

Like a Falling Star

Jean Tinguely presented a new type of artwork to an invited audience in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on the evening of 17 March 1960. It was a vast conglomeration of objects and mechanical parts found largely in scrap yards, which were engineered to perform a series of movements leading to the slow disintegration of the piece. It was the Swiss artist's first auto-destructive sculpture.

The evening proved a memorable event, though in fact most of the construction malfunctioned. To assist the machine's planned 'suicide' Tinguely had to take an axe to it in the final stages, and the machine's performance was eventually cut short by the intervention of the fire brigade. Lasting only twenty-seven minutes, the machine's performance is known now only through black and white film and a small number of photographs. Later most of the artwork was thrown away, as planned, though some parts were retained as mementos of what some saw as an exciting new art form. Despite – or perhaps because of – its short life, *Homage to New York* became Tinguely's best known work. A collaborator of the project described it as a spectacle full of 'beautiful humour, poetry and confusion'. Today, notwithstanding the fact that there are very few people alive who can remember the event, it remains for many an almost archetypal example of 'lost art'. And for the artist himself it was a turning point and affirmation of his hopes for a new form of art:

What was important for me was that afterward there would be nothing, except what remained in the minds of a few people, continuing to exist in the form of an idea. This was for me very liberating ... It wasn't the idea of a machine committing suicide that fascinated me primarily; it was the freedom that belonged to its ephemeral aspect – ephemeral like life, you understand. It was the opposite of the cathedrals, the opposite of the skyscrapers around us, the opposite of the museum idea, the opposite of the petrification in a fixed work of art.

In 1953 Tinguely left his native Switzerland for Paris, aged twenty-eight. There he quickly began to explore his interests in the new art forms of kinetic art and sound art, producing by 1959 some twenty machines of various sizes that made thousands of unique drawings on rolls of paper. This was no experiment in engineering: these 'meta-matic' sculptures provided him, he said, with the opportunity to be 'poetic' and to make machines that were 'joyous' because 'free' and unpredictable. For him, these machines 'demonstrated that a work of art is not something finished or final, but something that makes its own life within the bounds of its potentialities; the work of art itself has creative powers.' Tinguely's mechanised sculptures created a storm in Paris (the elderly dada poet Tristan Tzara declared he had finally seen the end of painting); and the young Swiss artist hoped to create the same impact in New York, when invited to show recent works at an exhibition at the Staempfli Gallery in January 1960.

During his voyage to New York in early 1960 Tinguely conceived the idea of creating a large, self-destroying machine to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Critical of the way museums tended to preserve or ossify works of art, he wanted to create something transient within the grounds of the Museum:

I wanted something ephemeral, that would pass like a falling star and, most importantly, that would be impossible for museums to reabsorb. I didn't want it to be 'museumised'. The work had to pass by, make people dream and talk, and that would be all, the next day nothing would be left.

At first the Museum of Modern Art was not keen to offer Tinguely space. One curator told him that the museum's role was to 'preserve and conserve, and not destroy art'. However, with the support of curator Peter Selz, Tinguely eventually obtained permission to stage the sculpture's 'suicide' in the sculpture garden as a temporary exhibition.

Tinguely enlisted the help of a Swedish electrical engineer and scientist Billy Klüver who had an interest in marrying art and technology. Klüver helped Tinguely source equipment in surplus stores and in the dumps of New York to create the massive machine that, amid breezes, fire and smoke, and a cacophony of musical sounds and the percussive clanking of the machinery, was intended to tip over and eventually collapse. Remembering this period of building the machine, Klüver later wrote: 'It is against the background of the anarchy and chaos of the Newark city dump that I see the growth of his machine'.

