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"The Constructivist Tradition in Contemporary Sculpture" by George Rickey, 1967

MALE 1

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. May I welcome you to the first in a series of five Sunday afternoon lectures on various issues and subjects in contemporary sculpture, to be given from now until December, on the occasion of the fifth Guggenheim International Exhibition, which, as you probably realize, is devoted to a survey of contemporary sculpture in the 1960s from 20 nations. Our lecturer this afternoon is Mr. George Rickey, who has had a most extraordinary, what I would call almost double career, as both artist and a very distinguished writer, on both contemporary art [00:01:00] and particularly on kinetics. Mr. Rickey was born in 1907, in Indiana. He was educated in Scotland, and he is a graduate in history from Balliol College, Oxford. He studied painting in Paris and the history of art at New York University. He has been a professor and artist in residence in numerous American universities, and among his various honors include, I might add, the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1960 and 1961. He is one of the outstanding kinetic sculptors in the world today, and in addition, he is one of the leading authorities on kinetic art and the theory of kinetic art and practice. And he has, [00:02:00] in addition, established himself as an authority on advanced Constructivist tendencies in post–World War art, both in the United States and in Europe. His book, *Constructivism: Its Origins and Evolution*, which has just been published, is, I feel, destined to become a standard work in its field. Mr. Rickey's lecture today is on the subject of the Constructivist tradition in contemporary sculpture. Mr. Rickey. (applause)

GEORGE RICKEY

If I were to give a very brief definition of Constructivism, [00:03:00] I think I would say that it was a preconceived, non-objective art, either painting or sculpture. The word *non-objective* is an invention of Malevich. He wrote a book with that phrase in the title, wrote it in 1927, although — it was published in 1927, I think written at various times much earlier. The ideas behind Constructivism, I think, are very much older. A historian can always find antecedents. I want to read you two or three quotations as a starter. The first from Plato, the *Philebus*, on [00:04:00] geometric forms: "For I say that these things are beautiful, not in relation to something else, but naturally and permanently beautiful, in and of themselves, and give certain characteristic pleasures, not at all like the pleasures produced by physical stimuli." After a couple of thousand years, that is still fairly yet relevant. Then, in 1912, before Constructivism really got started, but only just before, a Futurist, Boccioni, known to the artists who were to become Constructivists, wrote this in his technical manifesto: "The straight line is the only means that can lead to the primitive virginity of a new architectural construction [00:05:00] of sculptural masses and zones."

And then Malevich, 1913. In 1913, Malevich, a Russian, the founder of a school called — or way of painting that he called Suprematism, which later merged, or overlapped, Constructivism. "In 1913, trying desperately to liberate art from the representational world, I sought refuge in the form of a square. I felt only night within me, and it was then that I conceived the new art, which I call Suprematism. The square of the Suprematists can be compared to the symbols of primitive men." [00:06:00] I think it's quite interesting that both Boccioni and Malevich use the word *primitive*, something that goes right back to the beginning. You see, right back to the beginning. The ideas of Constructivism, I think, were born in Russia. The word itself was an invention of a Russian artist, Tatlin. He went to visit Picasso in Paris in 1913, and saw Picasso's first

assemblages, made with string, with wood, paper, and so on, that were a slight advance development from collage. Tatlin at once went back to Moscow and began making such constructions, and devised this word. [00:07:00] I think, for him, the word meant, really, joined together, made by methods of construction.

