

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 18 (1991)
Heft: 4

Artikel: On the death of Jean Tinguely : perpetual motion
Autor: Willumat, Heidi
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907803>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>



On the death of Jean Tinguely

Perpetual motion

He was not only the most famous of contemporary Swiss artists and culture export article number one. He also transformed the very nature of modern art in both comprehensive and international terms from 1950 on by bringing movement into a world of sculpture and painting which had previously been entirely static. Jean Tinguely died of a stroke in Berne on August 29, 1991, at the age of 66.

The list of his exhibitions reads like an enumeration of the most famous museums in the world. In spite of the widespread recognition he enjoyed and his assured place in the artistic establishment, Tinguely refused to accept the verdicts of critical analysis because, as he said, he had none of the deep-rooted theories attributed to him; for the moment his exact place in the history of art is uncertain. He never denied that there were influences and past streams in his work – and he never for a moment implied that his use of movement in art simply occurred to him one day as if it had fallen directly from the heavenly host.

the great pioneers of abstract art – the Russian painters, Kandinsky and Malevich. There was nothing revolutionary or even new in this, it was a reflex which had been felt by many artists of Tinguely's own and earlier generations, but these others had never broken away from the traditional kind of picture, closed to the outside world by its unalterable position within a frame. Tinguely was to break down this stark demarcation between the world and art. The abstract form of a "picture" was to be emphasised by the introduction of a moving quality which was at first more or less hidden or apparent, a kind of art which was constant-

1960, Pierre Restany and the association of "Nouveaux Réalistes" which he founded declared that a true work of art was not complete without fragments of reality – there had to be a bridge (or relay station) between art and reality. What this meant was a retreat from art which was "invented" from outside the real world. It implied the application in artistic terms of some of the waste of contemporary civilisation – springs, motor chassis, oil drums and pipes, as seen in Tinguely's welded machines. These constructions from the bric-à-brac of everyday did indeed provide the required relay-station to the technological age, but there was also a sense in which their strange scraping noises and shudders had less to do with the perfectionated and artistically sterile machines of our day than with the distant origins of a prototype machine age.

Life and Times

Tinguely's life was like his art. He was always moving, himself a perpetuum mobile until the moment when the spark of life was extinguished. He was born in Fribourg but grew up in Basle – and then after many years abroad he came back to his birthplace. He was the blissful incarnation of the Germanic and Gallic sides of the Swiss character. He was chaotic, original, unconventional and uncomplicated. He was not above creating designs of ties and scarves for the 700th jubilee – regardless of the idea that he might be blurring the frontier between art and commerce. He was a man of the great world but also ever a patriot. He dipped deep into his origins, and he loved above all the annual Carnival in his adopted Basle. In August 1, Switzerland's national day, his speeches were never stuffy but both thoughtful and thought-provoking. The rhythm of his life was movement – a process which has been interpreted as flight from the ideas of anxiety, illness and death. He loved movement in its extremest form – motor racing so extremely lived that a Formula One racing car even found a place in his bedroom. Fast cars and beautiful women: it may sound a trifle trite and banal. But Tinguely was an



The Carnival Fountain in Basle (Photo: Leonardo Bezzola)

Roots

At the beginning of the 1950s, Jean Tinguely was living in Paris, and it was there that he first started composing his "moving pictures" with a combination of wire, old iron and small electric motors. But it is interesting that he did not seek inspiration in the artistic fashion then prevailing but looked backward to

ly presenting new forms to the eye. This was the innovation in Tinguely's "Peintures cinétiques" – or moving paintings. For the artist it was only in this way that the work of art could keep its character as a model, something which adequately reflected the changes of the post-war era with its emphasis on new discoveries in science and technology. In



aesthete and he appreciated women in the truest sense: he never thought of them as decorative attachments or even household muses – fit only to be the wife of home and hearth. He promoted them as artists, he helped them to self-realisation and worked with them – witness the examples of Eva Aeppli and Niki de Saint Phalle (see box). He always thought of them as equals.

An example

Between the Church of St. Merri and the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris there was until 1982 a sad little square. It could hardly be even graced by the name of square, and it seemed like an area left over from other grander purposes. It was called Igor Stravinsky Place, and the only good thing about it was its name. Parisian art administrators were casting about in their minds what to do to revive this small leftover piece of their city without repeating what they possessed already. And then they remembered the fountains specially designed for the Basle Carnival – and inevitably the name of Jean Tinguely. They took the example of Basle's Theatre Fountain as an example of what Tinguely's machines could be. They were not simply parodies of machines, but works of art which could be taken seriously. They demonstrated true characteristics of human nature in their movements,

now reflective, now hurried, now cheeky, now bashful.