Also involved was the young artist Robert Rauschenberg (he later went on to collaborate with Tinguely on other projects and with Klüver in an organisation called Experiments in Art and Technology or E.A.T.) Later he talked about feeling privileged to have been part of the team that helped build *Homage*: 'There were so many different aspects of life involved in the big piece. It was as real, as interesting, as complicated, as vulnerable, and as gay as life itself.' (Tinguely had asked for many American artists to join him in the project, but only Rauschenberg responded.) On the day of the performance Rauschenberg brought a 'money-thrower' machine, made using an old metal toaster and some springs, which took many hours to connect to the sculpture and then went off in a big flash, sending silver dollars into the crowd.

Homage to New York had begun with two drawing machines but over the space of three weeks grew to be a structure that was some seven metres long and eight metres high, created with parts taken from scrap merchants' yards and rubbish dumps. The completed piece included about eighty bicycle and pram wheels, parts of old motors, a bathtub, a weather balloon, a piano, oil cans, saws, an address label machine, an American flag, a radio and a fire extinguisher, and bottles of chemical smoke and smells. Painted a unifying white, making it visible against the night sky, the structure was equipped with about a hundred different operations, all started by pre-set time-

delay releases, so that, in theory at least, the machine would function automatically and ultimately collapse and so ‘commit suicide’.

The museum’s press release for the event gives more details about what was meant to happen (but mostly did not):

As the various sections are set in motion, key parts of the structure will be sawed, hammered or melted so that after 30 minutes the entire machine will collapse to the ground.

During its brief noisy life cycle, a meteorological trial balloon will be inflated and burst, colored smoke will be discharged, paintings will be made and destroyed, bottles will be moved across a horizontal metal trough and crash to the ground. A text of words will be shown on a revolving roll of paper and a text of meaningless symbols on another. The piano controlled by a rheostat will be played at 5 speeds by mechanical arms while a radio will be tuned to local news. The percussion noises made by metal parts hitting each other will be augmented by a sound track playing two voices: the artist explaining his work with another high shrill voice constantly and improving his explanation.

Although Tinguely was relatively little known in New York, there was an atmosphere of great excitement surrounding the unveiling of the first auto-destructive artwork. Tinguely was seen as part of a new generation of neo-dadaists: two artists associated with the first flowering of the dada movement, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Duchamp, wrote texts for the brochure accompanying the event, along with the art writer Dore Ashton, the Swedish museum director Pontus Hultén, and distinguished Director of Collections Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art and curator Peter Selz.

In front of an increasingly impatient audience (it was a cold and wet evening), the performance of the mechanised sculpture started an hour later than planned, at 7.30pm. Almost immediately, things did not go to plan. A fuse blew; one of the drawing machines started sending the paper in the wrong direction; only a few of the piano keys were hit and the piano was quickly set alight by a bucket of petrol; the radio started on cue but could not be heard above the din of the motors and clanking drums; a small chariot alight headed into bystanders, rather than the museum’s pond; the fan sent smoke into the faces of the audience, obscuring its view; the extinguisher did not go off; the label maker started to work but quickly fell over; the stink bottles did not break; and the structure only sagged rather than collapse entirely as planned. However, for Tinguely, such accidents were both inevitable and welcome: the mechanised sculpture was meant to have an unpredictable life of its own. It was not a something that could succeed or fail: it was a spectacle.

Reactions of those present were mixed but many enjoyed the event, made all the more unusual by the presence of a photographer and cameramen. People booed and hissed when firemen ended the performance by hosing down the fire, instructed to do so by Tinguely himself, suddenly nervous that the fire extinguisher in the machine might

explode. After the performance curator Peter Selz commented: ‘I had no idea how beautiful it was going to be. You had a real feeling of tragedy that that white machine couldn’t be preserved somehow.’

Press response was similarly mixed, with some predictably calling the event a damp squib. The *New York Times* critic, however, suggested that the piece’s destructive aspect reflected the mood of the times:

the significance of the event lies not in the fact that it was, over all, a fiasco, but in the intention of Mr. Tinguely and the Museum of Modern Art in staging it in the first place.

