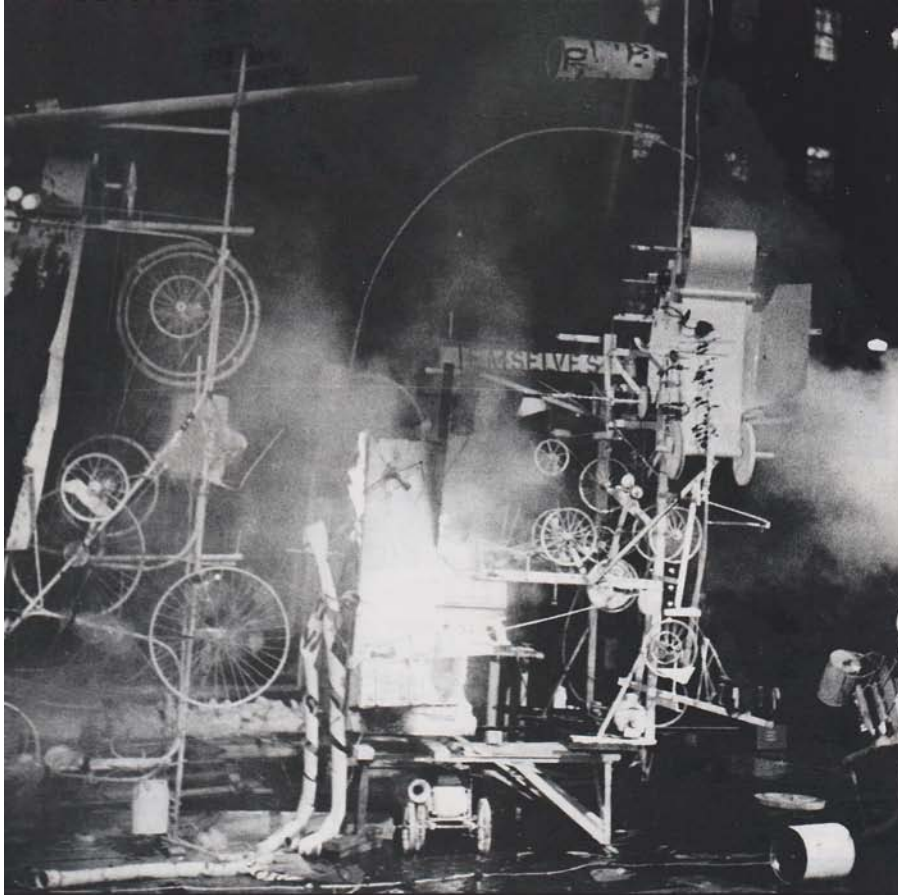


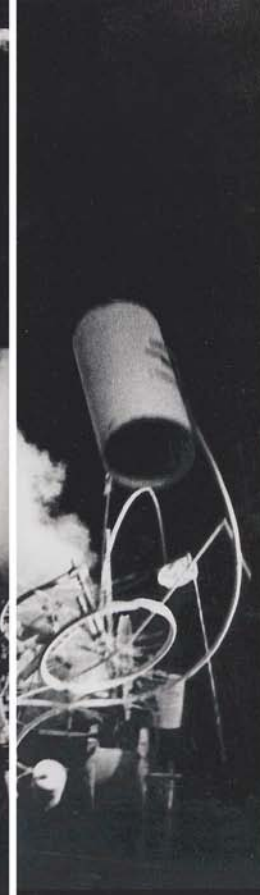
SWISS INSTITUTE / CONTEMPORARY ART
495 BROADWAY / 3RD FLOOR
NEW YORK / NY 10012
TEL 212.925.2035
WWW.SWISSINSTITUTE.NET

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Art in America
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By Brooks Adams

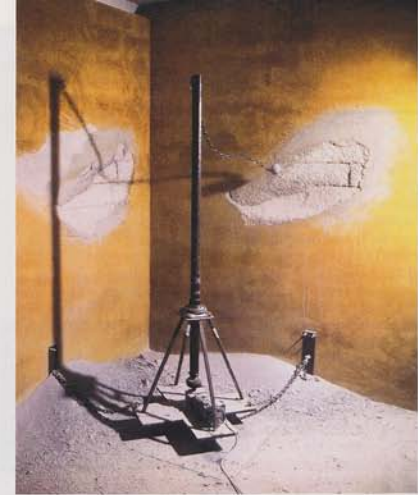


BLASTS FROM THE PAST



Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



Far left, photo of Jean Tinguely's sculpture *Homage to New York*, in the Museum of Modern Art's garden, Mar. 17, 1960. © Estate of David Gahr.

