

PRESS RELEASE

Basel, February 2012

Kienholz: The Signs of the Times

Museum Tinguely, Basel: 22 February – 13 May 2012



The oeuvre created by the American concept and object artist Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) from the mid-1950s onwards is strongly polarizing and rebellious in character. Central to his work, which from 1972 was executed in collaboration with his wife Nancy Reddin Kienholz, are religion, war, death, sex and the degenerate sides of society. As well as being members of the same generation, Kienholz and Tinguely shared a bond of friendship and of respect for the (differing) radicality of each other's artistic creativity. The exhibition shows work from the period 1960–1994, notably a number of impressive smaller sculptures in conjunction with a series of the expansive and spectacular "moral tableaux".

Rebellious, provocative and polarizing, the oeuvre associated with the name Kienholz has always caused quite a stir since its beginnings in the mid-1950s, first the works by Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) alone, then later, from 1972 on, the collaborative projects with his wife, Nancy Reddin Kienholz. The sensation caused by Kienholz's art is hardly surprising, given that its central subjects are religion, war, death, sex and the more inscrutable sides of society and its social conflicts. With themes such as the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution, the role of the media, or the consequences of ethnic conflicts, the works pinpoint fractures of Western societies which have hardly been remedied to this day and thus lend the oeuvre its unmitigated topicality. But this contemporaneity is not due solely to the themes dealt with; today we view the works as anticipating central trends in contemporary art like those we find ourselves confronted with in Paul McCarthy's and Mike Kelley's pieces, for example, but also in the production of Jonathan Meese, Thomas Hirschhorn, or John Bock. On show from 22 February 2012 until 13 May 2012, the exhibition at the Museum Tinguely, spanning from the first three-dimensional smaller works to the conceptual pieces and room-filling tableaux, offers a complex survey highlighting the essence of Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's achievements.

Edward Kienholz was born on 23 October 1927 in Fairfield, Washington, and died in 1994 in Hope, Idaho. On the occasion of the exhibition *The Kienholz Women in Berlin* in 1981/82, Edward Kienholz publicly declared his wife's co-authorship concerning all his works produced since 1972, the year of their first encounter. Although Edward Kienholz studied at several colleges, he never attended an art academy. His pursuit of such diverse occupations as nurse, car dealer, handyman (his van carried the inscription "Ed Kienholz – Expert"), and bar-owner gave him experience of a great variety of spheres of life and enabled him to gather impressions and insights that were to provide him with inspiration

in his creative work. From 1973 Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz divided their time between the remote town of Hope, Idaho, and Berlin, where they maintained a lively exchange with the German art world.

In 1953 Edward Kienholz settled in Los Angeles, where from 1954 he did his first wood reliefs and small material assemblages. Two years later he organized exhibitions in Los Angeles, where in 1957 he opened the Ferus Gallery together with Walter Hopps. Shortly after, his works developed into three-dimensional "tableaux" – room-spanning environments and installations. The material he used was mainly comprised of everyday objects found through scouring junk shops and markets, and examples of Western consumer culture waste found on scrap heaps and disposal sites – television sets, automobile parts, lamps, loudspeakers, furniture, goldfish bowls, shoes, signs, flags, advertising articles, cigarettes, toy soldiers, or dollar bills. These were often complemented with plaster casts of various family members and friends.

This radical approach was unparalleled in the history of art. Kienholz intended everyone to be able to get his message and therefore refrained from using an elitist visual language. His work comes across in a quite unusual and unaccustomed manner: with all its real elements it is close to everyday life and yet at the same time it points beyond. This was too much for respectable 1960s America, where the works were considered obscene and yet thousands thronged to Kienholz's first big exhibition to savour the taste of scandal.

Edward Kienholz and Jean Tinguely first met in 1962, when Tinguely had an exhibition in the Everett Ellin Gallery in Los Angeles and his partner Niki de Saint Phalle mounted a "shooting picture" on 4 March. Tinguely and Kienholz acted as her assistants, laying the foundation for a close friendship. The two artists met frequently in the following two years, during which one important moment was certainly the shooting excursion that gave them the idea for the collaborative concept tableau *The American Trip* of 1966.