However, I don't think that is an acceptable definition in our times. A word is defined not just by its inventor, but by how it is used, and by the kinds of things which it is used to described. If I were to define this tradition of Constructivism, now over 50 years old, I would do it in terms something like this. Now I'll be a schoolteacher and I'll just give you a series of points, of characteristics, that seem to me to be essential to the Constructivist [00:08:00] idea through this half-century, and still applicable today. First, the only subject of the work is the image itself. "There are no images of." That last is a quotation from Gabo. The image does not depend on any recollected experience, or observed object, or association, or suggestion. The image is premeditated, deliberate, and precisely adjusted. The artist is autonomous in choosing the image. There is no illusionism of an object or the space surrounding the image. The technique is not part of the image. There is no handwriting, no interesting [00:09:00] surface. There are no romantic motives or inferences. There are no symbols. There is no chiaroscuro — that is, expression by means of light and dark shading. And there is no abstraction from nature, nor any other thought process apparent in the image. For the Constructivist, the image — to sum that up, the image is the object. It is not an image of an object. The image and the object are one. And there is no association, or recollection, or tie, or cord to anything outside. It is truly an autonomous kind of art, unlike [00:10:00] much of the art that had gone before, although there had always been antecedents. One can find them in these geometric forms that Plato was speaking of. Also, one can find images of this sort in applied art, in art that was not quite — what shall I say? — not exactly aristocratic. I think one finds it in flags, memorial burying, in decorations on buildings. Images which would now be admitted, but before 1912 or 1913, would have been thought to belong to the sign painter. This began as reaction. This interest in an image, Malevich's interest in the square, [00:11:00] began, I think, in reaction against Cubism. Cubism had come up very fast. Cubism, in 1913, was six or seven years old. It had spread very rapidly. It had one very gifted adherent. But very soon, there were reactions against it. I think some of the reactions were in Italy, among the Futurists, but also in Russia.

I should make a distinction, I suppose, between the Cubist image and the Constructivist image. In Cubism, there was always a reference to an observed nature, which was modified, often in geometrical terms — usually in geometrical terms. But it was a modification, a processing of [00:12:00] nature experienced and recorded. This remained in Cubism, but this is precisely what was banished from Constructivism.

Now, in Russia, at this time, 1913, 1914, 1915, there was Tatlin, another artist Rodchenko, Malevich, and, at the same time, in Holland, without any connection, there was an artist who had begun in Cubism — begun, actually, in painting the realistic painting of nature. This was Mondrian, who had been a flower painter, and then went into a kind of Cubism. Then, by a process of refinement and elimination and trying to discover the essence, he arrived [00:13:00] in, I should say, five or six years, at a geometrical painting very much resembling the work of the Russians, neither at that time knowing about the other. Malevich was very rapid. He came to this realization in a few months. With Mondrian, it took several years.

In the '20s, the two movements — the one in Holland came to be called Neo-Plasticism, and the group to be called De Stijl. In the '20s, the two styles very largely overlapped. This was conceded by both. I thought I would be the schoolteacher and read you the characteristics, the essential characteristics, [00:14:00] of Neo-Plasticism. These are taken rather directly from notes of Mondrian. First, a flat plane. Now, this was later changed by adherents of Neo-Plasticism who went into three dimensions. The primary colors, plus black, white, and gray. Equilibrium — an important word to them — established between large, empty space and small, colored surface. Color finds opposition in non-color. That is, in black, white, and gray. See, they're set against each other. Equilibrium is obtained through proportions of the plastic means: plane, line, and colors. There is no symmetry. However, there is equilibrium.

Mondrian, as you know, was a kind of mystic, and steeped somewhat in [00:15:00] philosophy. He was not free of symbolism, as the Constructivists were. One of his statements was approximately this, that "equilibrium annihilates individuals as particular personalities, and thus creates the future society as a real unity. The balanced relation is the purest representation of universality." So this is one of the differences. Visually, there was a great deal of similarity, but there was a substantial difference in purpose. Then there was one other requirement of Mondrian, and that is that the composition must be in vertical and horizontal lines only. Now, there is one painting in Philadelphia which is made on a diagonal [00:16:00] grid, and there may be others, but the painting itself consists of verticals and horizontals. When Mondrian's colleague, van Doesburg, began to paint diagonals in order to get a little more excitement into the painting — this was in 1924 — Mondrian wrote, "After your arbitrary correction of Neo-Plasticism, any collaboration has become impossible for me." Those are the two branches which, by the '20s, had begun to overlap and provide this mainstream of the Constructivist tradition.

