

# **Kinetic Art in Dada Tradition:**

## **Auto-destructive Sculptures by Jean Tinguely**

“[Jean] Tinguely. I mean, he was an anarchist. But even though he had very strong critical views, he didn’t go about writing manifestos or giving lectures. He went on with his work.”<sup>1</sup>

Dadaism was influential for almost all modern art movements; Kinetic art was not an exception. Dada’s anti-art ideas were especially important for Jean Tinguely, one of the most famous kinetic artists. He used humour and irony as weapons to critique the contemporary technological world, and he did so from a position of genuine appreciation for the mechanical beauty of the machine. The general issues discussed in this essay are: the importance of Dada as an anti-art movement; the revival and merger of the Constructivist and Dadaist movements (the appearance of Kinetic sculptures); self-destructive art as a concept of anti-art; extended range of sculpture beyond durable materials; and why Jean Tinguely’s sound sculptures were unusual in the relation between machines and sound.

Avant-garde sculptural artists in Europe and North America in the 20th century began to



Figure 1

experiment in space, time, movement and sound. Kinetic art has been a gradual attempt to produce non-representational art using these parameters.<sup>2</sup> The arch-sculptor of mechanical perversity, Jean Tinguely, brought to light what, has always been suspect concerning the artistic use of machines: producing a physical system, which strives toward psychic

ambiguity, liberation and remains a device conceived upon the precepts of physical restraint.<sup>3</sup> Tinguely was one of the most radical and subversive sculptors of the century whose work was

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<sup>1</sup> Obrist, Hans-Ulrich; Metzger, Gustav: *Gustav Metzger*. Walther König, Köln, 2008. pp. 16

<sup>2</sup> Chau, Christina: *Movement and Time in the Nexus between Technological Modes with Jean Tinguely’s Kineticism*. Arts, 12/2014,

<sup>2</sup> Chau, Christina: *Movement and Time in the Nexus between Technological Modes with Jean Tinguely’s Kineticism*. Arts, 12/2014, Volume 3, Issue 4, 2014, pp. 395.

<sup>3</sup> Brett, Guy: *Kinetic Art*. Studio Vista, London, 1968. pp. 37.

typified by its irony, parody, humour and inventiveness. Using junk as his basic material, Tinguely was seldom happier than plundering a scrap heap, hunting out the newly discarded.<sup>4</sup> He extended the range of sculpture beyond durable materials and became an important part of the evolution of modern sculpture. If most of the artists tried to draw their artworks towards perfection, Tinguely tried to draw his machines/artworks towards imperfection. His famous self-destructive machine, a complex of carefully chosen animated mechanical junk, worked itself up to the point of explosion as a lunatic end to everything monstrous in the world. Tinguely's works can be seen as the critique of art aesthetics, since that what was made from metallic/wooden junk and was self-destructive, had a completely different aesthetic approach than a traditional understanding of sculpture. This was an obvious influence on the DADA movement and the concept of anti-art as a protest against the always aesthetic and tasteful bourgeois culture.

Jean Tinguely's artworks, same as the whole kinetic art movement itself, can be understood as a



Figure 2

revival of dada and constructivism. Constructivists proposed to replace art's traditional concern with composition with a focus on construction. In constructivist art, material had very important role; what different properties had wood, glass or metal and by combining its difference, constructivist artists like Vladimir Tatlin tried to express the experience of modern life - its dynamism, its new and disorientating qualities of space and time (one of the best examples which reflect these qualities is Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* 1919-1920).<sup>5</sup> The men pivotal in determining the practical aesthetic of future Kinetic art were few in number – Marcel Duchamp, Naum

Gabo, Alexander Calder and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Significantly, the reputations of three of these artists were based primary on their fixed works, not their kinetic output.<sup>6</sup> During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sculptural and environmental works of Tinguely, Nicolas Schöffer, Pol Bury, and Jésus-Raphael Soto, along with several other young, Paris-based kineticists, showed interest