Left, Liz Larner: *Corner Blasher*, 1995, steel, motor and mixed mediums, 10 feet tall. Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Under Destruction" at the Swiss Institute, New York, Apr. 6-June 4.

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, a current exhibition brings together 20 artists who carry on his destructive vision.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

HOW BEST TO CELEBRATE a vanished "total work of art"? Probably the most open-ended way is to bring in a lot of rambunctious contemporary artists who don't care too much about the original lost work, and let them wing it from there. That at least seemed to be the strategy of Gianni Jetzer, director and chief curator of the Swiss Institute in New York, and Chris Sharp, an enterprising American curator based in Paris, in putting together

AND PRESENT

"Under Destruction," a clever group show of 20 artists. Its theme was destruction in art, designed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Jean Tinguely's infamous sculpture *Homage to New York*. (On view at the Museum Tinguely in Basel last fall, "Under Destruction" arrives in altered form at the Swiss Institute this month.) The show raised many questions about the continuing relevance of machine art, its strengths and foibles.

A NUMBER OF THE SCULPTURES AND INSTALLATIONS SEEMED TO EMBLEMATIZE TORTURE AS AN ASSAULT UPON THE MODERNIST WHITE GALLERY SPACE, ITS VERY WALLS AND FLOORS.

On the evening of March 17, 1960, in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, *Homage to New York* by Tinguely (1925-1991) went on the fritz. The sculpture—a whirligig of 80 bicycle wheels, “Meta-matic” painting machines, a piano and a bathtub (among many kinetic protagonists)—was designed to self-destruct, though this happened much earlier than intended due to faulty wiring. The work was intensely controversial, and much discussed by the popular press and the New York avant-garde as the latest contestant in the “Is it art?” sweepstakes. Needless to say, this first major monument of “auto-destructive” art, a movement that had been gathering force through the ‘50s, assured the Swiss artist’s celebrity for life. The artwork’s beneficent act of self-annihilation also had an implicit political edge, in that it was made at the height of the Cold War, at a time when America and Russia toyed and tinkered with European peoples and territories, in contrast to the mass extinctions visited on the Continent during World War II.

One of my earliest memories of machine art, or rather the imagery of machines-as-artists, comes from J. Lee Thompson’s movie *What A Way to Go!* (1964). In that delirious Shirley MacLaine vehicle, Paul Newman plays Larry Flint, the second of her character’s five husbands, all but the last of whom meet with disastrous ends. Flint is

an avant-garde artist, an American-in-Paris who uses robotic machines (and a chimpanzee) to make his painterly abstractions. When Newman’s blithely macho character (based in part on Tinguely’s charismatic persona) achieves great worldly success with his newfangled canvases, the now-gilded robot painters turn on him and beat him to death. Clearly inspired by TV and magazine coverage of Tinguely’s machine-art performances in New York, Denmark and the Nevada desert, this sequence of *What A Way to Go!* (not in the Basel show) encapsulates the popular American conception of ‘60s machine art as a kind of lethal hoax: it can make you a fortune, and it can kill you.

NO SUCH DIRE (or comic) consequences were on view in “Under Destruction,” where the emphasis was not on body imagery, but rather on the theme of destruction as visited upon displaced objects and props: stand-



View of the exhibition “Under Destruction,” showing Pavel Büchler’s “Modern Paintings,” 1999-2000 (on wall) and Monica Borvicini’s *Plastered*, 1998/2010 (floor); Photo Bettina Matthiassen, courtesy Museum Tinguely, Basel.

