Passages of Light and Time

George Rickey’s Life in Motion
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Shannon Kephart

Snite Museum of Art
University of Notre Dame
I was snatched from South Bend at the age of six in 1913, and it was Notre Dame that brought me back.

— George Rickey, July 4, 1996
This spread and the following two spreads show sculptures in a forested meadow at the George Rickey Workshop, East Chatham, New York, 1999.
I tried to keep my mind on movement itself, pushing gently on to try to find what was possible and discovering, with each new idea, how near the beginning I still was.

— George Rickey
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Beginning the Journey
Early Exploration and Discovery
Expanding the Possibilities of Sculptural Motion
Kineticism and the 1960s
Cultivating the Artistic Process
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The Snite Museum of Art takes great pleasure in publishing its George Rickey Sculpture Archive on the occasion of two 2009 events: the opening of the Innovations: George Rickey Kinetic Sculpture exhibitions in nearby South Bend and the concurrent Abstraction in the Public Sphere: New Approaches symposium at the University of Notre Dame, organized to celebrate Rickey’s artistic legacy.

Innovations features five outdoor Rickey sculptures installed on downtown South Bend sidewalks and plazas, and indoor and outdoor exhibitions at the South Bend Museum of Art. The exhibitions are the result of model collaboration between Philip Rickey, president, George Rickey Foundation; Rose Meissner, president, Community Foundation of St. Joseph County; Susan Visser, director, South Bend Museum of Art; the Snite Museum of Art, and 1st Source Bank. Philip Rickey generously devoted his time and the resources of the George Rickey Workshop to make these exhibitions in George Rickey’s birthplace possible. As is typical of him, Philip was enthusiastic, gracious, and involved in many aspects, large and small, of the exhibitions and symposium. Similarly, Meissner and Visser labored tirelessly and in good humor to make the South Bend exhibitions possible. This project is just the most recent example of their profound dedication to the arts in our community—which would be sorely impoverished without them.

Similarly, Notre Dame faculty members Erika Doss, chair, American Studies, and Elyse Speaks, art history, cheerfully shared expertise and energy in organizing the Rickey symposium, as did the indefatigable Harriet Baldwin, associate professional specialist, College of Arts and Letters.

The South Bend exhibitions complement the Snite Museum’s permanent exhibition of its George Rickey Sculptures Archive, which includes one outdoor sculpture and nineteen indoor sculptures that are promised gifts of the George Rickey Foundation. The Foundation will also one day place Rickey’s professional and scholarly papers at the University of Notre Dame Archives. Rickey archive material includes business correspondence with clients, museums and galleries; engineering drawings and specifications; photographs, videos and films of Rickey’s sculptures; as well as a computer database of sculptures created by Rickey. Published works include essays written by George Rickey on various topics, including the manuscript for his, Constructivism: Origins and Evolution, and essays written on George Rickey by other authors.

This catalog features a fine essay by Shannon Kephart, researched and written when she was a Notre Dame graduate intern. Kephart was an ideal curatorial assistant; she was self-directed, energetic, open to suggestions, and her essay adds new insights into Rickey. Sarah Tremblay Guiley masterfully edited the essays; Museum photographer and digital archivist Eric Nisly prepared many of the images; and Michael Swoboda imaginatively designed the catalog, as well as provided handsome photographs. The Humana Foundation Endowment for American Art funded printing costs.

In closing, I reflect on one of the greatest rewards of my work: the opportunity to meet some of our nation’s finest artists. I had the pleasure of working with George Rickey on several projects during the last decade of his life, when he was always a gracious host, and a natural teacher, at the George Rickey Workshop. I will never forget the visual delight of approaching the Workshop by road. Visitors were treated to rolling, forested hills populated by George’s kinetic sculptures that moved slowly and silently, occasionally flashing reflected sunlight. While these works once seen in upstate New York are no longer there, Rickey’s unique artistic legacy is his kinetic sculptures that remain constantly in motion around the world, activated by indoor air currents or outdoors by the whims of the wind. In their graceful trajectories, these hypnotic sculptures reveal the play of natural forces and light upon artworks that utilize physics to control the time and limits of their motion.

