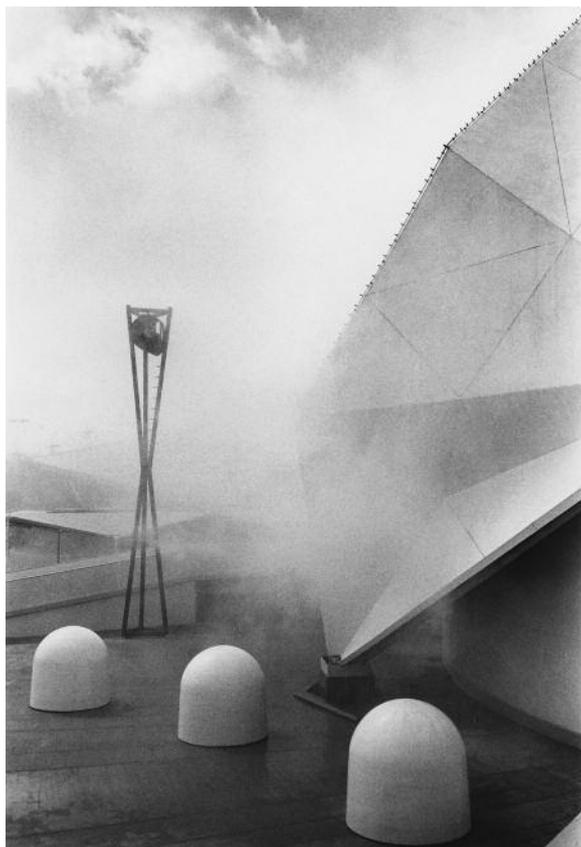


Robert Breer

The Floats



Press kit

CAPC
musée d'art contemporain
de Bordeaux

Robert Breer

19 November 2010 - 27 February 2011
In the nave of the CAPC

This autumn the CAPC is to play host to the collection of Floats by American artist Robert Breer. This is a premiere. For three months, these quasi-minimalistic and historic floating sculptures are to have the run of the museum's nave, triggering the stirring vision of an unfixated exhibition between mobile-sculpture convention and silent debutants' ball.

Robert Greer was born in 1926. For some 60 years, he has been building an undisciplined oeuvre whose watchwords are weightlessness, gliding and fluid movements. Associated successively with several French and American avant-garde movements of the 1950s, the artist at first devoted himself to experimental film and abstract painting. In 1965, he attached small wheels to one of his structures, which he placed on the ground. And so there began an epic floor-level journey for *Tanks*, *Rugs* and other *Floats*, showing scant regard along the way for the minimalistic sculpture, plinths and the conventional static aspect of exhibitions.

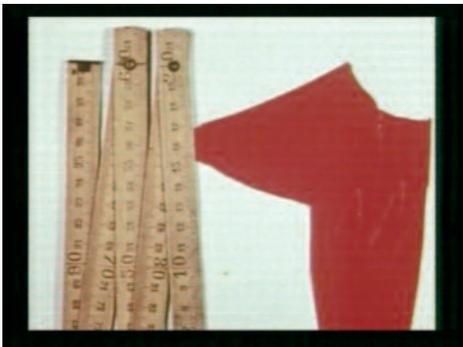
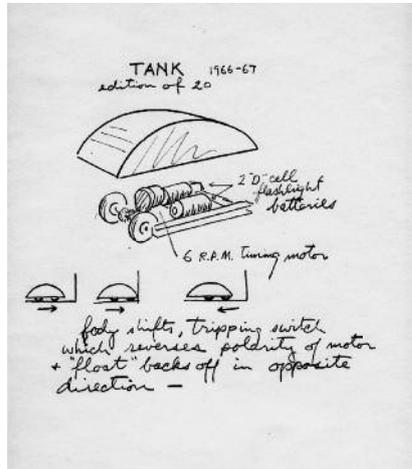
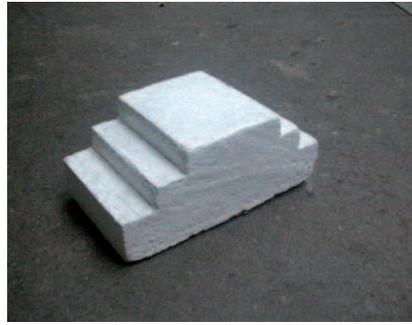
The Floats - or floating sculptures - that Robert Breer took up producing again at the end of the 1990s, emerged in 1965. The word "float" meaning something floating - a marker, fishing float or buoy - and which also describes those carnival vehicles whose pretend wheels give them the appearance of floating above the tarmac, enabled Robert Breer to apply this principle to works of a new genre. Primary shapes, neutral colours and, for the most recent, an industrial aspect, the *Floats* were then made with polystyrene, foam, painted plywood, and, more latterly, out of fibreglass. At first glance, these simple structures appear immobile. In fact, they are moving, imperceptibly, within the

space they inhabit. Motorised and on mini-rollers - which raise them slightly above ground, giving them an air of weightlessness - they glide unbeknown to the visitor, following random paths that are interrupted by the slightest obstacle that they encounter. Stemming from the autonomy of movement characteristic of *Floats*, this liberty indicates the presence of a kinetic eye that proliferates the points of view, not so much on the work itself but on what it passes through and into which its colour merges.