Now, this still had to be stated in general terms, and the basic statement was made by another Russian, [00:17:00] Gabo in a manifesto which he wrote in 1920 and pasted up around the walls in the streets in Moscow, where other manifestos and government statements were pasted up. People, at first, thought it was going to be a political document. He called it the Realist Manifesto, and the word "realist" is a little difficult. I've talked to Gabo about what he meant by that. It's a little difficult to be sure. It is not a Russian word. I think it's an important word, from French, and I think what Gabo meant by "realist" was the making of an art in which the object has a reality within itself, [00:18:00] and without any of this associative quality that I spoke of in my earlier list. It was the realism of a made object that could be held in the hand. Now, there was another requirement of Gabo, and it is still a requirement when he talks about this. He will not use the word "constructivist." His word is "constructive." He feels that, with the "-ist" on the end, it is a kind of assertion. It has to do with argument rather than with the activity. So he always prefers to call it, the [00:19:00] work, the art, "constructive." The manifesto uses this word quite often. I made a count. I've forgotten what it is.

But I'm going to give you one more list, the five points that he made in the manifesto, which, incidentally, was signed by Pevsner at Pevsner's request. There were five points, each starting with a rejection. The manifesto rejected color as accidental and superficial. It rejected the descriptive value of line in favor of line as the direction of static forces. It rejected volume in

favor of depth [00:20:00] as the only pictorial and plastic form in space. It rejected mass in sculpture in favor of the same volume constructed of planes. And the fifth, it rejected the thousand-year-old illusion of static rhythms in favor of kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time. That was the beginning of a clear concept of what kinetic art might be.

Now, if I could have some slides. Get those little sharper, I think. [00:21:00] Can we get them a little sharper? The left-hand one. I think there's more in there than you're seeing. A little sharper here. [00:22:00] That's fairly good. These are both Tatlin. The one on the left, 1914. Soon after this visit to Picasso, a hanging construction. And the one on the right, a year later, a corner construction. He made a number of these constructions of ordinary, sort of throw away material, as Picasso had done. Tatlin later became a champion of the use of industrial material, and also, in general, of worker's art, an unsophisticated, unspecialized art for the work. On the right, 1913, according to Malevich himself. This is, [00:23:00] I think, the dating of the early Malevich drawings and paintings. It's very uncertain. This is a pencil square. That's all. Just a drawing in pencil. He did squares, he did (inaudible). On the left, this quadrilateral. This is early hard edge, but he gives you one soft edge. These very simple images. These are Rodchenko on the right, a construction, made simply of these circles as a nest. It is not a kinetic work in the ordinary sense that it moves. However, it is apparently a moveable work, because [00:24:00] each of these rings is separate from the one outside it, so it can be jumbled up, and it would come out a little bit (inaudible). On the left, a light construction with the ruler and the compass. These are both about 1920. Could we get this a little sharper, the left one? There. Now we've gone to there. Very good.

Picasso was a source in that he was a Cubist from whom the Constructivists reacted, and also he began using constructed materials. But I think he was not really [00:25:00] in the least interested, never really has been, in a non-figurative art. However, now and again, he came very close to it, and this construction of 1928, which is now in the Modern Museum, in the Picasso sculpture show, I think is as close as he got to the Constructivist idea, this construction of (inaudible). But there was, I think, with him, no follow-up, no interest in this as a way of making art. I think that his art had to be enriched in different terms, and I think there is already the suggestion of a figure here. On the right is Gabo, also interested in the figure at that time. It is 1915. It is not Cubist. It superficially [00:26:00] resemblant. What Gabo had in mind was this idea of penetrating into the space with planes. The outline of the figure is retained, but it is constructed of these surfaces at angles to each other, so that the interior space is revealed. This was the beginnings of his thought about a space sculpture. I think that if there is one other outstanding quality about this half-century of Constructivism, it is, besides its complete non-objectivity, its involvement with ideas of space. And this is how it began.

