



SIK ISEA

Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft
Institut suisse pour l'étude de l'art
Istituto svizzero di studi d'arte
Swiss Institute for Art Research



Tinguely, Jean, *Dissecting Machine*, 1965, Metallteile, Schaufensterpuppe, Sägen, Drillbohrer, circa sechs Elektromotoren, alles schwarz bemalt, 185,5 x 188 x 200 cm (Objektmass), Privatbesitz

Documentation level

■■■■■

Name

Tinguely, Jean

Dates of birth and death

* 22.5.1925 Freiburg i. Ue., † 30.8.1991 Bern

Municipality of origin (CH)

Basel, La Roche (FR), Pont-la-Ville (FR)

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Plastiker, Maler und Zeichner. Vertreter des Nouveau Réalisme. Verheiratet mit Eva Aeppli, später mit Niki de Saint Phalle

Fields of activity

Skulptur, Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, Eisenplastik, Objektkunst, Assemblage, Collage, Zeichnung, Druckgrafik, Film, Kinetische Kunst

Lexicon article

In 1925, the mother Jeanne Louise Tinguely-Ruffieux moves with her only child to Basel, where the father Charles Célestin Tinguely had lived since 1918. While a boy, Jean Tinguely tinkers with mechanical constructions in the forest, driven by waterwheels. In 1940, he begins an apprenticeship as a decorator in a department shop. After one year he abandons it and attends the school of arts and crafts, where he studies under [Theo Eble](#), [Max Sulzbachner](#), and [Julia Ris](#). In 1944 he is drafted into the military training school, after which he does one year of active service. He is intensively engaged in the theory and history of communism and anarchism. 1949 meeting with [Daniel Spoerri](#). 1953 Tinguely moves to Paris with [Eva Aeppli](#) and their daughter [Miriam](#). Begins work on kinetic constructions, especially wire

sculptures and reliefs.

In 1954, the first two solo exhibitions are held at the Arnaud Gallery in Paris. This leads to a friendship with the art historian and later museum director Pontus Hulten. In 1955 Tinguely, as a neighbor of Constantin Brancusi, moves into a studio on the famous Impasse Ronsin. Together with Yaacov Agam, Pol Bury, Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp, Victor Vasarely, and Rafael Soto, he participates in the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René. The first sound reliefs are created. The year 1958 is marked by the friendship and collaboration with the painter and utopianist Yves Klein. In 1959 Tinguely has his first exhibition at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf. There he drops his manifesto *Für Statik (For Statics)* above the city from an airplane. From now on, he no longer works with a soldering iron but with a gas welding machine, later with an electric welding machine. This allows him to use larger and heavier metal parts. He builds drawing machines, *Métabotics*, which quickly create a furor. At the end of the year, a happening takes place at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London as the conclusion of the *Métabotic* series: A cyclist drives a drawing machine, which the audience covers with a several hundred meters long paper snake. In 1960 Tinguely builds the machine *Homage to New York*, which is spiked with petards, in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; on the occasion of its inauguration it blew itself up. The first museum exhibition follows in September at Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld; the Kunsthalle Bern is also the first institution in Switzerland to show a larger group of works. The longstanding private and artistic relationship with [Niki de Saint Phalle](#) begins. With her, Spoerri, Arman, Klein, and others, Tinguely becomes a member of the group of artists Nouveaux-Réalistes initiated by the critic Pierre Restany. The series of *Baluba* sculptures is created. The following years bring a number of exhibitions, happenings, and joint projects in Europe, the USA, and Japan. In 1963 Tinguely begins to paint his machines black, thus temporarily breaking with the colorful assemblage and junk aesthetic of Nouveau-Réalisme. In 1964, he creates the first large sculpture, *Heureka* (now in Zurich on the Zurichhorn), for the *Swiss National Exhibition* in Lausanne. Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle settle in Soisy-sur-Ecole, south of Paris.

Over time, a specific labor economy crystallizes in Tinguely's work. He works on three levels: Firstly, he pursues his own small-scale sculptural and graphic work; secondly, he takes on large-scale projects that often require several years of preparation. Thirdly, he launches large-scale collective projects in collaboration with artist friends.