Left, three stills from Roman Signer’s video *Stuhl*, 2002, approx. 5½ minutes.



ins for the human body. The actual destruction of physical objects was practiced by only a few of the works on view, though there were countless images of destruction. Tinguely's novel distending of time, through the consecutive workings of machines that seem at once inevitable and pointless, was seen to spawn a new kind of artwork, potentially political, and overtly spectacular, and all too easily co-optable by museum culture.

Many of the strongest pieces were videos and film works (occasionally shown in tandem with sculptural objects)—images of destruction by well-established masters of the genre like Jimmie Durham, Roman Signer, Christian Marclay, Michael Landy and Martin Kersels. These works speak of torture, punishment and natural disaster in indirect ways, and the absence of a human body makes their visceral effect upon the viewer that much more direct.

In *St. Frigo* (1997) by Durham (American, b. 1940), a battered old icebox stands alongside two video monitors showing documentation of his performance *Stoning the Refrigerator* (1996). Here "documentary" imagery and found object work together to produce a haunting effect. From the videos, I surmised that the locale of the stoning was Old Europe, in a placid city square or courtyard. There, once upon a time, the artist and his cohorts, some in long winter coats, hurled cobblestones at an icebox for 10 days. In the gallery, the beat-up object began to function as evidence that the event had in fact taken place, that it was more than just an image on-screen. So powerful were the resulting feelings of disbelief that I approached the actual fridge with trepidation. I remember being sur-

prised that it was not roped off. Was the icebox still alive? I didn't want to see the wounds too closely. I could barely make out an old "Rogec" label. Was this an East German mark, akin to the "Trabi" automobiles of yore? I felt like a voyeur, yet Durham's piece remains chillingly ambiguous. Just what in fact has been destroyed?

In *Stuhl* (2002) by Signer (Swiss, b. 1938), there's no question as to what's being obliterated. The video footage begins outdoors, where we see close-ups of a pretty, functioning waterwheel. The scene shifts to an empty interior in which a wooden chair is being drawn inexorably by a rope toward a disused chimney in the wall. At a certain point, the chair begins to burrow into the wall and splinter, slowly, achingly. What powers the rope? All the picturesque of the Swiss landscape is brought to bear on this one detail: it's the waterwheel that powers the annihilation. Signer is the one artist in the show to nail the mystical, sylvan, almost Snow White aspects of destruction.

A number of the sculptures and installations seemed to emblemize torture as an assault upon the modernist white gallery space, its very walls and floors. The winner in this category was definitely *Corner Basher* (1988) by Liz Larner (American, b. 1960). This motorized ball and chain on a sturdy-looking, four-legged rolling base whacked into the pristine white walls of a corner, the sculpture clearly constructed especially for that purpose. (The thrashing machine had to be turned on, and each session lasted about two minutes.) The chain wrapping around the vertical metal pole made a deep, clanging sound.

Plastered (1999/2010) by Monica Bonvicini (Italian, b. 1965) ran a close second in the "destroy the white cube" contest. A false floor of sandwich construction with plaster panels and underlying polystyrene that makes a crunching sound when trod upon, *Plastered* feels like a classic piece of Italian neo-'70s entropic design. (It also left a lot of plaster dust on your shoes.) What's great is that at the Museum Tinguely, Bonvicini's piece was run through the entire special exhibition space. Now *that's* decorating.

THE SOARING, FENESTRATED GALLERIES of Mario Botta's Museum Tinguely building (1996) seemed to be more than willing collaborators in the slightly sinister fun and games. Botta's architecture is robust, corporate, and feels discordant with the whimsical and freewheeling spirit of Tinguely's art. The museum is under the aegis of the Swiss drug company La Roche, for whom the production of a bold architectural statement was nonnegotiable. All of this lent a certain heavy quality to the proceedings.

