JEAN TINGUELY DREAMS OF ELECTRIC COWS

Christine Burger

Introduction

Jean Tinguely's *La Vache Suisse—Corso Fleurie* (fig. 1) is part machine and part animal—a bovine that stands larger than life, with most of its body made of scrap metal, discarded tools, and other inorganic material. From a wheel that replaces the cow's characteristic hip bones, two femurs rotate mechanically: one, a rusty piece of folded sheet metal, and the other, a real scapula bone. The motor that generates the machine's movement is the animal's 'heart'. Attached to the end of the long torso is a skull of a cow that is decorated with a bouquet of white and red plastic flowers. The 'heart-motor' opens the jaw in what appears to be an exaggerated movement, not true to the animal's nature, turning the docile crowned cow into a hungry lion.

La Vache Suisse dates from 1990, the year before the artist's death on 30 August 1991, at the age of sixty-six. About a decade before his death, Tinguely began to incorporate bones and taxidermized trophy heads[1] of non-human animals into his machines with increased frequency.[2] While he used animal skins and furs in earlier works, Tinguely exhibited a larger group of works that included skulls and bones for the first time in the summer of 1981 at the Abbaye de Sénaque in the south of France. Besides his sculptures, the artist subsequently worked with animal remains in large altars, such as *Cenodoxus* from 1981. There, the skulls replace the statues or depictions of Christ or various saints that are usually found in altarpieces. As the 1980s progressed, Tinguely's use of bones and skulls only increased, with *Mengele—Dance of Death* from 1986 as the best-known and most ambitious example. The inclusion of skulls and bones marks a crucial moment in Tinguely's oeuvre, as it rings in a change not only in material but also in subject matter and affect. Pontus Hultén confirms that for thirty years, from the 1950s until the 1980s, Tinguely's art remained relatively constant, with irony, humour, and playfulness being the central aspects. Hultén also notes that the 1980s ushered in a 'dramatic and even tragic vein'.[3] The iconography and materials of these late works necessarily invoke an active engagement with death that is not entirely coincidental—and actively addresses the viewer in the tradition of the *memento mori*, reminding them that they too are mortal. Tinguely's omnipresent humour and whimsy is inherent in these works, yet the striking biographical background of their creation cannot be ignored. This text suggests a reading in which the playful is accompanied by the nightmarish and the apocalyptical, both of which are directly connected to the artist's own brushes with death throughout his life. While life-altering events such as his mother's death in 1979[4] and the destruction by fire of the neighbouring farmhouse in Neyruz where cattle perished[5] doubtlessly had a great impact on his oeuvre, it was Tinguely's own heart attack in 1985, which left him in coma for several days, that weighed particularly heavily on him.[6] The balancing act between humoristic lightness and nightmarish abyss is reflected in the tangible duality in Tinguely's work. It emphasizes that a one-sided interpretation would be reductive and would risk ignoring the complex context of the artist's late works. Thinking through the various connotations of the inclusion of animal remains in Tinguely's works, this paper suggests a difference between the machines and altarpieces from the 1980s and the late zoomorphic machines created in the last years before the artist's death. Focussing on works from 1990–1, I propose to rethink those very late works that reanimate skeletal remains of non-human animals by seeing them within the context of the artist's declining health and medical treatment. While in works such as *Le Chien de Niki* from 1981 Tinguely already 'imitated' an animal—here a dog—by including a skull in his anthropomorphic machine, at first glance the playfulness in these works still appears to trump and disguise death.

A crucial difference in Jean Tinguely's animal-machines to the altarpieces including animal remains is

Fig. 1 Jean Tinguely, *La Vache Suisse—Corso Fleurie*, 1990, scrap iron, wooden wheel, skull, plastic flowers, electric motor, 200 × 210 × 110 cm, Museum Tinguely, Basel, Donation Niki de Saint Phalle

that they are not *objects*; rather, they represent *beings*.[7] By thinking of all those types of works as the same kind jeopardizes an understanding outside of life's finiteness and art's *memento mori*. I propose to ponder instead how Tinguely chose to approach his own imminent mortality through his artistic production, by relying on lightness and humour. I suggest that at the core of these machine-animals' artificiality lies the concept of the cyborg that is related to Tinguely's own posthuman medical body, which is brought to a head in the artist's very late works, created in the final years of his life. Ultimately, I want to think about how his machine-animals can be seen as a means to outsmart death through the creation of a cyborg body, one that unites humour with the dread of mortality, thus combining the nightmarish with the comical.