In conceiving and carrying out (as far as he was able) what must seem to most people only a preposterous and wasteful stunt, Mr. Tinguely was, rather, a kind of philosopher, even if one of nihilism, and the leading one of a current generation of artists descended from the dadaists of World War I times ... [dada]’s recent revival, in force, is without much question a reflection of a similar despair in our own moment.

After the performance members of the audience helped themselves to parts of the work (and in so doing broke the stink bottles, creating a stench that lasted two days). Tinguely later willingly signed scrap items, notably the pieces of paper that the two drawing machines spewed out during the performance, for those who wanted souvenirs.

The next day the remains of the work were cleared away. However, the little chariot that had signally failed to ‘commit suicide’ by plunging into the pond in the sculpture garden survived and was given by Tinguely to the Museum of Modern Art. Other surviving parts include the car with horn, now in the collection of the Tinguely Museum, Basel.

Tinguely returned to Paris immediately after the performance. Encouraged by his sense of the success of *Homage to New York* – and, significantly, having learned how to use electrical welding equipment – Tinguely went on to create a great many mechanical works that combined pathos, humour and theatricality. However, the spectacle and excitement of *Homage to New York* lived on in people’s memories and through their written accounts and photographs.

Perhaps something of its double-edged message about New York also lodged in people’s minds. Tinguely spoke about New York in terms of ‘all 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’, against which he contrasted the joyous and playful irrationality of *Homage*, a machine ‘conceived, like Chinese fireworks, in total anarchy and freedom’. Curator Peter Selz claimed that the setting of New York was crucial to the concept and resonance of the work:

In New York Tinguely finds a maximum concentration of life and energy, a virility which accelerates its own dissolution. He believes that the idea of a self-constructing and self-destroying mechanised sculpture would never have occurred to him in the ancient ambience of

the Mediterranean coast. Its dynamic energy as well as its final self-destruction – are they not artistic equivalents for our own culture?

For many Tinguely's wayward machine provided a fitting commentary on modernity. Of Tinguely's 'anti-machines', the curator Pontus Hultén wrote, 'This kind of art accepts changes, destruction, construction and chance, that rule anyway. These machines are pure rhythm, jazz-machines.'

Although it functioned for only twenty-seven minutes and was thrown out the next day, *Homage to New York* became seen as a milestone in the history of twentieth-century art and took on legendary status. It also challenged conventional understanding about the relationship of art and time. Tinguely's accomplice in making *Homage*, Billy Klüver later reflected:

The art of the museum is related to a past time that we cannot see and feel again. The artist has already left his canvas behind. This art then becomes part of our inherited language, and thus had a relation to our world different from the reality of the immediate now. [Ephemeral art], on the other hand, creates a direct connection between the creative act of the artist and the receptive act of the audience, between the construction and the destruction. It forces us out of the inherited image and into contact with ever-changing reality.

At the very least, the fun involved in this artwork-as-event marked it out as something different from what was experienced in the normal round of museum openings and private views: one woman spectator was recorded on film as saying, 'It felt like being in the '20s again. Very amusing and very nice.'

Over half a century later British artist Michael Landy wanted to pay homage to Tinguely and his first auto-destructive work. He had long felt inspired by the Swiss artist's inventive repurposing of junk to make art and comment upon man's relationship to technology and consumerism. Of all Tinguely's work it was *Homage to New York* that most haunted his imagination. In 2007 he advertised for anyone with any surviving fragments of the piece to get in touch with his New York gallery. No-one, in fact, contacted him, suggesting that there were not many more physical remnants of the work to be discovered. He was not permitted by the Tinguely estate to attempt to recreate the work but made 160 drawings and a documentary about *Homage to New York*, based on his close study of the records and talking with those who remembered the performance. Like a falling star, Tinguely's *Homage to New York* may have disappeared almost as soon as it was created but – because of the vivid impression it made on people at the time and the survival of documentation – it has not been forgotten.

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