In "Under Destruction," the imposing white spaces, far from feeling endangered, stood up to the art and, if anything, emphasized the fragilities and especially the stylistic derivativeness of work by artists born in the '70s and '80s. (Arte Povera and Post-Minimalist sculpture here seemed the most prevalent points of reference.) We were treated to a current species of macho monsters made by tyro-artist-tinkerers who very often conceive an art of spectacle that provokes thrills and chills at contemporary art fairs. In the context of the museum, this kind of art can end up looking defanged.



THE VISUAL EFFECT OF SCHIPPER'S SCULPTURAL ADAGIO WAS RATHER LIKE THAT OF A CAR SHOWROOM; THE EMPHASIS SEEMED TO BE MORE ON THE SLICK COMMODITIES THAN ON THEIR DESTRUCTION.

Most prominent in this regard was *The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle* (2007-08) by Jonathan Schipper (American, b. 1973), an in-the-round, kinetic sculptural complex, made with the assistance of the engineer Karl F. Biewald, which comprises two cars slowly but surely grinding into each other, to the depth of about 3 feet on each vehicle. This slow-paced, motorized duel has a kind of youthful exuberance, and it seemed most appropriate in a museum devoted to Tinguely, who was well known for his passionate love of Formula One race cars. But the visual effect of Schipper's sculptural adagio as seen from the garden entrance through Botta's big windows was rather like that of a car showroom; the emphasis seemed to be more on the slick commodities than on their destruction.

Even more macho was an untitled floor work from 2007 by Arcangelo Sassolino (Italian, b. 1967) in which a high-powered hydraulic piston gradually bores through a thick block of wood. This piece of sculptural braggadocio was not functioning the afternoon I saw it: it lay forlorn on the floor, like some discarded Post-Minimalist relic, an eviscerated Richard Nonas perhaps. I was informed that the blocks of wood are replaced every couple of days. (Usually installed as a viewer-activated piece, Sassolino's sculpture was on a timer at the museum.) In sensibility, the work seemed the polar opposite of Johannes Vogl's *Ohne Titel (Marmeladenbrotreichmaschine)*, 2007—a charming, whimsical bricolage in which pieces of bread travel up a conveyor belt, are splashed with jam by two kinetic knives, then plop into a sweet, sticky pile on the floor.

Painting was not really the object of destructive impulses in this show. An assortment of "Modern Paintings" (1999-



Left, Jonathan Schipper: *The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle*, 2007-08, cars, motors and mixed mediums. Courtesy Pierogi, New York.

Above, Arcangelo Sassolino: Untitled, 2007, wood and hydraulic piston, 39¼ by 63 by 31½ inches. Courtesy Nicola von Senger, Zurich.



MANY WORKS ON VIEW APPEARED TO BE LESS ABOUT DESTRUCTION THAN ABOUT AGGLOMERATION, AN ADDITIVE COBBLING-TOGETHER OF ELEMENTS TO MAKE NEW TOTEMS.

2000) by Pavel Büchler (Czech, b. 1952) was clustered in a tight group on a long empty wall: they looked like benign, if crusty, abstractions. Learning that they were in fact thrift-shop paintings, or paintings by friends, that had been subjected to a process of *décollage*—in which paint layers were meticulously peeled off the canvas, the canvases washed and ironed, and the paint layers then reassembled upside down on the supports—didn't make them seem any more dangerous. My favorite looked like an early Ryman. The act of painting is more effectively deconstructed in a humorous video by Alex Hubbard (American, b. 1975). *Cinépolis* (2007) shows a portable movie screen—which functions as a kind of flatbed picture plane—that in quick, madcap takes is cut up, tarred and feathered, and festooned with balloons. Here the deconstructive antics of Action painting and Pop art are bracingly reframed, and for once (in this context) made light of.

Otherwise, much of the machine art in "Under Destruction" seemed to be high-maintenance; these kinetic sculptures and archaic film projectors appear to need constant

help. The same nice Swiss guard who offered to turn on the Liz Larner piece for me was later seen carefully tending to *Bubble Machine* (2006) by Ary Schlesinger (Israeli, b. 1980), feeding it more of that yummy amalgam of cooking gas and soap that, when dropped in bubble form onto a high-voltage transformer, made such lovely balls of fire. Many works on view appeared to be less about destruction than about agglomeration, an additive cobbling-together of elements to make new totems, and Schlesinger's marvelously quirky contraption, perched atop a rickety old ladder, seemed most in the spirit of Tinguely.