The Medical Body—Altered Existence

While it is true that Tinguely began to include remains of non-human animals before his heart attack in November 1985, this moment must be understood as an event that drastically affected his life, his ability to work, and, ultimately, his oeuvre. Niki de Saint Phalle attests that Tinguely's personality changed from being quiet and secretive to more talkative in the second half of the 1980s.[8] She further highlights how this medical event affected his body, making the execution of simple tasks cumbersome.[9] To approach the machine-animals is to acknowledge that Tinguely's heart attack transformed his own body into a 'medical body'. This term is borrowed from Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, who defines the 'medical body' as 'a particular instance of the way in which technologies and bodies interact … the 'medical body' is acted upon by illness or disability, and/or the diagnostic and therapeutic activities of the medical profession'.[10] It is crucial that while the 'medical body' is a subject, it is simultaneously reconfigured into an object that is denied agency.

Tinguely's treatment following his heart attack—a coronary bypass surgery—further permanently altered his system. This surgery is part of the advancements in medical science in the twentieth century that resulted in a successful prolongation of life. During a coronary bypass surgery, a part of the patient's vein is removed from the leg and transplanted into the heart to bypass narrowing arteries around the heart to restore and ensure blood flow. Tinguely experienced alternative states during this life-saving treatment: the anaesthesia and the post-surgery coma, as well as the artificial stopping of his heart during the operation. Throughout all this, it was life-support machines that kept him alive: the organic body had to work together with the technology to sustain life. Through the technology used in the medical field, Linda Hogle asserts that the body 'will produce and be produced by medical data' in the context of diagnostic procedures in hospitals.[11] The narrative surrounding a person changes as soon as they enter the medical environment; their story becomes reduced to notes on a chart.

What becomes apparent in the context of the coronary bypass surgery is that it not culminates in the creation of a medical body, but, additionally, by transplanting the vein from the patient's leg to their heart, a posthuman cyborg body is created. The transplantation results in the material of one's own body to exist in another state, or, as Hogle puts it, in 'another category from the whole person'.[12]

The Cyborg

'In 'A Cyborg Manifesto', her seminal essay from 1978, Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'.[13] The idea of the cyborg goes back to the 1960 essay 'Cyborgs and Space' by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. As

the title suggests, the cyborg was first thought of in the context of space travel, where an astronaut—who for Clynes and Kline is necessarily a man—does not survive in space by manipulating it into a liveable environment, but rather by adapting the human body to the environment through a technologically advanced spacesuit. This suit takes care of problems automatically and unconsciously, 'leaving the man free to think'.[14]

Tinguely's lifesaving coronary bypass surgery would not have been possible without biomedical advances; consequently, as Clynes and Kline argue, his body had been adapted in a way that would take care of the problem without him knowing. Arguably, however, with his zoomorphic machines Tinguely did not want to merely celebrate medicine and technology. Rather, he wanted to explore the possibilities of imitating or extending life through art. The idea of the cyborg is clearly connected to overcoming a physical defect or shortcoming, and Haraway explicitly links it to a masculinist world of war.[15] Betty Friedan observes that all 'assumptions and definitions of masculinity are based on young men',[16] discussing society's expectation of young men, which she calls the 'male mystique'. The ageing male body, on the other hand, is no longer capable of the same performance, which not only affects men on a physical but also on a mental level.[17] Tinguely's declining health and weakening body strongly affected him, as Niki de Saint Phalle touchingly recalls: 'You did not want to live with your diminishing physical strength. … You did not take your medications, or when you did, you would take the whole box. There was nothing I could do or say to help. You were in purgatory. You did not like it … .'[18] Accordingly, for Tinguely, the last years of his life were a time of unbalance, chaos, and confusion—states that Parker-Starbuck links to moments when the cyborg appears. In these moments, the cyborg represents a stable alternative to the unstable current situation that endangers bodies, societies, or individuals.[19] The coronary bypass surgery that permanently altered the 'natural' makeup of Tinguely's body, brought the artist himself one step towards a cyborg existence, and offered a posthuman alternative to a dying body.

