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Caught in the Circuits: Jean Tinguely in Nevada, On Television

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Abstract

In 1962, Study for an End of the World No. 2 *by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, which entailed the mock-apocalyptic explosion of a junk-fashioned kinetic sculpture on a dry lakebed in the American desert—just a stone's throw from the Nevada Test Site, where actual atomic tests were carried out repeatedly in the period—was relayed to the American public by way of primetime television. Tinguely's gesture addressed two technologies that profoundly reshaped the decades following World War II: the atom bomb (representing the potential end point of all technology) and television (representing the potential translation of all into spectacle), simultaneously mimicking atomic tests and their widespread coverage in the mass media. This essay considers the artwork's unlikely trespass into, and inextricability from, the then-young medium of television, which itself radically refigured space and experience in the period.* Study for an End of the World No. 2*, indeed, mirrored the growing impossibility of potential detachment, or autonomy, in a society ever more enveloped by various circuitry and grappling with the unsettling implications of an unprecedented haziness between here and there, between event and "pseudo-event," between news and entertainment. As such, it holds renewed relevance to our own moment, marked as it is by accelerated entrapment within various entangled networks of late capitalism and when the lines between real versus fake news, AI versus human-generated content, and the public versus private spheres are thus ever more difficult to discern.*

Keywords*: Tinguely, television, atomic test, pseudo-event, spectacle, mediation, desert, spatiotemporal relations, Nevada Test Site, 1960s.*

> "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."
>
> Michel Foucault (1967)[1]

In the early hours of July 10, 1962, a host of men huddled, sweat-browed, around sleek control panels at a collection of stations on either side of the Atlantic, among them at Cape Canaveral in Florida, the Andover Earth Station in Maine, the Pleumeur-Bodou Telecom Center in Brittany, and outside Cornwall, England. On this morning, with the aid of a Thor-Delta rocket developed by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the first direct relay communications satellite, Telstar 1, was launched into orbit.[2] [Figure 1] Within days, an inaugural live television signal was transmitted across the great wide sea, carrying with it the black and white image of a fluttering American flag.[3] Telephone calls, telegraphs, and facsimiles would soon follow, over the course of the satellite's brief operation. (In an odd twist, albeit one with laser precision for my own narrative purposes, Telstar 1 was damaged by radiation from a high-altitude nuclear test that the U.S. Atomic Energy

[1] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27. This text is based upon a lecture given in March of 1967 and was published in the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in October 1984.

[2] The first artificial satellite to orbit the Earth, Sputnik, was launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. The promoters of Telstar 1, however, were quick to emphasize that it would be the first to affect the daily lives of ordinary citizens in a direct way. Before Telstar 1, television and telephone calls were largely relayed via microwave towers, with oceans posing a natural barrier until subsea cables were later installed.

[3] NASA would retrospectively mark July 10, 1962, when this breakthrough occurred, as "the day information went global." See "Telstar Opened Era of Global Satellite Television" (July 10, 2012): https://www.nasa.gov/history/telstar-opened-era-of-global-satellite-television/

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Commission had conducted the day before its momentous send off, the apparatus's working lifespan slashed from ten or fifteen years to a mere few months.[4]) If Telstar 1 facilitated global telecommunications—and more broadly, the networking of distant points on Earth—it also indexed a new type of global configuration: the multinational, public-private financial conglomerate. For this technological feat was the culmination of a convoluted collaboration between Bell Telephone Laboratories, AT&T, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the British General Post Office, and the French National Post, Telegraph & Telecom Office. A promotional film by Bell Systems boasted, "private industry and government worked shoulder to shoulder under a unique arrangement for the project," while *National Geographic* proclaimed that Telstar 1 established a "Space Age precedent for private investment."[5] The opening of new circuits, in other words, entailed new forms of entanglement, and enclosure, as well.

