



*Vertical Constellation
with Yellow Bone*, 1943
Photograph by Herbert Matter

Deployed Nuclei

Alexander S. C. Rower

As sculptural assemblages of carved elements, Calder's Constellations imply a return to the craft of his forebears. Yet as open, reduced-mass abstractions, they are a clear departure from the conventions of solid sculptural form. My grandfather reminisced about this later when he said, "They had a suggestion of some kind of cosmic nuclear gases—which I won't try to explain. I was interested in the extremely delicate, open composition."¹ These majestic sculptures reconcile tradition and innovation in a decisive way.

There were six Constellations in my mother's home on MacDougal Street. Her four-story townhouse stunned all who gained entrance, with its many mobiles, paintings, and pieces of furniture by her father, along with Indian prints, metallic Sufi embroidery, Léger and Masson paintings, and works by Picasso, Miró, and Arp. These were blended in a bohemian vocabulary she had learned from her parents, which was balanced by outdated wooden furniture discarded by others and pulled off the New York City streets by my father. The Constellations were mixed in there, too. One large one, up on the third floor, radiated a presence like a compact toroidal power station [PLATE 6]. Delicate yet assured, this standing Constellation, with its upward-branching tower, created a magnetic field that projected well beyond its physical boundaries. To encounter it was to feel as if you were discovering a sentient *being*. You felt its presence. I would occasionally spin the red and blue objects that were threaded on steps of wire, creating residual waves that pushed up through the sculpture. I'm sure I sometimes spun them too violently, trying to see if they would blur into purple. Another Constellation—a small one—was hung almost randomly on a wall by the garden door [PLATE 27]. A red "T" with four sprouting objects was on the mantelpiece, and there was a strange ebony bone that just hung out nearby, next to the record player, which incessantly blared Dylan and the Beatles [PLATES 16 and 11]. Two more Constellations were in my mother's workroom on the second floor. One, which stood on a bureau, I would casually

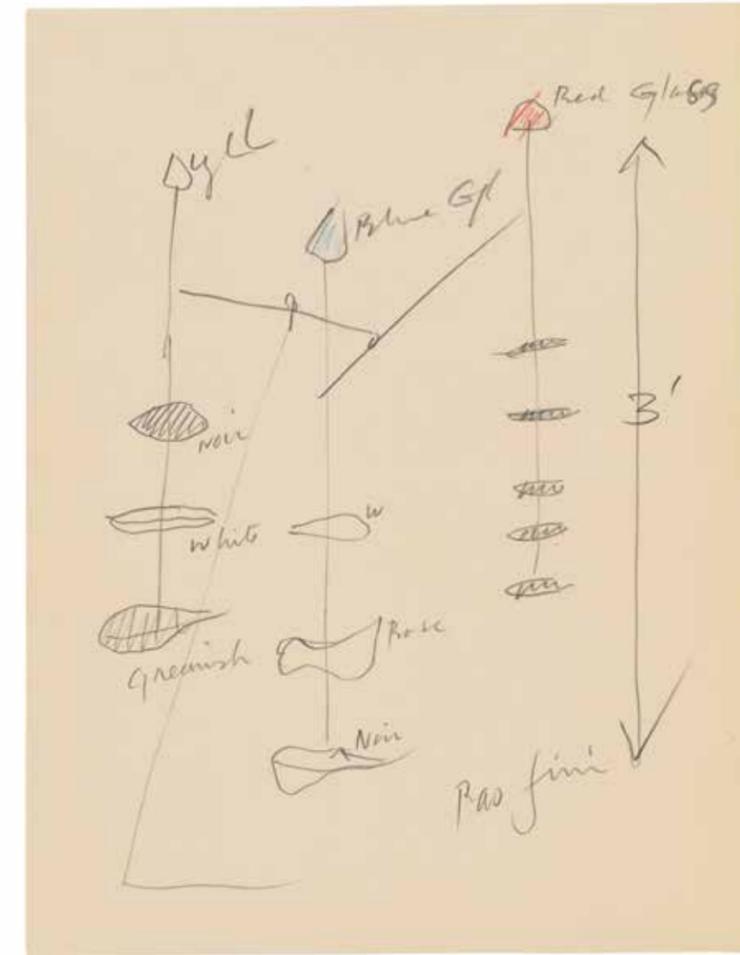
set into a very slow motion, often establishing an eccentric orbit by forcing an element down as I pushed it away [PLATE 23]. The ephemeral forms that it created in its wake were mesmerizing. But my favorite Constellation, the other one in her workroom, confounded me with wires set askew that supported diverse elements; a single red beacon was installed at the farthest extension. To me it was a mysterious landscape, with one pierced element providing a gateway to another realm [PLATE 2]. I often considered what was beyond that hole. James Jones had a sense of that, too, when he wrote:

I had the nervous feeling that if I walked in under one of the larger [stables], I might not be there; that if I pushed my hand between elements or through a hole of the smaller ones, the hand would disappear. I wouldn't drive a car under the Spoleto stabile for anything, because I could never be sure I would always come out on the other side!²

Over the last five decades, I've remained intrigued by these concentrated works, which have driven me to new places in my thinking. Existing somewhere in between the known and the unknown—forces crystallized from an otherwise ethereal force—Calder's Constellations access multiple expanding universes out of synchronicity with each other. Like the bowsprit of an ocean liner just poking through the wall, these works invite us to explore beyond our agreed-upon three dimensions—to imagine not what's on the other side of the wall, but to imagine what's *through* the wall, beyond our planar limitations. Their projections are evidence of an immense grandeur: a space station of an obscure dimension, tethered to the third.