Finally, the cyborg as life extender can only work if it is sentient; it cannot be a mere machine driven by artificial intelligence. However, it can be argued that through constant medical and technological improvements, it is the machine that becomes the repository for the sentient mind. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry discusses sentience in artifice and the human body, with a special emphasis on the process of self-artifice, meaning how the medical advances of the twentieth century affect the human body and its sentience. For Scarry, the artificial body is the outward projection of the human body, and humans project their own fragility as well as their strengths into artificial objects. The artificial body can then be improved—for instance, when a prosthesis does not fit, it can be adapted until it does. This manner of 'improvement' is not available to the human body.[20] The cyborg, the epitome of an artificial body, becomes the improved, sentient version of the human body. Tinguely's machine-animals must be understood in this context, as through them he was able to transform his own failing body into beings that live on.

The Ghost in the Machine—Moving Cyborgs

This idea of the artist living on in his machines evokes a feeling of eeriness that is reflected in the concept of the cyborg, but also the zoomorphic machines themselves. The idea of the cyborg as an organism created through the combination of the artificial and the organic represents an uncertain status. Donna Haraway sees this status as blurring the lines between human and animal and human and machine, writing that 'the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.'[21] It is unclear to what extent the newly created 'being' is their old self, and in the case

Video,
La Vache Suisse—Corso Fleurie

of cyborgs, if they can feel and think—in short, if they are sentient. This inherent ambiguity is often at the core of fictional accounts such as movies and comic books—prominent examples being the *Terminator* franchise or Marvel Comics heroes—and can be understood as a reflection of our own unease when encountering these humanoid or zoomorphic machines. The ambiguity is not new to the twentieth-century development of the cyborg but already present in earlier versions of robots and automata. The following definition of the automaton by Minsoo Kang perfectly captures the tension and unease: 'It is an artificial object that acts as if it is alive; it is made of inert material yet behaves like a thing of flesh and blood; it is a representation that refuses to remain a stable version of the represented; it comes from the inanimate world but has the characteristics of an animate creature; and finally, it is a manmade thing that mimics living beings.'[22]

Machines such as automata and cyborgs subvert common dualities, of living or dead, artificial or organic. Tinguely created his works within these same parameters as a combination of organic and inorganic materials that can be brought to life by turning a switch. Returning to *La Vache Suisse*, Tinguely not only sought to represent the animal but also imitate it through movements (video). The animal's characteristic features of the hips and long torso are emphasised in this sculpture, whereas a bouquet of plastic flowers replaces its horns. The animal is set in motion by a motor, and while the resulting movement evokes the creature's heavy and slow gait, there is nothing natural about it. The two 'femurs' dangle off the wheel without extending further into legs and hoofs, turning around lifelessly. The actual femur bone on the right hip is connected to the upper part of the skull, and its rotation results in the opening of the mouth. The ragged and angular movements are accompanied by the metallic noises caused by the motor, the hinges, and the dangling metal objects. While this description highlights all the elements of *La Vache Suisse* that are completely alien to a cow, the sculpture exists in the area where, returning to Haraway, the boundaries between animals, humans, and machines are crossed.

Extension of Life, Denial of Death

This final section turns to Tinguely's cyborgs and considers his machine-animals in the context of the artist's final year of his life and the machine's attempt to overcome death, both through a combination of organic and non-organic matter and the creation of movement.

