Jean Tinguely, Neo-Dada, Anti-art, the Subversion of the Utilitarian Purpose of Contraptions and Explosive Science and Physical Comedy by Signer and Fischli & Weiss

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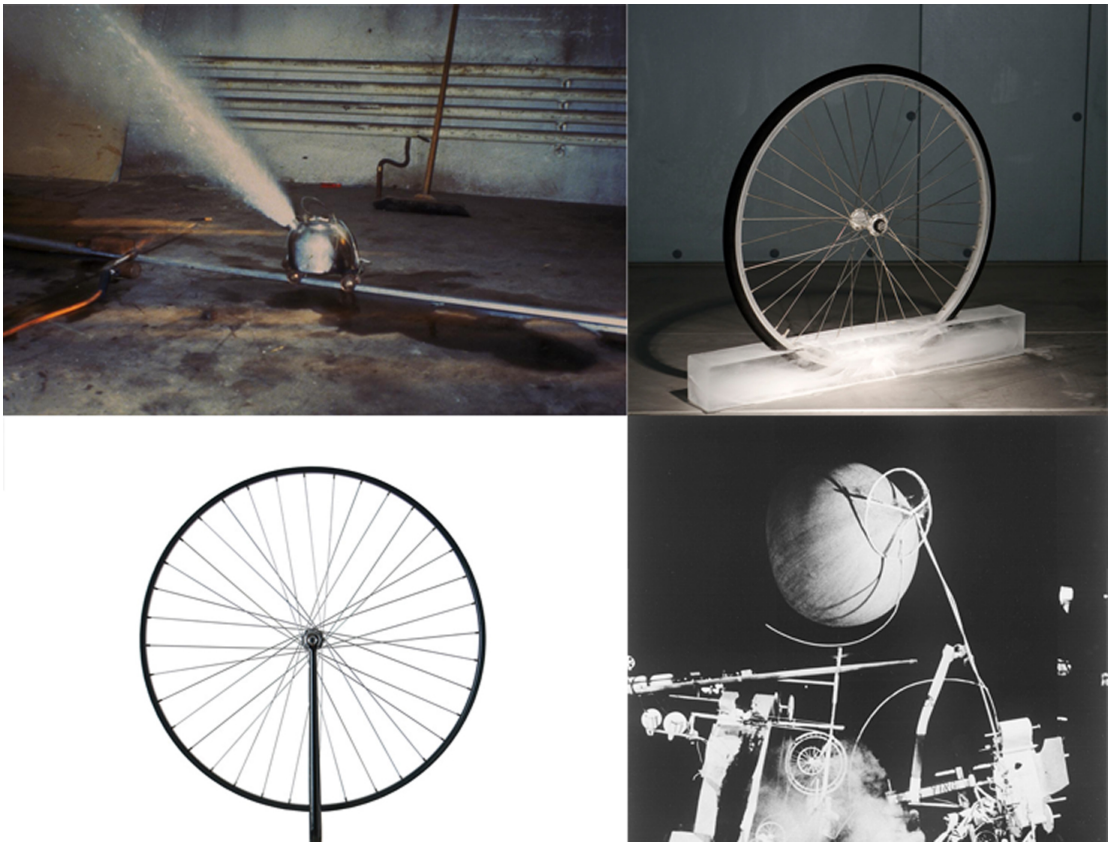

Fig 1. Top Left: 'Der Lauf der Dinge', Fischli and Weiss; Top Right: 'Rad (Wheel), Roman Signer; Bottom Left: 'Bicycle Wheel', Duchamp; Bottom Right: 'Homage to New York', Jean Tinguely

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This piece of writing aims to provide an argument for the statement: '*The spirit of Neo - Dada leapt from Jean Tinguely to Roman Signer and Fischli and Weiss'*. If art theory proposes absolutes, then we are to say Dadaism began in 1915, and ended when Russian Constructivism started in the 1920's. It is a given that the effects of the more significant movements would reverberate in artistic communities.

The main tenets of Dadaism are outlined through research, and juxtaposed with the artistic practices of four Swiss eccentrics. Themes of anti-utilitarianism, chance, negation and destruction are found to be similarities between the Dadaist 'movement' and the proposed Neo-Dadaists. The effectiveness of the works are based on their vigour and unpredictability, owing to their anti-utilitarianism and inventiveness. The humour of the works, influenced by silent slapstick, would also prove important to the enquiry.

Final Studies: Statement of Originality

The words in this study are my own, except where specific attribution is made to another source. All sources of information, ideas and quotations are given in conformity with standard academic procedure.

Signed……

1. Introduction

Since the establishment of Dada in Zurich, the inclination towards ignition has been a similarity for Swiss artists. This tendency would seem surprising, as Switzerland has an image as safe and a precisely arranged state. In Carol Reed's filmic thriller, *'The Third Man' (1949),* a ***'dizzying mechanical contraption, like a pinball machine' (Sante: 2007)***, the main protagonist, Harry Lime notes atop a large Ferris wheel: ***'In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.' (skeptics.stackexchange.com: 2012)*** The sheltered country seemingly reserves elements of the disruptive entirely for the arts.
Reflecting its armed neutrality for World War I and II, it is no surprise an art movement that was critical of extreme patriotism and over-automation would evolve there. It would seem that Dadaists wholly favoured chaos, but more in the name of artistic freedom. Jean Arp, a German-French Dadaist sculptor and painter, ***'accepts chaos but at the locus of a higher order and meaning, which effectively amounts to a rejection of the unstructured and meaningless nature of that chaos'. (Pegrum: 2000 : 99)*** The sort of work that can be produced from this apparent dichotomy would come to be described as nihilistic; representing a rejection of the functional.

Initially, the declaration of the intentions of the movement would be formed in part through an adherence to Ball-Mallarme's 'nonsense poetry' – its anti-utilitarian, jarring nature would prove apposite for the First Dada Evening held in 1916. Roussel, mysterious author, would influence Dada with his literary experimentation. The themes of randomisation and subversion, in particular placing everyday items in incongruous positions and in ways that would render them useless, would become fundamental tenets of Dada.
Arp would start to experiment with notions of chance with collages such as his *'Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance), 1916-17'* – varying degrees of control would be used for its assembly. The papers for the artworks were chosen indiscriminately.
Hans Richter in Feuer's *'Einstein and the Generations of Science'* is cited as remarking: ***'The central experience of Dada, that which marks if off from all preceding artistic movements… was the conviction that chance was the basic stimulus to artistic experience'. (1989 : 186)*** An offshoot of the anti-utilitarian nature of Dadaism would be that because the actions of modified mechanics could no longer be predicted, the results would be indeterminate, and potentially, wonderfully exciting.
As an anarchic movement, Dadaism would seek to escape all definitions, and through doing so, it would define its tendency towards negation – Dadaist negation is the destruction of all ideas. This pulling down would be demonstrated by not only disregarding convention, but could be interpreted as literal incendiary.
The main artists in discussion have displayed sedulous inquisitiveness and experimentation, and a desire to set off explosions.
There is a suggestion that the Swiss, without an outlet, would manifest this potential energy with these artworks that give off an air of hypothetical counter-culture. How would Dadaism, proposed in the early 20th century, with its doctrines of negation, chance, anti-utilitarianism and destruction, present itself in the work of more contemporary practitioners? Why may it have endured?