They are, indeed, poetry in motion: once elegiac totems to the passage of time; now also markers of the time their maker passed in our midst.

— Charles R. Loving

Director and Curator, George Rickey Sculpture Archive
On a calm day or inside a gallery, a viewer unfamiliar with the work of George Rickey may at first pass one of his sculptures without detecting its kinetic potential. However, at the slightest shift of wind or air current, witnessing its subtle movement is as captivating for the novice as it remains for the veteran. This motion displays Rickey’s refined sleight of hand and intricate construction techniques, and holds the key to the magnificence of his works.

Throughout his life, Rickey traveled extensively between Europe and America. His itinerant lifestyle exemplified a career that continuously investigated and discovered different ways to exhibit motion. Rickey ventured from place to place just as he worked to perfect his aesthetic language of motion. These exploratory journeys—both his physical travels and his artistic investigations of movement—paralleled the many roles that Rickey would play throughout his lifetime, as an artist, teacher, father, critic, historian, mentor, and innovator.

In “The Morphology of Movement: A Study of Kinetic Art,” an article that Rickey wrote in 1963 for Art Journal, he outlines the sources, principles, trends, and difficulties of kinetic art—that is, art with mechanical parts that can be set in motion. Alongside this genealogy, he hints at his own pursuits and inspirations within the nascent field of kinetic art. The article includes a line drawing of a sailboat demonstrating several classic ship movements: pitch, roll, fall, rise, yaw, and sheer. Illustrated at right. Summarily outlining the sails, mast, and hull in a view of each movement, Rickey reduces the ship to its fundamental parts. A carefully placed horizon line marks the sailboat’s pitch and roll in the wind and its rise and fall on the waves. Two movements, “yaw” and “sheer,” are shown from above, with a dotted outline suggesting the diagonal shift of the hull. This study of a sailboat’s actions on water proposes nature as a source for movement and traces the artist’s quest to formalize a language of motion back to his childhood, when he often set sail on the family’s cutter along the river Clyde and up the west coast of Scotland.3

Rickey’s drawing recalls the experience of viewing a sailboat from a distance, watching its forceful movements lulled to a calm as the crashing waves are hushed. The artist freezes the fluid, continual rocking of the boat into distinct moments and simplifies its dramatic sway into a few lean words. Turbulent movements become subtle and controlled. Designed with apparatus such as keels, rudders, and rigging, sailboats utilize the forces of nature for movement but resist being overcome by them. Similarly, Rickey engineers artworks that employ these same forces for movement but are equipped with controls to counter their potential violence. This conciliation between the unpredictable power of nature and control over the movement it generates defines Rickey’s sculptures. In his 1963 article, he discusses this relationship with nature, which becomes the driving force of his artworks: “For the kinetic artist... nature is omnipresent and is always nudging his elbow. For him, it is source book, example, competitor, analogy, tyrant, seducer, and also inexorable adversary.”

The typology of motion based on the model of a sailboat helped Rickey build an understanding of movement and provided a small reserve that offered unending opportunity for re-creation in his work. He describes the possibilities that just a few movements provide in his statement: “Few though they [basic movements] be, they offer themselves, just as visible colors do, for an almost infinite range of variation, permutation, and combination.” The desire to discover and display movement mapped George Rickey’s life, both through his travels and in his artistic pursuits, captivating his mind and illuminating his sculptures.