Tinguely, who was brought up Catholic, began a series of altarpieces in the early 1980s after his mother's death. These altars represent objects whose structure conforms to the principles of altarpieces in Catholic churches. Other works from the 1980s that use skulls and bones, such as *Mengele—Dance of Death*, evoke creatures of the underworld, demons, and witches. They embody a different approach to death than the zoomorphic cyborgs, one that is based on commemoration and fear. The animal-machines aim to imitate life, which might be best illustrated by a work from 1988 that does not show an animal but a person; Tinguely's work *Autoportrait* from the collection of the Centre Pompidou. The figure is a mask, carrying a taxidermized bird. Various chains are attached to a wheel that makes this *Autoportrait* move.[23] Through this designation as a self-portrait, Tinguely seeks to 'adapt the man'—that is, himself—to the new environment, reanimating his own failing body through the machine's motor. He projects himself into this machine, thus making the artificial object sentient. What Tinguely appears to be trying to achieve through this work is a way to show his pain—something that, following Scarry, is impossible to show.[24] While there is a vocabulary to talk about, describe, and categorize pain, these words and systems can never do justice to the *feeling* and *experience* of pain. This incapability to express pain and suffering is illustrated in Niki de Saint Phalle's

Fig. 2 Jean Tinguely seated on *L'Ours de Bursinel*, La Verrerie, 1990

Fig. 3 Jean Tinguely, *Hippopotamus*, 1991, tar barrel on wheels, scrap iron, motorcycle parts, hoses, hippopotamus skull, electric motor, 180 × 360 × 130 cm, Museum Tinguely, Basel, Donation Niki de Saint Phalle

earlier quote: 'You did not want to live with your diminishing physical strength. ... There was nothing I could do or say to help. You were in purgatory. You did not like it ... .'[25] Purgatory, like pain and suffering, is a place of isolation that cannot be shared. I argue that Tinguely attempted to break his self-isolation through sentient machines.

Perhaps realizing that the approach to the cyborg through the replication of the human did not work, Tinguely turned to animals. This shift might be understood in the context of Haraway's cyborg theory. The author maintains that beside the negative aspect of the cyborg—the one she ties to a 'masculinist orgy of war'—there is room for another perspective, a more positive one, where 'a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.'[26] Tinguely did not hide the composite nature of his works. The scrap metal that he collected and reused is rusty and blemished, many of the skulls are incomplete. The artifice of the zoomorphic cyborgs is blatant, and it is the transparency that reveals the mechanics of the machines,[27] fostering and embracing the human-animal-machine kinship.

In *La Moto de la Mort* (1989), for instance, the human presence is implied. The crocodile skull crowns a motorcycle chassis, which from a certain angle looks like a dinosaur or dragon standing up. The seat is free, and, similar to *Le Safari de la Mort Moscovite* (1989), the human driver of these vehicles is wholly absorbed by the machine and made one with it. These works may strengthen the human body, they encase it and thus protect its frailty, but they cannot 'exist' without the human.

One year later, in 1990, Tinguely found a tree trunk in the forest in Bursinel, near Nyon, that reminded him of a bear. Instead of completing the trunk with limbs or a head, he brought *L'Ours de Bursinel* back to life by attaching machines and machine parts to the scarred stumps. In a photograph (fig. 2), Tinguely sits on top of the 'bear', replacing its head, lending the cyborg his own, human, sentience. The *Hippopotamus* (fig. 3), created in the year of his death, is a stark example of how the artificial cyborg body is an improved version of the human body and how its weaknesses are ironed out. The imposing tar-barrel body and the beast's height overcome the artist's own dying, medical body.

Let us now return to where we started, to *La Vache Suisse*. Tinguely placed this machine-animal in

Figs. 4.1–4.2 Jean Tinguely, *Poya (High Altar)*, 1982–4, metal, wood, skull, found objects, rubber belts, electric motors, private collection Switzerland