"Adrenalin-producing anger carried me through that work," as Edward Kienholz put it when looking back on his initial years. In a period marked by the Cold War and the anticommunism of the McCarthy era, Kienholz had good reason to be angry and was among the critical figures who joined their voices in passionate contempt of vulgarity and injustice. Denouncing consumerist delusion, bigotry and inhibition, they pursued alternative ways of living, deliberately sought out dirt and disorder, and took a special interest in outcasts and groups on the edge of society. In the large tableau *The Eleventh Hour Final* of 1968, Kienholz evokes the comforting atmosphere of an average respectable bourgeois living room. Critically, though, he destroys it at a stroke with one single object: a concrete television set with a severed doll's head standing for the victims of the Vietnam war, visible behind a matt screen bearing statistics of the numbers killed. The simple act of quotation highlights the absurdity of the statistics, which – as indicated by the work's title – were read every evening on the late news. The television set becomes a memorial but also a literal reminder of media manipulation.

The tableau *The Jesus Corner* of 1982/83 likewise juxtaposes cosy bourgeois homeliness with the harsh realities beyond its world. In so doing it expresses and champions open-mindedness and tolerance towards society's outsiders, loners and nonconformists. With its use of Christian devotional objects, the assemblage is symptomatic of Kienholz's profound scepticism towards institutionalized religion, which finds its expression in mocking irony or open rebellion in different works.

A great many works make it their concern that everybody should be granted a fair share in the American dream. *Claude Nigger Claude* of 1988, a portrait by Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz of a black man from Idaho (a state with a minimal black population), is an appeal against racism in its habitual, everyday guise. *The Potlatch*, from 1988, on the other hand, is concerned with the marginalization of the indigenous population and the destruction of their social and cultural identity. In *Claude Nigger Claude* and *The Potlatch*, the artists spoke as inhabitants of Idaho, showing an acute awareness of the history of the American Northwest.

Other works deal with sexual power and exploitation, presenting the utopia of liberated sexuality in opposition to the commodified sexuality of the brothel. Works such as *The Pool Hall* of 1993, *The Rhinestone Beaver Peepshow Triptych* or *The Bronze Pinball Machine with Woman Affixed Also*, both from 1980, mirror commercialized sex and advertising images of utmost banality, which have deeply embedded themselves in the society's subconscious. In today's world of YouPorn in which porn

pictures are available at any time to virtually everyone, a pinball machine offering an outlet for impulses and urges nearly strikes us as belonging to some golden age. The perspective seems to be profoundly Protestant in this case and incessantly oscillates between exhibitionism and enlightening gesture.

One particular highlight of the exhibition will be the spectacular installation *The Ozymandias Parade* with its 687 blinking light bulbs (which in Basel are in Switzerland's national colors red and white but are adapted accordingly wherever the work is mounted). The "Ship of Fools" in the form of a mirrored arrow is presented as a decadent parade symbolizing the abuse of political power. Whether the ominous-looking President of the parade will bear a YES or a NO over his face is determined by the public's answers to the simple question: "Are you satisfied with your Government?" In the two weeks prior to the exhibition, visitors to the Internet page www.tinguely.ch/jajaneinnein can take part in the survey. The result of their voting then becomes apparent at the opening.

The exhibition *Kienholz: The Signs of the Times* is mounted by the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt in cooperation with the Museum Tinguely Basel.

Catalogue:

The exhibition will be accompanied by the catalogue *Kienholz. Die Zeichen der Zeit/The Signs of the Times* published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König (edited by Martina Weinhart and Max Hollein; German-English edition; 245 pages; CHF 38) with a foreword by Roland Wetzels and Andres Pardey as well as texts by Dietmar Dath, Martina Weinhart and Cecile Whiting and an interview with Nancy Reddin Kienholz by Martina Weinhart (ISBN 978-3-86335-087-1).

General information:

Opening hours: Tuesday – Sunday 11 - 18 h (closed on Mondays)

Admission prices: Adults: CHF 15

Students, trainees, seniors, people with disabilities: CHF 10

Groups of 20 people or more: CHF 10 (per person)

Children aged 16 or under: free

For further information and press images please visit our website: www.tinguely.ch.