The production of mechanical sculptures of small and medium format is carried out by Tinguely in typological series. These are followed, often with long interruptions, for

years, accompanied by graphic production. Here a distinction is made between actual construction sketches and ex-post representations of the works. The most important series of works (also type designations) are *Metamechanical Sculpture* (from 1954 on), *Metamechanical Relief* (from 1954 on), *Metamechanical Sound Relief* (from 1955 on), *Polychrome Relief* (from 1955 on), *Métabatic* (from 1955 on), *Variation* (from 1958 on), *Fontaine* (from 1960 on, water or fountain sculptures), *Radio* (from 1960 on), *Totem* (from 1960 on), *Bascule* (from 1960 on), *Baluba* (from 1961 on), *Char* (from 1964 on), *Eos* (from 1964 on), *Spiral* (from 1965 on), *Motor Cocktail* (from 1966 on), *Rotozaza* (from 1967 on), *Lamp* (from 1970 on), *Cannon* (1972), *Candlestick* (from 1974 on), "macabrisms" sculptures with animal and human skulls (from 1981 on), winged altars/triptychs (from 1981 on).

The large sculptures executed by Jean Tinguely alone or with a slowly growing staff of permanent and temporary helpers from the mid-1960s onward can be distinguished as follows:

1. Self-destructive large sculptures: *Homage to New York* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1960), *Etude pour une fin du monde No 1* (Humlebaek, Louisiana Museum, 1961), *End of the World No 2* (in the desert of Las Vegas, 1962), *Vittoria* (on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Nouveau-Réalisme, Milan 1970).
2. Large sculptures: *Heureka* (1964), *Chaos No. 1* (1974), *Klamauk* (1979), *Pit-Stop* (1984), *Métabarmonie* (1985), *Métabarmonie* (1986), *Meta-maxi-maxi* (1987), *Cascade* (Charlotte, North Carolina, 1991).
3. Large reliefs: *Requiem pour une feuille morte* (1967), *Fairy tale relief* (1978), *Métabarmonie* (1978), *Métabarmonie II* (1979), *The Little Man* (1981), *Métabarmonie III - Pandemonium* (1984), *Métabarmonie IV - Fata Morgana* (1985), *Retable des petites bêtes* (1989), *Retable de l'Abondance Occidentale et du Mercantilisme Totalitaire* (Triptych, 1990).
4. Fountains: *Fasnacht fountain* (Basel, 1977), *Schönenberg fountain* (Pratteln, 1987).
5. Groups of figures on platforms: *Plateau Agricole* (1987), *Inferno* (1984), *Eva Aeppli et les Bourgeois de Calais* (1988-89).
6. Room-filling lamp installations: *L'Odalisque No 2* (1988), *L'Avalanche* (1990), *Large Luminator* (1991).

From the mid-1960s onward, Tinguely encourages numerous artists who were friends of his to collaborate on large-scale projects or (in the case of Niki de Saint Phalle) and he contributes significantly to large-scale projects by others: *DYLABY* (room installation at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, with Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, Daniel Spoerri, Per Olof Ultvedt, Martial Raysse), *HON* (with Niki de Saint Phalle, Per Olof Ultvedt, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1966); *Eloge de la Folie* (stage design for a ballet by Roland Petit, with Niki de Saint Phalle and Martial Raysse, Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 1966); *Le paradis fantastique* (with Niki de Saint Phalle, Skeppsholmen (S), 1966); *La tête (Le monstre dans la forêt)* (the largest project, a multi-storey walk-in large sculpture in the forest of Fontainebleau with Niki de Saint Phalle, [Bernhard Luginbühl](#), Sepp Imhof, [Rico Weber](#), Eva Aeppli, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, César, Arman, Larry Rivers, Rafael Soto, and others, started in 1971, opened in 1994); *Cenodoxus* (1973, stage design and costumes for Werner Düggelin's production at the Salzburg Festival); *Le Crocodrome de Zig et Puce* (with Bernhard Luginbühl, Daniel Spoerri, and others, Paris 1977); *Il Giardino dei Tarocchi* (contributions to a major project by Niki de Saint

Phalle, Garavicchio (I), from 1980 on); *Fontaine Igor Stravinsky* (with Niki de Saint Phalle, Paris, 1983), *La Fontaine de Château-Chinon* (with Niki de Saint Phalle, 1988).

