



## Calder, *The Conquest of Time: The Early Years, 1898–1940*

by Jed Perl Alfred A. Knopf, \$50/£35 (hardcover)

One doesn't make it five pages into Jed Perl's new biography of Alexander Calder before getting something close to Perl's theory of biography itself: 'There is a physics of biography, one that involves the facts and how they are related to one another. And there is a metaphysics of biography, especially the biographies of creative spirits, that involves determining how the facts of the artist's life somehow fuel the imaginative life.' It's a bit perplexing as to what Perl is after here. By 'imaginative life' are we meant to assume Perl means the artist's work – presumably the most direct manifestation of the artist's own imaginative efforts? Or is it meant to indicate something broader, a 'sensibility', say, that goes beyond the dry 'physics' of an artist's life to get at something like the spirit of his time? Are we to learn something about Calder's work by learning about Calder the man? Or are we to learn about the 'age of Calder'?

I'm not sure Perl is clear on the answer himself, or indeed if it's a question he feels needs posing, at least on the evidence of *Calder, The Conquest of Time: The Early Years, 1898–1940*, which remains, to use Perl's own terms, at the level of biographical physics, and rarely rises to anything like a metaphysics, either about Calder or his age.

Could this all be Calder's own fault? Alexander 'Sandy' Calder is a curious giant

in the menagerie of modern art. A figure at once immensely visible (what childhood of the past 50 years has not been introduced to, or produced, a variation on Calder's greatest contribution to the history of art: the *mobile*?) and admired (by giants of Modernism, eg Cocteau, Duchamp, Miró), and yet oddly without acolytes.

Calder's mobiles, his *Cirque Calder* (1926–31), even his wonderfully deft and economical wireworks have not posed challenges for subsequent generations of artists. Not in the way that Constantin Brancusi or Alberto Giacometti remain artists with whom a young sculptor often must *contend* – or avoid. Calder's greatest work, by contrast, requires acknowledgement, even admiration, but no one today is wrestling with it, or crediting it with opening up new horizons of artistic practice, or damning Calder for getting there first, or doing it better.

Could it be that Calder the man just isn't all that fascinating? Perl's early chapters on the Calder family – on A. Stirling and Nanette, Calder's very accomplished artist parents, and on the family's moves from East Coast (Philadelphia) to West (Pasadena) and back (Croton-on-Hudson) following Stirling's career – on Calder's exposure to a wide range of top talents at the turn of the century and

on Calder's education at the Stevens Institute of Technology and at the Art Students League in New York, all combine into a dense portrait of a young artist who appears more or less at ease with the advancing artistic life that in many ways was destined to become his own.

Then there's Paris, where Calder falls in with the right crowd right away, makes important friends (Duchamp), gains recognition and all through the interwar years never sheds the impression that he is the big American boy, the 'man cub', a title that Calder's father had given to one of his own early sculptural portraits of his son. Calder's peers in the 1920s and 30s may have been fascinated by him, but on the page, in Perl's hands, exactly what animates Calder and his own 'imaginative life' is difficult to parse. Mostly Calder's life comes across as rather charmed: 'On the boulevard Arago...', Perl writes, 'Sandy and Louisa plunged back into the rounds of entertainment that had always characterized their life in Paris.' On the same page, Perl tells how Matisse and Duchamp show up one night, and that 'it's unclear, but Henry Miller may have also been among the group'. Unclear? With numerous statements of this sort salting the pages of *Calder*, one feels the need to ask Perl if there is a physics of gossip as well. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*

## YEAH

Edited by Tuli Kupferberg Primary Information, \$40 (boxset)

This boxed facsimile reissue of the ten staple-bound pamphlets published as *YEAH* (1961–65), a zine put together by the New York poet and musician who would go on to form The Fugs, is an antic compendium of its editor's interests and preoccupations at this inflection point in American history and culture. Subtitled 'a satyric excursion, a sardonic review, a sarcastic epitome, a chronicle of the last days', *YEAH* comprises a mix of literary matter and newspaper clippings. Poems, facetious contracts, film reviews by bureaucrats and short stories by men and women (mostly) of the underground address social mores, racism, military blunders, the pursuit of sex and love, pomposity, toilet habits, nuclear annihilation and much else besides.

The tone, overwhelmingly satirical with a pinch of beatnik, is aimed at highlighting

the absurdities of modern life, and, implicitly, carving out an alternative space in a conservative society (Kupferberg's Birth Press, founded with wife Sylvia Topp, also published '1001 Ways to Live Without Working', 1961, 25¢). In one poem we meet the familiar 'Lord High Curator in Charge of Castrations and Paper Clips'; in 'A *YEAH* Extra' titled *Kill Magazine*, we are treated to an appreciation for Adolf Eichmann on the occasion of his execution ('Eichmann was a small clerk in the German government...'), and a political ad foreshadowing another: the drawing of a noose over the line 'Impeach the Traitor John F. Kennedy'. And then an entreaty: 'Come lover / Carpe penem'.

The balance of the material consists of unlikely headlines, small-town perspectives

and, most enthusiastically, advertisements – want ads, ads for police dogs or the latest circumcision tool, fur-lined potties, a suspiciously vibratorlike 'clipper' advertised with 'special low price for nuns'. Over the lifespan of *YEAH*, these excerpts from other media, arranged by Kupferberg in dense collages, crowded out and then entirely replaced the literary material, a sign of confidence, perhaps, that the absurdity spoke for itself. I prefer to think that his interests and energies had passed to The Fugs, founded with fellow poet Ed Sanders between issues 9 and 10, and sounding, in its mordant, bawdy celebration of an unshackled, political life, like nothing so much as an arrangement in guitar, drums, keyboard and raspy voices of these typewritten, mimeographed pages. *David Terrien*