Robert Breer's sculpture is a contemporary of the minimalistic geometric forms that symbolised the 1960s, along with the numerous experiments imbued with the spirit of *performance*, which appeared within the sphere of influence of John Cage and Merce Cunningham - artists frequented by Robert Breer on his arrival in New York. But during the 1960s, these *Floats* were not taken seriously. Were they? And would those glib critics of the ascendancy of the minimalistic sculpture of that period have been able to do so?

So it was to be another three decades before they made another appearance, again in New York, with the same energy and relevance, this time in collective exhibitions with artists of another generation. And, just as they did in the 1960s, the *Floats* disrupted the measured order of exhibitions, projecting the visitor into a state of utter confusion, unable to tell which it was - out of the works of art, the building or himself - that had really moved. In the nave of the CAPC, the first ever meeting of thirty-odd of these pieces will imbue this experience with a quite exceptional intensity.

Exhibition curator: Alexis Vaillant,
Chief curator at the CAPC



Floats, 1966
Photo Peter Moore
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

Exhibition view *Hors jeu*, gb agency, Paris, 2001
Photo Marc Damage
Beam, 1966
Rug #5, 1965
Float, 1970
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

Recreation, 1956-57
Film 16 mm
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

Zig, 1965
Painted styrofoam, motor
16 x 20 x 35 cm
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

Tank, 1966-67
Drawing on paper
35 x 28 cm
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

Floats, 1970
Pepsi Cola pavillion installation, Universal Exhibition, Osaka
© Roy Lichtenstein Foundation
Photo Shunk-Kender
Courtesy Robert Breer & gb agency, Paris

**Engineering Uncertainty:
The Art of Robert Breer**

Simone Menegoi
(excerpts)

Article published in Kaleidoscope, N°5,
February–March 2010

(...) In an interview with Yann Beauvais in the early 1980s, Breer described his sculptures as “motorized mollusks,” but added that when he came up with them, in the early 1960s, it had not been his intention to imitate nature. Rather, he had been thinking about sculpture as a discipline, and his objective was to set his sculptures free from the pedestal and make them autonomous. For Breer, an American who was familiar with the avant-garde on both sides of the Atlantic, “autonomy” took on a different meaning at that time from the one that it might have had for the artists of previous decades—a meaning defined on the one hand by the clattering automata of Jean Tinguely, who was a friend of Breer’s, and on the other, by John Cage’s experiments with chance operations, which allowed the work to evolve according to a logic extraneous to the preferences and choices of its creator. To these two sources of inspiration, Breer added the element of slowness, an element that catches you off-guard in two ways: firstly, because you don’t expect a sculpture to move, and secondly, because if it does, you don’t expect it to move so slowly that it runs the risk of passing unobserved.

Breer, who was born in 1926, grew up in a climate of passion for research and technical innovation. His father Carl, an engineer and inventor, became famous in the 1930s for having designed the first automobile frame based on aerodynamic principles (the Chrysler “Airflow”), and in the 1940s was already making short films in 3D with a double camera of his own invention. The whole of Breer’s career has been molded by a creative restlessness, by a bent for experimentation in the effort to break fresh ground. It is this dynamic impulse that has led him to make forays deep into at least four fields of expression:

painting (which he practiced professionally for around a decade, from the end of the 1940s to the end of the 1950s), animated films (he made his first in 1952), optical devices and finally sculpture. Only one of these activities, painting, has been abandoned, or rather has been transformed into his work with animated drawings; the others have continued to be part of his output right up to the present day.

After attending Stanford University, where, notwithstanding the realist slant of his teachers, he was able to practice abstract painting, Breer moved to Europe in 1949. Obviously, he headed for Paris. There he came into contact with the crème de la crème of the avant-garde in the first half of the century, from Picabia to Man Ray, and made friends with some of the figures who were to shape the history of the second, from Tinguely to Pontus Hultén. In Paris, his style, which was rooted in the neoplasticism of Mondrian, was in keeping with that form of geometric abstractionism that constituted “an artistic ‘third way’ between Picassoid, socialist realism and the existentialist Informel” (Laura Hoptman).

(...) If Breer’s paintings grew increasingly animated and unpredictable over the course of the 1950s, it was partly because in those years the artist was experimenting with images in movement. As a boy, he had amused himself making flip-books, those booklets in which a figure, repeated with small variations, comes to life when the pages are flipped rapidly between the thumb and the index finger. He remembered that game at the beginning of the 1950s, at a time when he was starting to have doubts about the principles and results of his work as a painter. Says Breer, “In that neoplastic period one made ‘absolute’ paintings. It was ‘art concret.’ So I made about one ‘absolute’ painting every week, and it occurred to me that there was a contradiction in being able to make so many absolutes. (...) I made a flip-book of small paintings to try to

understand how I arrived at making this final painting." Out of that flip-book sprang two trends in Breer's production, both linked to the idea of borrowing the elementary mechanisms of the cinema in order to subvert them: optical devices and animated shorts.