Fig 2: Still from 'The Third Man' (1949), Dir Carol Reed

II. Non-Utilitarianism and Negation: Outline of Dadaism and its Influence on Tinguely

Much like the questioning of the roles of painting, the roles of the mechanical were beginning to be eroded before and during the automated slaughter of World War I. Duchamp placed a bicycle wheel atop a wooden stool. This assemblage was touted as the first assisted readymade. The status of 'sculpture' was conferred upon it.

"In 1913," recalled Marcel Duchamp, 'I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.' (Elderfield : 1992 : 135)

A wheel, obviously a very old and basic machine, is ***'transposed into the aesthetic sphere and thus rendered completely useless in terms of its original purpose.' (Zemer : 2007 : 118)*** Duchamp combined more than one utilitarian item in such a way that it looses its practical utilitarianism, but allows viewers to demonstrate playfulness through interacting with the objects. It is now an irrational assemblage, but also one of the earliest documented kinetic sculptures. The use of motion, here, is used to approximate the constantly changing nature of life. Even though this style of art that sought to create more reciprocal exchanges with the viewer flourished in the 1950's, it had its roots here with Duchamp and others in the Dadaist era. Molesworth in *'From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again'* considers that these readymades could be seen as a ***'reaction to the Taylorist demand for efficiency' (2003 : 179)***, that creativity could now be unleashed free from hard work but forfeiting a sense of individuality.

Duchamp's *'Bicycle' (1913),* his early challenge to assumptions into what constituted a work of art, would evolve into the more instructive, but given more of a surrealist tinge with *'Rotary Glass Plates' (1920*). They are explanatory and revealing in the sense that they demonstrate optical illusions to the viewer. This motorized machine used an axis connected to a motor by rubber strips ***'…when they turned the machine on for the second time, a belt broke, and caught a piece of the glass, which after glancing off Man Ray's head, shattered into bits.' (Tomkins : 1996 : 227)***

He did not consider this work as art because it was solely instrumental. Duchamp's work '*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,' (1923)* a wire, varnish and foil artwork depicting the 'Bride' above her 'Bachelors' gathered below. The Bachelors here look like clothes on a clothesline. The lower panel of the piece contains an abundance of baffling mechanical apparatus. Dalrymple Henderson wrote that in preparing for the *'Large* Glass' (as 'The Bride' was most often called) Duchamp ***'assumed the role of amateur scientist as he speculated on the laws of his 'Playful Physics'. (1997)***

Picabia, initially using the Cubist motif and then using starkly diagrammatical designs embraced modernity with his mechanical portraits. He would present Stieglitz, the American photographer as a camera, which would later be described by critics as a 'mechanomorph'. The image, created using pens, brush and ink and cut papers, is a linear depiction of a broken device. He was invested with the idea that mechanisms, a

human invention, could symbolise a person. Picabia's mechanical contrivances were not conceived to function as mere conventional machines. Perhaps because they operate in a manner ***'liberated from function' (Camfield : 1966 : 309)***, we can appreciate them in a different manner. The artist's humour and his delight in ingenious absurdity would be well represented with his work for the *291* arts and literary magazine, published from 1915-16. His Dadaism calls for leaving the sensible and letting desires flourish, with all the turmoil and chaos that implies. William Camfield presented another point of view in Joselit's *'Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp'*: ***'They do not function in an ordinary manner because their contacts are psychological, not mechanical… When viewed in this way, Picabia's machines do work'. (1998 : 148)*** This remark sheds interesting light on the specifics of a Dada machine – the artistic movement itself implies a disregard for physical mechanisms in favour of mechanisms of the mind.

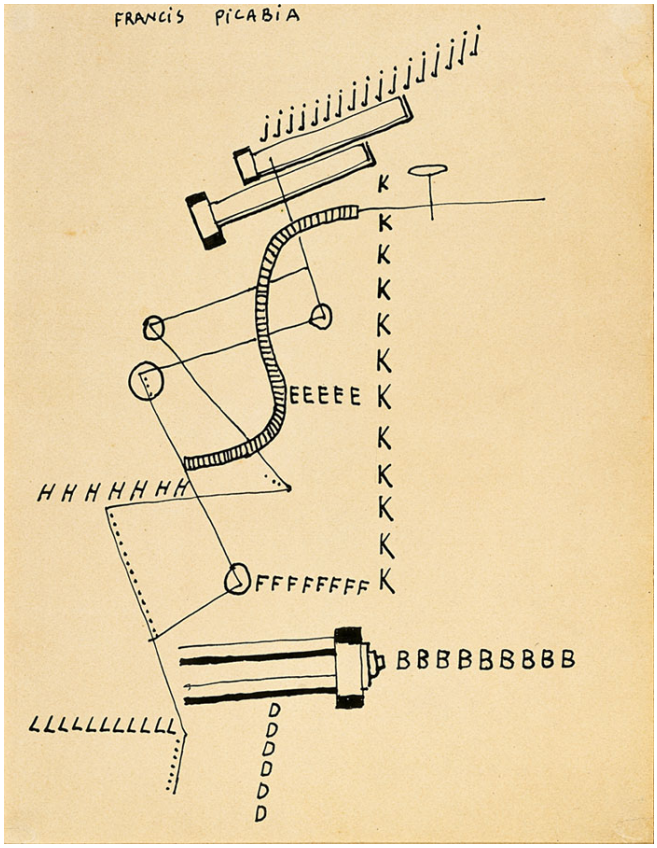

Fig 3: 'Mechanomorph' (1913), Francis Picabia

These physically impractical machines, if left to their own devices, would spark exciting solutions and question the role of destruction as a creative act. Duchamp, Picabia and later, John Cage produced avant-garde piano music that questioned how chance has a role to play in artwork. Duchamp conceived his *Erratum Musical* as notes drawn at random from a hat, and in the second, Rube-Goldbergian setup, balls are dropped through a channel into carriages drawn by a toy train. John Cage conceived *Music of Changes*, one of his first 'fully indeterminate' instrumental works; it was composed applying decisions made using the *I Ching.* This description would perhaps

imply that Cage's works had no structure, but almost paradoxically, his chance systems were crafted with an '***ear towards the sorts of results they would produce' (Pritchett : 1993 : 4)***; The exploration of the philosophical concepts of creation and free will are implied here.
These ideas put forward by Cage were then used to develop the Fluxus movement; 'Fluxfests', concerts organised including Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell and Cage became notorious, particularly for the *Piano Activities* performance. The instrument was repeatedly hit with a hammers and struck by bricks, the doers finishing the act by solemnly carrying the remains out through the emergency exit.

