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Jean Tinguely (Fribourg, 1925 – Bern, 1991) *Méta-Herbin* 1955 Iron tripod, metal rods, wire, seven painted metal forms and electric motor124,8 x 52,5 x 75 cm FGA-BA-TINGU-0001

Provenance

Collection M. et Mme Max Wasserman, Massachusetts Sotheby's, Los Angeles, 3 février 1975, lot n° 46 Collection Eva de Burén, Stockholm Birgitta Berkley, Los Angeles Galerie Bonnier, Genève, 1995 Collection particulière, 2001 BFAS Blondeau Fine Arts Services, Genève, 2010



Exhibitions

Le Mouvement, Paris, Galerie Denise René, 06 – 30.04.1955 Rörelse i konsten, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 17.05 – 03.09.1961 Bevægelse i kunsten, Humlebæk, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 22.09 – 22.10.1961 Two Kinetic Sculptors. Nicolas Schöffer and Jean Tinguely, New York, The Jewish Museum, 23.10.1965 – 02.01.1966 ; Washington, The Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 14.01 – 20.02.1966 ; Minneapolis, The Walker Art Center, 07.03 – 10.04.1966 ; Pittsburgh, The Carnegie Institute, 28.04 – 29.05.1966 ; Seattle. The Contemporary Art Council of the Seattle Art Musuem, 27.06 – 31.07.1966 Jean Tinguely, Bâle, Kunsthalle Basel, 22.01 – 27.02.1972 ; Hanovre, Kestner Gesellschaft, 17.03 – 16.04.1972 ; Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 07.10 – 03.12.1972 Jean Tinguely. Super Méta Maxi!, Düsseldorf, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast, 23.04.2016 – 14.08.2016 Jean Tinguely. Machines – Spectacle – Destruction, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 01.10.2016 – 05.03.2017 Présentation élargie de la collection Jean Tinguely, Bâle, Musée Tinguely, 05.06.2018 – 15.11.2020

Présentation élargie de la collection Jean Tinguely, Bâle, Musée Tinguely, 05.06.2018 – 15.11.2020 Calder, Soulages, Vasarely ... Abstractions plurielles, 1950-1980. Collection de la Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Pully, Musée d'art de Pully, 02.03.2021 – 21.11.2021

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Bischofberger, Bruno. *Jean Tinguely. Catalogue raisonné Sculptures and Reliefs 1969-1985* (vol. 1). Künsnacht/Zürich, Galerie Bischofberger, 1990

Blistène, Bernard. *Jean Tinguely. Méta-Reliefs, Méta-Matics, 1955-1961*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, 05.10 – 17.11.2012], Paris, Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, 2013

Hultén, Pontus. Jean Tinguely "Méta". Berlin: Propyläen Verlag [1973]

Rolez, Anaïs. La métaphysique dans la sculpture de Jean Tinguely: mécanique, contradiction et métamorphose comme principes générateurs. Doctoral thesis, Rennes, Université Rennes 2, 2015



Going beyond the static form: Jean Tinguely's Méta-Herbin

The first work by Jean Tinguely to join the collections of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art in 2010, *Méta-Herbin* from 1955 (ill. 1) is a piece representative of the artist's pioneering work. Presented at the Galerie Denise René as part of *Le Mouvement* exhibition held in April 1955, the work sheds light on the genesis of the "metamechanical" creations conceived by the Swiss artist. Through its composition, the work pays tribute to the abstract avant-garde of the early 20th century. The artist employs forms characteristic of the pictorial vocabulary of Auguste Herbin (ill. 2), a pioneer of geometric abstraction. The latter sought to go beyond the static condition of painting and explore movement, a theme dear to Tinguely and one that he would develop throughout his life.

With his kinetic works, Tinguely, who joined the Nouveau Réalisme movement in 1960, became a major figure in the art of the second half of the 20th century. At once an inventor and a handyman, he skilfully developed a mechanical and poetic universe assembled from recycled materials, which were brought to life thanks to mobility of his pieces.

Decorator and artist

From an early age, Tinguely's interest in machines was apparent. As a child, he enjoyed playing with constructions powered by water wheels in streams and experimented with the sounds that certain objects could produce. Born in Fribourg in 1925, Tinguely and his mother soon moved to Basel, where his father worked. It was here that the artist grew up and, in 1940, he began an apprenticeship as a decorator at the Swiss department store Globus, and later with Joos Hutter, an independent decorator.¹ The latter encouraged him to pursue the arts by studying at the School of Applied Arts in Basel where Tinguely discovered contemporary art and the heritage of artists like Walter Bodmer.² The latter's wire

¹ Hahnloser, Margrit. "Jean Tinguely: les années suisses" in *Musée Jean Tinguely Bâle. La Collection.* Berne: éditions Benteli, 1996, p. 90.