Here are two more. Gabo, [00:27:00] somewhat later, 1942 on the right, and 1938 on the left. You can see, with the plexiglass here, how he has drawn lines on the surface of the plexiglass, penetrating into the space. Those lines, of course, they sort of became strings, his famous strung strings. Also is involved with curved forms, which become tangents to each other, where there is a kind of pressure. The strings are stretched. They become tangent to curves, created by the strings.

Now, I'm not showing you Mondrian, because you know that already. What is on the left here is

not Mondrian. It is much earlier. It is 1912. [00:28:00] It is Frank Lloyd Wright. It is the window of a playhouse he designed for the Coonley family in Chicago. I think it shows that you can never be quite certain where things begin. Then, on the right, Vantongerloo, 1919. He was more or less a contemporary artist. Mondrian — I think a lesser man, a follower, but already in 1919, pressing the relational ideas of Neo-Plasticism into three dimensions, as van Doesburg did also. He called that interval of [masses?]. I thought I would just pursue this [00:29:00] kind of vertical/horizontal relationship a little further. Here on the left is another Vantongerloo, very much later, 1935. The title — I didn't write it down. I should have, because it's an equation. *y = x^4 + 11 x^2 + 5* or something of that sort. That is the title. I don't have the numbers exactly right, but I have the idea. Vertical, horizontal.

On the right, 1923, it is Gropius. Walter Gropius. His design for the Chicago Tribune building. They held a competition — he didn't win — for the Chicago [00:30:00] Tribune building. Sent in from the Bauhaus, which had, shortly before, become aware of the Neo-Plastic ideas in Holland. Van Doesburg visited the Bauhaus in Weimar and talked to the students, although he was not actually welcomed into the Bauhaus. I think the ideas were welcome, but I think they didn't want quite so vehement a champion.

Now, these are much more recent vertical/horizontal ideas. The one on the left, from Holland, Visser, and the one on the right from Switzerland, Mary Vieira from South America, but a pupil of Max Bill. This strict vertical and horizontal [00:31:00] canon is observed. In the case of Mary Vieira anyway, the work, the fabrication, is done by others, from a model or from drawing. And then, still more recent, on the left, Donald Judd, as you probably recognize. On the right, Burgoyne Diller. Both of these, of course, are related to ideas that are now current, and which, in my opinion, have a lineage of at least half a century, not much longer. I think probably in both of these, besides their fairness and directness and clarity as images, is the [00:32:00] idea, fundamental to Constructivism, of using space as one of the materials of which the work is actually made, so that space is not what is left around an object after you've made it, but it is incorporated as part of the object, and just as valid as the [matter?]. I think that this is of the greatest importance in this tradition, and I think that Judd can be thought of as a kind of space sandwich. I think that, with Diller, the block and the plane and the column are articulating space around the object, but also within this [doorway?]. [00:33:00]

Going back to Gabo, his basic thought — these drawings on the right were made by Gabo to explain what he meant about the use of planes to show volume. What he objects to is what is on the left, a closed cube, where you see only the surface, and what he is trying to accomplish is a statement in which the cube is arrived at with planes set up in a different way, permitting the interior of the mass to be revealed. Of course, one can see it in those early years of Gabo, and in his work with planes and with surfaces. Then later, of course, he goes still further, using transparent surfaces with plastic, and [00:34:00] virtual surfaces with his stretched strings.

Now, on the left, Max Bill, who, although of a younger generation, has actually been in this for a long time. He went to the Bauhaus. He is a graduate of the Bauhaus just before it closed. A very important influence in Switzerland, and also in South America, which he visited in the very early '50s. He lectured there, and I think had a great deal to do with the presence of so many gifted South Americans in Europe today.