Cage embraced the idea of negation as a response to his interest in Zen Buddhism which would seem entirely compatible with Dada, in the sense that it proposed that there should be less emphasis on 'retinal art' that had been created to showcase technical skill. There is no sense of self within the Zen school of thought.
Cage, referring to Duchamp's *Fountain,* noted, ***'To Zen a Buddha and a roll of (toilet paper) are the same thing. If there is a difference, it is time to leave art'. (Craft : 2012 : 227)***
Cage's friendship with Rauchenberg would have exposed him to ideas relating to Duchamp.
The questioning of erasure as a creative act would be posed by Rauchenberg's *'Erased de Kooning Drawing'* (1952); the artist sought to discover if an artwork could be produced entirely by deletion. The piece was obliterated. De Kooning's Abstract Expressionist work was held in very high regard and in that climate, the erasure was seen as particularly scandalous. Rauchenberg seemed to be creating the work in the joking sense of Dada, the movement that did not honour the 'divinity' of the art object. Also echoing Duchamp's displaying of mass-produced objects under his own name, Rauchenberg placed both his and De Kooning's names under the piece. The ephemerality of Willem de Kooning's piece, courtesy of Rauchenberg, would in itself be partially negated by modern technology: digital photographs produced by the San Francisco Art Museum in 2010 digitally intensified the remaining remnants of the underlying drawing, reversing Rauchenberg's expunction.

Rauchenberg would later collaborate with a Swiss artist, Jean Tinguely. An artist of motion and chance, he would use many tropes of Dadaism, from his use of found objects to its celebration of chaos, but he extended it to make provocative and raucous works.

'The latest item to achieve the status of a icon of twentieth-century art, alongside… Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase'… Rauchenberg's 'Erased de Kooning Drawing' is Tinguely's 'Homage to New York'… so many of the creations sacred to modernism embody destruction, either of objects or of earlier art'. (Rosenberg : 1972 : 156)

The idea of self-destructing art is in close kinship with that of conceptual art, or art that was never actually created. But, with Tinguely's work, there is no mistaking its existence – his hulking, enormous objects caused a sensation, not least because of the blaring sounds they produced.
His fantastical machines with programmed random elements, the so-called 'Metamatics', were shown in Paris for the first time in 1959. Although the terminology

sounds similar to the way critics termed Picabia's drawings, (mechanomorphs) conceptually they are quite different.

Fig 4: 'Metamatic' (1959), Jean Tinguely

The latter are imitations which, according to Michel Sanouillet ***'très souvent tournent au canular poétique et visuel',*** **('very often involve practical jokes')** ***(Bohn : 1991 : 140),*** the former motor-driven devices that produced instant abstract paintings. An explanation of the term 'Metamatics' is illuminating. It is a combination of the words 'metaphysics' and 'automaton'. Metaphysically, the machines explore the fundamental nature of being through displaying quirks that would humanise them. Tinguely's works did not seek order and regularity, like the ideals embodied by the prewar mechanical 'emblems'.

The element of interactivity mentioned previously as having its roots in Dadaism would be expanded with these Metamatics. Through the early attack on the aforementioned retinal art, the subject of conversation was dislocated from a discussion about aesthetically agreeable objects to that of a communication between the artist and the audience. Reichardt writes in *'New Scientist'* that Tinguely's machines would produce ***'clanking sounds which were programmed in a primitive fashion and some even produced a variety of smells'. (1972 : 563)*** To operate a Metamatic, one had to place a coin in a slot, and the visitor was able to select colours – in a sense, Tinguely and the visitor were collaborators. The machines mimicry of human activity, the anthropomorphism, would be the source of laughter.

Referring back to John Cage's indeterminate music, where the compositions were left up to chance, Tinguely's machines were subject to fallibility, error and disorganization. Tinguely maintained that his Metamatics were ***'irrational in their movement, employing, as he put it, 'the functional use of chance'. (Lee : 2004 : 113)*** It is unusual to consider the mechanical as spontaneous, not dull and repetitive, but this would actually turn out to be a strength of the artworks. Their volatile nature would allow one to describe them as subject to 'mood'. In machines designed for practical use, the engineer attempts to reduce the number of irregularities, but it is the exact opposite for Tinguely.
In Tinguely's later years, he created unconventional 'portrait galleries' depicting illustrious thinkers who had inspired him. Of course, these are not figurative depictions, but they display human dimensions. One piece entitled *Martin Heidegger, Philosopher (1988)* is constructed from scrap iron and pipes. A wheel turns while pipes perhaps representing an arched back overhang it; it displays a stooped pose. The works wholly represent Picabia's abstract caricatures – they are not concerned with the representation of recognisable human features – but they differ in the fact that they are three-dimensional. They also share the same sort of absurdist humour; Tinguely not only references serious philosophers, but satirists and comedians.
The Fluxfests by Cage et al mentioned previously also had incarnations in the form of 'Happenings', avant-garde experimentations that sought to move from ordinary modes of art. In Venice in 1960, Jean-Jaques Lebel, the French artist and publisher, produced *L'Enterrement de la Chose* (Burial of the Thing). The 'Thing' in question was a Jean Tinguely sculpture. It was conceived as an austere procession through town; the Tinguely machine placed on a plinth and presented as a draped cadaver. It was stabbed, a demonstration of ***'the execution of art for art's sake' (artnews.org : 2013)***. Extracts from the writings of the Marquis de Sade were read at the event. The sculpture was placed on a gondola and was slid into the canal. The references to decadence, in the form of readings from the Marquis de Sade, imply a sense of decay in standards, a decline and erosion of the self because of over-indulgence. The negation, in the form of the stabbing and drowning of the Tinguely work call to mind the defacement of the piano for the *Piano Activities* performance, and also reinforce the idea of Tinguely's sculptures possessing some kind of life. Holding a burial procession for an art object but entitling the work 'The Thing' display a humorous contradiction, at once pretentious and self-deprecating. The quote above implies the destruction of the piece here was for the greater good, that philosophical ponderings were valued more than the tangible object.

Tinguely's more bluntly self-destructive works, including *'A Study for the End of the World' (1962),* would demonstrate violent destruction in the most explicit sense. Constructing a Rube Goldbergian conglomeration of mechanical items, he riled against the idiocy and waste inherent in mass production techniques. These works were designed to annihilate themselves, carrying obvious reference to nuclear war, contrasted to early Dadaist and Fluxist works that called on spectators and their own makers to destroy them. The nature of life and art, to Tinguely, is composed of a succession of continual changes, and volatility.
Around about this time, Gustav Metzger released the first manifesto of 'Auto-Destructive Art'. In it, he would set out the platform for his 'newly invented' artform.