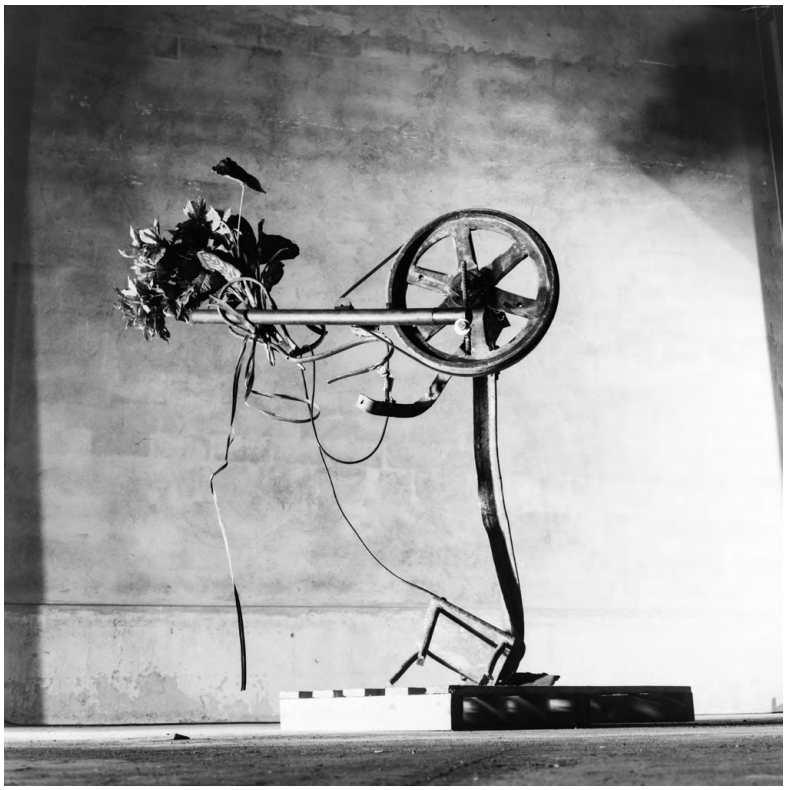

Fig. 5 *La Vache Suisse—Corso Fleurie* as a work in progress, La Verrerie, 1990

a very specific moment in time: what is known as the *Alpabzug*, when the cattle and the alpine herdsmen all over Switzerland descend from the lush alpine meadows where they have spent the summer. The cows that produced the most milk, or those that are exceptional leaders of their herds, will be decorated with seasonal flowers. The *Alpabzug* takes place between mid-August and mid-September, marking the end of a fertile and productive season, before the cows return to their stables, where they will spend the winter and the flowers that crowned their heads will wilt. This was not the first time that Tinguely took the changing seasons that follow the alpine cattle herds as his subject. The 1983 altarpiece *Poya* (figs. 4.1–4.2), created before his life-altering heart attack, references the *Alpaufzug*. As a child, spending his summers in Gruyère, Tinguely witnessed *poyas*,[28] which must have left a lasting impression on the artist who translated the event into two works at the end of his life.[29] Tinguely created *Poya* in the tradition of the Catholic altar, where death is omnipresent; here, actual skulls and bones replace the allegorical *memento mori* of the status of Christ and martyrs. The commemoration of the beginning of the summer in this earlier work becomes a wistful anticipation of a certain end. The later work, on the other hand—the cyborg work—is an attempt to both accept the end of summer/life and bargain with technology for an extension of life.

A photograph (fig. 5) of *La Vache Suisse* taken during the creation process is vital to illustrate my argument. Most elements are there—the flowers, the wheel, the motor—and it is clear in which direction the work is going. But one crucial element is missing: the skull. Without it, the machine cannot be a cyborg, it needs the organic animal part upon which sentience can be projected. Tinguely had to include the skull to reverse the narrative of the earlier altar—death is not the certain end; there is room for bargaining, for finding a way to extend life. *La Vache Suisse* thus seemingly brings Tinguely's fear of death to a head by turning the symbols of mortality around. Yet, ultimately, this cow remains a human-made thing, with a motor creating a futile movement as the temporary motion is neither forwards nor backwards. Yet in this patched-up animal's eerie noises, the heavy movement of its skull and bones, the looming presence of Tinguely's ghost in the machine can be felt.

And so we have come full circle, with a juxtaposition of skulls in altarpieces and a cyborg where we began. *Poya (High Altar)* and *La Vache Suisse* illustrate the turn that Tinguely's late work had taken within the span of a decade, from a Catholic inspired *memento mori* to an attempt to overcome death through the creation of sentient animal-machines. While these efforts ultimately did not extend Tinguely's own life, they do live on as artificial creatures representing the life-extending improvements that can hopefully be made to the human body in the future.

1 While there are examples of works where Tinguely used human remains, especially human skulls, this text focuses exclusively on the artist's works that incorporate bones of non-human animals. The ethical and moral, as well as the artistic, implications of using human remains versus the remains of non-human animals is vastly different and would go beyond the scope of this paper.

