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Mindless Machines: Jean Tinguely at Gladstone

by Noah Dillon

Jean Tinguely at Gladstone

November 6 to December 19, 2015

530 West 21st Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 206 7606



Installation view of Jean Tinguely at Gladstone, 2015. Courtesy of Gladstone.

Standing in Gladstone's 21st Street gallery, Jean Tinguely's sculptures might run the risk of appearing jokey and dumb. Some do, but being jokey and dumb doesn't preclude being serious and intellectually engaging, which Tinguely's work is. Negotiating presumed contradictions is usually difficult, but they're often not true binaries, and those qualities that are considered dichotomous turn out to have a complicated relationship. Dumb and smart, at least in some art, in Tinguely's work, are interdependent.

In a 1975 review of Brice Marden's work, Mel Ramsden wrote that he didn't think it's stupid, but that it's dumb. There's a big difference. In some ways, this is studio shorthand: as Ramsden notes, Marden himself, that same year, said, "A painter's just this odd weird person who has to do this *dumb* thing called painting."^[1] One important distinction is that while "stupid" implies a moral judgment, "dumb" typically doesn't. It's not pejorative. Dumb is big, blunt, crude, juvenile, corporeal, synonymous with mute. As an aesthetic strategy, dumb can smuggle a lot of complex information. Tinguely's dada lineage is visible in the absurdity of his artworks, but there's something more in being dumb. Beyond an artwork addressing the viewer as an invitation to play, it invites the viewer to grapple. One might consider the work of Richard Serra, Roxy Paine, Tim Hawkinson, or John O'Connor.^[2] The same goes for other media — dumb video, dumb performance, dumb sculpture, etc. It needn't be confined to kinetic art or sculpture.

The Tinguely exhibition features work made between 1954 and 1991, and its dumb may be harder to detect now. Some of this invisibility can be accounted in time and canonization, the hermetic seal of their historicity. Art is often expected to be erudite and sophisticated, savvy even in irreverence. Tinguely opens his hands and offers: Here is a thing made of garbage and it might disintegrate. In addition to the multicolored lights and spinning feathers, twirling poodles, that adorn his sculptures, Gladstone underscores the comic tone with large red buttons, which viewers step on to activate their kinetic features.^[3]

The onanistic and spasmodic pieces rumble and screech and shake, powered by old motors. They smell, look, and sound decrepit. *Trüffelsau* (1984) sharpens the metaphor, with a boar's skull blindly chewing air, foraging nothing. Its jaw is forced open by a rotating, motorized piece of driftwood attached at the left side, connected to the mandible by a jerking, twisted metal armature. Another, *Untitled* (1990), mounts an antelope skull on a rocking pendulum, powered by a motor and a rotted tire. A slat of sheet metal appears to have been torqued and worn into a wavering ribbon by the repetitive motion of being mindlessly rammed by the mechanical pendulum. In many pieces it's unclear what purpose certain parts serve, or if they do at all.



Jean Tinguely, Trüffelsau (Lugis Wildsau, La Hure II), 1984. Iron, animal skull, wood and electric motor, 37 x 31 1/2 x 56 3/4 inches. Courtesy of Gladstone.

A recent book by designer, artist, and amateur ethnographer Ernesto Oroza, entitled *Rikimbili* (2008), depicts constructions reminiscent of Tinguely, found in Cuba and made by common people trying to create machines to fill technological gaps with handmade antennae, repurposed motors, improvised battery chargers, motor bikes, and other devices. As Oroza explains, gadgets often come with a set of manufacturer-proscribed allusions that limit their possible uses, whereas these backyard inventors "liberate" objects from such strictures, repurposing and re-organizing components into novel, unsophisticated tools — a discipline he calls "technological disobedience." They highlight the dysfunction of centrally planned consumer goods, assist in black market trade, and also serve as a model contrary to capitalist production. Like Tinguely's assemblages, they strip existing information from devices (brands, patents, target markets, functionality, the timeline of planned obsolescence, international supply chains) and make curious, unexpected mutants.



Images of "technological disobedience" collected by Ernesto Oroza: the electric engine from the widely-owned Soviet Aurika washing machine is commonly repurposed. Clockwise from left, in the photos above, the motors have been repurposed as coconut shredder, a key duplicator, a grinding wheel, and a shoe repair tool. Photos by Ernesto Oroza. Courtesy of the PBS NewsHour, 2015.

And, similarly, Tinguely's rude robot functionaries can be read against capitalist labor relations just as easily and effectively as they could be used to flog any of its historical alternatives — the headlessness of Marxism's obsession with production, class, and technological development. Tinguely's dumb can be critical, as in Oroza's technological disobedience, and so, too, in its refusal of articulation. It pushes viewers in broad directions, but needs them to close finer hermeneutic gaps.

Tinguely's work has been analogized with Rube Goldberg contraptions,^[4] whose complex mechanisms achieve small tasks. But that's wrong since, even less than Goldberg, his machines actually do nothing. They shudder and groan, perform spastic fits. *Raichle Nr. 1* (1974) presents ski boots holding up large shears with a rusty armature. Press the button and the blades begin cutting, with blind and fearsome violence. The mechanical age is supposed to be surpassed by the digital, the information. The motorized, headless relics here are fun and frightening.

[1] Emphasis added

[2] It's unclear whether or not this is largely a male phenomenon.

[3] This is, apparently, SOP for contemporary curations of Tinguely's work.

[4] As by Alfred Barr in a press release for Tinguely's 1960 *Homage to New York* performance at the Museum of Modern Art.



Jean Tinguely, Untitled (Lamp), 1982. Iron, feathers, light fixtures, light bulbs and electric motor, 33 1/2 x 41 x 27 1/8 inches. Courtesy of Gladstone.

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