<sup>4</sup> Landy, Michael; Tinguely, Jean; Sillars, Laurence: *Joyous machines: Michael Landy and Jean Tinguely*. Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, 2009. pp. 9

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.theartstory.org/movement-constructivism.htm#key\\_ideas\\_header](http://www.theartstory.org/movement-constructivism.htm#key_ideas_header)

<sup>6</sup> Burnham, Jack : *Beyond modern sculpture*. London: Allen Lane, 1968. pp. 226.

in geometric abstraction with an emphasis on technology. Tinguely's earliest meta-mechanical devices, from 1954 onwards, were Constructivist-influenced reliefs consisting of either geometric or biomorphic forms that rotated against flat boxes of solid colour.<sup>7</sup>

However, as mentioned before, one of the biggest influences for Kinetic art movement and specifically Jean Tinguely were Dadaism and the works of Marcel Duchamp. Marcel Duchamp's



Figure 3

forays into Kinetics remain difficult experiments to evaluate because their metaphysical and aesthetic implications run far deeper than their success as art in motion.<sup>8</sup> For instance, *The Bicycle Wheel* by Duchamp cannot be regarded as a mobile object and it has not been exhibited although it is the first modern Kinetic work. From the practical standpoint, the readymade bicycle wheel was an apt choice. The lightweight wheel, the chain drive, and tubular frame construction made the bicycle, along with the automobile, revolutionary forms of personal transportation. By submitting ready-made objects as pieces of

art to the public, art juries, and his patrons, Duchamp challenged conventional notions of what can be and what cannot be considered, art.<sup>9</sup> Dada desired to make art more relevant to life: from the use of everyday media and advertising to urban debris with which everyone is familiar, from the kitsch available to mass culture to graffiti as a direct expression of disenfranchised and otherwise voiceless, who scribble their protest in the margins of city life.<sup>10</sup> The use of readymade/ junk material was very important in Jean Tinguely's sculptures. He uses found objects as a base material in all of his kinetic sculptures. As a part of his incessant experimentation and engineering, Tinguely had studied the visual and physical impact different kinds of movement had upon objects. In the late 1940s, looking to Marcel Duchamp's spinning works as a model; Tinguely devised a mechanism made from a high-speed motor, an axle and a door mounted to the ceiling of his apartment in Basel.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hanor, Stephany Jennings: *Jean Tinguely: Useless Machines and Mechanical Performers, 1955–1970*. The University of Texas at Austin August, 2003. pp. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Burnham, Jack : *Beyond modern sculpture*. London: Allen Lane, 1968. pp. 226.

<sup>9</sup> Tomkins, Calvin: *Duchamp: A Biography*. Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Pegrum, Mark A: *Challenging modernity: Dada between modern and postmodern*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2000. p. 309.

<sup>11</sup> Landy, Michael; Tinguely, Jean; Sillars, Laurence` : *Joyous machines: Michael Landy and Jean Tinguely*. Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, 2009. p. 11

“Aesthetic experience is now a matter of participation, a three way dialogic situation actually taking place in space and time between the artist, the spectator, and the object. It is something which happens, in which one is actively and psychologically involved rather than something you look at and take on subjectively. Thus, if we must have father figures, they should be Duchamp, not Picasso, Jarry, not Apollinaire.”<sup>12</sup>