This is a cube of Max Bill's. He calls it *With and Within a Cube*. The date is 1944. That's already 20 years ago. Where he partly opens up the interior. [00:35:00] The mass is not allowed to keep its complete integrity as a mass. Now, I slipped on this, didn't I? Could we turn the right hand one through 90 degrees? Maybe I can say that louder. The right hand one. I tried very hard to get this straight, but I've always had some problems. [00:36:00] There are only four possibilities. Morris and Judd that are out on the main floor here. What I would assert is that these have a great deal in common with this 50-year-old tradition. I'm sure the artist will disagree with this, but I can just tell what I see. The canons of Constructivism fit very well with what is being done here, and that the essential character of these repeated forms [00:37:00] has a great deal to do with what is done with the space, as well as what is done with the simple repetition of a form. Repetition in art, of course, is a very old story. The repetition of an element and what grows out of the repeating of a form, and how the whole becomes more than the sum of the separate parts. But here, the parts that Judd and Morris did not make, namely the space, is of cardinal importance in these two sculptures, in my opinion. The circulation of space, the way space is enclosed, the way it can be imagined as a material that is defined and punctuated by the fabricated form, that this is [00:38:00] of critical importance in the work. The developments of Constructivist tendencies, in the last, I would say, well, 15 now, almost 20 years, has been very energetic and very diverse. It seems to me that it is not, in any way, a revival of Constructivism. The development has been continuous, and it has become very diversified. I would consider, coming in the direct line of the inheritance from Constructivism, such things as — here's another list — light, the use [00:39:00] of light, the use of optical phenomena, the use of an art based on relations — just on relationships — the use of mathematics. I showed you this example of Vantongerloo. Of course, there are many others. The use of progressions, the use of chance. Movement, of course. What is called programmed art. The emphasis on relief space, the special space that can be thought of as projecting from a table or from a wall, which has received a great deal of attention in the last 10 or 15 years, largely, I think, in Europe, through the influence of an American, Biederman, I think too little known. Transformations, for an object can be transformed. There are two upstairs that can be transformed by the observer. [00:40:00] And the use of cellular structures. The repetition that you saw in Judd and Morris, for example, being extended manyfold, so that there is repetition of countless elements arriving at some kind of new form.

I thought I would just pursue that a little with two or three examples. The first two here are, of course, not contemporary. This is Kandinsky on the left. I'm giving you some dates because I'm trying to show an influence. Nineteen twenty-seven. Then, on the right, [Stajefsky?], who was a friend of Malevich, 1932. Among other things that they are doing is this [00:41:00] repetition of a single form with different proportions, different size, to arrive at a multiplicity which, in the case of [Stajefksy?] — the Kandinsky is colored. In the case of Stajefsky, is, in a way, a substitute for color. I read you the statement of Gabo distrusting color, that color was to be avoided. Many European artists have avoided color as too subjective, too personal, not detached enough. This has led to a great deal of white painting, black painting, white on white, and so on.

A substitute for color is, of course, some kind of cellular activity on the [00:42:00] surface. That also has been in art for a very long time, as one can see if one looks at a Moorish ceiling. Here are other examples of cellular division. On the left, Paul Klee, 1931. He gives it a title, *Portal of*

a Mask, but actually, except for the title, it is an abstract, non-objective painting. On the right, a light sculpture of Otto Piene. It's actually a ceiling in the Bonn opera house.

Then two sculptures in this exhibition. On the left is Richter, and on the right [Mia Walkie?]. Each of these is composed of identical hundreds — I haven't counted them — of identical [00:43:00] components, each one ending in a square. They are not fixed. Their relations are fixed in two axes, but in the third, they are movable, so the surface can be pushed in or pulled out, adding an element of indeterminacy. There is no correct position. The least correct position would be when they are all flat.

