

“George Rickey and Kenneth Snelson at the Palais Royale.” In Deux Américains à Paris: Sculptures de George Rickey et Kenneth Snelson. Paris: Louvre Palais Royale, 2006.

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GEORGE RICKEY AND KENNETH SNELSON AT THE PALAIS ROYAL

Robert Hobbs

By focusing on George Rickey's and Kenneth Snelson's mature sculptural styles, which were initiated in the 1960s, this exhibition in the Palais Royal gardens indirectly affirms the positive outlook that predominated in the United States in the mid-twentieth century when art and technology were thought to be eminently compatible. This view of a new and better world attainable through modern technology was first publicly articulated as national policy in the aftermath of the launched Russian orbital satellite Sputnik on October 5, 1957 when advances in space-age science were equated with national standing and Cold War politics. But aspirations for a symbolic understanding of advancing science, as both Rickey's and Snelson's early experimental works of the 1940s and '50s readily demonstrate, antedate Sputnik and extend beyond it to other concerns.

Looking at the desire for joining art and science as well as the U.S./Soviet space race from the vantage point of a half century, we now have the necessary distance to see how space itself - and not just outer space -- became an important thematic for new sculpture in the 1960s. This sculpture ranges from Minimalist works by Robert Morris, which project space outward to include viewers' actual space to Robert Smithson's Nonsites - his ongoing dialectics - which cancel the legitimacy of gallery space at the same time that they deny Sites in the country anything but referential legitimacy.

The overriding concern with space that was of crucial importance to Minimalism and Earth Art was also a significant aspect of the work of both Rickey and Snelson who found ways to make the actual envelope of space surrounding their sculpture an inherent component of it as well as an ongoing dynamic. In his Kinetic sculptures that slowly and majestically respond to subtle changes in wind direction and velocity, Rickey characterizes the movement of space as coeval with his art, thus creating compelling, if consciously unintentional, symbols of the space age's positive outlook. In a somewhat different manner, Snelson's sculptures acknowledge the preponderance of space as a generative force. Through ongoing networks of cylinders and guide wires joined in an interlocking series of tensions and compressions taking place in a seemingly weightless realm, these interconnected forces unite his sculptural components in an internal grip that, in my opinion, served initially as a compelling metaphor of the Cold War polarities, which characterized many of the social, political, and economic tensions and goals of the period, even though this was not the artist's expressed goal. Considered in terms of the time in which he first developed his mature style, Snelson's work for many people reinforced an overriding optimistic view about resolving this stalemate through rational means. Although his pieces can be viewed in historic terms as enacting and symbolically resolving aspects of a Cold-War stalemate, they also reveal a fascination with basic laws governing the universe and its way of connecting individual elements through tension and compression, which Snelson's sculpture is the first art to realize. His expression of these tensions enacts a fundamental push/pull, which his one-time professor, the American architect and theorist R. Buckminster Fuller, subsequently named "tensegrity," a neologism formed from the words "tension" and "integrity." Serving, then, as a primary vehicle for both Rickey's and Snelson's works, space functions as a potential or an active dynamic in the former's art, becoming the modus operandi for its movement, while in the latter's sculpture, it acts as a vector for animating and opposing forces.

Weighing in on the subject of the necessary interactions of science and nature, both Rickey and Snelson regard art and technology as ideal means for working with nature. Instead of using motors to invigorate his work as his fellow Kineticist Jean Tinguely did in his wonderfully lugubrious and lumbering machine-like sculptures that herald the beginnings of our postindustrial world, Rickey depends on the capriciousness of the wind, thus uniting his burnished stainless steel sculpture with nature, which is thereby acknowledged as its ideal force as well as the best place for viewing it. Since 1960 Snelson has pondered the actual structure of one of nature's smallest integral forms, the atom, in an ongoing artwork named "Portrait of an Atom." Believing that quantum physics does not obviate the ability to visualize the atom's structure, he has worked for decades to create a viable model that responds to (1) the sequencing of atoms on the periodic table, (2) the bonding of electrons, and (3) the discrete fields that individual electrons articulate. Although physicists have not readily accepted his model, many are intrigued with his ideas and believe that there may be important spin offs from his research. His investigations have enabled him to picture the atom as a nucleus taking the form of a sphere surrounded by different numbers of electron orbits perpendicular to it: the exact number of orbiting electrons thereby distinguishing different types of atoms. Snelson's "Portrait" renounces the dominant view of the atom as a replication of the solar-system model, which preceded his work and unfortunately continues to be the most popular view of it.