Even Tinguely's extant early work (a painted youth's work has been destroyed) is dedicated to kinetic sculpture. He develops it first as a relief and soon afterward as a free sculpture. Sounds and noises are then integrated. The next step is the inclusion of the audience (*Métabatic*, *Rotozaza*). Fountains and water sculptures are another basic element. Early on, the talent for staging happenings with a public appeal is also evident. Formally, this artist appears to be deeply divided. The whole work is pervaded by a struggle between a rather classical, geometric-abstract formal will and a Dadaist-Baroque exuberance. The "classical" Tinguely has his roots in Constructivism and the Bauhaus; he is as much inspired by the rigor of the art of engineering as he is by Alexander Calder's mobiles, and for a short time in the late 1950s he also moves close to the aesthetics of ZERO and the contemporary kineticists (Agam, Soto, Vasarely). Monochromy, especially black, characterizes these works. His main works are the early mechanical reliefs as well as the strict, reductive reliefs and machines of the 1960s (*Requiem pour une feuille morte*, *Hannibal II*), constructed from a few clear forms, gliding silently and quietly. Next to the rational engineer stands, far more popularly, the "crazy inventor" Tinguely. Vladimir Tatlin, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, [Heinrich Anton Müller](#) are the forefathers of the Baroque Dadaist, the laughing constructor of the wildly swirling, colorfully feathered scrap assemblages and the crashing machines of hell. In the course of the work's development, the baroque element increasingly gains the upper hand; it culminates in a late work full of sinister death symbolism.

Already during his lifetime, Tinguely was considered, alongside [Alberto Giacometti](#) and [Max Bill](#), to be the most internationally successful and important Swiss artist of the century. His death determined the headlines in the major newspapers, and the meticulously planned funeral in Fribourg became a public festival. No other artist in this country has so quickly and self-confidently made the transition from a mocked lunatic to a folk hero, courted by Federal Councilors and economic giants. Initially, Tinguely owed this career to an energetic, hyperactive disposition: always on the move, always on the go, always at work. An often unthoughtful, aggressive assertiveness was tempered by an irrepressible curiosity, charming humor, generosity, and lust for life. This bipolar character found adequate expression in a work that ultimately does not consist of iron constructions, but of an immense ensemble of harmonious and dissonant movements. Tinguely's enthusiasm for racing cars, airplanes, and all technical high-performance machines points to this central drive behind his work: the technical and aesthetic mastery of motion sequences. Although they are often understood as mere parodies critical of civilization, it must not be forgotten that Tinguely created functioning, complex machines. They live in their movement, and no still image can reproduce the actual artistic clou of these sculptures: The beauty created by coordination, subordination, and contrast of simultaneous, interlocking sequences of movement. However, it is not just a matter of what is being moved, nor is it just a matter of how the movements take place. What is essential is rather the

absolutely original appeal of the interplay between the expressiveness of the lines of movement on the one hand, and the meaning of the moving forms and materials on the other. They not only brought Tinguely's works rapid success with a trained art audience but also genuine popularity.

Works: Public Art Collection Basel, Kunstmuseum; Basel, Museum Tinguely; Basel, Theaterplatz, *Fasnacht fountain*, 1977 (15 sculptures; in collaboration with Niki de Saint Phalle); Basel, Euroairport Basel Mulhouse, *Large Luminator*, 1991; Freiburg i.Ue, Grande Place, *Jo-Siffert-Fontaine*, 1984; Gelsenkirchen, Opera House, small foyer, *Relief of Gelsenkirchen Opera House*, 1959; Cologne, Museum Ludwig; Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou; Paris, Place Stravinsky, *Fontaine Igor Stravinsky*, 1983 (in collaboration with Niki de Saint Phalle); Milly-la-Forêt (F), *La tête or Le monstre dans la forêt*, 1969; Skeppsholmen (S), *Le paradis fantastique*, 1972; Kunsthaus Zürich; Zürich, Parkanlage Zurichhorn, *Heureka*, 1963–1964.