² Walter Bodmer was a Swiss painter and sculptor, born in Basel in 1903. In the 1930s, he protested against art and architecture's conservative tendencies, by cofounding the anti-fascist group *Gruppe 33* with artist friends. From 1936 onwards, Bodmer used metallic wire in his work, creating reliefs and metallic sculptures that made him a pioneer of abstract art. In 1939, he was made a professor at the Basel Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) where Jean Tinguely took classes in 1944.



constructions were also a great source of inspiration for Tinguely's early works, especially in his profession as a decorator.³

Initially a student of painting, the artist quickly turned to other mediums, better able to satisfy his artistic aspirations. While Bodmer's work inspired his first metallic compositions, it was thanks to Alexander Calder's mobiles that Tinguely discovered the possibilities beyond painting: a perpetual metamorphosis in space and a subtle play between shapes and colours.^{4,5} From then on, and throughout his career, it was towards this perpetual research on movement that Tinguely oriented his work.

"I could continue on a painting for months, until the canvas was completely worn [...]. It was impossible for me; I could never decide: 'That's it' and choose the moment when it became fixed. It was from this basically, that movement imposed itself on me. In other words, movement allowed me to simply escape petrification."⁶

Movement

While continuing his activity as a decorator, Tinguely worked relentlessly on technical solutions allowing him to incorporate movement into his creations. Very quickly, the electric motor, the only element capable of providing him with "a lasting and constant rhythm"⁷ imposed itself in his research and preparatory sketches.⁸ He first used it to activate his *Reliefs* by concealing a rotating case at the back of his works, thereby enabling the forms to move in a rhythm similar to the mechanism of a clock, endowing them with an individual sense of play.⁹ (ill. 3 & 4).

³ Hahnloser, Margrit. *Musée Jean Tinguely Bâle. La Collection*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴ Tinguely discovered the work of Alexander Calder mainly at the Basel School of Applied Arts where his work was evoked, along with that of other artists, such as Kazimir Malevich, even though at that time, their work had not yet been the subject of intense research. Hultén, Pontus. *Tinguely*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 08.12.1988 – 27.03.1989], Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988, p. 15.
⁵ Hahnloser, Margrit. *Musée Jean Tinguely Bâle. La Collection*, op. cit., p. 92.

⁶ "Parole d'artiste", excerpt from an interview with Jean Tinguely, Charles Georg and Rainer Michael Mason, June 1976 in *Jean Tinguely. Dessins et gravures pour les sculptures*, exhibition catalogue [Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 25.06 – 03.10.1976], Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1976.

⁷ Hahnloser, Margrit, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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In the early 1950s, Tinguely advanced his research by developing new relief compositions and metal wire sculptures in his Parisian studio, where he had moved in 1952 (ill. 5). His first solo exhibition took place in May 1954 in the bookstore section of the Galerie Arnaud in Paris.¹⁰ Here, he presented his first reliefs composed of white forms on a black background and driven by a motor. These surprising pieces earned him considerable success with Parisian critics and a second exhibition that same year, in the same venue. This time, Tinguely exhibited for the first time two constructions in wire and geometric metal plates, painted in yellow, red and blue.¹¹

These "metamechanics" – a term suggested by his friend and Swedish art critic Pontus Hultén¹² – would also be included in *Le Mouvement* exhibition at the Galerie Denise René. On this occasion, Tinguely exhibited work alongside the pioneers of kinetics he had always admired, including Alexander Calder and Victor Vasarely. While the latter still concentrated his practice around abstract painting, where he manipulated forms that came to life by means of optical effects, on the whole, the new generation of artists was beginning to move further and further away from the easel, questioning painting in a different way. With kinetics, everyone brought their vision of movement while starting from a common denominator: abstract geometric language.