Just four months prior—in front of a fleet of television cameramen, news reporters and other journalists—the Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely had stepped onto the desolate desert floor of Jean Dry Lake, in Nevada, behind his own makeshift console. [Figure 2] He was twenty miles southwest of Las Vegas and a stone's throw from the Nevada Test Site [6], the United States' central atomic proving ground from 1951 onward. *David Brinkley's Journal*, a weekly news report from the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) had commissioned the artist's imminent spectacle, the mock-apocalyptic explosion of a junk-fashioned kinetic sculpture, to be aired two weeks later on American primetime television.[7] In this artwork, *Study for an End of the World No. 2,* Tinguely addressed two technologies that profoundly impacted the decades following World War II: the atom bomb (representing the potential end point of all technology) and television (representing the potential translation of all phenomena and experiences into spectacle), simultaneously mimicking atomic tests *and* their mass mediation on television. The scene enacted at Jean Dry Lake was archetypal: a lone man facing the vast emptiness of the desert, one cast in countless cowboy Westerns, Marlboro ads, and science fiction films and television programs from the period. On Brinkley's show, Tinguely's confrontation with the desert was set to an atonal soundtrack, the kind of stock genre music that would have immediately conjured images of alien spaceships and extraterrestrial locales on the part of contemporary audiences. Teasing apart Tinguely's artwork from its televisual mediation, however, is difficult here as elsewhere. [8] Did the artist intend for such associations to be drawn? What control, in fact, did he have over the media's framing of the event? To make matters more complicated, our sole access to this piece—save press coverage and a handful of drawings and postcards Tinguely sent back to Europe from Nevada—is through Brinkley's episode itself.

In this essay, I wish to consider Tinguely's "study" in terms its trespass into the then-young medium of television, which itself radically refigured spatiotemporal experiences and relations in the period. The art historian Pamela Lee has argued that "Tinguely was among the earliest artists of the sixties to exploit the media

[4] Named "Starfish Prime," this test was one of a handful conducted by the U.S. government in 1962 at high-altitudes—400km above the Earth's surface, in this case. A nuclear warhead was launched from Johnston Island in the Pacific on a Thor rocket. It created an electromagnetic pulse that was far more powerful than expected, to the extent that much of the instrumentation was thrown off scale and exact measurements were unobtainable. Some of the high-energy electrons created by this blast became trapped and formed worrisome radiation belts around the Earth, which disabled Telstar and other low Earth satellites. See: Saswato R. Das "How the U.S. Accidentally Nuked Its Own Communications Satellite," *Scientific American* (July 11, 2012): http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-us-accidentally-nuked-own-communications-satellite/ (accessed by the author on Nov. 15, 2024); and W.L. Brown, J.D. Gabbe, and W. Rozenweig, "Results of the Telstar Radiation Experiments," *The Bell System Technical Journal* (July 1963): 1505-1559.

[5] "Telstar!" promotional film from 1962 produced by Bell Systems (now owned by AT&T Archives); 27 minutes; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKH-GijnAGk (accessed by the author on June 30, 2024); and Rowe Findley, "Telephone a Star," *National Geographic* (May 1962): 642.

[6] Originally named the Nevada Proving Grounds in 1950, this area was renamed the Nevada Test Site in 1955 and has since been renamed the Nevada National Security Site in 2010. In line with the historical period discussed in this essay, I'll refer to it at the Nevada Test Site, or NTS. https://nnss.gov/about-the-nnss/nnss-history/

[7] *Study for an End of the World No. 2* culminated on March 21st, 1962, and aired on NBC on April 4th from 10:30-11pm. At the archives of the Museum Tinguely, in Basel, Switzerland, the episode is broken onto two DVDs: one with scenes from Brinkley's newsroom in New York (5 minutes); the other, with scenes from Nevada (21 minutes). The show was apparently broadcast in both color and black and white, copies of which are available from NBC News Archives in New York.

[8] The following recent article elaborates upon the inextricability of Tinguely's piece and its televisual context: Justin Keever, "The Televised Apocalypse," Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal vol. 3, no. 1 (2020): 263-283.

culture of the decade so intrepidly."[9] Taken further, this piece reveals what was a nascent sense in the 1960s: that locations and events were no longer isolatable, but instead existed in relations, in the process of mediation, in a hovering between. In her astute writing on the American artist Walter de Maria, and more generally on the "innovative, interdisciplinary, performative arena that emerged in New York in the early 1960s," the art historian Jane McFadden discerns, "With distant wars, moonwalks, and pop stars circulating as so many images on television, culture at large seemed to be both on the ground and in the air."[10] Many key thinkers of the day celebrated the increased connectivity ushered by the expansion of electronic media and communication networks, not to mention commercial airline travel.[11] Marshall McLuhan, for instance, famously characterized this reordered world as a new "global village," wherein breaking news was instantaneously available across the planet's reach.[12] Others, however, took a more negative view: lamenting the growing *im*possibility of potential detachment, or autonomy, in a society evermore enveloped by various circuitry; and grappling with the troubling implications of an unprecedented haziness between here and there, between event and "pseudo-event," between news and entertainment.