Kenneth Coutts-Smith’s notes on violence in art hits upon two key factors relevant to the understanding of Tinguely’s work, namely the iconoclasm of Duchamp and Jarry’s works—through the manipulation of time and space as a way to engage an audience in active participation with art. Tinguely’s auto-destructive mechanical performances helped to define new possibilities for art.<sup>13</sup> However, he was working on a continuum of artistic exploration and sharing interest in radical politics that influenced his choice of artistic media and practice. Tinguely had sympathy for anarchist thought and a strong antipathy to capitalism, which came to light in his self-destructive machines.<sup>14</sup> The post-second-world-war period was particularly important as a concept in Jean Tinguely’s machines. Tinguely’s sculptures in relation to anarchism in an attempt to legitimize his work and that of other artists working with movement, as a radical and worthy response to the hegemony and power of the existing art structure.<sup>15</sup> Some of the major movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have a single idea that runs through them – destruction: throughout Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Kineticism. These movements had tremendous explosive and destructive force. The artists were not only interested in destroying and transforming previous styles, they wanted to destroy and bend to their wills entire social systems.<sup>16</sup> A further contemporary extension of the idea of auto-destructive art goes far beyond the conceptual art so empowering Gustav Metzger’s and others Destruction in Arts Symposium (1966) artists’ experiments with self-destructive matters and playing with its effect on society. In the symposium Metzger succeed to gather various pro-situationist, neo-dadaist (aka fluxus artists), Viennese actionists and other radical artists for an experimental activities – Jean Tinguely was presented by his text-statement for “Homage to New York” piece. As Gustav

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Coutts-Smith, “Violence in Art,” *Art and Artists* 1, no. 5, 1966. p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hanor, Stephany Jennings: *Jean Tinguely: Useless Machines and Mechanical Performers, 1955–1970*. The University of Texas at Austin August, 2003. p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> Metzger, Gustav: *Damaged nature, auto-destructive art*. Coracle, London, 1996. p. 25

Metzger noted, auto-destructive art seeks to be an instrument for transforming peoples' thought and feelings about their society, about capitalism and not just about art itself.<sup>17</sup> Gradually he was joining the auto-destructive features involved as inner characteristic in construction of structures with general ecology what got its logical realization in the declaration of the 3-year-long art strike in 1977-1980 and other activities.

"The permanent existence of the structure may be a treat to existing balance of life on the planet."<sup>18</sup>

Aesthetics were not the only thing in which Tinguely was interested in, in his works sound had an important role as well. In 1959, Tinguely made the 'Metamechanique', a lengthy machine that careers about the floor, recording a ceaseless graphic trace of its exertions on a roll of paper built into the machine. He has also made fountains in which a rubber hose was waved and bent by the machine, throwing the water out wantonly; and radio-sculptures in which a small crank turns the tuner backwards and forwards over the stations. Tinguely was one of the first sculptors who actually considered sound as an important part of their work. However, as a founder of the "sound sculpture" movement was considered Harry Partch (1901-1976), which aimed to make the visual and acoustic qualities of invented instruments interacting observer or participant in acoustic magic or ritual experience. The especially close attention for the relation between machines and sound in Jean Tinguely's work appeared in 1978 in The 'Meta-harmonies'. In this artwork, the sounds specific to the various movements of machines are complemented by the sounds of musical instruments like pianos, cymbals, drums and wood blocks. 'Fata Morgana', which is incorporated into the 'Meta-harmonies', proves to be a genuine sound generator. As Tinguely claimed:

"I manage to disturb everything by means of sound which move about. Two or three of the percussion instruments are linked together, but you would have to wait for years in order to hear the same sequence of sound twice"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 27

<sup>18</sup> Metzger, Gustav: *History.History*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005. p 238.

<sup>19</sup> Bosseur, Jean-Yves; Broniarski, Alexandre. *Sound and the visual arts: intersections between music and plastic arts today*. Dis Voir, Paris, 1993. p. 82.

In this sense, Jean Tinguely's work can be seen as a rudiment of generative music that later in 20<sup>th</sup> century was popularized by English composer Brian Eno. The term of generative music includes ever-different and changing sounds, which are created by a system/algorithm. Debris of the machines, Tinguely transposed on to a different level the spirit of irony and surprise which had always been his distinctive mark.

