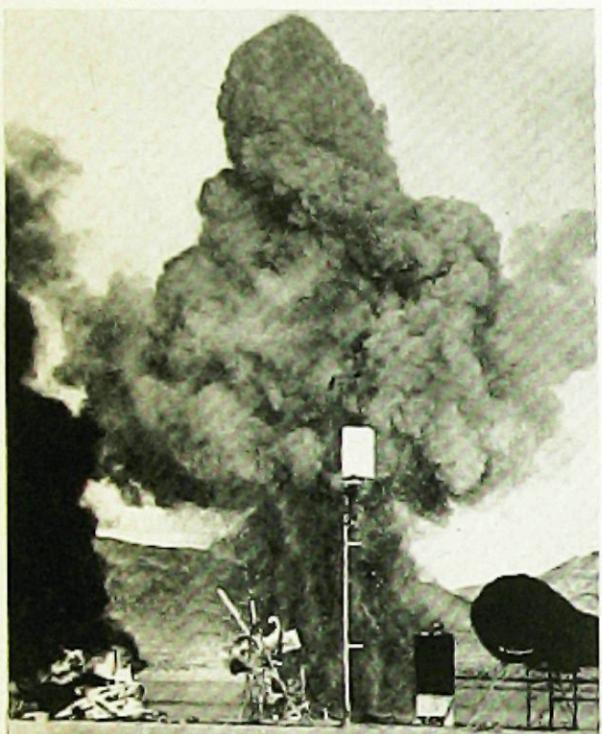


WACKY ARTIST OF DESTRUCTION

BY WILLIAM R. BYRON



Tinguely's mechanical "world," made of junk, ends with a bang.



Before the blast, the sculptor totes a batch of oddments to the pyre.

Unlike most artists, who hope their creations will live forever, Jean Tinguely is happiest when his commit swift suicide. His most ambitious work to date, *Study No. 2 for an End of the World*, did just that on March 21 on the desert south of Las Vegas—but not quite as Tinguely had planned.

An improbable piece of sculpture composed of such heterogeneous parts as old washing machines, bathroom fixtures, dolls, beer cans and toy wagons, it was supposed to writhe to life, animated by a series of electric motors, while colored smoke rose, rockets shot off in all directions, and a radio blared frantically, until the final agony when more than 100 sticks of dynamite finished it off. Unfortunately, however, the electric circuitry failed Tinguely, and in the end most of the *Study* simply blew up without ever having come to life.

But the sculptor accepted his disappointment philosophically. "You can't expect the world to end the way you want it to," he said.

At thirty-six, Jean-Charles Tinguely (he pronounces it "Teenglee," like the bells on the junk-pile sculpture in his Paris studio) has done more to make scrap iron respectable than anyone else since World War II. Tinguely assembles his assortments of junk into outsize machines which he calls "metamatics." (The Greek prefix *meta* means beyond, or transcending, as in metaphysics.)

This is Tinguely's way of explaining that they are not conventional machines, in the sense of being precise and repetitive. They have an erratic, unstable quality that he calls "the functional use of chance."

The current market for metamatics is not erratic, however. Tinguely's machines are selling at a rate of almost one a month at up to \$3000 apiece.

To comprehend metamatics one must consider Tinguely's origin. His native Switzerland—his father is a chocolate worker—is a country whose standard of excellence is the delicate precision of the watch. The national image is one of order and method. Thus if the artist is, as the maxim goes, always in rebellion against his society, then irregularity—or organized chaos—is the natural goal of the Swiss artist. Tinguely admits that "I probably never would have thought of working this way if I had been born, say, on the Mediterranean or in South America."

One of the most spectacular offenses in Tinguely's revolution against the perfection of the machine took place on the evening of March 17, 1960. The lone combatant was a machine called *Homage to New York*—a contraption twenty-three feet long and twenty-seven feet high that

"committed suicide" in the garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Homage was made of oddments that included eighty assorted bicycle wheels, parts of fifteen motors, an old upright piano, a fire extinguisher, an addressing machine, a golden weather balloon (that refused to pop on schedule), a collection of empty bottles (that were supposed to break, but didn't), a machine for making abstract paintings on a continuous roll of paper (the paper ran off backward and didn't get near the paint) and an enamel bathtub.

This anguished behemoth, painted white to show against the evening sky, coughed colored smoke. Before it died, the machine "gave birth"—a child's go-kart scooted out of its fuming innards, rolled a few feet and stopped.

Homage was designed to burn up and disintegrate in planned phases, but things got out of hand. A nervous fireman administered the *coup de grâce*.