L'art pour l'art, the French slogan from the 19th century mentioned above, holds that true art is divorced from utilitarian function. The autotelic nature of a non-utilitarian

item, that is, its purpose is in and not apart from itself, would become attractive to Dadaism and merged with its practice after the glorification of technology seen in Futurism. There was a tendency for artists to defang the mechanical. In an interview in *Paris Review*, Tinguely states his concerns about over-mechanisation, and how, with his creations, he seeks to ***'point out the stupidity of the machine; the enormous uselessness of this gigantic effort'. (1965 : 85)*** His point of view towards the contraption is complicated. It would seem that the machine, quintessentially, should be practical, but what happens when it stops working? He asks if progress really is a movement towards perfection, and derides the apprehension of a promise of reliability.

It is worthwhile considering the prosthesis – the mechanical means of creation, and how there is often a mechanism as a go-between amidst the inspiration and the end result. Dadaism posits the object as the finished piece, while Tingely et al. use the assemblages to generate new artworks. So, while these practitioners use many of the signature themes of the movement, such as the idiosyncratic sense of aesthetics, and the use of development of techniques such as the assemblage, they strove to mature it.

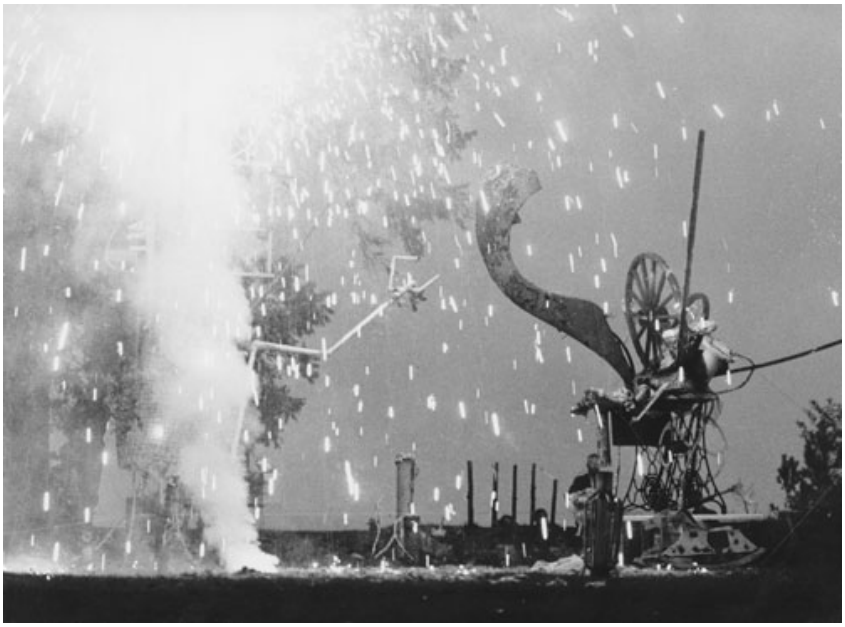

Fig 5: 'Study for an An End of the World No 1' (1961), Jean Tinguely

III. Signer Incorporates Video

In the 16mm film *'Stools, Kurhaus Weissbad' (1992),* several indistinguishable stools are hurtled simultaneously from the windows of a deserted building. They curve adroitly through the sky before violently breaking on the floor. An audience may ponder the meaning behind this action, but they are perhaps simply endeavours to find out about relationships between objects.

Roman Signer is chiefly a visual artist who sets up and records experiments. His 'action sculptures' use objects such as umbrellas and bicycles. He uses everyday, utilitarian items, yet the way that he presents and uses them is anything but commonplace. These practical barrels, chairs, wheels and tables are allowed to become unorthodox, creating a break with their usual roles. Bradley, in an interview with Signer, writes ***'he is a great admirer of Duchamp – rather than rely on conventional sculptural materials… he makes work out of … everyday things' (2007 : 12)*** Explosions and controlled destruction ensue, and the twisting of an object's functionality is played with. In other sculptures we find peculiar unions of found items, such as an umbrella fired through a suitcase by a cannon. Signer's procedure is evidently simple: he probes the changing effects of energy by taking these items and subjecting them to unanticipated processes and the forces of gravity, incendiary, and inferno. The objects themselves, along with the videos taken, testify to these processes.

Signer performs quasi-scientific inquiries into the properties of materials, much like the Linda Dalrymple Henderson assertion mentioned above concerning Duchamp and his impersonation of a scientist. These articles have their functionality swapped for roles in strangely theatrical happenings, and while useless and unproductive, are rousingly destructive; while filmed and set up like experiments, the works are not concerned with the verification of a certain theory; instead they seem like a claim for mischief and rebellion. Even though the works are only *abstractly* hazards, they give off a strong impression of counter-culture. Dadaism ***'produced a kind of anarchy. They were attempting to explode the pomposity of much Western art…Yet it was inevitably self-destroying'. (Lewis : 1978 : 43)*** While Signer and other latter-day engineer-artists borrow from the visual and thematic language of rebellion, they are less often overtly political in their intentions. This sense of artistic *seppuku* would be seen with the artist's video piece, *'56 Kleine Helikopter' (2008).* A single, wide, fixed shot documents the 'action' (Signer's selected expression for his undertakings) happening in a featureless room. Small helicopters are positioned on the floor in rows. The arrangement is substituted for disorder as the 'copters take flight. Signer is out of view and how they are controlled is left a mystery, imparting the idea of artificial intelligence, and a sense of unease (evocative of Heinrich von Kleist's writings about marionettes exhibiting themselves as human). Even though the choppers are controlled remotely, they display behaviour implying independent thought as they inevitably collide, according to Signer, like a multitude of insects – ***'an army which is bent on destroying itself'. (Martinjanda.at : 2008)*** The helicopters 'die' with machine-like convulsions on the floor.

Fig 6: '56 Kleine Helikopter' (2008), Roman Signer

In an interview between Signer and Armin Senser, Senser asks if the artist ever makes calculations. Signer replied: ***'I can only perform very primitive weight calculations. I work intuitively.' (Bombmagazine.org : n.d.)***

His sculptures develop from incidents, and even though they appear as if he is conducting research, his works aren't didactic. His reliance on intuition would owe something to the Dadaist tradition of prizing irrationality; only that which was preposterous could have definition in a world so apparently logical, yet also so fraught with destruction. Arp, Picabia and Tzara would employ the strategies of avoiding conscious intention, the use of the sprightly comedy of court jesters, and a keenness for the seemingly inappropriate. Their practice involved trusting the general impression rather than the rule, which would unleash new interpretive methods.