In consideration of Rickey's and Snelson's common interests in art, nature, and science, which take the form of mechanics and physics, it is not surprising that a warm and long-term friendship developed between them, even though Rickey (b. 1907 and d. 2002) was twenty years older than Snelson (b. 1927). A number of coincidental biographical experiences connect the two men and their work and thus create a symmetrical intellectual and experiential background for this exhibition. For starters, both started to receive public recognition for their work in 1964. That year Rickey's notable contributions to Kinetic Art were first understood in the international exhibition, Documenta III, which was held in Kassel, Germany. And Snelson's early technological achievements culminated in his inclusion in 1964 in an exhibition on twentieth-century engineering at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In addition to coming under the public's radar during that year for their cool, rationally conceived work, both sculptors share a number of the same contacts and interests. Both started out as painters and were keenly interested in the early twentieth-century machine aesthetic associated with the Bauhaus' aesthetic. Consequently, both studied at different times at the so-called "New Bauhaus" - László Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design in Chicago. And each enrolled at different times in the Paris academy that the French cubist Fernand Léger supervised.

Although the work of the two artists can be connected with the constructivist wing of modern art, Rickey, who had studied art history and taught studio art in a range of universities, was much more connected with this stylistic approach as an ongoing historical phenomenon. He wrote the book Constructivism: Origins and Evolution (published in 1967). In addition, he assembled, either through purchase or exchange, an impressive collection of over 100 constructivist works that were shown in the traveling exhibition "Constructivist Tendencies," which toured the U.S. between 1970-72 before being donated to the Roy R. Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York at Purchase.

In addition to sharing similar educational experiences and a general appreciation of art as a gratuitous form of mechanics, both men became known for their work in stainless steel, which Snelson most often combines with aluminum tubes. Since the first of these two predominately twentieth-century metals distinguishes Rickey's mature sculptures and both are important for Snelson's established mode of working, the special historical role that each metal has assumed in the modern period needs to be briefly recounted if we are to appreciate the historical resonances these works build on and activate.

Even though aluminum is the third most abundant element on the earth's surface, its existence was established only in 1808 by Sir Humphry Davy who also had the distinct honor of naming it. When a commercially produced bar of the aluminum was exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1855, the metal's price was higher than that of either gold or platinum. By 1927 the cost of aluminum was substantially reduced, making it a ubiquitous sign of modern design, and its capabilities - particularly its lightness, conductivity, and resistant surface - made it an esteemed material for household utensils and appliances. During World War II factories in Great Britain began turning

recycled aluminum pots and pans into such warplanes as Spitfires and Hurricanes to aid the country's efforts to counter Germany's aerial onslaughts, and in the United States aluminum production, which was deemed "critical" to the war's ultimate success, was increased sevenfold. This dramatic increase in production that served the needs of war became a cause of concern once peace was established. The plight of both the tremendous amount of aluminum and its manufacturing capability, coupled with a greatly reduced demand for it, was dramatized by the Alcoa Aluminum Company's development of the post-war advertising initiative entitled "Imagineering" in its effort to stimulate new imaginative engineering solutions. This advertising campaign underscored the seeming open-ended ability of this material to be directed to new uses and made it an attractive component of Snelson's space-age-era sculpture that depends on its lightness as well as on the blank slate of potential benefits to be accrued from its assumed binding contract with the future. Later, with the passing of the early space age, Snelson's sculptures have become the foci for more universal and far-ranging meaning that are poised on such seemingly contradictory ideas as lyricism and engineering as well as playfulness and science. Bespeaking a keen intellect, these sculptures are also ebullient, lofty, and often soaring.