2 This is confirmed by various sources, see, for example, Reinhard Bek: 'From the early 1980s, Tinguely began to employ animal skulls and bones as well as cheap disposable items. He obtained the skulls of large game animals from hunter friends of his and also from taxidermists. Prepared horse and cow skulls usually came from Luginbühl's circle in the Emmental valley.' See Reinhard Bek, 'Conserving the Kinetic: Mechanical Sculptures at Museum Tinguely', in *Museum Tinguely Basel: The Collection*, ed. Museum Tinguely, Basel (Heidelberg and Berlin: Kehrer, 2012), 194.

3 Pontus Hultén, *Jean Tinguely: A Magic Stronger Than Death* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 265.

4 Margrit Hahnloser writes, 'With the death of his mother in November 1979, motifs of transitoriness and decay began to drown out the playful, clowning aspect of his work. His mechanical realm increasingly extended to haunting and demonic elements, and altarpieces referred directly to Christian iconography. The Church, the liturgy, purgatory and death became powerful images in Tinguely's work in the eighties.' See Margrit Hahnloser, 'Jean Tinguely and Switzerland', in *Museum Jean Tinguely Basel: The Collection*, ed. Museum Jean Tinguely Basel (Bern: Benteli Publishers, 1996), 119.

5 This event specifically gave rise to *Mengele—Totentanz* (1986), an installation comprised of fourteen individual sculptural machines. See Rudolf Suter, object entry for *Mengele—Dance of Death*, in *Museum Tinguely Basel*, 130–7.

6 'Jean Tinguely: Life and Work (1925–1991)', https://www.tinguely.ch/de/tinguely-sammlung-restaurierung/tinguely-biographie.html (accessed on 12 March 2025).

7 The group of works that could represent *beings* is certainly larger, including groups such as the portraits of important philosophers, created between 1987 and 1990, or the *Balubas* (1961–3). Considering these in more depth would go beyond the scope of this paper.

8 Niki de Saint Phalle, 'A Little of My Story with You, Jean', in *Museum Jean Tinguely Basel*, 27–9. This is also confirmed by Hahnloser, *Museum Jean Tinguely Basel*, 85.

9 De Saint Phalle, 'A Little of My Story', 27–9. Margrit Hahnloser again supports Niki de Saint Phalle's recollection, mentioning that this declining strength resulted in Tinguely combining his studios into one single workplace, and accepting fewer exhibition projects. See Hanhloser, *Museum Jean Tinguely Basel*, 127–8.

10 Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, as summarized by Alex Merikides and Gianna Bouchard in their introduction to *Performance and the Medical Body*. See Alex Mermikides and Gianna Bouchard, eds., *Performance and the Medical Body* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 11.

11 Linda F. Hogle, 'Tales from the Crypt: Technology Meets Organism in the Living Cadaver', in Chris Hables Grey, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 203.

12 Hogle, 'Tales from the Crypt', 205.

13 Donna Haraway, Simians, *Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

14 Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, 'Cyborgs in Space', reprinted in *The Cyborg Handbook*, 30–1.

15 Haraway, S*imians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 196.

16 Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 165.

17 Friedan, *Fountain of Age*, 165.

18 De Saint Phalle, 'A Little of My Story', 28.

19 Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 34.

20 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 254–6.

21 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 152.

22 Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 36.

23 For a more comprehensive analysis of the *Autoportrait* by Jean Tinguely, see Fabiana Senkpiel, *Beziehungsgeflechte—Jean Tinguelys Selbstporträts mit präparierten Vögeln*, Tinguely Studies, forthcoming.

24 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 3–6.

25 De Saint Phalle, 'A Little of My Story with You, Jean', 28.

26 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 196.

27 Jenny Graser, *Das Plastische Ereignis: Das Zusammenspiel von Objekt- und Ereignishaftigkeit in der Bewegten Skulptur am Beispiel von Jean Tinguelys 'Maschinentheater'* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2016), 57.

28 In the dialect of Fribourg, *poya* is the word used for the ascent of the cattle to the summer meadows in the Swiss Alps.

29 Heidi E. Violand-Hobi, *Jean Tinguely: Life and Work* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1995), 124.

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