Throughout his career, Signer's work has stood at borderline of various artistic movements; therefore his work is hard to place in a specific class or group. It cannot be described as simply performative, and does not fit comfortably in the sculptural model. However, we do see questions about chains of circumstance, one object affecting the other, and an infectious playfulness.

Signer's *'Stuhl' (2000),* a film of a water wheel making shards of a chair, is teeming with tragedy: the seat has been connected to the wheel, and is dragged slowly towards it. The cutting techniques employed for the video are amusingly nonchalant, much like the determined destruction itself. His works possess a filmic quality, specifically that of a thriller, in his use of suspense and climax; the chair slowly approaching its demise is reminiscent of a scene in a certain Ian Fleming filmic adaptation where the hero is to be emasculated by a laser.

We see purposeless depictions of cause and effect in the works, these explosions that while 'unnecessary' are there to depict the ludicrousness of the human condition. In his sculpture *'Kerzen, Ausgeblazen' (Candles, Blown Out) (2013)* a hoover snuffs out some candles and, through that, averts their melting. The assemblage reminds us of fragility; Signer says of his work: ***"They are works that come into being and pass away. And for me it is the in between that matters, not only the result: not the aesthetic aspect but rather the process." (Grzonka : 2008)***

The temporal nature of the works and that it is not their beauty, but the process that is

important, brings the works in line with the philosophy of negation. This exploration of the metaphysical can also relate to the artists desire to set off physical phenomena without necessarily wanting to control them. His attitude is one of a meek spectator, as though the actualities of life can only be seen through a distancing from them. His staging of unusual circumstances that sometimes resemble acrobatic shows is thematically caught between concepts of free will and chance. Even though meticulously planned, the works are still subject to this chance, which generates a delicious tension.

A Signer exhibition at the *Häusler Contemporary* saw him ***'presenting black umbrellas … which became the protagonists of a sculptural event'. (Action with Black Umbrellas : 2012)*** The wording here implies the brollies themselves are the leading or one of the major characters of a play. His intervention with the items involved detonations, and the result would not be pre-determined. The events were captured photographically, separating the moments of reaction from the rest, preserving the action. These fleeting, momentary sculptures would be lent longevity through documentation. The brief, predestined, time-based essence of his works means that their impact usually has a conclusive quality. It is clear when the works have begun and concluded; and his use of incendiaries allows him to tightly control the temporal nature of his works, as if he is constructing the punch line for a joke.

A lawnmower is set to play on woodwork flooring with 15 chairs for Signer's *'Stühle', (2007).* The small, red, robotic mower both crashes into and seems to purposefully avoid the conventional black office chairs in a ***'manifestation of the incalculable forces between order and chance that obsess the Swiss artist.' (Coomer : 2008 : 83)*** Close to the wall is a line of red masking tape, which turns back the pottering grass cutter. The mercurial machine 'greets' gallery visitors and returns to its red 'doghouse'. One could imagine, if the trimmer's path were plotted from above, it would resemble a Jean-Paul Riopelle, using sketchy impasto – the same sort of look the Metamatics manufactured. When the mower became stuck between chairs, a gallery worker would come to the rescue, lending the work Signer's trademark temporality. Here, unlike the usual marked, conclusive jolt, the work would perpetually be renewed.

'*Tisch', (1982)* a video work, provides a summation of his concerns and a further demonstration of the limited lexicon of situations and materials that he uses, albeit as variations. A table has its legs wrecked by incendiary devices. A series of events is set in motion; one part of the series involves the use of a river as randomiser. The table falls into the water and moves downstream. The perspective, once from the shore, is now from a camera positioned on the table. The viewers become virtually present on the table top transformed into a raft. The 'barge' unhurriedly advances, and pivots lightly with the current, occasionally meeting with the bank. The ethereal quality of the piece becomes apparent as the soothing movements tranquilize the previous explosion. After 12 minutes of calm, the artist wades into the water and reclaims his equipment before the clip repeats.

Initially sculptural, the work invites practical items to perform, where nature, gravity and time are the means of alteration. There is always a transitive verb in a Signer work: one item collides with another, which causes a response. For *'Tisch',* a camera is placed atop a stool, and the original purposes of the works are disfigured, altered by the explosion: made *L'art pour l'art.* As the raft advances slowly, our view is subject to the stream; the creator relinquishes control. In Tinguely's spectacle *'Homage to New*

York' (1960), which will be described in greater detail in the next chapter, ***'members of the audience… witnessed the event*** *(a machine destroying itself)* ***and … took bits of the sculpture away with them as souvenirs'. (Tate.org.uk : 2009)*** The parts of the mechanism would be afforded the possibility of 'perpetual' motion through being collected by the spectators; the downriver cycle is reoccurring.

Fig 7: 'Zelt' (Tent) (2002), Roman Signer

IV. Fischli and Weiss: Pyrotechnic Sculpture

Before processes are set in motion, could the potential of action be just as compelling as the proceeding event? Austrian artist Erwin Wurm's *'One Minute Sculptures' (1997-98)* series involve persons balancing ordinary items in unusual ways. A woman lies, arms positioned horizontally, on oranges. Another stands with a yellow bucket positioned on her head, precariously slanted to the side. The very presentation of a utilitarian, recognisable item in an artwork implicates it in *any* prospective activity. The uncomplicated humour and use of familiar objects demonstrated in Wurm's works must surely be indebted to the Swiss duo, Fischli and Weiss.

In *Equilibres (1984-87)* the artists ***'play with suspension, equilibrium and gravity in precariously balanced, makeshift sculptural assemblages, which they photographed on the brink of collapse'. (Marcoci, Batchen and Bezzola : 2010 : 18)***

A number of different objects are positioned precariously. They are all rather plain – household objects like apples, spoons, stools, ladders and cups – that have been arranged into unusual gatherings, and then photographed. The artists have said of their photographic work ***'Balance is most beautiful just shortly before it collapses'. (2006 : 25)*** For *'Natural Grace' (1984-86),* a spatula is positioned on a flat dish, which is in turn balanced on a bottle. These constructions, sometimes complex, seem to contradict common sense and physics. The balance is often so delicate that the works display a temporal aspect. The ephemeral character of the assemblages is implied to the viewer through the use of photography instead of the sculptures physically being present.

The collections are concerned with invisible forces, those of gravity and time. The forms held by the 'characters' are often held in such a way that the slightest adjustment would actuate collapse. These items, placed in such an extreme way, would become the definition of prospective animation.