The history of stainless steel, a non-toxic, rust-resistant, zinc- and lead-free form of iron-nickel-chromium alloy has been even more closely associated with the twentieth century than aluminum, even though its highly valued property of imperviousness to certain acids was discovered in 1821 by the French metallurgist Pierre Berthier. Credit for inventing this tremendously tough material is usually given to the English metallurgist Harry Brearley who found in 1912 a substance capable of protecting cannon bores from erosion, even though alloys prepared by the French researcher Leon Guillet between 1904-1911 would now be considered stainless steel.

The highly reflective mirror polish of stainless steel made it a preeminent art deco material, particularly in the United States where it was regularly employed for such vernacular structures as roadside diners and occasionally was used in such eminent pieces of architecture as New York City's Chrysler Building where it was employed as sheathing for its top seven stories. In addition to being used for kitchen sinks and furniture as well as car accessories in the 1950s, a bare sandblasted stainless steel case with white striping was utilized for the Explorer I, the United States' first launched satellite. Although stainless steel in the 1920s had been employed on occasion by the Russian constructivists, particularly Aleksander Rodchenko, not until the 1960s was this material used intensively as an artistic material when it became a medium of choice for Snelson's seemingly weightless structures, Rickey's scintillating planes, and David Smith's Cubis.

Even though Smith preceded Rickey in the use of machine-ground stainless steel sculptures, the two approached their surfaces very differently: Smith's machined surfaces were organic and gestural in appearance, while Rickey maintained a more distanced and cool approach to his works. As art historian Nan Rosenthal explains:

Smith's marks . . . may indeed be described as "calligraphic"; they are bold, looping, and possibly grow from his having expressionistically painted the surfaces of a number of sculptures in the fifties. Rickey's strokes, however, are wide, short, random, and all-over in pattern: although not rigidly machine-like, they are impersonal and do not evoke thoughts of the hand that held the tool as Smith's do.

Despite differences between the two bodies of sculpture noted by Rosenthal, the two men's employment of stainless steel appears to adhere to the same oxymoronic meaning of futurity and timelessness, which are predicated on stainless steel's prior use in deco buildings, weaponry, and space vehicles.

When we look at the exhibition of George Rickey's and Snelson's sculptures at the Palais Royal, this belief in rationalism as a springboard to universality assumes a special poignancy and urgency. Rickey's bright surfaces acquiesce to wind currents, and Snelson's harness the push/pull, tension/compression forces of the universe. Among their many attributes and far-ranging meanings for both the present and the future, both sculptors' works also call to mind the post World-War-II period when an optimistic vision of the future still seemed a viable possibility. At the same time, the qualities of power held in suspension, delicacy of balance, and openness to nature and its basic laws, which we find in these sculptures, point us in the direction of the continued possibility of balancing new technologies by responding to nature's needs.

Changing perceptions of nature's role are also crucial to the understanding of this exhibition in which both Rickey's and Snelson's works are situated in a venerated seventeenth-century neoclassical garden that was initially enjoyed by Cardinal Richelieu and later the youthful Louis XIV. The rational and classical attitude of superimposing culture on nature in this garden in which plants and even trees have been either forced or coaxed over the years to conform to a severe geometrical order serves as a counterpoint to these sculptures that bespeak an entirely different type of rational order and view of nature. In Rickey's and Snelson's sculptures, art develops from nature's processes and laws so that it acquiesces to changes of light and wind in the former artist's work and accords itself with its forces and counter forces to achieve a lightness bordering on transcending gravity in the latter's art. For classical artists, originality rests in returning to earlier well-established prototypes and working within their purview, but for mid-twentieth century artists like Rickey and Snelson, it consists in being in accord with given materials and their encoded meanings in addition to finding new ways of understanding and extending them. Thus, contrasts between classical and mainly twentieth-century vanguard views ricochet back and forth in this exhibition as first one cultural perspective and then others are assumed as the basic conditions for seeing and understanding this exhibition.