Méta-Herbin

Following a stay in Stockholm in September 1955, Tinguely returned to Paris and continued to develop his thinking and the works presented in Sweden, pursuing the artistic research undertaken with the

 ¹⁰ Hultén, Pontus. "L'homme et l'œuvre" in *Musée Jean Tinguely Bâle. La Collection,* op. cit., p. 38.
 ¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pontus Hultén was a visionary twentieth-century exhibition curator. He contributed to the organization of projects at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, of which he was appointed director in 1959. He also participated in the elaboration of the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René in 1955, and had met Jean Tinguely a year beforehand, at the latter's first solo exhibition at the Galerie Arnaud. After that first meeting, a firm friendship developed between the artist and the art critic. In the catalogue for the Jean Tinguely retrospective that was held at the Centre Pompidou in 1988, Hultén explains how the term "metamechanic" came about: "The question as to what Tinguely's machines ought to be called had arisen with his first exhibition. None of the names suggested were satisfactory, not *Automates*, nor *Sculptures mécaniques*, nor indeed *Mobiles*, as the latter was too closely associated with Calder. My suggestion was *méta-mécaniques*, by analogy with "metaphysical": I had in fact discovered in the *Larousse* French dictionary that "meta" not only meant "with" but also "after" or "beyond". Furthermore, the association of ideas with the terms "metaphor" and "metamorphosis" seemed to me to be very appropriate." Hultén, Pontus, *Tinguely*, op.cit., p. 27.

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exhibition at the Galerie Denise René.¹³ His large reliefs and mobile sculptures were entitled *Méta-Kandinsky*, *Méta-Malevitch* and *Méta-Herbin*. A formal reference to the pioneering artists of the abstract avant-garde of the early 20th century, Tinguely sought to pay homage to geometric art while going beyond its static aspect.

Each group of "metamechanical" works has a particularity. With *Méta-Herbin*, Tinguely employs the forms of Auguste Herbin's pictorial vocabulary (ill. 2) and brings them to life via an electric motor placed under the sculpture's tripod (ill. 6). Once turned on by the artist or the spectator, the work composed of metal wires forming very fine cogs begins to move in a jerky and random fashion, giving life to the forms in metal and coloured cardboard that compose it.¹⁴.

Chance plays a key role in the mechanism of this work. When it is in motion, the geometric shapes and cogs rotate at different speeds giving way to endlessly changing compositions. Each image yielded by *Méta-Herbin* is therefore new and almost never repeated: "when he created the first of his cogs, [Tinguely] realized it to be a veritable creative source, a mechanism whose purpose is not precision, but anti-precision: the 'mechanics of chance'".¹⁵

Méta-Herbin perfectly illustrates this observation. Based on the principle of the cog, the rotary movement is equivalent to repetition but also to perpetual change, two fundamental elements of Tinguely's œuvre. The wheels of *Méta-Herbin* support and respond to each other in a jolting mechanical gesture, their trajectory is reduced and the possibilities of variations are therefore limited. Seeking mechanical disorder, Tinguely constructed the cogs in such a way that they jump out of gear, randomly snagging, jamming, and restarting unexpectedly.¹⁶ In this, *Méta-Herbin* is the perfect witness to Tinguely's work on chance: the perpetual movement of the elements that compose it gives the sculpture a particular freedom, rather than being subject to exact calculations. However, the artist did not advocate the participation of chance in the creative act, but studied "chance in action".¹⁷ According to Pontus Hultén, movement gave art a realistic character and this is what made the form free, as

¹³ Rolez, Anaïs. La métaphysique dans la sculpture de Jean Tinguely: mécanique, contradiction et métamorphose comme principes générateurs. Doctoral thesis, Rennes, Université Rennes 2, 2015, p. 188.

¹⁴ Some of his *Méta-mécaniques* were also activated by means of a crank that the artist would manually operate under the sculpture.

¹⁵ Hultén, Pontus. *Tinguely*, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁶ Hultén, Pontus. "La Liberté substitutive ou le mouvement en art et la méta-mécanique de Tinguely" in *Tinguely*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.,* p. 17.



exemplified by the creations of the Swiss artist.¹⁸ With *Méta-Herbin* and his modifiable abstract images marked by mechanical imperfection, Tinguely can be said to have made a major contribution to kinetic art.

Lucie Pfeiffer Assistant curator Fine Arts Collection Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, february 2022

¹⁸ Rolez, Anaïs, *op. cit.,* p. 191.



Illustrations



III. 1 - Jean Tinguely, *Méta-Herbin*, 1955, FGA-BA-TINGU-0001 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Sandra Pointet



III. 2 - Auguste Herbin, *Bien*, 1952, FGA-BA-HERBI-0003 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Sandra Pointet



III. 3 & 4 - Jean Tinguely, *Relief SYN no. VII*, 1956, FGA-BA-TINGU-0003 (front and rear with mechanism) © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: André Morin





III. 5 - (archival film) Pontus Hultén activating a metamechanical piece at the Galerie Denise René, 1955. Film: Robert Breer and Pontus Hultén, courtesy Galerie Denise René, Paris 1955 © Rights reserved