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Basle has inaugurated the Jean Tinguely Museum

A museum for the master

During his life, he moved both machines and men. Five years after his death he is once more shaking up the Swiss artistic scene. Jean Tinguely's last will and testament and the museum which has been set up in his honour in Basle are raising dust.

A world-renowned Ticino architect designs a museum for a Fribourg artist no less popular, commissioned by the multinational chemical company, Hoffmann-La Roche. If you bang big names like that together, you

Alice Baumann

are not far from scandal. It is being alleged that "Jeannot", as the iron sculptor with the famous name was known, would never have wanted this modern museum, right on the Rhine. Some of Tinguely's friends argue it is implied in his will that the work of three and a half decades remaining in his atelier, an old factory building at La Verrerie in Canton Fribourg, should be left there or installed there anew, and that it should continue existing as a sort of anti-museum.

Betrayal of a dead man?

The French-Swiss magazine, *L'Illustré*, went so far as to state that his widow and sole executor, Niki de Saint Phalle, had morally betrayed him by handing over to the new museum many of his works on loan. It describes the bright red Botta building – the architect too says he was a friend of the artist – as an antiseptic glass and concrete mausoleum. The takeover of the anarchist and

"The absurdity, the crazy, self-destructive, repetitive, playful, sisyphus-like side of machines, which are locked into their movement to and fro: I think that I participate with fair validity in this society. Let's say: my work provides a spicy and satirical commentary upon it, in that it explores much that is ambiguous, equivocal and enigmatic."
(Jean Tinguely on his work.)

scourge of the bourgeoisie, Jean Tinguely, by industry and the establishment is described in *L'Illustré* as his "second death". Fellow artists have also been talking about a "cultural disaster".

Anyone who takes seriously Jean Tinguely's philosophy, that though machines made of scrap metal have no purpose they can have a meaning, will do well to consider what the deeper significance of this Switzerland-wide artistic dispute may be. Is it a controversy about whether museums are necessary? Is it a fight between the material and the spiritual? Is it a reflection about time – because Tinguely's machines will fall to bits if they are not maintained? Or is it simply an expression of the fact that Tinguely was as volatile and dynamic as some of his works and that he chopped and changed about just how his creation should be conserved?

Undoubtedly the one hundredth birthday of the great multinational company is more than reason enough to establish and sponsor a memorial in Basle to the tune of over Sfr. 30 million – whose operations as well as construction are to be financed by Roche. This is particularly the case since Tinguely spent the years of his youth in Basle and continued to foster close ties with the population of this cosmopolitan city.

Amongst his friends was Maja Sacher, the daughter-in-law of the firm's founder, Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche. He sent her letters in the form of collages – genuine works of art as shown in the museum's catalogue just published. While he kept up his correspondence with her, she promoted him and his work financially by providing him with commissions. After her death, her second husband, musician and patron of the arts Paul Sacher, now aged 90, took her place.

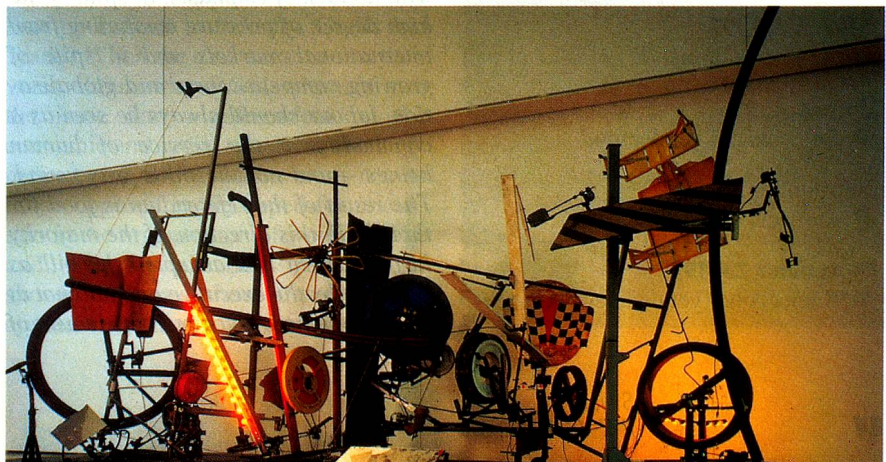
Comic sculptures out of scrap metal

Who was Jean Tinguely? With hindsight, he was certainly the most famous Swiss artist of the second half of this century. He was the creator at the same time of joyful installations such as the Carnival Fountain in front of the Basle City Theatre and macabre machines such as the Mengele Dance of Death. He was one of life's originals, who loved to provoke in both thought and action. He liked vivacious women and fast cars. He was an advocate of technical innovation and at the same time a critic of our blind belief in progress.

In the Jean Tinguely museum, all these facets of a life's work, which came to an abrupt end five years ago with a fatal heart attack, are to be seen. It contains over seventy kinetic sculptures, ranging from the gigantic to the fragile, from the playful to the completely crazy, from the cheerful to the sinister, some abstract in design, some portrayals of reality such as the racing car made of old iron with the name of Lotus – all of them powerful in both their colour and their form. In addition, much graphic work illustrates the uncompromising artistic development of Jean Tinguely.

Never stop moving

The rattling, clattering and knocking mechanical monsters of an obsessed inventor and a restless entertainer still have the power to provoke people, to annoy them or to amuse them according to their point of view. This is basically what the controversy surrounding the new museum is all about: it is tomfoolery on a huge scale. We may assume that the tongue-in-cheek and mischievous Jean Tinguely would be delighted if he knew. ■



(Photo: zvg)