've combined more than one, one gong or...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah. Well I had some where...there were a few where I had two or three put in. I have one up in Roxbury that has three little discs, cause I had strong air conditioning (laughing).

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it keeps going. Well, in making the kind of pattern of that, is that done through drawings or some kind of idea or do you just kind of work with a wire and the shapes and cut out...and build?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well I've made several, that one over there is similar. The one in the stair. Maybe there's one in the Museum of Modern Art...

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, I mean, you know, the way they kind of unfold?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah well, I don't know how I got that idea but...it worked (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, for example, even that one which is similar to what...do you ever make any kind of drawings of...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh yeah, well I make a drawing of the thing and the approximate points of support but when you make it, you're usually going back on the bottom there and get it hooked to the next one and then you seek for a--

PAUL CUMMINGS: The balance.

ALEXANDER CALDER: for an arc...and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So they really, they grow like...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah. I mean now you see the growth and the movement and try to get bigger (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, are there any 20th century sculptors that particularly interest you or...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well I like Brancusi...oh, Giacometti.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the quality, what about Brancusi interests you? What qualities would you say?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, the simplicity of his things. I only went to see him once or twice but his place was wonderful where...great simple forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was very crowded people have told me--

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've seen some photographs.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah well, he had to store them in his own place (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about Giacometti? What interests you about him?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Well, I don't know. There are certain ones that I like. There's the one with two wheels and the bar and the guys standing up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes and the figures, I mean he's so different from Brancusi...

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: ...who's sort of solid and he's so lenient.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Oh, I liked Arp, but the early ones with the panels with the sort out blocks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting. You've done very little modeling of any kind, have you?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've seen a few photographs of some odd pieces but not...

ALEXANDER CALDER: I've made some in wax. I lived in [7] Villa Brune [Paris] which is next door to Valsuani, the foundry. So I went there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: See what happens.

ALEXANDER CALDER: I've always meant to make some more, but (laugh). It's really funny about going back to some previous era where production doesn't seem quite right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, just talking about going back like that, do you look at older things you made for ideas and...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And is there a relationship back and forth...or only with recent...?

ALEXANDER CALDER: No, why I remember them mostly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that's always intrigued me is the fact that in a way what you've done is to make color move. Are there any, is there a reason why you used the few colors you do? Because they're not really that great a variety of colors.

ALEXANDER CALDER: Yeah. Well I like the original...I like black and white, that's one thing and then, black and white and red, red's very...it's the only color that really counts somehow. Then you just use the other colors to do [gesture] (laugh).

PAUL CUMMINGS: A little music to the sides. OK, well I think that's...

END OF INTERVIEW

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