Tinguely was not the only vanguard artist to appear on television in these years, but one of a small handful who made tentative forays into this increasingly dominant, if somewhat perplexing, context.[13] Niki de Saint Phalle, his longtime partner—who was centrally involved in the making of *Study for an End of the World No. 2* and also featured prominently in its documentation—had, in fact, already been profiled on *David Brinkley's Journal*. It seems likely, in fact, that her prior connection opened the way for Tinguely. She starred in an episode that aired on December 13, 1961, along with two other Paris-based artists, Arman and Raymond Hains, all three of whom were highlighted for the destructive impulse in their high-priced art.[14] The scenes of Saint Phalle, set to jazz music, took place at Innenhof of Impasse Rosin, where she and Tinguely then shared a studio (formerly belonging to Constantin Brâncusi). After shooting one of her paintings with a rifle, she delivers a high-pitched, almost hysterical rant: "My problem is creating, creating now, creating beauty, creating something which has to do with you, which has to do with now, with bombs, and everything exploding, and the end of the world, and bang!"

Almost two years before, in January 1960, the experimental musician John Cage stepped onto the set of *"I've Got a Secret,"* in his first national television appearance.[15] The premise of this game show was that a celebrity panel was to determine, by way of yes-no answers alone, the "secret"—typically something surprising, exceptional, and/or embarrassing—of a mystery guest, in this case Cage. Both host and audience were apprised, and therefore in on the process. At the start of the show, Cage whispers to the emcee, "I'm going to perform one of my musical

[9] Pamela M. Lee, "Study for an End of the World," *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the Sixties* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004), 144.

[10] Jane McFadden, "Toward Site," *Grey Room* 27 (Spring 2007): 37-38. Tinguely and Saint Phalle were both involved in this "interdisciplinary, performative arena" and the "happenings" associated with it. For example, just prior to departing from Los Angeles for Las Vegas, on March 4th, 1962, Saint Phalle performed a "shooting action" at gallerist Virginia Dwan's Malibu beach house, in front of a small but noteworthy audience, including actors Jane Fonda and John Houseman, fashion model Peggy Moffitt, and Henry Geldzahler from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The same day, a private pre-opening was held for three congruent exhibitions – Tinguely's at the Everett Ellin Gallery, Robert Rauschenberg's at the Dwan Gallery, and Ed Kienholz's at Ferus – which came on the heels of a multi-week series of events in Los Angeles orchestrated by Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg (who together rented one of Dwan's Malibu homes for a month). In April, after returning from Nevada, Saint Phalle organized a second shooting tableau in the hills overlooking Malibu, with the assistance of Kienholz. And on May 4th, the couple participated in a staging of Kenneth Koch's play, "The Building of Boston," at the Maidman Playhouse on West 42nd Street in New York, directed by Cunningham, and involving many other artists (e.g., Rauschenberg, Billy Klüver, Frank Stella). See Jerry Tallmer, "The Building of Boston," *The Village Voice* (May 10, 1962): 9.

[11] The advent of commercial airline travel, of course, directly impacted the direction of and possibilities for art, from the facilitation of new social networks, especially those spanning vast distances, to the execution of "site-specific" projects in places previously unrealistic to engage.

[12] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). See also: "The Global Village" interview with McLuhan, which appeared on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on May 18, 1960: https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.3595306 (accessed by the author Feb. 25, 2024).

[13] Salvador Dalí was a game show contestant on *"What's My Line?"* in an episode that aired on January 20, 1952, the earliest instance of an artistic "infiltration" into mainstream television programming of which I am aware.

[14] Copies of this episode are viewable at the archives of the Museum Tinguely and at NBC News Archives.

[15] I would like to thank Angela Bartholomew for bringing my attention to this Cage piece in the context of a seminar that I taught at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (while a visiting professor through the Metamatic Research Initiative), "Art, Media, and Site in the 1960s," in which she was enrolled. Cage's appearance on *"I've Got a Secret"* is viewable online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSulycqZH-U (accessed by the author on July 15, 2024).

compositions." And then, to mounting laughter and disbelief from the audience, he elaborates:

> The instruments I will use are: a Water Pitcher, an Iron Pipe, a Goose Call, a Bottle of Wine, an Electric Mixer, a Whistle, a Sprinkling Can, ice cubes, 2 Cymbals, a Mechanical Fish, a Quail Call, a Rubber Duck, a Tape Recorder, a Vase of Roses, a Seltzer Siphon, 5 Radios, a Bathtub and a GRAND PIANO.