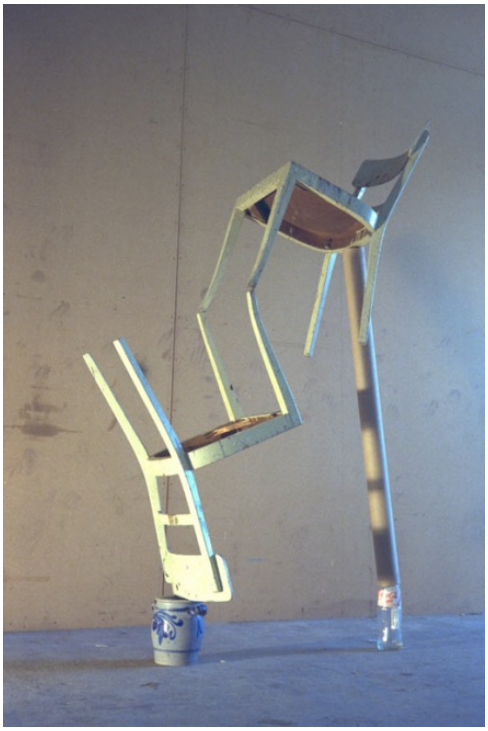

Fig 8: 'Equilibres' (1984), Fischli and Weiss

We would see that elements of play would link artists across time. Millar, in the book *'The Way Things Go' (2004)* writes ***'there are qualities in their (Fischli and Weiss's) sculptures that brings to mind the invention of Roussel's novels'. (2007 : 10)***

'It was Roussel who fundamentally was responsible for my Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare…(1915-23)' (Satz and Wood : 2009 : 149) remarked Duchamp in a conversation with J.J. Sweeney, art curator. Roussel's writings involve notions of chance, and in his *'Impressions d'Afrique', (1910)* word play is used. ***'I chose a word and then linked to another by the preposition à (with); and these two words, each capable of more than one meaning, supplied me with a further creation.' (Lustig : n.d.)*** His writing was a question of connecting phrases with a narrative; this method would force the writer to conceive circumstances that would remain otherwise unseen. For the *Large Glass,* according to Duchamp, he transposes Roussel's literary method to painting. In *'Impressions',* we see the idea of a painting machine evolving. ***'The problem was to generate by purely photographic means, a motor force sufficiently precise enough to guide a pencil or brush with certainty'. (Allington : 2002)*** This Roussel quote was used in a *Frieze* article where Allington muses how the writer may be connected to Duchamp. Many more machines would be described in the Roussel work, mainly seeming impromptu and improvised. Some would perform these human functions, using articulated arms and prostheses, others executing entirely fantastical, pseudo-scientific tasks, reminiscent of Jules Verne.

Marcel Duchamp did not intend to paint like a machine through reference to Roussel, but he did want to make use of machines for painting; he would end up operating one of Tinguely's Metamatics in the *Galerie Iris Clert.*

It is the element of scrupulous play, experimentation, and the linking of disparate parts that would connect these artists. The use of wordplay and nonsense would extend even to the titling of the *Equilibres* sculptures; *'Roped Mountaineers'* depicts items fastened with cord, poised in a treacherous alpine expedition.

The *Equilibres* 'series' is just that: a number of related assemblages, arranged temporally and spatially. If motion is suggested in those unsteady gatherings, it is made clear in 'Der Lauf der Dinge' *(The Way Things Go, 1987).* Filmed over a number of months in a warehouse in Zürich, this film explores the very *possibility* of film, as opposed to photography. As direct precursors to this film depicting direct causal chains, the *Equilibres* arrangements are static. For *Lauf der Dinge*, everything moves.

'First there were the Equilibres. We were… playing around with the things on a table… and thought about this energy of never-ending collapse… should be harnessed and channelled in a particular direction'. (Heiser : 2006)

The art installation, about 100ft long, incorporates materials as diverse as ladders, tyres, rubbish bags, soap, water and old shoes. Pyrotechnics are used as chemical triggers. When the first item falls over, or is moved, a chain reaction is caused. The aesthetic is straightforward, using no overt trickery. There is no description or mediation by the artists. Despite its very obvious cuts, the work is still regarded as representing a single event. Perhaps the editing does hide interventions, but mostly, the cuts seem to be used to facilitate the sense of the cinematic. It is much like the Roman Signer *Super 8* films that use the movie formula of tension, climax and denouement, however an apparent conclusion perpetually gives way to the next event.

'In truth, 'The Way Things Go' (the title is worthy of DW Griffith!) belongs to the great genre of physical comedy, whose golden era was that of silent film, with its famous clowns, … Charlie Chaplin'. (Fleck et al. 2005 : 101)

Subversion, in its most basic sense, is the essence of humour. Dadaism, occurring after the First World War, would allow artists to explore the curative nature of art. The work could be seen as an anthology of comedy techniques and playfulness. Gravity plays a part in the work as much as it did Chaplin for *'In His Musical Career' (1914),* where we see a piano careering into a lake after a series of mishaps. In *The Way Things Go,* there are times when the objects display elements of the uncanny. Endowing the now animate objects with faculties reserved for humans lends the work its anthropomorphism, and the items supposed temperamental natures.

The whole work is seemingly formed from nothing. The source of the rustling sound heard initially is not clearly defined, and visually, an attempt is made to mask the correct verification of the identity of the introductory object. After a short time the blackness is of a spinning sack is viewed, which appears planetal. Below it, a tyre is placed. As the bag revolves and unwinds, its base touches the tyre, rolling it down a shallow slope. The bag has become the basis for Aquinas's cosmological arguments, whereby he proposes that there must be a First Mover that begins all the processes in the universe.

'rickety ladders, buckets, bottles, planks (are used) to enact a philosophical drama'. (Fleck et al. : 2005 : 93) Cage's aforementioned examinations of creation and free will with his indeterminate music would seem relevant to this reference. Theological points have been made based on observations of the film and the imagery used, but the unassuming sacks are in no way transformed, and many perform tasks that they were manufactured for. This work is about the celebration of the commonplace, and the amusement that is provoked by this honouring. In French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's *'The System of Objects' (1968)*, we see a critique of over-automation, and the fruitlessness of the search for the 'perfect' machine. ***'When it becomes automatic (the mechanism) … its function is fulfilled, certainly, but it becomes hermetically sealed… automatism amounts to a closing off… which exiles man as mere spectator'. (Baudrillard : 1996 : 118)*** It is in the sense that the some of the items depicted in the Fischli and Weiss work serve dual purposes, that they escape the hermetic sealing; they become intensely enigmatic. Perhaps if the giant Rube Goldberg machine depicted here worked in a utilitarian fashion, there would be no room for interpretation, or for it to evolve.

'The artwork with which 'The Way Things Go' has the greatest affinity is perhaps 'Homage a New York' by fellow Swiss of an earlier generation, Jean Tinguely' (Fleck et al. : 2005 : 100)

This observation is interesting, however the argument could be made that one was *made* specifically for film, the other for live spectator. Documentation does exist of the destruction of Jean Tinguely's machine, but the remnants and afterlives of the works prevail in different forms; a fragment of it consisting of painted metal, fabric, tape, wood and tyres currently resides at the MOMA, and Fischli and Weiss's assemblage has been released on DVD and broadcast on television.