(...)

From that moment on, Breer began to experiment frantically with the possibilities offered him by the cinematic medium. He made a clean sweep of the conventions of mainstream film in general and those of animation in particular, commencing with the most elementary: the fluidity of the moving image. Instead of lining up hundreds of frames with small progressive variations, he started to change the subject completely every handful of frames, rising to the fever pitch of a new image every frame. The result, as can be imagined, is a true retinal bombardment, one of the most bewildering since the times of Man Ray's *Le retour à la raison* (1923) . A pressing or even frenzied pace soon became a constant feature of Breer's cinematic production.

(...)

In fact, the end of the 1950s saw two major changes in Breer's career: the final abandonment of painting and the return to America, more precisely to New York, where the artist still lives. His return to the States allowed Breer to find a congenial milieu, made up both of the pioneers of American postwar experimental cinema (Jonas Mekas, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage) and of the visual artists who were soon to give rise to movements like Fluxus, Pop Art and minimalism. Just as in Europe, Breer did not adhere to any specific movement or tendency, but this did not prevent him from forming friendships, exchanging ideas (not always amicably: he recalls having heated arguments with Rauschenberg, whom at the outset he considered a mere imitator of Schwitters) and carrying out collaborations. One of these linked him with Billy Klüver, an engineer with a passion for art who had helped to build

Homage to New York, the famous self-destroying machine shown by Tinguely at the MoMA in 1960. In 1966, Klüver founded EAT, Experiments in Art and Technology (...). Breer, the artist-son of an engineer and an enthusiastic constructor of mechanical contraptions, was obviously on the same wavelength. EAT's most spectacular creation was born thanks to his contacts: the association was commissioned by Pepsi to realize a pavilion at the Osaka Expo in 1970. What emerged was somewhere between a work of public sculpture, a space for multimedia performances and an interactive environment: a gigantic geodesic dome swathed in artificial mist, inside of which were staged technological happenings and outside of which Breer's self-propelled sculptures moved with their customary phlegm.

(...)

"Now really the point of my pieces is that they travel. They move around the space by themselves. [...] For one thing the sculpture has been taken off the stand, and not only that but its connection between itself and the floor is a very active area and this has no precedents for sculptural concern. There is no way to deal with this, the bottom of this piece that is sliding along and its relationships to the floor. That's a very intense area of unresolved aesthetic." If Breer's peculiar "flooriness" owes nothing to the minimalists (not even from the chronological point of view: the first documented floats are from 1965, while Carl Andre's historic *Lever* dates from 1966), the idea of a trajectory of the works through space, slow enough to pass almost unobserved, is no less original.

Events

Conférence

Pierre Bal-Blanc
Wednesday 24 November 7pm
In the nave of the CAPC
€5, free for members

«Surtout ne fermez pas les yeux»

Robert Breer's films by Bertrand Grimaud
Association Monoquini, Bordeaux
Auditorium
Wednesday 8 December 7pm
€5, free for members

Contacts presse

- Claudine Colin Communication
Sandrine Mahaut
sandrine@claudinecolin.com
Tél. +33 (0)1 42 72 60 01
- Mairie de Bordeaux
direction de la Communication,
service de presse
Tél. +33 (0)5 56 10 20 46
- CAPC musée d'art contemporain
François Guillemeteaud
f.guillemeteaud@mairie-bordeaux.fr
capc-com@mairie-bordeaux.fr
Tél. +33 (0)5 56 00 81 70

Other exhibitions

CAPC, ou la vie saisie par l'art
Until 21 November 2010

BigMinis, Fetishes of Crisis
19 November 2010 - 27 February 2011

Jean-Paul Thibeaudeau : Méta-archives 1
(Fragmentary and enigmatic Anarchives)
7 October 2010 - 27 February 2011

CAPC

musée d'art contemporain
Entrepôt Lainé. 7, rue Ferrère
F-33000 Bordeaux
Tel. +33 (0)5 56 00 81 50
Fax. +33 (0)5 56 44 12 07
capc@mairie-bordeaux.fr
www.rosab.net
www.capc-bordeaux.fr

Access by tram

B line, CAPC stop
C line, Jardin Public stop

Schedules

11:00 - 18:00 / 20:00, Wednesdays
Closed on Mondays and public holidays

Guided Visits

Saturdays and Sundays
By appointment, for groups
Tel. +33 (0)5 56 00 81 78

Le Salon

14:00 - 18:00 / 20:00, Wednesdays
Closed on Mondays

The Library

14:00 - 18:00
From Tuesday to Friday
Tel. +33 (0)5 56 00 81 59

Café Andrée Putman

11:00 - 18:00 / 20:00, Wednesdays
Closed on Mondays and public holidays
Tel. +33 (0)5 56 44 71 61

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Tel. +33 (0)5 56 56 78 36
info@arcenreve.com

Exhibition partners

Château Chasse-Spleen
20 minutes
Mouvement

CAPC partners

The Regent Grand Hôtel Bordeaux
iConcept
Air France
Lyonnaise des eaux
Wit FM

front page
Robert Breer
Floats, 1970
Osaka
Photo: Shunk-Kender
© Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