Water Walk, the score he executes with this motley assemblage of cables, gadgets, and other everyday objects (which bears notable resemblance to Tinguely's own ramshackle inventions), was composed in 1959 specifically to be performed on television.

Distinct from later instances where artists (e.g., Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Gerry Schum) engaged the medium of television, exerting a fair amount of control over its form and content, in the cases of Cage, Saint Phalle, and Tinguely, a mainstream, syndicated program provided the primary structure within which an artist was inserted. Ambiguity arises here on several fronts: what degree of complicity exists between the artist and his/her "host"? Is art packaged as a novelty for the amusement of popular audiences, or does it somehow serve to actively disrupt the familiar codes of television? Where does the performance begin and end? The art historian and critic Sven Lütticken, in his examination of the long and mutually influential relationship between television and performance art, ties such confusion to the emergence of "general performance" in the 1960s:

> Television was the first medium that transmitted a potentially uninterrupted flow of images into people's homes, penetrating daily life much more thoroughly than film had done. The formats developed to fill this flow also created new forms of performance. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol's pop prophecy that everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes both articulated a fundamental transformation and belied its complexity. If it emphasized the element of *acceleration*—fame becoming ephemeral—it failed to note that time has also been *dilated* through the creation of what one might term 'general performance', a performance no longer bound by the conventional duration of plays or films.[16]

"Happenings," an experimental and expanded artistic form with which Cage, Saint Phalle, Tinguely, and many others were deeply involved, encapsulated the broad "dilation" of performance at the time as well as the trend toward using multiple media concurrently, whether they be networked, juxtaposed, or side-by-side. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, in his well-known statement on "intermedia" from 1967, defines the "intermedial approach" in terms of its emphasis on "the dialectic between the media," citing its origins in the contemporaneous breakdown of traditional media, in any discrete sense.[17] If such performance-based branches of art responded and contributed to the erosion of medium-specificity—representing a generalized imperative of dispersal as opposed to constraint—it is worth noting that television is, itself, a fundamentally "intermedial" medium. Television scholars, from Raymond Williams to Samuel Weber, have repeatedly stressed the uncommon heterogeneity of this technology and "social technology" that we call one thing, but which in fact is many un-unified things at once.[18] Weber goes so far as to say that television *"above all differs from itself."*[19] As such, television was a particularly befitting tool and sphere for those artists probing the edges of art's limits.

Tinguely had enacted two previous "ends": the first, entitled *Homage to New York*, at the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in March 1960; the second, *Study for an End of the World No. 1*, at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark in September 1961. Apparently, near injuries to spectators

[16] Sven Lütticken, "Performance Art After TV," *New Left Review 80* (March/April 2013): 109.

[17] Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," reprinted in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, edited by Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 172-73. Originally published in the journal *Dé-coll/age* #6, edited by artist Wolf Vostell (Frankfurt: Typos Verlag, 1967).

[18] Raymond Williams, "The Technology and the Society," reprinted in *Electronic Media and Technoculture*, edited and with an introduction by John Thornton Caldwell (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000), 46-7; originally published in Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1974).

[19] Samuel Weber, "Television: Set and Screen," in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 110. See also Stanley Cavell, "The Fact of Television," in *Video Culture: a Critical Introduction*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1986), 192-218.

during the latter opened the way for Tinguely's use of television for its third iteration, in Nevada, allowing audiences to view even more risky pyrotechnics from the safety of their own living rooms. The entertainment value of Tinguely's fiery displays and their potential translatability into the medium of film were recognized immediately, as evidenced by a letter from Walt Disney Productions to the Director of Collections at MoMA, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., penned just six days after Tinguely's event there. The company had read about the artist's "gadget to end all gadgets," and wrote to inquire about whether or not "motion picture footage was taken of the incident [...] and if it [was] available for screening."[20]