The Constellations were born out of *The Crowd*, a conventional ebony sculpture depicting a group of people massed together, which Calder carved in 1929. He had relegated this work to obscurity. But in 1942, he took it out and destroyed it! He sawed it in half, busted it into pieces with an axe, and pulled it apart, exposing the native wavy grain of the ebony. It was a process of disregarding the work, only to reclaim it through an epiphany, and in the process reimagine its purpose. This extreme type of recycling was occasioned by the reduced availability of his usual aluminum sheet metal. World War II required vast quantities of aluminum for airplanes and bombs.

Calder carved chunks of *The Crowd* into suspended objects for a few sculptures such as *Untitled*, 1942 [FIG. 1, PLATE 1], before developing the pressurized collages that came to



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Drawing of *Untitled*, 1942. From a series of thirty-one drawings of objects Calder sent to his dealer Pierre Matisse to be considered for a 1942 exhibition. "Pas fini" means the sculpture is in progress; see *Untitled*, 1942 [PLATE 1], for final composition. The Morgan Library & Museum; Gift of the Pierre Matisse Foundation, 1997.

be dubbed the Constellations. Eventually he worked in a multitude of wood varieties, both common and exotic, which he exploited for their various qualities: walnut, maple, oak, ash, rosewood, ebony, mahogany, purpleheart, lignum vitae, and others. As in the sculptures of Calder's friend Brâncuși, the texture of the chisel and the rasp remained part of the aesthetic. He would carve, smooth, and occasionally paint the individual wooden elements, then lay them out on a table and assemble them with vigor.³ By resolving the individual objects beforehand, my grandfather created an opening for his intuition to flow as he gathered the elements together in sophisticated orchestrations. This process can be likened to the way in which he realized his mobiles: "About my method of work: first it's the state of mind. Elation. I only feel elation if I've got ahold of something good.... I start by cutting out a lot of shapes. Next, I file them and smooth them off. Some I keep because they're pleasing or dynamic. Some are bits I just happen to find. Then I arrange them, like *papier collé*, on a table, and 'paint' them—that is, arrange them, with wires between the pieces...."⁴

In early 1943, James Johnson Sweeney and Marcel Duchamp proposed the name “Constellations” for these new sculptural works.⁵ They were first presented in New York later that spring in what turned out to be Calder’s last exhibition with the man who had been his dealer for a decade, Pierre Matisse. A roomful of them must have felt like a fantastical calligraphic guide to an otherworldly language. Calder intended for the majority of the Constellations to hang at surprising positions in the upper regions of the wall, their heights dictated by the daring angles of their protrusions. Why shouldn’t sculptures hang above paintings? Especially these sinewy objects, perched in frozen animation, as if primed for action.

Calder’s entire achievement abounds with interrelationships—a fluid interplay of past, present, and future. And the Constellations are very much an extension of what came before. Reflecting on his first abstract sculptures, which he called volumes, vectors, densities, and arrested movements, shown at Galerie Percier, Paris, in 1931, Calder remarked, “For though the lightness of a pierced or serrated solid or surface is extremely interesting the still greater lack of weight of deployed nuclei is much more so. I say nuclei, for to me whatever sphere, or other form, I use in these constructions does not necessarily mean a body of that size, shape or color, but may mean a more minute system of bodies, an atmospheric condition, or even a void. I.E. the idea that one can compose *any things* of which he can conceive.”⁶ Like those hyper-refined and radical objects in wood and wire at Galerie Percier, the Constellations are “deployed” objects—a displacement caused by a community of elements resonating into alignment through Calder’s intuitive wisdom.

Much as they are today, modern imaginations in 1931 were perplexed by the profound ways in which Calder reframed space, time, and perception. One critic quipped, “You will regret to see, moreover, the artist evolving a grandiloquent and esoteric formula for constructing *volumes, vectors, densities (?)*, and *arrested movements (??)*.”⁷ My grandfather exploited time and space, dismantling not only the third but also the fourth dimension in ways that still confound us today: Is the fourth dimension movement, and thus time, or is it intuition, the kissing cousin of the sixth sense? The Constellations push beyond the profundity of the fourth dimension and allude to something greater than anything we can reason. They are attuned to my grandfather’s subconscious desires, with his emotions coalescing into waves of communication that we can react and respond to. With its universal suggestions, Calder’s art brings coherence to our circumstantial union and ultimately elevates our collective experience.

1

Alexander Calder in H. Harvard Arnason and Ugo Mulas, *Calder* (New York: Viking Press: 1971), 202.

2

James Jones, “Letter Home,” *Esquire* 61, no. 3 (March 1964): 34.

3

Thirty-three completed yet unused objects from Calder’s Roxbury studio can be seen in the endsheets of this book.

4

Alexander Calder, in Selden Rodman, ed., *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), 140.

5

Notably, Calder did not create terminology for his sculptures. It was Marcel Duchamp who christened the term “mobile” in 1931 (a pun in French meaning both “motive” and “motion”). In response, Jean Arp ironically coined the term “stable” in 1932.

6

Alexander Calder, “À Propos of Measuring a Mobile,” manuscript, Calder Foundation archives, 1943.

7

Pierre Berthelot, “Calder,” *Beaux-Arts* 9 (May 1931): 24.