

PRESS
RELEASE

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Tinguely@Tinguely

A new look at Jean Tinguely's work

Museum Tinguely, Basel: 7 November 2012– 30 September 2013



It is now sixteen years and over fifty exhibitions since the opening of the Museum Tinguely. While Jean Tinguely was then still very present in our memories, both as “our Jeannot” and also as a public figure, the passage of time has now shifted the focus of interest away from his person and more onto his work. Today Jean Tinguely is being rediscovered as one of the most inspirational figures in the international art scene around 1960, which has prompted us to revise our view of his pioneering oeuvre and present his works afresh in a new and wide-ranging large-scale exhibition using

more than 3000m² of space and entitled “Tinguely@Tinguely”. The exhibition will be accompanied by a new comprehensive collection catalogue reflecting the work and growth of the Museum Tinguely since 1996. This publication will not only be the standard reference work for future research but will also provide fascinating bedtime reading for all admirers of Tinguely's remarkable art and artistry.

The exhibition is to offer a comprehensive survey of Tinguely's oeuvre, presenting him as a major innovator and as a real inventor of post-mid-twentieth-century art, particularly of kinetic art. In the years 1954 and 1955, in a frenzy of creativity, Tinguely brought forth the *Méta-Herbin* group, the *Méta-Malevich* group, the *wBlanc sur blanc* group, the first *Machines à dessiner*, and the *Volumes virtuels*. With their incorporation of movement, pure chance, and elements designed to stimulate all the senses, these works paved new paths for the abstract formal experiments of European post-war art. In the *Méta-Malevich* reliefs, Tinguely used the kinetic element to produce works that appear to have fulfilled Kasimir Malevich's vision of aeronautically motivated animation and abstraction of landscape. In the drawing machines that he called *Méta-Matics* he offered one of the subtle but at the same time one of the most complex answers to Walter Benjamin's essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.

That Tinguely's artistic career was marked by numerous changes of direction demonstrates the openness of his creative life and the extent to which he participated in the international art scene, which he was also instrumental in shaping. In 1960 he began to mount actions, performance pieces and happenings that featured *objets trouvés* and were governed by a radical scrap or junk aesthetic. In so doing he succeeded in investing the waste of our consumer society with a new life of its own, a life that was wilfully original, strongly absurd, and often short-lived.

With the auto-destructive art works and performance pieces he mounted in Paris, London, New York, Humlebæk, the desert of Nevada and at other locations, Tinguely joined company with a rising generation of neo-Dadaist action artists. His *Homage to New York* of 1960, the very first self-destructing art work, is a dramatic and spectacular commentary of the destructive potential of a world politically and socially dominated by the atmosphere of the Cold War. The auto-destructive action *Study for an end of the World No. 2*, 1962 which was designed to be broadcast and publicized in the media, pointed in the direction of the staging of landscape that later developed into what we now know as Land Art.

The black sculptures he created from 1963 onwards possess a new dynamic of their own. More compact in their appearance than earlier works, their matt black surfaces also give them greater homogeneity as a group. The sculpture *Heureka* created by Tinguely for Expo 1964 in Lausanne can be regarded as the first peak of achievement in this development, with *Eos*, *Bascule*, *Char*, *Santana* and *Hannibal* being other notable examples.

The works on which Tinguely collaborated with other artists occupy a particularly important place in his oeuvre from the sixties onwards. *Le Cyclop*, which was created between 1971 and 1991 at Milly-la-Fôret to the South of Paris, was also conceived as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Over 22 metres high, this collective "friendship sculpture" was co-executed by friends of Tinguely's such as Niki de Saint Phalle, Bernhard Luginbühl, Daniel Spoerri, Eva Aeppli and many others.

Although Tinguely's choice of iron as an artistic material meant that he was working in a medium of great durability and stability, he regularly used it to focus on the subject of transience, or at least of the transience of the use of this material in productive machinery. His fountain sculptures bring out the contrast between stable and ephemeral elements in a particularly poetic manner. In the *Fasnachtsbrunnen* or "Carnival Fountain" he created for Basel in 1977 Tinguely developed a true mastery of the art of liberating the water spouts and fountains from the force of gravity and of using them to do drawings in the air to fine and varied effect. Each of the fountain's constituent water sculptures has its own specific character, rhythm and artistic style. When seen together they form a highly theatrical and parody-like water music, which in winter comes to a standstill in a magnificent array of sculptures in ice.

Tinguely's sculptures always meet the beholder on several levels at once, using kinetic, optical, and acoustic means to make their impact and sometimes also working through the senses of smell and touch. One of the most many-faceted and monumental work groups is the series of four music machines created between 1978 and 1985. Two of these complex large-scale sculptures are displayed in the new exhibition: *Méta-Harmonie II* of 1979 is on loan from the Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung, while *Fatamorgana Méta-Harmonie IV* of 1985 is part of the Museum Tinguely's permanent collection. The *Grosse Méta-Maxi-Maxi-Utopia* of 1987 also belongs to the series of large-scale acoustic sculptures, amongst which it is the only walk-in installation. Once inside, the visitor becomes – as in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* – a part, or a product, of the machine and gets lost in a mechanical labyrinth and system of wheels and cogs. The *Grosse Méta-Maxi-Maxi-Utopia* is a highly theatrical work and a fine example of Tinguely's commitment to performance art.

Of Tinguely's many passions, one of his greatest was for motor racing. He never ceased to be fascinated by the terror it can instil, by the high level of perfection in the association of man and machine, but also by the ever-present danger of accidents, chaos and death. Through his friendship with the racing driver Jo Siffert, Tinguely had access to the world behind the scenes. For many years, Tinguely's diary revolved around the dates of the Formula One races, which took him as far from home as Japan and South Africa. Naturally enough, he also used his impressions of motor racing in his art. In *Klamauk* of 1979 he contrasted a sleek and dynamic racing car with a machine that is nothing but a mass of gears and wheels, belching smoke as it creeps slowly on its way.

Tinguely was one of the most radical and subversive artists of the twentieth century. His work deals with many fundamental questions of our human existence: how we relate to machines, the collaborative art work, the beauty and uselessness of movement, sound, noise and music, shadow play, lightness and heaviness, dissolution and emptiness, and the elements, as well as generally questioning the roles of art works, their originators and their beholders. One of Tinguely's special qualities is that his artistic achievements went hand in hand with great lightness of touch, humour, irony and parody. His oeuvre ranges from Dadaism à la Marcel Duchamp through geometrical abstraction and kinetic animation right through to works that are veritable outbursts of Baroque extravagance.

Catalogue

The catalogue contains illustrations of all the sculptures in the collection as well as a generous selection of drawings and sketches. It includes a thorough biography, a text on the happenings and events in which Tinguely was involved, recently compiled work lists as well as an essay on the restoration of the machine sculptures in the museum. This makes the book a standard reference work for lovers of Jean Tinguely's art and the European avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s.
Kehrer Edition, 552 pages, 962 ill., 58 CHF

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General information:

Opening hours: Thursday – 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

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