In a letter from 1961 to curator Pontus Hultén, Tinguely proposed the idea of pitching one of his "suicidal sculptures" to a major television broadcast network (countering the common story that NBC initiated the collaboration): "Billy [Klüver] wrote to me that there is a new NBC team in Stockholm. We have to tell them that this could interest them. VV Gagarin and Castro and Lumumba and the force."[21] His final line references three then-prominent figures in world news: a Russian cosmonaut, the Communist leader of Cuba, and the recently assassinated Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, as if to suggest that television might relay his work into such a circuit.[22]

Within Brinkley's show, Tinguely's desert affair would, indeed, go on to be situated squarely within the context of current events, and specifically, the Cold War arms race. Underscoring this, *Study for an End of the World No. 2* was timed by the artist to coincide with a major political convention underway in Switzerland, where leaders gathered to (unsuccessfully) negotiate nuclear disarmament, just weeks before testing resumed in Nevada after a three-year moratorium.[23] Prior to cutting to onsite footage from Nevada, Brinkley begins the episode from his newsroom, "the Russian Foreign Minister was in Geneva talking disarmament, while Khrushchev in Moscow was bragging about a new rocket. It was this picture of hypocrisy and danger that Tinguely was trying to say something about." The show concludes on the same note: "Having had his say, Tinguely packed his bags and left Las Vegas. At the same time, statesmen were packing their bags and leaving Geneva. They had gone there to have their say about the threat of destruction, said it, and left."

If conceived by its makers as news, it was equally meant to entertain. In one scene, for example, Tinguely and Saint Phalle visit a Las Vegas toy store, where the artist was, Brinkley informs us, inspired "for the first time in his life" to "buy some new objects to assemble along with his junk." The duo playfully overloads a shopping cart with disposal trinkets (e.g., plastic balls, a ketchup bottle), a slapstick quality to their hasty consumer spree: they grab goods randomly, fumble them in brimming arms, and knock others off the shelf. Lee has rightly identified the "made-for-television artiness" of this and other sketches in Brinkley's production, remarking, "There is a staginess to the dialogue between Tinguely, Saint Phalle, and those they encounter that betrays the deeply *performative* quality of their actions, displayed for the benefit of the camera."[24]

Such performativity was not confined to Brinkley's program alone, but likewise permeated Tinguely's depictions of his Nevada undertaking. The ephemera he selected to send back home, for example, amplified the exotic nature of this far-away land while simultaneously framing the artist himself as a renegade cowboy type. On the front of one postcard to Hultén, a statuesque American Indian, donning feathered headdress and beaded buffalo skin, is pictured.[25]According to its caption, "Chief Bull gives the sign language for 'Welcome.'" He is not from around the Southwest desert, but instead from the Plains, decipherable from his ornate attire. His peoples' dress, as well as their

[20] See letter, dated March 23, 1960, in the archives of the Museum Tinguely. No further correspondence between Walt Disney Productions and Tinguely or Barr has been archived.

[21] Letter in the archives of the Museum Tinguely.

[22] Yuri Gagarin, a Soviet cosmonaut, was the first human in outer space, and to orbit the Earth, in April 1961. This event, along with the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957, propelled the space race, which was intimately bound to the arms race. Fidel Castro, of course, became the Prime Minister of Cuba, after leading the successful Communist Revolution there. Patrice Lumumba, assassinated in 1961 after only months in office, became the first legally elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo after he helped win its independence from Belgium in June 1960. For more, see a lengthy Wikipedia page devoted to Lumumba: Patrice Lumumba - Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrice_Lumumba

[23] For more on this convention, see Howard Margoles, "Arms Control and Disarmament: Notes on the Situation at Geneva," *Science* vol. 135 no. 3508 (March 23, 1962): 1049-50.

[24] Lee, 89, 141-143.

[25] This postcard, which was postmarked from Las Vegas in March but with specific date illegible, is in the archives of the Museum Tinguely.

teepees, however, had assumed iconic status by the mid-20th century, operating as a signifier for generic American Indianness in myriad films and television programs from the period. Tinguely's messages similarly caricatured the physical conditions of the desert. Another postcard reads: "Here it's hard to find a coca cola. We've gone miles. It's terribly hot. Snakes everywhere and scorpions [...]." In fact, Tinguely and Saint Phalle are bundled in jackets in most scenes of Brinkley's episode, and it's rare to glimpse such creatures in the Mojave even with intent searching. Years later, Tinguely would report to French audiences, "I had been carried away with explosives. They are freely available in each hardware shop," when, in reality, stores in Las Vegas had refused to sell him dynamite and fireworks had been shipped from California because illegal in the state of Nevada.[26] Tinguely's portrayals of Nevada exaggerate its ruggedness and lawlessness to dramatic effect, incorporating (whether consciously or unconsciously) commonplace clichés from the popular media. In so doing, they reveal a growing reality and perception in the period: that one's access to the world was inevitably, and inescapably, mediated.