Rickey’s artistic method of capturing motion interlaced with engineering with nature, combining influences that can be traced back to his early years as the son of an MIT-educated engineer and the grandson of a clockmaker, living in Scotland in close proximity to the constant waves, currents, and tides of the ocean. All of George’s grandparents grew up in New England and descended from a line of Yankees who came from England in the seventeenth century. His maternal grandfather was a lawyer and then a judge for the New York State Supreme Court. His maternal grandmother taught drawing at a girls’ school in Schenectady, New York, for many years. His mother, Grace Rickey, graduated from Smith College and instilled in George and his siblings a passion for reading, writing, and the arts. Walter Rickey, George’s father, worked as a mechanical engineer for Singer Sewing Corporation in Schenectady and, in 1904, was transferred to South Bend, Indiana.5 There, George was born on June 6, 1907, the third of six children and the only son. When he was five years old, his father accepted another transfer within the company that took the family from the Midwest to Helensburgh, Scotland, a coastal town where many industrial workers from Glasgow lived and where George Rickey would spend his formative years. On the way to Scotland, George spent a few months in Athol, Massachusetts, with his paternal grandfather, a clockmaker who later lived with the family at their home in Scotland. Fascinated by the mechanical parts of these intricate clocks, young George would spend hours taking them apart and trying to put them back together.6
This initial transatlantic trip, from Indiana to Scotland, presaged a journey that George Rickey would take many times. Both shortly before and during college he sailed across the Atlantic, and throughout his career he frequently traveled between the United States and Europe, with considerable stays in Paris and many summers in Berlin. With each new voyage, the memory of his encounter with the wind on the river Clyde resonated. He once described how captivating a force the wind can be to an artist: "The artist finds waiting for him, as subject, not the trees, not the flowers, not the landscape, but the waving of branches and the trembling of stems, the piling up or scudding of clouds, the rising and setting and waning and waxing of heavenly bodies."

His own desire to display motion and "make the wind visible" encouraged Rickey to discover a different form of movement with each trip and to uncover a fresh aspect of nature with each new place. Absorbed in the natural sway of a ship in the wind, but fascinated by an engineer’s desire to understand how things work, he cultivated a relationship between nature and engineering that would become the source material for his art.

Rickey’s preoccupation with ships is seen in his early experimentation with sculpture. In the mid-fifties he constructed a series of eleven increasingly complex ships. Each sits on a base, with the sails, mast, and hull isolated above, and varies in height from eight inches to four feet. These works represent the artist’s first use of a gimbal, a device used aboard ships to allow navigation tools and kitchen equipment to remain upright as the ship pitches and rolls. In Rickey’s sculptures, this technology is reversed: a stable base allows the ship to rock freely back and forth. Flat planes of imperfectly finished brass or stainless steel cut into geometric shapes—sometimes lightly and crisply scored—form segmented sails, whose flutter suggests wind-driven movement. In these and other early sculptural works, Rickey experimented with brass for its soft malleability and rich color. This allowed him to achieve exact effects in a soft metal before moving to the harder and less pliable material of stainless steel.

In the first sculpture of this series, Ship I (fig. 1), from 1954, the central sail is divided vertically into three segments. A thin steel frame outlines each one and continues into the hull, where the counterweight and gimbal are located. A forceful breeze can activate the pitch and roll of the ship, and with this shift of the hull the sails also turn. In Rickey’s later ships, the weight and gimbal are separated; the gimbal still forms part of the hull but the counterweight sits below or beside the hull. These works are among the earliest examples of the artist’s practice of combining engineering techniques with natural forces to achieve his signature delicate movement.
Following in his father and grandfather’s footsteps, Rickey had initially received training in math and science to become an engineer. He was therefore familiar with mechanical apparatus and understood the relationship between form, movement, and function: a machine’s form is built to execute a specific motion, and this motion conducts its function. In 1964 he described, “My technique is borrowed from crafts and industry. It has more in common with clocks than sculpture.”10 His description of ship movements in “The Morphology of Movement” precedes a listing of mechanical parts such as the wheel, pendulum, and piston and their use in various machines. However, the article goes on to criticize the predictable, stagnant motion of these apparatus. For Rickey, the repetitive movement that results from the execution of a mechanical function distinguishes practical machines from his kinetic artworks. Activated by natural forces, Rickey’s works remain subject to chance—an element that is vital to his art. Although he recognized the essential relationship that allows a form to produce a desired type of motion, he left function out of the formula. Thus his sculptures remove the function from, for example, his father’s sewing needle or his grandfather’s clock pendulum and allow these same slender forms to work toward other means. Experimenting with weights and bearings, Rickey created objects that move as subtly as the tick of a clock but with the grace of swaying branches and falling leaves—an organic type of movement that he sought from the beginning of their design.