Tobia Bezzola, 1998, updated 2010
Translation: Uli Nickel

Selected bibliography

- *Tinguely*. Düsseldorf, Museum Kunstpalast, 2016. [Texte:] Kaira M. Cabañas [et al.]. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016
- *Jean Tinguely. Mythes et Survivances. Mythos und Nachleben*. [Dir.:] Alain Clavien, Claude Hauser, Julia Gelshorn, Caroline Schuster Cordone. Fribourg: Société d'histoire du canton de Fribourg, 2016
- Olivier Suter: *Jean Tinguely. Torpedo Institut*. Zürich: Patrick Frey, 2015 [mit Faltblatt]
- *Museum Tinguely Basel. Die Sammlung*. Texte: Reinhard Bek [et al.]. Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2012
- *Robert Rauschenberg - Jean Tinguely. Collaborations*. Basel, Museum Jean Tinguely, 2009-10. [Texte:] Annja Müller-Alsbach [et al.]. Bielefeld: Kerber, 2009
- *Leonardo Bezzola. Jean Tinguely. Schwarz matt und Ginggernillis*. [Texte:] Guido Magnaguagno [et al.]. Basel: Museum Jean Tinguely, 2003
- *Museum Jean Tinguely Basel*. [Texte:] Niki de Saint Phalle [et al.]. Bern: Benteli, 1996 [Dieser Katalog erschien zur Eröffnung des Museums Jean Tinguely Basel am 1. Oktober 1996.]
- Heidi E. Violand-Hobi: *Jean Tinguely. Biographie und Werk*. München, New York: Prestel, 1995
- *Briefe von Jean Tinguely an Maja Sacher*. Hrsg.: Margrit Hahnloser. Bern: Benteli, 1992
- Michel Conil Lacoste: *Tinguely. L'énergétique de l'insolence*. Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1989, 2 Bde.
- Pontus Hulten: *Tinguely*. Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, 1988-89. Paris, 1988
- Pontus Hulten: *Tinguely. A Magic Stronger than Death*. Venezia, Palazzo Grassi, 1987. Milan: Bompiani, 1987
- *Jean Tinguely. Werkkatalog. Skulpturen und Reliefs. Bd. 1: 1954-1968; Bd. 2: 1969-1985; Bd. 3: 1986-1991*. Bearbeitet von Christina Bischofberger. 3 Bde. Küssnacht und Zürich: Edition Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, 1982, 1990, 2005
- K. G. Pontus Hulten: *Jean Tinguely. «Méta»*. Berlin: Propyläen, 1972

Website

<http://www.tinguely.ch>

Direct link

<http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4022334&lng=en>

Last modification

17.11.2020

Disclaimer

Alle von SIKART angebotenen Inhalte stehen für den persönlichen Eigengebrauch und die wissenschaftliche Verwendung zur Verfügung.

Copyright

Das Copyright für den redaktionellen Teil, die Daten und die Datenbank von SIKART liegt allein beim Herausgeber (SIK-ISEA). Eine Vervielfältigung oder Verwendung von Dateien oder deren Bestandteilen in anderen elektronischen oder gedruckten Publikationen ist ohne ausdrückliche Zustimmung von SIK-ISEA nicht gestattet.

Empfohlene Zitierweise

AutorIn: Titel [Datum der Publikation], Quellenangabe, <URL>, Datum des Zugriffs. Beispiel: Oskar Bättschmann: Hodler, Ferdinand [2008, 2011], in: SIKART Lexikon zur Kunst in der Schweiz, <http://www.sikart.ch/kuenstlerinnen.aspx?id=4000055>, Zugriff vom 13.9.2012.