As a fourteen year-old boy, Tinguely first experimented with water power when he took a hammer and fixed almost two dozen cast-out wheels together, and he would perhaps have stayed with water power if he had been able to drive his first experiments in kinetics by its means. But for his "Moulins à prière" he would use a hand-operated lever and later clockwork. Afterwards he used mainly electric motors to power his machines. It was only after 1960 that water again came to play an important role in his "Fontaines", or water machines, as Tinguely himself liked to call them, just as he was to use fire for his series of self-destructing machines. With his underwater fireworks display in the sea off Stockholm, he even succeeded in "forcing together" these two most contradictory of the four elements.

With his famous "Fontaines", Tinguely was continuing a tradition of water art which had been current throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. It was precisely in Paris that fountains had been most used to decorate the elegant squares of the French capital and the most important traffic intersections. What was now new in terms of urban development was that the fountains of both the Basle Carnival and Stravinsky Place were away from



Children were always Jean Tinguely's favourite public. (Photos: Michael von Graffenried)

Dates and Works

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1925 | Born on May 25 in Fribourg the son of a factory worker. |
| 1927 | Moves to Basle |
| 1932–1940 | At school in Basle. First mechanical constructions driven by water wheels. |
| 1940–1945 | Apprenticeship as decorator at Globus department store in Basle, coupled with study at Arts and Crafts School. |
| 1949 | Meets the sculptress, Eva Aeppli, and Daniel Spoerri, inventor of the "Fallenbild". |
| 1953 | Marriage to Eva Aeppli. Moves to Paris. Work on wire sculptures and reliefs. |
| 1954 | First exhibition at the Gallery Arnaud in Paris. Reliefs expressed as automatic machines. |
| 1955 | Own atelier in Impasse Ronsin. Start of series of works "Meta-", e.g. "Meta-Kandinsky" (= going beyond Kandinsky) for reliefs. First drawing machines. Meets the neo-realist artist, Niki de Saint Phalle. |
| 1959 | Drops 150,000 manifestos "In favour of Statics" on Düsseldorf. |
| 1960 | "Homage à New York": a self-destructing art work in the garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art. First museum exhibitions of Tinguely's work at Krefeld, West Germany, and in the Berne Kunsthalle. Separation from Eva Aeppli. Starts living with Niki de Saint Phalle. Foundation of the artists' association "Nouveaux Réalistes". |
| 1963 | The constructions out of multi-coloured old iron are painted a uniform black. Construction of the huge "Heureka" sculpture for the 1964 Swiss National Exhibition. |
| 1966 | Creates in Stockholm, together with Niki de Saint Phalle, "Hon" ("She"), a reclining woman 28 metres long, capable of movement. |
| 1967 | For the official Swiss pavilion at the Montreal World Exhibition: "Requiem pour une feuille morte" ("Requiem for a Dead Leaf"), an 11 metre long wall relief made up of wheels, spirals and steel bands. |
| 1970 | "La Vittoria" a house-high phallus gushing sperm – floodlit gold at night – in the square outside Milan Cathedral. |
| 1977 | Carnival fountain in Basle. |
| 1978 | The "Agrikulturelle Plateau", a scenario out of various agricultural machines. |
| 1983 | Together with Niki de Saint Phalle, Tinguely builds the "Sacré du Printemps" fountain in Stravinsky Place in Paris. |
| 1987/1988 | Retrospectives in Venice and Paris. |
| 1990/1991 | Retrospectives in Moscow and Fribourg. |
| 1991 | Died in Berne on August 29. |

traffic. They were strategically placed in pedestrian areas and were intended as a street spectacle for unhurried passersby – in Basle most appropriately placed on the site of the old theatre which had been demolished, and in Paris near the Pompidou Centre. In both places the kernel of Tinguely's water sculpture was a wide shallow basin. In Paris this had a surface of 36×17 metres but a depth of only 29 centimetres. Inside the basin were arranged 16 of Jean Tinguely's machine sculptures and 9 of Niki de Saint Phalle's richly coloured, rounded plastic sculptures. These were the instruments in a festive "water opera" in which Ragtime, the Firebird and other elements from Stravinsky's musical world played the main roles. But it would not have been true Tinguely without an allusion to man's sad ultimate fate: suddenly a white skull appears on the scene surrounded by pointers to nuclear-age technology in stainless steel.

This sparkling, bubbling joy of life was thus laced with intimations of mortality. Jean Tinguely directs our thoughts to the goblets of the ancient Romans decorated with a skeleton intended to remind the drinker of his inevitable end. And we think also of those sensual baroque facades of our own European past which always contained somewhere in a corner of the masonry the little skull which was to offset the obligatory and joyous theme of dancing cherubs.

Heidi Willumat