Violent explosions that blew about audiences' clothes reverberated around the Sculpture Garden in New York. The performance lasted for half an hour, the same length as the later Fischli and Weiss work. It was produced in collaboration with another darling of negation, Rauchenberg. Weather balloons, gears, pulleys, wheels and other objects were combined. A *Metamatic* was added to the stew, and it attempted but was unable to produce a painting during the performance.
In a way Tinguely hadn't anticipated, the failures of the sculpture would make him become inextricably part of it. ***'When one dynamite charge failed to go off, he raced fearlessly into the smoke and flames and set it off by hand' (Tinguely and Hultén : 1975 : 239)***. Tinguely again referencing Fluxus, afforded his sculpture the
coup de grâce by assaulting it with an axe. The work ended up being unintentionally transgressive because a dove had been killed due to a technical fault; the works was ***'condemned as monstrous that French artists should be allowed to come and kill Danish doves'. (Tinguely and Hultén : 1975 : 216)***
Researching Cai Guo-Ciang's modern, automated fireworks will make one aware of their genteel, tamed nature; the fizzle of fuses is never heard and because the timings have been pre-programmed into a computer, they lack the vigorousness seen in the artworks and personas of the truly avant-garde. Because he seeks to control every aspect, he stifles his work. Or perhaps this is an overly romanticised position.
As with '*Homage a New York,'* there are possible glitches or breaks in the system portrayed in *'The Way Things Go'*. Occasionally, one will discern possible interventions, and many are quite clear, such as the dissolves on the foaming liquids. Even though the *impression* of a continuous take is achieved, there is the possibility that perhaps things did not go according to plan, and this enigma enriches it with the potential for discussion: an uncertainty that is mainly eschewed by the piece that is described below.

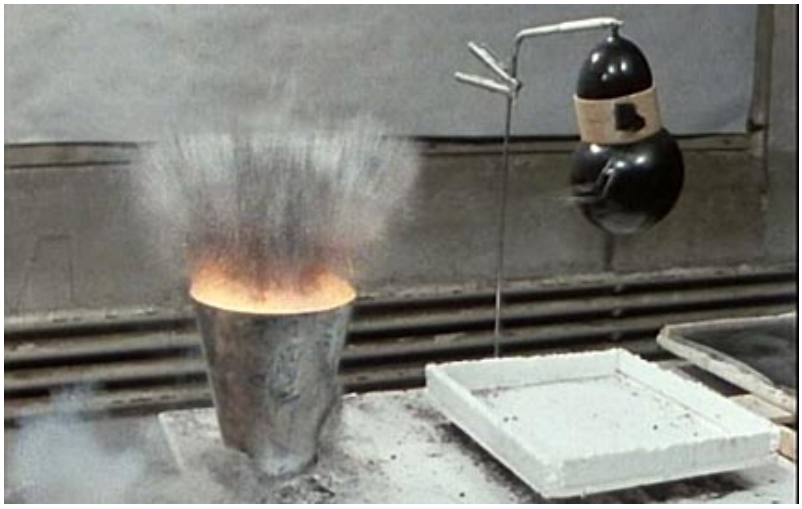

Fig 9: 'Der Lauf Der Dinge' (1987), Fischli and Weiss

'The Cog,' (2003) an advertisement produced by Honda and directed by Antoine Bardou-Jacquet, possesses a resemblance to *'The Way Things Go'*. ***'In 2003, a highly***

successful advertisement for Honda was produced, in which engine parts behave in much the same way as the bottles and tyres do in 'The Way Things Go'. (Fleck et al : 2005 : 104) We see the mobilization of over 85 parts from and only from a Honda Accord. The aesthetic is neatly shot, pristine, even; so immaculate that some questioned whether it was composed using computer graphics. Bearings move into each other, each one causing the other to move.

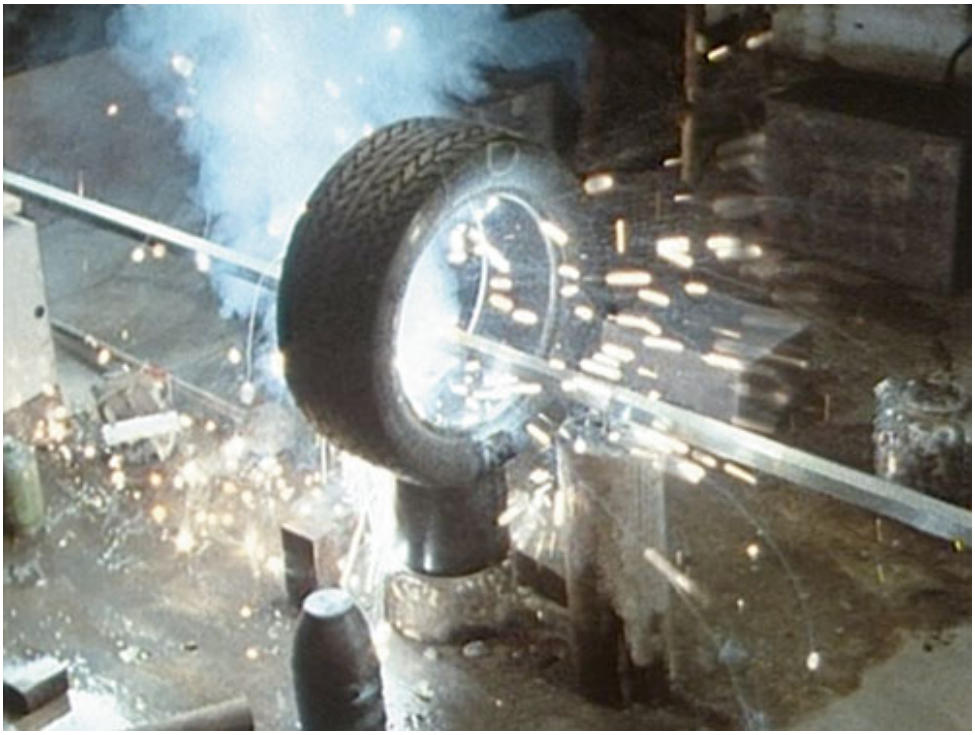

Fig 10: 'Der Lauf Der Dinge' (1987), Fischli and Weiss

In *'The Way Things Go',* telecine wobble is discerned for the initial title card, which is a video artefact that occurs when film in transferred for video. Anomalies like this give works an organic feel, and have been subjects of discussion for the proponents and detractors for the transfer from analogue cinema to digital. The 16mm film itself is grainy and jumpy, reminiscent of early sound chillers that blend fantasy and science, like James Whale's *'Frankenstein' (1931).*