In Three Vertical Two Horizontal Lines (Pivoting) (fig. 2), from 1966, five thin lines made of stainless steel, slightly thicker at one end than the other, resemble sewing needles. Attached to the base at each needle’s eye, they rotate around a central joint. Limitations placed on their movement ensure that, at any moment, three blades remain pointing vertically and two roughly horizontally. The thin structure of the base echoes the circling parts and lifts the needles into the air, where they remain free to drift and follow the slightest breeze. In a later work, Two Vertical Two Horizontal Lines (fig. 3), from 1974, Rickey continued to play with limited movement within the vertical and horizontal directions. Four blades are posted at the corners of a flat, square plane that is tilted to hang as a diamond. Each of these pendulums points toward opposite corners of the base, tracing its form with their paths of gentle motion as the air currents shift. The lines pass over the center at an intricate crossing that changes uniquely with every slight movement; intervals of chance turn this clock’s hands. In both works, lines weave in and out of one another and joints sew a secure link that enables the delicate motion of the sculptures’ parts—motion in which no sequence repeats over the life of the sculpture.
In 1926 Rickey left Helensburgh for Balliol College in Oxford, England. He decided on a history major and attended classes at the nearby Ruskin School of Drawing in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. His liberal arts education later complemented his artistic career when he became an active art critic and historian, composing a history of Constructivism and contributing cultural essays and art criticism to numerous publications. Rickey would also go on to teach art history courses at several colleges, and his own education influenced his teaching style, leading him to recognize the critical role of art history in preparing studio art and design courses.

After graduating from Balliol in 1929, Rickey spent a year in Paris pursuing a career as an artist, while supporting himself by teaching English at the Gardiner School. Within this short time, an encounter with Stanley Williams Hayter, studies under André Lhote at the Académie Lhote, and painting courses with Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne laid a foundation for both his later kinetic sculpture and the importance of writing to his career. First, his conceptions of spatial convention in painting were broken open when, upon arriving, he was introduced to the British painter and printmaker Stanley William Hayter. In Hayter’s Surrealist artwork, Rickey saw “a revelation … a painting did not have to be vertical and have a top and a bottom and a left and a right.” “This new way of thinking introduced the necessity of going outside the flat canvas to express some subjects. For Rickey, conveying movement would require four dimensions, or working in kinetic sculpture.

At the Académie Lhote, Rickey met the prominent French painter and sculptor André Lhote, who was also an art critic in early twentieth-century Paris. Lhote revered the so-called traditional subjects of nature, landscape, and the nude, but to them he applied the new geometric aesthetic of Cubism to achieve compositions that suggested motion. Studying painting under Lhote, Rickey learned this “grammar of cubism” that was, at the time, prevalent in artistic circles all over Western Europe. It provided him with an avenue to combine his interests in drawing and the subtleties of nature with a machine aesthetic that recalled his adolescent exposure to engineering. Further, Lhote’s emphasis on theory encouraged Rickey’s interest in history. After the Académie Lhote, Rickey briefly enrolled in painting courses at the Académie Moderne, where Fernand Léger inspired him to begin by drawing from nature and not to practice only the prevailing contemporary aesthetic. Thus, in Paris, a challenge to artistic boundaries was complemented by exposure to a method rich in writing and history. Rickey developed the beginnings of an aesthetic and critical theory that twenty years later would dominate his artistic career and teaching philosophy.

In 1930 Rickey left Paris and returned to the United States to accept a position teaching English and European history at the Groton School, a boarding school west of Boston, where he continued to paint, often portraits. He traveled briefly to Heidelberg, Germany, and then to England, where he met his first wife, Susan Luhrs. In 1933 Rickey left the Groton School and moved to New York City, where he and Luhrs were married. He then returned shortly to Paris and traveled through France and Spain. On this stay in France, he investigated the soft fragmentation of Cézanne’s floating landscapes. Cézanne’s lightening of the Cubist’s hard lines and heavy geometry would later be reflected in the subtle motion of Rickey’s kinetic sculptures.