Outside the museum, a man distributed leaflets condemning the performance as godless and an example of "miserable neurotic reality." Tinguely pronounced himself hugely satisfied with the show.

Most critics laughed at the machine, yet took the artist seriously. "Inspired tomfoolery," said one. "Encouragement to *joie de vivre*," exulted another. *Time* magazine dismissed the machine as "an unbeautiful joke with no punch line."

By September, 1961, Tinguely was ready to present *Study No. 1 for an End of the World*. This mammoth metamatic took \$250 and three weeks of painstaking labor to build and not quite five minutes to destroy. More than 2000 people showed up in the courtyard of Copenhagen's Louisiana Museum to view the spectacle.

"The trouble was," Tinguely says, "everybody thought it was just a fireworks display and began crowding around before I could warn them there were thirty-five pounds of explosives aboard."

"Very violent destruction," he recalls with satisfaction. "Nothing left but cinders. No one seriously hurt though. But I've reached the end, you see, for museums in this kind of thing. I need a place where I can build as big as I want, and destroy as violently. The only two settings I can think of as appropriate are the Sahara and the American Desert."

Tinguely's scrap-iron aesthetics may not be so far out of the mainstream of art as a first glance might suggest. Italian Renaissance painter-historian Giorgio Vasari, in his study of the life of Leonardo da Vinci, joyfully recounts the master's passion for monstrous creations:

"Leonardo thus brought together, in a room which only he could enter, lizards,

crickets, snakes, butterflies, grasshoppers, bats and other strange beasts. Putting (parts of) them together, he made of this a horrible monster, terrifying, whose poisoned breath inflamed the air around it."

Oddball? Maybe. But this was the man who painted *Mona Lisa* and experimented with a flying machine.

Tinguely first made art news in 1955 with his metamatic painting machines. These are weirdly handsome devices looking like a surrealistic cross between a block-and-tackle and a dentist's drill. They allow anyone investing a coin in them to jiggle the machine, press paint buttons, waggle the paper, speed or slow the electrical impulse governing the mechanical brushes, and come up with a three-minute abstract design that as often as not will be decorative and pleasant.

When Tinguely showed a late model at a Left-Bank Paris gallery in 1959, an average of 500 people a day tossed coins into the machine's craw to become artists the easy way. More than a few were professionals, come to see themselves automated.

Tinguely has sold seven of the painting machines and nearly fifty other metamatic sculptures to museums around the world. The United States is his biggest market.

He also has decorated two walls of a West German opera house with moving sculpture and has flown over Düsseldorf scattering 150,000 copies of a manifesto exhorting that eminently businesslike city to "resist the anxious drive to fix the instantaneous, to kill that which is living."

Tinguely's studio, one cubicle of a condemned warren of artists' shanties adjoining a municipal heating plant in the Montparnasse section of Paris, is a hodge-podge of machines, some of them whole, some dismembered objects which Tinguely refers to as "carcasses."

The ones that excite him are the ugly ones, the strange ones, the machines which seem to have souls of their own.

He turned to one which was little more than an angular, erratic coil of heavy, rusted steel about three feet long. A rusty chain dangled from the zigzagging coil and was clamped to a cowbell at the top of the spiral. The coil was attached to a small electric motor cemented to the top of a concrete block about waist high.

In repose it looked silly. Tinguely switched it on and the delicately balanced coil came to life, springing and writhing, clanking and whirring as though struggling desperately to be free of the restraining concrete. The bell bonged, the coil swayed and shuddered, its flanks whipped by the chain. It seemed panicky and a little evil.

Tinguely laughed. "Most people have the same reaction," he said. "While the

Jean Tinguely rebels against machines by creating mechanized sculpture designed to commit suicide.

machine is going, they smile, they think it's ridiculous. Then it stops, and they begin to feel doubt, a kind of anxiety."

Tinguely's interest in aggressive machinery showed itself early and with disastrous results. As a Basel schoolboy of fourteen, he rigged up a device that rang bells under the desks behind and in front of him. He was expelled. "The teacher was very annoyed," he recalls fondly.

A few months later he was in jail for stealing twenty Swiss francs (about five dollars) from his boy-scout troop. He had planned to join the Albanian resistance against Mussolini's army and had got as far as the Italian border. Tinguely delighted in the hard bed and vile food of his three days in a cell. The experience stuck with him: Lunch still is likely to consist of cold cuts gobbled disinterestedly while he sits on the studio floor.