Fischli and Weiss's film may appear fantastical because it seems to betray the laws of thermodynamics – processes that we are used to seeing ending abruptly are given longevity. It is wonderfully tentative; wheels wobble unreliably, objects look cobbled together much like the *Equilibres* series. The work is strangely robust, in spite of the hesitancy. On occasion, the process is not uniformly smooth – one section would require the ignition of a flammable substance by candles, and one of the two clearly does not stay lit. The viewer can see how it works, there is more of a relatability and a humour – the objects used are everyday, not hidden under car bonnets. The function of the advert was to ***'reinvigorate a brand that was lacking emotion and meaning.' (W+K London : 2003)*** It doesn't contain what it was seeking to inject into the brand; it isn't as playfully mad, as *Der Lauf*, and is staunchly *utilitarian*. Millar critiques the work in his book *'The Way Things Go' (2007)* by writing ***'It has none of the uncertainty of its predecessor, (The Way Things Go) no sense of self-awareness, no sense at all that it wouldn't 'just work''. (2007 :79)***

This automation and streamlining reflects the Baudrillard quote above, that the viewer is not permitted the same sort of engagement. Conversely, could it be that 'The Cog' happily invites engagement through its assurance and populist quality?
An advert wouldn't serve its function if the technology were portrayed as volatile, and cannot necessarily be critiqued fairly alongside an art film.
Baudrillard's quote is best considered in the context of his general uncertainty towards over-automation, and several critics have noted he does not balance his arguments with an appreciation of the many benefits afforded by technological advancement. His writing style has been considered ***'hyperbolic and declarative'. (Dhamee : n.d.)***
Another way of describing the effects of recruiting Fischli and Weiss's ideas for advertising is to look at the work of Guy Debord, a French theorist and writer. He put forward the idea that through revolution, '***art may be superseded' (Gallix : 2009)*** and humans themselves should become sentient works of art, linking him somewhat with Dadaism and Surrealism. Debord and Danish painter Asger Jorn published '*Mémoires'* in 1959 that was bound in abrasive sandpaper so that it would destroy any book it was next to on a shelf.
The work published a year before '*The System of Objects'* called *'The Society of the Spectacle'* puts forward his views that culture is being made less intellectually demanding through the growth of mass media. Debord convincingly protests against what he sees as the barbarizing aspects of automation, where worth is measured by the generation of capital. ***'The commodity's mechanical accumulation unleashes a limitless artificiality…' (1994 : 44)*** Applbaum in *'The Marketing Era: From Professional Practice to Global Provisioning' (2014)* uses the above quote to illustrate how Debord ***'shocked audiences with the following sweeping censure of commodity culture'. (2004: 207)*** Debord faintly echoes Duchamp's response to the Taylorist demand for efficiency with his readymades mentioned in the first chapter. Perhaps the representations of the perfect machine in *'The Cog'* are, according to Debord, the result of the capitalist establishment maintaining its authority through, as Dugin writes in *'The Fourth Political Theory' (1997)* '***reducing genuine human experiences into representational images in the mass media.' (2012 : 97)***
The works of Tinguely, Signer and Fischli and Weiss resist the notion of capital by being impractical in form and volatile. The works do not provoke the feeling that the viewer is being enticed, necessarily, to part with money.
Dadaism, with its wholehearted acceptance of irrationality as a corrective to a pervading 'falsified' rationality, and Duchamp's opposition towards purely retinal art is a precedent to Debord's criticism of over-automation. He describes the purely streamlined, advertised product as a ***'falsification of life'. (1994 : 44)***
However, all of this anti-utilitarianist, left-wing dreaming must be tempered by an appreciation that this generation of capital affords Switzerland's cradle to grave healthcare, its very high standard of living.

V. Conclusion

The Dadaist influence on Tinguely, Signer and Fischli and Weiss can be seen through their anti-utilitarian assemblages, their focus on destruction and negation, and their use of chance. Dadaism gave authority to chance and accident, displaying the uselessness of their acts compared to the supposed value inherent in the bourgeois institution of art. Duchamp himself questioned whether art needed to involve 'creative effort' and also the presumption that only specific *things* are appropriate subject matter.

Even though Dadaism used utilitarian objects, it made them anti-utilitarian through placing them in positions that render them unable to perform the functions intended by their original design. Manufactured items became viable for exhibition. Artists of the avant-garde proclaimed themselves as 'anti-art' and embraced the ideals of destruction and negation. It ignored artistic convention, instead using chance as its favoured methodology.

Jean Tinguely's self-destructive machines showcased what we share with machines, by allowing them to display quirks and mortality and his works are, therefore, perhaps more positive than Dadaism in general. The creation of his Metamatics was driven by his interest in chance – his kinetic forms reflected a post-war world where resourcefulness would become an imperative asset. His parodic, anti-utilitarian representations would allow him to be described as 'Neo-Dada'.

Roman Signer cunningly reveals the possibilities of items that are, beforehand, concealed by their solid and logical appearance. Asger Jorn said of his work ***'the method of chance is the ability to lose', and Roman Signer plans this failure.' (Bowron : n.d.)*** He expands the concept of sculpture to include time, nature and chance. His ephemeral sculptures only fleetingly exist before destroying themselves.

Fischli and Weiss display works that contain discarded material and rejected utilitarian objects, and would display elements of *calculated chance* similar to Roman Signer. Unlike American Pop Art's (obviously influenced by Dada) tendency towards idolisation, they use recognisable objects, but are not presented as anything other than 'worthless' – for Dadaism, and neo - Dadaism, it is the artistic *act*, rather than the product that is of utmost importance. The ironic nature of their works would possess definite reference to Dadaism.

Immanuel Kant's ideas of 'purposive purposelessness' – that is, something's purpose is that it is purposeless – would seem to unite many of the works described here – and it is the purposelessness of the works that would make them exciting, vital, unpredictable and joyous to behold. They are sustained by the possibility of different interpretations and relations. The frenzied uselessness is fascinating. When functionality becomes a work's *raison d'être*, it becomes sapped. Debord's critical theory is reminiscent of the Dadaist critique of consumerism and the Fluxist focus on immateriality. An attack on modernity is demonstrated. His ideology partially outlines a similarity between the posited neo-Dadaists.

A limitation of the comparisons noted is that the works by Signer and Fischli and Weiss were not in service of anti-authoritarian gatherings and demonstrations and were *not* particularly political – they only display theoretical hazards. They, however, still employed revolutionary ideas and explosives as mediums for their work.

Does further streamlining and technological advancement leave any room in the future for Dadaist ideals? Current artists such as Chris Burden display playful and rebellious attempts at stretching the boundaries of the perception of art, but more aim to conceal imperfections to gain credibility.

Word Count

7930

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