In 1934 the artist returned to New York City, where he maintained a studio for several years and worked briefly as a copy editor for Newsweek. He continued painting, completing portraits, still lifes, and landscapes in the manner of Cézanne. In 1935 he accepted the first of several artist-in-residence positions that would take him throughout the Midwest. He traveled from Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan, to the Kalamazoo Institute of Art in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and then to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. During this time, he completed several mural paintings at these colleges and other locations, including his Susquehanna Countryside, from 1938, in the post office in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. “Rendered in the style of Social Realism, these murals sought to portray the harsh realities of working-class living and working conditions, as well as the impact of factory work and industry on the urban environment. They were inspired in part by the farm subjects of Grant Wood and John Stuard Curry and the paintings of the Mexican muralists. Several trips to Mexico, where mural painting had become an instigator of political change, fostered Rickey’s interest in this art form.” After a divorce from Susan Luhrs in 1939, Rickey spent the winter absorbed in the writings of Frank Lloyd Wright on the shores of Lake Michigan. During these few years in the Midwest, his experience in mural painting encouraged him to experiment with large compositions, while the vernacular character of Social Realism, the farm subjects of Wood and Curry, and the writings of Wright furthered his interest in nature.

In 1941 Rickey received his Master of Arts degree in modern history from Balliol College. That same year, he accepted a position to set up an art and art history department at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. At Muhlenberg, an interest in Bauhaus teaching methods prompted him to organize an exhibition on the art of Josef Albers, who was then teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. “The Bauhaus school, founded in 1919 by the architect Walter Gropius in Weimar, Germany, sought the merging of art and design and, likewise, the convergence of “high” art and the functional craft of “applied” arts. Its methodology promoted a new form of art—industrial design—that would use technology as an expression of modern times. Delicate use of mechanistic materials in art embraced the pervasive realities of industry and mass production, and achieved the Bauhaus goals of truth to materials and high-quality products. These theories and their resultant attention to design and building technique would later inform Rickey’s own sculptures.”
Josef Albers investigated color relationships through paintings that placed different colored squares next to and within one another. These arrangements demonstrated the relativity of colors and the ability of a color’s surroundings to alter its appearance. Building complex relationships through straightforward juxtapositions. The hard lines and exact forms that Albers used bespoke a strict discipline of construction, and his color strategy introduced Rickey to a method that resonated with his developing theory on movement. In a later interview, Rickey described the correspondence he saw between color and movement:  

Motion, which we are all sensitive to, which we are all capable of observing without having to be taught, is a sensation that appeals to the senses just as color does. It has an equivalent of the spectrum, different kinds of types of motion. I think that one can, to a very considerable extent, isolate motion as a visual component and design with that.17

Albers’s influence can be seen in Rickey’s works from the late 1950s. In 1956 the sculptor completed Diptych: The Seasons (fig. 4), one of several works made up of an accumulation of rectangular shapes whose surfaces were delineated with flat fields of color. The color schemes represent the seasons, with yellows, for example, as spring and blues as winter. The structure hangs from the ceiling in an elegant horizontal poise and is meant to be viewed from two vantage points—one showing spring and summer, and the other, fall and winter. This contrast heightens the dynamic experience of viewing the work.

In later sculptures Albers’s influence became more prominent, as Rickey focused on the abstract quality of the shapes and color relationships within his three-dimensional compositions, rather than tying them to subject matter such as the seasons. Abstraction in 4D (fig. 5), from 1959, consists of an asymmetrically balanced accumulation of rectilinear shapes partially painted with fields of color. Small cutouts within each shape break up the surface area, folded in the reverse direction, they open the plane and present further geometric abstraction. The relationships of the planes of colors within the shapes are revealed as the viewer walks around the sculpture. During this period color remained an important element in Rickey’s work, but in Abstraction he left many planes unpainted, featuring the silver of the metal. This choice foreshadows his later works that solely use a polished, stainless steel finish.