One of the most famous and in retrospect infamous of Jean Tinguely's sculptures is *Homage to New York*. Tinguely got the chance to realise it during the trip to New York in 1960. This piece highlighted the growing connection between Tinguely's work and Dadaist ideas, as well as

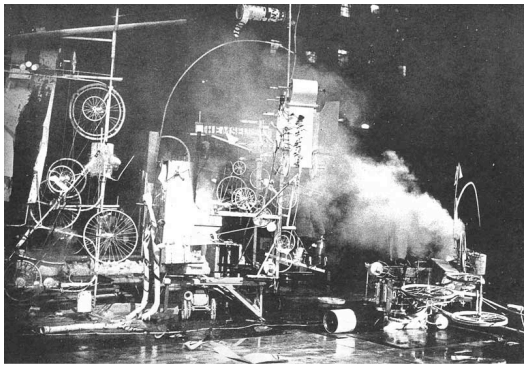


Figure 4

Duchamp's work with Dada principles. *Homage to New York* was approximately 27 feet high and 23 feet long and was collected from the New Jersey city dumpsters. Used material included old motor parts, 80 different kinds of wheels, metal drums, a piano, a bathtub and an addressograph machine. This giant structure was powered by 15 motors and controlled by 8 delay relays. Jean Tinguely intended to include this actions:

playing piano with mechanical hand in various speeds, the smashing bottles, various percussion noises made by the whole structure just hitting and destroying itself, the discharge of colored smoke, creation and destruction of *meta-matic* paintings (as very straight forward anti-art concept) and the final and most important action – setting fire and complete destruction of the work. There was a lot of discussions about the setting up fire and destruction of the piece, some critics, wanted to hide the whole anti art concept of *Homage to New York* and noted that fire appeared by accident (apparently overload of motors caused the fire). However, later on Jean Tinguely confirmed that it supposed to catch fire and that the every single minute of that piece was planned. The fire was supposed to be a symbol of anarchy and freedom from the industrial and capitalist industry.

“I saw in my mind's eye all those skyscrapers, those monster buildings, all that magnificent accumulation of human power and vitality, all that uneasiness, as though everyone were living on the edge of a precipice, and I thought how nice it

would be to make a little machine there that would be conceived, like Chinese fireworks, in total anarchy and freedom.”<sup>20</sup>

The essence of this piece was a critique of bourgeois everyday life and art industry. Completely the same principle as works of Metzger, Duchamp and other (pro)Dadaist's. The anarchism and freedom of the *Homage to New York* and other self destructive machines like *Study for an End of the World No.2* (1962) and Tinguely's Radio sculptures could be considered as assault on spectacle and construction of the situation, where artist, object, and audience are inseparable — and a destruction that defies pre-determined causes to create an action that is unique and unpredictable.<sup>21</sup>

Kinetic art of Jean Tinguely joined the constructive capacities of constructivist movements and the destructive ones of Dadaism into a continuous dialectics of appearance and self-annihilation. Tinguely succeed to overcome the static conceptuality of Duchamp's objects and the fixed permanence of the constructivist artists' results. The totality of those appearances gave a birth to a naturally nascent sound of experimental origin – unpredictable, unrepeatable, unseparable from its origins and continuously self-transforming which could be the best understanding of what uniqueness is all about.

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<sup>20</sup> Tomkins, Calvin: *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde*. Penguin Books, 1976. p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> Hanor, Stephany Jennings: *Jean Tinguely: Useless Machines and Mechanical Performers, 1955–1970*. The University of Texas at Austin August, 2003. p. 116.

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Cover picture: Tinguely, Jean: *Sketch for Homage to New York*, 1960, Felt-tip pen:

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Figure 1: Sherman, John: Tinguely at the MoMA, proposed sculpture, 1994:

<http://shermanjk.squarespace.com/john-k-sherman/2011/4/19/jean-tinguelymoma-a-pile-of-junk.html>

Figure 2: Tatlin, Vladimir: *Monument to the Third International*, 1919:

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/classconnection/819/flashcards/6253819/png/picture8-14C86AAEDEA63A622EB.png>

Figure 3: Marcel Duchamp: *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913: <http://www.radio.cz/fr/rubrique/culture/claire-fontaine-bartleby-ou-la-greve-humaine>

Figure 4: Tinguely, Jean : *Homage to New York*. 1960, New York:

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