

Taming an Artwork

“Maybe, I could tame artworks”, I thought one day. “All I must do is to pick an artwork, sit in front of it and wait patiently. Maybe, I shall even sit there several times before we get to know each other...” The Gemeentemuseum of The Hague currently houses a retrospective exhibition on modern art¹. It appeared to be an ideal target for my taming exercises. “Now, which work shall I choose?” I recalled several exhibits I especially loved. Then suddenly the image of an artwork entered my mind that I had found absolutely hazy and crazy during my previous visit. That was the work I had to start with:



Jean Tinguely: *Le Golem* (1990). 176 x 107 x 140 cm steel, chains, wire, electric motor and skull of a hippopotamus (source: arttattler.com)

My experiment held out the promise of success: a bench stood at comfortable distance from the artwork. I sat down in front of the monstrous being and waited. My attention was drawn to the skull, for it was the most familiar element for me in

¹ The exhibition entitled: ‘*Paris. City of Modern Art*’ is on between 15 October 2011 and 29 January 2012. It presents famous masterpieces from Kandinsky, Brancusi, Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Giacometti, Léger, Braque and Delaunay; forty of which are on loan from the Parisian Centre Pompidou.

this composition. It is the lower jaw of a hippopotamus, with enormous tusks. The robust bone, at the place where the jaw muscles used to attach, was machine drilled and connected to the metal frame with an enormous grub screw. I sketched down how this screw would look in a man's jaw. Then I started studying, still from my sitting position, the way it was assembled. I saw the two small wheels, and the strong frame, and imagined the terrible noise this structure could make while slowly advancing. As it was obvious that the electric motor attached to its back and the belt drive served to move this creature. Contrarily to all ugliness, admittedly it was a nicely assembled, precisely welded structure.

Time passed, visitors walked up and down, they wondered what is to see on this piece... and I also wondered. I raised and made a round. As I looked at it from the back, I saw the skull and the enormous tusks protruding, as if from inside. Now I could really see the movement and, all of a sudden, I understood something. (Being condemned to stand still, *Le Golem* is really a piece to be viewed from each side, and not only from the front, as the present situation suggest.) I could see how terrible those tusks were: the four razor-sharp incisors at the middle, aiming straight forward, were like four pikes. The two upturned canines at the sides seemed to serve as shields, or even windshields.

What an enormous contradiction lies between the docile appearance of hippos and the actual aggression these animals bear in them! Their plump, bulky body which is balanced on short, stumpy legs, the twinkling of the relatively small eyes and their peaceful herbivore diet: all these signs easily delude the unguarded. But a single glance at this jaw is enough to convince us: hippos are dangerous animals.

I imagined that this particular piece of bone inspired the artist. He may have seen in it the inherent movement; this readiness to forge ahead, to fight. He took this bone and created a whole structure around it, bearing the same inner contradiction: *Le Golem* is indeed similar to a hippo. The huffer-muffer of the frame serves for clumsiness, the huge "lid" ensures an evenly docile looking and yet the jaw makes it menacing. The presumably inconvenient noise certainly adds to the effect: it could blare down our laughter easily.

My second sitting was not on the following day and not even at the same hour. This time the hall was packed with visitors. I tried to focus on the metal structure. My lack of mechanical knowledge got suddenly helped by a museum guide who explained that due to a swinging lever attached to the belt-driven wheel, the straight advancing of the sculpture was time by time interrupted by a sudden change of direction.

The strong contrast, the surprise or even shock is certainly an important element in Tinguely's work. Next to *Le Golem* we find a small object: "*Untitled*", from 1964; it consists of a small piece of paper in a metal clip which is attached to an electric motor. By pushing a button the visitor sets the clip in fast motion creating a

loud and quite inconvenient noise, breaking the decent atmosphere in the exhibition hall. Tinguely was certainly a man of humor and imagination.



La Fontaine Stravinsky, near the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Created in 1982-1983 by Jean Tinguely and his wife Niki de Saint Phalle, it is probably the most well known of Tinguely's works.

The Swiss-born artist², who moved to Paris in 1952, at the full-swing of the avant-garde movement, soon attained wide international recognition with his kinetic sculptures. His sculptures were made from recycled material. Some of his structures were self-destructing which detonated after being set in motion.

Tinguely's art is widely considered to be a critique on the overproduction of material goods by the consumer society. However, exceeding any social consideration, I believe his art talks about something much more fundamental. It talks about life that exists in motion. Tinguely was convinced that the essence of both life and art consists of continuous change, movement, and instability.

² Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) was a Swiss painter and sculptor, best known for his sculptural machines.

The Renaissance genius, Leonardo da Vinci also showed strong interest in assembling moving structures. He designed several automatic machines, such as a self-propelling cart, a mechanical lion and a mechanical knight. Leonardo's structures served well-defined practical purposes, though they were quite unpractical at their time. They had function, though they failed to function. Tinguely's works, on the contrary, function without having any function at all. For Leonardo, creation was a divine work and man's creations had to mirror the divine beauty and order that lies in the natural world. Tinguely did not search for beauty outside his structures. In his appreciation the beauty was inherent in the machines: the functioning, the movement itself was beautiful. For him, machines were not just functioning tools, but moving, almost living creatures, which got alive when set in motion and "died" when exploded. Tinguely even introduced a kind of unpredictability ("free will") by involving spectators in many of the events that he engineered; where the spectators were able to partially control or determine the movements of his machines.

Afterword

What we seek in artworks is the spirit. The spirit cannot be grasped intellectually such as ideas. Ideas have form, they can be described, almost touched, but the spirit only exists in motion, in the change itself; it can only *happen*. The artwork is a chest, which opens as if by itself, if we approach it the right way. It opens for a short instance and then closes again. But that short instance is enough to fill our soul with joy. And that joy is sometimes translated into ideas that we can share.