In 1942 Rickey was drafted into the World War II army, where his service as a teacher and aircraft mechanic recalled his early training in engineering. These appointments took him to Miami, Denver, Brooklyn, and finally to Laredo, Texas, in 1945. In Laredo he set up a studio and began constructing sculptures with the supply of scrap metal available at the base, while also continuing to paint portraits. He was released from service the same year and briefly attended graduate courses in the art history department at New York University under the GI Bill. While in New York at this time, he met the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was putting together an issue of his magazine Les Temps Modernes focusing on the United States. Rickey contributed an essay entitled “The Mobility of Americans” that discussed the cultural manifestations of Americans’ fascination with movement, especially cars and travel.18

Rickey then returned to Muhlenberg College as the chairman of its art department. In 1947 he married Edith Leighton (Eddie) at Christ’s Church in New York City. The next year, he left Muhlenberg College and taught briefly at the University of Washington at Seattle. In 1948 his continued interest in the pedagogy of the Bauhaus led him to the Institute of Design in Chicago, a school established in 1937 by László Moholy-Nagy as the New Bauhaus to promote Bauhaus principles in the United States. Rickey took design courses at the Institute for one year, becoming familiar with the work of Naum Gabo, a leading artist of Constructivism who he heard lecture at the Institute.19
In 1949, after a long summer in Europe, Rickey began a professorship at Indiana University at Bloomington, where he would remain for several years. After experimenting with metal in the army, it was here, at the age of forty-two, that he began to dedicate his efforts to sculpture. Throughout this early experimentation, many of his works explored subjects of nature, including Fish, Waves, Thore, Sedge Themes, Seasons, Water Plants, Nuages (Clouds), Tidals, and Landscapes.20 In each case, the artist abstracted his subjects by reducing them to their component parts. He first investigated motion by constructing hanging mobiles, and then created intricate standing structures that connected colored shapes with wires and pivots that allowed them to move. Rickey’s earlier engagement with the geometric language of the Cubists, whose flat compositions of broken shapes were filled with implied movement, developed naturally into a study of three-dimensional motion in his sculptural works.

It was in the work of Alexander Calder, the inventor of the mobile, that Rickey found a more delicate approach to displaying subtle movement. Calder’s brand of motion, which recalled the rocking action of the sea, was befitting to Rickey’s nature subjects of the early 1950s, especially in series such as Fish and Waves. Rickey began creating mobiles first in glass and then in metal, which he often painted. He mastered catenary systems to achieve form by balancing weights on hanging wires. This method required a precise equilibrium of elements within the sculpture to achieve and maintain the shape of the subject. Often in these works, he radiated wire lines from a core wire and capped the lines with flat planes of color that alluded to the full shape. A long wire would outline and complete the form. Several of these mobiles consisted of a pair of fish that were counterbalanced structurally and formally, as in Fish (fig. 6), from 1951. In this pair, a length of wire outlines the shape of one fish, while the other consists of an accumulation of flat planes hanging from a main wire.

Some of Rickey’s mobiles hang from the ceiling; others are grounded by three-legged, indeterminate forms. In many of them, thin intertwined wires branch out from a central spine, terminating in assorted shapes that serve as counterweights. These constructions clearly evidence the influence of Calder. In Four Last Leaves (fig. 7), completed in 1952, a slightly curved inner axis forms a thin line that is interrupted at various intervals by the twist of a joint where other wires attach. Minute flat circles attached to four of the elongated legs serve as delicately engineered balance points, lightly anchoring the structure and allowing the slightest air current to send the work crawling through the air.
In 1951 Rickey completed his most dramatic sculpture to date, *Silver Plume I* (fig. 8), a work that he would alter in 1961 (fig. 9). This piece is often cited as a turning point in his career, because of its scale and mastery of balance. “Ten feet above the sculpture’s tripod support, one twelve-foot-long arm reaches out horizontally. In the first version, a series of shorter and shorter wires hang from this arm. Attached to the end of each wire is a small triangular plane. In the later modification, a horizontal steel bar hangs from the main arm; underneath this first bar, two more horizontal bars are suspended by short wires in descending steps. In both versions, the asymmetrical balance indicates Rickey’s structural mastery of weights even in large-scale works. This experimentation indicated that he was moving in his own sculptural direction, purposely departing from earlier influences. In regard to motion, he had begun to wonder “whether Alexander Calder had said it all; when I found he had not, I had to choose from the many doors I then found open.”22 Although *Silver Plume II* was made of stainless steel, Rickey did not use welding to develop its framework. He would soon, however, adapt this technique, which became essential to investigating these open doors in other stainless steel works.”
Maxwell Davidson, in his monograph of Rickey's early works, describes the year 1954 as “a pivotal year for George Rickey. For the first time he is confidently forging ahead with sculptures and devices that carry his unique imprint.” It was in 1954 that David Smith came to Indiana University to teach for a year as a visiting artist, at the request of Rickey. During their time together at Bloomington, Smith became the keystone that brought together many earlier influences and helped Rickey develop his own signature style. The two artists had first met at a party in Woodstock, New York, in 1937, but it was in the 1950s—when Smith lived in Bolton Landing, New York, and Rickey spent a summer teaching at a camp in Lake Placid—that their friendship developed. At Bloomington, Smith gave Rickey a welding lesson that added a new variant to his fabrication techniques. He also encouraged Rickey to become more generous in scale and to experiment with different materials, and he reinforced the Constructivist principles of sculpture to which Rickey had already been exposed.