Here is this use of micro-elements. The participation of the observer, which has a relation to kinetic art, a kind of indeterminacy, which involves the element of chance, and further, the idea of depersonalization, which has been in Constructive art from the very beginning. The artist suppresses some of his personal preferences, choices, [00:44:00] acts of will, in order to make the object still more detached. This is related to no handwriting. Another quality or phenomenon that has been employed is the use of tangential situations. This, too, can provide a kind of pressure or tension or activity, intensity, which might be thought of as a kind of equivalent to color, but which is in completely detached terms. On the right, Paul Klee, a relief (inaudible) a relief, in which the sawn pieces of wood have been distributed so that they just touch each other. The space is squeezed between, and there is a kind of pressure among the [00:45:00] components in their relation.

On the left, Max Bill again, a work from 1942. It is a geometrical form. This comes out of his ideas of concrete art, which are closely related to Constructivist ideas, perhaps a little, but even more purified and detached. And also, in the relation of the two parts, they are tangent. They touch at a point. Here, in this exhibition upstairs, is the Kelly, which, in this slide, standing on the floor, shows the idea of a tangent somewhat more clearly. The two parts of the fold tangent to the floor, and then, in the way they are folded, there is also the squeezing of [00:46:00] space between. Tangent and pressure go together.

On the right, David Smith, a circle, tangent to a recto-linear form. Of course, he never really quite got away from the figure. I think the figure haunted David Smith, even in the most geometrical of his forms. But he is using this tangential idea there also. Now, another recent development, but I think consistent with this tradition, is the use of nature, not as something to be inspired by or to reminiscence about or to copy, but in a different way, where the actual forces of nature and the laws [00:47:00] of nature are used by the artist as a means. This appears in kinetic art. It appears in the use of magnetism, in the way light is used with the properties of lenses, mirrors, and so on. It can be used with hydraulics, the forms and forces which water takes and employs.

Here on the left, Hans Haacke, a *Wave*. See where the liquid is trapped in a box, which, when pushed, produces this wave form. It is not a statement by the artist. It is a statement apart from the artist, where, in a way, nature is permitted by the artist to reveal itself.

In the one on the right, Motonaga, [00:48:00] Japanese, fills these plastic tubes — not fills, but puts certainly a little water, liquid, in the plastic tube. It's hung between trees. They swing in

the wind, a combination of wind and water. The tubes take the form of a catenary, which varies according to the forces. I think one of the rich possibilities in the development from these depersonalized, detached, very austere canons of Constructivism is this employment of nature and its diverse forces as a plastic means by the artist. [00:49:00] The primary structures, of course, are with us. We have them upstairs. I think my thesis is that we've had them with us for 50 years, and although there are always changes with development, the changes may be less than the resemblance. Malevich on the left, and Turnbull on the right.

Then I think my last two slides are going back even further to structures which are geometrical, which follow, which are closely aligned [00:50:00] with the thinking of these lists that I gave you, and are five thousand years old. The Saqqara pyramid on the left, and the Champaran temple on the right. There is the thesis and an attempt at historical terms.

I have tried to keep it somewhat impersonal, but I have some personal thoughts, too, that I'll finish up with. Some contemporary works can be thought of as polemical, and by that I mean that there is [00:51:00] a quality in them apart from this unassociated, independent, intrinsic quality that I've been speaking about. That additional quality that I call polemical is the insistence by the work that it is art. I think that where there is this insistence, it is actually a dilution of the work. A work of art needs no insistence. It may need time, but it doesn't need polemics.

Another current idea, prevalent idea, is that of an avant-garde. Things have [00:52:00] been written recently about it. It's a word that we use a great deal, and yet I have a suspicion that, in looking around and into the past, that important developments in art have tended to come from people who looked back rather than who insisted on their place in the avant-garde. Of course, the outstanding example is Cézanne, who was looking to Poussin and the museums. I thought of Picasso, possibly, as an exception, but Picasso, after all, looked at Iberian sculpture and at the sculpture of West Africa, and looked at Velázquez and so on. [00:53:00] I think that it is a possible thesis that the development in art does not come about through the avant-garde, but comes about through the extension of the tradition, which is often done by those who don't insist on it. Then I would suggest that newness is the most fleeting quality in a work of art. (applause)

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