

Attention Artists of the Planet Earth!
G. W. Smith, May 2018

(See here for online video version: www.vimeo.com/274731207)

Attention artists of the planet Earth!

I speak to you today from my micro-studio at latitude thirty north, longitude ninety west; and if you will please excuse me, my purpose here today is to share with you a document which is focused on a single important idea: despite the fact that modern art seems to be thriving, and especially within the techno-art sector, could there not exist at its core a startling deficiency -- and which deficiency, in turn, has implications for the environment itself? Please bear with me, as our direction will soon become clear:

As we know, it is part of the role of the visual arts to assimilate science and technology, and to make it part of the human landscape.

Impressionism, for example, not only took advantage of the new technology of photography and the new science of color perception, but also helped acclimate the 19th century to the realities of industrialization and urbanization.

But my purpose here today is to warn you that art is now *failing* in its role of assimilating technology -- and more to the point, the initial moment of that failure -- in the early 1930s -- has not, to this day, been recognized. Please let me explain:

It was the destiny of 20th century art to assimilate the *machine* -- and hence we have early 20th century artists like Constantin Brancusi; Raymond Duchamp-Villon; Vladimir Tatlin and Naum Gabo of the Constructivists; and László Moholy-Nagy and Oscar Schlemmer of the Bauhaus.

And as the twentieth century progressed, the machine became more and more and more influential, and especially as it was able to conquer the sky itself: Bleriot flew a heavier-than-air craft across the English Channel in 1909; and in 1927, Charles Lindbergh flew a similar machine from New York to Paris -- and in the process becoming the most celebrated individual on the planet.

And now let us shift our focus to a young sculptor who had actually been present at Le Bourget airport the night that Lindbergh landed; the artist, in fact, who seemed destined to preside over the final marriage of art and the machine. I refer, of course, to Alexander Calder -- the young American whose father and grandfather had both been celebrated sculptors, but who himself had graduated in mechanical engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology; the engineer who had re-discovered his love of art, and who had in 1926 moved to Paris, and thus exposed himself to the influence of the Constructivists, the Futurists, and the Bauhaus.

So we would of course expect this young artist/engineer to devote himself to a quite adventurous mechanical sculpture; and thanks to the scholarship of Professor Arnauld Pierre of the Sorbonne, we are now able to place ourselves at a critical point in Calder's evolution, and indeed that of 20th century art itself: I refer to his 1932 exhibition at the Galerie Vignon in Paris -- "the first entirely kinetic exhibition in the history of Western art", and at which fully half of the pieces were motorized !

In short, Calder was the very first artist to create a complete series of works incorporating the electric motor -- and I cannot overstate the importance of this development! Even then the electric motor was at the heart of our civilization, running our pumps and elevators and ventilation systems -- and it is now poised to do no less than save the planet itself, and this by replacing the internal combustion engine in hundreds of millions of automobiles.

But at this exact point in art history -- the early 1930s -- Calder abruptly turned away from the motor to devote himself to the suspended, wind-driven mobile.

Noted art historian Jack Burnham has explained Calder's remarkable turn-about by reference to the *determinism* of the machine -- the fact that it must repeat over and over its series of movements, like Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill -- and thus the appeal to Calder of random wind currents, which caused his mobiles to move in an ever-changing manner.

But guess what, my friends! It is precisely the determinism of the machine which is of value to us: the fact that it performs its task with a wonderful precision and reliability -- that same precision and reliability which carried Lindbergh safely across the Atlantic Ocean!

And yes, there have been some modern painters who have successfully celebrated this aspect of the machine; and we cannot be surprised to recall that several of them -- Charles Sheeler in particular -- were identified as the "Precisionists".

But where is the machine itself as art? And when I say "machine", I don't mean the curious machines of Jean Tinguely, no matter how entertaining they may be.

Artists of the planet Earth! The question I ask of you today is this: if we wish to think that our culture as a whole enjoys a rapport with technology, why can't we find in any of our iconic art museums a sculpture in which the machine is depicted as the "precise and splendid instrument of human aspiration"?

And as we search in vain through our museums and galleries for such a work, must we not come to this conclusion: the all important marriage between art and the machine, and which was thought to have occurred at some point in the 20th century, has in fact never been consummated?

Or in other words, my dear friends, I submit to you that there is a continued and growing disconnect between the art impulse on the one hand and, on the other, the nuts-and-bolts technical knowledge required not only to keep our civilization running, but also to ensure that our engineering is carried out in a way that is as friendly to the environment as possible.

And I know that many of you young artists are now thinking to yourselves, "What does it matter? The machine is passé, and we should now be focused on computer art, virtual art, data base art, and so on" -- but let me share with you two more sobering thoughts:

First, there can be no doubt that the computer is itself a machine, and no less deterministic in its own way than a steam locomotive -- and so if art has not yet learned to deal with the determinism of the classical machine, what hope can there be at present for a truly thoroughgoing computer art?

And in the second place, there is a quite powerful symbiotic relationship between the computer and the classical machine, as per the automated factory, the robot, and so on. Or in other words, there will be more, rather than fewer machines in our future -- and again, it is critical that these machines be deployed in a way that is friendly to the environment, or perhaps even assists with its remediation -- and so an art which has not yet come to terms with this machine will find itself increasingly irrelevant.

Artists of the planet Earth: I thank you for your attention.