Both Smith's and Rickey's working techniques followed those of the Russian Constructivists, whose focus on continual form built up in space became highly important to twentieth-century sculpture. Early Constructivists, working within the revolutionary climate of Communist Russia in the second decade of the twentieth century, broke away from the then-traditional methods of casting or carving away material to make sculptures and instead investigated space by building up separate elements. These elements did not have to be physically connected, visual relationships could be created between two components of a sculpture by utilizing the negative space between them to imply volume. Some Constructivist sculptures incorporated kinetics, using movement—both literal and symbolic—as a call for political change.

For Smith, the influence of the Constructivists can be seen in his construction techniques and in his use of negative space to complete forms. Smith first created Surrealist-like sculptures that used wire to “draw” in space. He then began welding large cubes and other geometric shapes into towers of stainless steel, grinding their surfaces to achieve an individual finish that reflected its surroundings. The anthropomorphic quality of Smith's large, abstract steel forms coupled with their uniquely polished surfaces to reveal the importance that Smith placed on the individual artist's gesture.

Rickey had first been exposed to Constructivism through a longtime friendship with Naum Gabo and an acquaintance with Antoine Pevsner, two brothers who were pioneers of the style. Both worked as Constructivists at the beginning of the movement, and Gabo incorporated kinetics into...
his sculpture. Together the brothers wrote the Realist Manifesto, which outlined their aims. In this seminal text, they affirmed the construction principles of the movement: “Space and time are the only forms on which life is built and hence art must be constructed.” Further, they claimed that their art was an essential embodiment of modern times: “We affirm in these arts a new element the kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time.” In 1967, Rickey would publish a history of Constructivism, Constructivism: Origins and Evolutions, which, like much of his other writing, provided an astute historical analysis while offering insight into his artistic inspirations. As the 1950s progressed, his manner of building up form in his sculptures, as well as his integration of reflective light and movement, showed an affinity with the engineering principles and aesthetic concerns of the Constructivists.

Moving away from his earlier Calderesque mobiles, Planes and Circles (fig. 10), from 1957, demonstrates the additive manner in which Constructivist sculptures built form. Wire circles capped with flat, rectangular, polychrome stainless steel planes sit on several parallel wires that fit tightly together and complete the top edge of a square frame. The circles are secured to the square by a pendulum that swings on a pair of bearings. The planes, attached tangentially to the wire circles, leave the circles unbalanced and prompt their pivoting motion. As the circles rotate, the planes emphasize their movement. Rickey constructed form in the space within the outline of the core square and the wire circles and, further, through the colored rectangular planes that create a circular volume as they trace a path of motion.

Triads (fig. 11), completed in 1958, is a wall-mounted sculpture that rocks to and fro in the wind. Its form, punctuated by three sets of circular frames located in the upper, middle, and lower regions, recalls a spiral cranking motion. A gimbal situated in the middle near the perpendicular wall mount allows the sculpture to swing with the air current, while the solid disks at top and the hollow circles at bottom also rotate when the vertical balance is disrupted. The implied volume of these circling parts, and the repetition of their round shape at the top, center, and bottom of the sculpture, suggest a cylinder—a shape that is outlined by the wires stretching between the ends of the sculpture. Rickey’s economical use of stainless steel is highlighted by the thinness of the metal circles and delicacy of the wires.