At fifteen Tinguely entered the Basel School of Fine Arts. His academic career ended two and a half years later, when he was thrown out for chronic tardiness.

"They had a time clock," he explains, "and a red light showed over your name if you were even one second late. I couldn't stand that light. Even if I got there on time I'd wait at the door just long enough to be late."

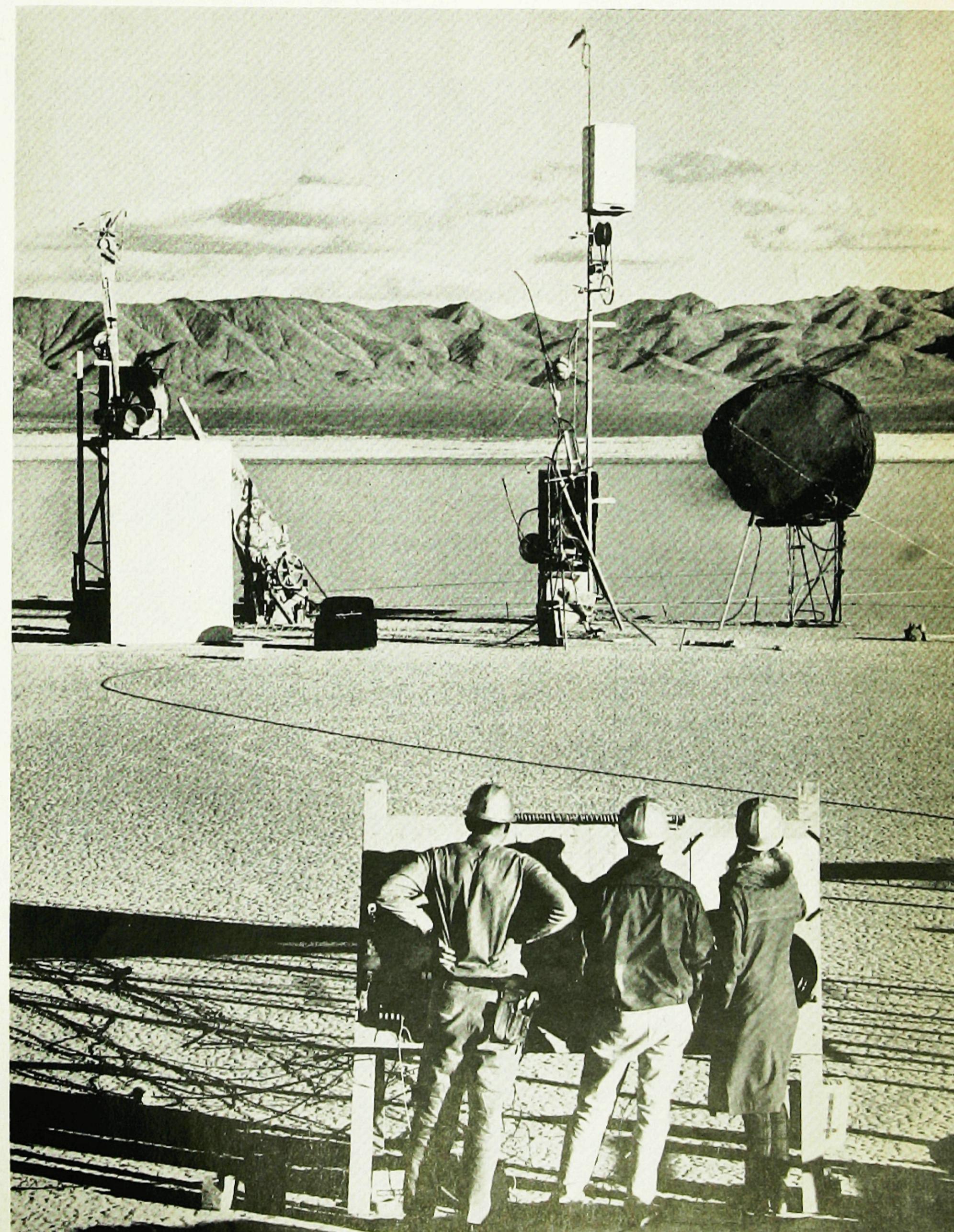
For seven years he drifted in and out of the Swiss Army, of odd jobs, of casual friendships, growing increasingly impatient with Switzerland and with the friends who helped him. His first metamatics were made in 1948, but he didn't think of them as an art form until years later. He says he made those first ones "for my friends' children, so they could shock their parents with them."