POLITICAL WORK was largely absent from "Under Destruction." Only a sculpture by Nina Beier (Danish, b. 1976) and Marie Lund (Danish, b. 1975), and a video by Michael Landy (British, b. 1963), addressed the notion of labor and the question of who is invested with the agency of destruction: the artist, the viewer or the machine. Beier/Lund's *History Makes a Young Man Old* (2008) features a scratched-up crystal ball that, as per the artists' instructions, had been rolled by the curators over the Rhine and along train tracks, as it were, from the New Age store in the center of Basel where it was purchased. In Landy's *Break Down* (2001), every one of the artist's 7,227 possessions is inventoried and then systematically pulped. The look of the machines that do the dirty work is that of a particularly infernal airport security

system (though big electric saws were also used). With its imagery of bright yellow trays and blue-costumed workers, Landy's video has an upbeat feeling. What could be more liberating than getting rid of all your belongings?

Yet the political despair, let alone the anarchic impulses, that may have led to Landy's piece were nowhere on view in "Under Destruction." The important idea of destruction as a subversion of failure was also not addressed ("abject art" was entirely bypassed). None of the works chosen for the show went in for institutional critique. There were no installations investigating the aesthetics of computer viruses, chemical warfare or identity theft, although Sharp does highlight these issues in his catalogue conversation with Jetzer. By confining the idea of destruction largely to a critique of commodity culture, the curators trivialize the implications of destruction as a trope and the generosity of Tinguely's world-view. (Landy for one has posited Tinguely as essential to his development and even cocurated a Tinguely show at Tate Liverpool in 2009.) By omitting any visceral object that actually unwinds or disappears over time, the curators seem to

imply that there is not currently a work of art capable of auto-destruction in the here and now. Apart from a few fender benders and fallen floors, the effect of "Under Destruction" rests more on preservation, or at the very most, entropy lite.

Most notably, the organizers of "Under Destruction" paid ample lip service to but did not include work by Gustav Metzger (German, b. 1926), the author, in 1959, of the first manifesto on auto-destructive art and a definite influence on Tinguely. Born of Polish Jewish parents in Nuremberg (where he witnessed Hitler's infamous rallies), Metzger was sent by his parents to England in 1939; many of his family members perished in concentration camps. He became an influential figure in Britain through his Happenings in public spaces, his art strikes, light shows and teaching.

Metzger is one of the indirect inspirations, as we read in the catalogue, for Christian Marclay's *Guitar Drag* (2000),



a fearsome, 14-minute video shown on a big screen in a dark room that documents a Fender Stratocaster being dragged behind a truck along a country road, with an earsplitting audio generated from within the guitar. The catalogue cites Pete Townsend of The Who, a musician famous for destroying his electric guitars, as an influence on Marclay (American, b. 1955). Also mentioned is the fact that Townsend studied with Metzger in art school. Metzger is still alive. His work was recently rediscovered by visitors to a 2009 retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery in London, and he will be the subject of an exhibition this fall at New York's New Museum. Prematurely relegating an artist to the dustbin of history is perhaps the most destructive act of all. □

Opposite, six stills from Alex Hubbard's *Cinépolis*, 2007, video, approx. 2 minutes. Courtesy Maccarone, New York.

Above, Christian Marclay: *Guitar Drag*, 2000, DVD projection, 14 minutes. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Left, Johannes Vogl: *Ohrie Titel (Marmeladenbrotreichtmaschine)*, 2007, shopping cart, conveyor belt, bread, jam and mixed mediums. Photo Bettina Mattnissen, courtesy Museum Tinguely, Basel.

"Under Destruction" was on view at the Museum Tinguely, Basel, Oct. 15, 2010-Jan. 23, 2011. The show opens this month at the Swiss Institute of Contemporary Art, New York, Apr. 6-June 4.

BROOKS ADAMS is an art critic based in Paris.