Rickey spent much of the 1950s developing his sculptural form, experimenting with new mechanical devices, and cultivating the intersection of movement with form. He was still using color, but this element quickly subsided as he focused more heavily on constructing shapes and different types of movement. During this decade, he also developed his academic and writing career by composing many publications that examined movement within contemporary culture.
and art, specifically sculpture. His texts discussed a broad range of art-related topics, including the role of art and how it functioned, how it should be presented in a public arena, and art education. Rickey’s first solo exhibition of sculpture was at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, in 1953. That same year, George and Edie’s first son, Stuart, was born.

Since completing *Silver Plume II* in 1952, he had been expanding the scale of his works, exploring the possibilities opened up by the welding skills he learned from Smith. As early as 1953, the size and weight limitations of the pivot that Rickey had utilized for several series, including *Bridges, Acrobats, Carrousels, and Vines*, became markedly apparent. He began to replace this device with a rotor, which consisted of a beam with gently rounded ends that fit into two sockets, allowing the rotor to turn smoothly and stably. This construction facilitated the movement of pieces connected to the rotor, such as rotating flat panels. Rickey first used only vertically aligned rotors, as in his series *Little Machines of Unconceived Use*, and then expanded the potential of this device by tilting rotors in many directions, as in his *U.N.* works. In 1954 he also began working more with pendulums, which varied the total weight and distance on either side of a fulcrum to induce movement. The pendulum became an essential element in many later works, particularly those shaped like lines or blades. Rickey soon developed pendulums that rested on two pairs of bearings perpendicular to one another and that could move in a conical path, which he classified as a variation of the gimbal.

By 1955 he had begun to combine different movement technologies into one sculpture. For example, in his series *Seesaw and Carrousels*, created from 1955 to 1956, he used both gimbals and devices he called “space churns.” During these years he also moved away from the linear wire form of his early sculptural work, focusing on geometric forms welded from stainless steel.

In 1955 the family moved to New Orleans, where Rickey became chairman of the art department and a professor of art at Tulane University. He spent most of his second year at Tulane on a prearranged sabbatical in Rome. This is the same year that he began calling his works “kinetic sculptures” rather than “mobiles.” In Rome he made more innovations to his movement devices, and began several other series of works that used multiple mechanisms in a single sculpture, such as *Rotors, Water Plants*, and *Flowers*. These works utilized a gimbal to balance a long vertical piece that housed many small, fluttering rotors on the upper end. Below the pivot point, these elements were weighted by a piece of rock or quartz. This same combination of technologies is present in a later work, *Column of Nine Rotors with Two Triangles* (fig. 12), from 1973, which uses a gimbal to balance a vertical column bracketed by two triangles. Nine spinning rotors complete the form of the column.
In 1959 Philip Rickey, George and Edie’s second son, was born in New Orleans, and the family spent their first summer at Hand Hollow in East Chatham, New York, the place where they would settle into a house the next year. In 1960 Rickey spent part of the summer teaching at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Later, from 1985 to 2001, he would maintain a studio in Santa Barbara.

At the end of the 1950s, Rickey created Acrobats (fig. 13). In this small tabletop sculpture, a thin stainless steel base extends up and splits in two. On either side, multiple small planes, brightly enamelled on both surfaces, turn on pivots. This is one of Rickey’s last works to utilize the device of a pivot, which allowed only a few options for movement and greatly restricted size. By the end of the decade, he had formulated more stable assemblies allowing for delicate works that shifted dynamically and fluidly, often with simultaneous motion through multiple planes. The years spent practicing the lightness of Calder’s mobiles and experimenting with the constructive method and metal-working skills of Smith had culminated in the creation of his own oeuvre of mechanisms and forms to describe motion—pendulums, gimbals, rotors, lines, blades, and planes—that would be eagerly received by both American and European audiences in the next decade.