In 1951 Tinguely went to Paris, following a trail blazed for Swiss intellectuals by architect Le Corbusier, composer Arthur Honegger and others. Accompanying him was painter Eva Aeppli, whom he was to marry a few months later and divorce in 1961.

"After years of fooling with art," he says, "I began to work seriously. Up to then I had been a painter, but painting didn't satisfy me. The results always seemed static. I began experimenting, and by 1953 I realized that the machine gave me a way to leave things 'unfinished'—an opening onto infinity which paint couldn't approach."

"We were really bums in those days, living from hand to mouth, sponging off our friends, begging. At one point we were stealing the milk out of cats' saucers—just a little, so as not to get sick—for want of anything else to eat."

The break came in 1955, with the sale of a painting machine to the modern-art museum in Stockholm. His star has risen so rapidly in the years since that one of



Outside Las Vegas, Tinguely (center) and his assistants stand back at a discreet distance to detonate Study No. 2 for an End of the World. His Study No. 1 exploded prematurely and injured two bystanders.

"I take noise and blood and brutality and make a work of art of them. . . . It's like a lunatic end to everything monstrous in the world."



The sculptor's La Sorcière bewitches onlookers in a Los Angeles gallery. Through his motorized studies Tinguely strives to create an interplay between the artist and the spectator.

his metamatics will be included in an international show of the 100 best contemporary works of art, to be held in Seattle this spring.

Success has had no appreciable effect on Tinguely's standard of living. He owns one good suit, says he dreads to possess things. Prosperity is reflected only by the luxurious new sedan—equipped with safety belts—parked in the alley that leads to his studio.

Tinguely has the physique and hands of the soccer player his father wanted him to be. With his squarish face and neatly combed brown hair, he'd look like the mechanic next door, except for the gleam, half-mocking, half-fanatic, in his sleepy brown eyes. He needs no coaxing to expound on his art. He talks quietly, intensely, but the fingers of his great hands curl like the roots of a tree as he hammers home his points.

"It's maddening, the work I'm doing," he says. "The possibilities are immense. After all, we're living in an age when the wildest fantasies become daily truths. Anything is possible. Dematerialization, for example, that will enable people to travel by becoming sound waves or something. Why not?

"I'm trying to meet the scientist a little beyond the frontier of the possible, even to get there a little ahead of him. That's the world I'm trying to live in, not the everyday world of the slaughterhouse."

Are his creations elaborate practical jokes? "These things are serious for me. Absurdity can be carried a long way, and when it's carried far enough, its effect is to make conventional values ridiculous, cut them down to size, cast some badly needed doubt on this 'wonderful age' we're living in. 'Century of the Common Man!' Man today is ill-treated, humbled as he has never been before.

"I take the noise and blood and brutality and make a work of art of them. That makes them doubly ironic, to be raised to the level of art. I feel a tremendous relief that the whole thing is going to be destroyed, because it's like a lunatic end to everything monstrous in the world."

He sipped deliberately at a mug of bouillon, his stocky frame bunched uncomfortably on one of the three stools that, with a bed, make up the furnishings of the studio. "I suppose," he reflected, "my attitude makes me a kind of criminal who never committed a crime."

Tinguely has observed that museum employees care for his machines as if they were good friends. This attitude puzzles him. "As far as I'm concerned, the machines are like people I met once, casually. If they die, that's just too bad.

"One guard at the Stockholm museum—he's a fanatic. He loves for them to break down, just so he can fix them. Whenever I go into the place he greets me with an eager look, rubbing his hands. 'Hasn't broken down yet,' he'll tell me. 'But don't you worry. I'll fix it if it does.'"

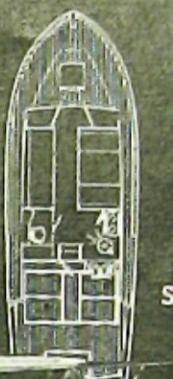
There are two main schools of critical thought about Tinguely's work. Art critic John Canaday of *The New York Times* spoke for the first when he said: "Mr. Tinguely makes fools of machines, while the rest of mankind permits machines to make fools of them."

The second is probably best expressed in a letter to the artist from his mother, written in 1959 on her return from Bern, where she had visited Jean's first show in Switzerland. "Your father was very angry," she said, "that people can make money out of stuff like that. . . . I can't understand how an intelligent boy like you can make such idiotic things." THE END



The metamatician with his Totem No. 2 (Wildman). "These things are serious for me," Tinguely says. He festoons chunks of scrap iron with jiggly springs, then hooks the whole business to a motor.

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