The significance of Tinguely's choice to stage the world's end on a dry lake in the shadows of Las Vegas would not have been lost on contemporary audiences. The Nevada Test Site (NTS) had been rendered familiar to the American public by way of dazzling atomic blasts that were represented in both the mass media and elaborate propaganda campaigns by the Federal Civilian Defense Administration throughout the 1950s.[27] Jean Dry Lake operates in Tinguely's piece as a double for Yucca Flats, a nearly identical looking playa some ninety miles north, which had served as ground zero for many of the most famous tests at the NTS. Although the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was reluctant to disclose information about the test site and its goings-on in the very beginning, repeated explosions quickly drew public attention. The first batch of tests apparently "lit up a half million square miles in four Western states" and was seen as far as downtown Los Angeles.[28]

On a sunny morning in April 1952, 197 reporters, forty-four photographers with 139 cameras, and 200 "distinguished guests" had gathered for the first atomic explosion *as media event*.[29] [Figure 3] *Life* magazine afterward announced:

> Last week, like animal trainers who at last are ready to show off a monster they have tamed, the men of the AEC exploded an A-bomb for the whole U.S. to see. The bombs that have burst in the past have done so in semi-secrecy. [...] But this time the wraps are off and, in the midst of one of the most secret areas in the world, the AEC set up bleachers for the crowd.[30]

The test was televised live to an estimated thirty-five million people, its image of unfathomable force transmitted into homes across the country. (We can imagine suburban family members, still in bathrobes, rubbing their eyes in front of the television set, one perhaps spilling her coffee at the blinding moment of detonation.) This and later media representations of such tests (e.g., on television, in newspapers, popular magazines, newsreels, and science fiction films) typically focused on the beauty of the elemental chain reaction, contributing to a pervasive fascination with the visual effects of atomic explosions.[31] Ultimately, an emphasis on

[26] "Jean Tinguely: Lecture," CNAC, May 5, 1971. Sonotheque Centre Georges Pompidou, BS92.

[27] The most notorious of FCDA films, *Duck and Cover* (1951), features an animated turtle urging school children to hide under their desks in the case of nuclear attack. Screened in schools across the country in 1952, this is one of many FCDA productions, aimed at instilling a sense of preparedness for the threats of communism and nuclear war. (The FCDA operated from 1951 to 1958 before being re-formulated into the Office of Civil Defense Mobilization.)

[28] "Atomic Tests Light Up Four States," *Life* 12 (February 1951): 25-27.

[29] On April 22, 1952, the AEC launched "Charlie," part of Operation Tumbler-Snapper, its first televised test.

[30] "An Atomic Open House: AEC Plays Host to Cameras, Newsmen and TV at Blast on Yucca Flat," *Life* (May 5, 1952): 37.

[31] Historian Peter B. Hales has pointed out that already by the early fifties, "Americans had anesthetized themselves to the destructive power of the mushroom cloud by inventing the atomic sublime." Quoted in Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 66. Photographer and curator Edward Steichen was apparently deeply disturbed by the public's desensitization to atomic imagery. In his infamous *Family of Man* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, he attempted to "recharge a symbol that had become all too commonplace to 1950s audiences": "[...] the single most arresting and important image of the exhibition [was] the only color image and the only photograph to command an entire room [...]. It was a huge, six-by-eight-foot color transparency of a hydrogen bomb explosion, glowing red and orange in a dark enclosure that forced the individual close, close enough to be enveloped by the cloud." (Sandeen, p. 58 and 48.) On the atomic sublime, see also: Vincent Anthony Leo, "The Mushroom Cloud: from Photographic Fact to Cultural Symbol," M.A. Thesis (Ohio State University, 1984); David E. Nye, "Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI: New Forms of the Dynamic Sublime," in *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1994), 225-56; and the book *Camera*

seeing and *imaging* atomic detonations, of course, served to *de*-emphasize the technology's bodily implications.

Sociologist Daniel Boorstin's notion of the "pseudo-event," developed in his 1962 book *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream*, provides a useful lens for analyzing both *Study for an End of the World No. 2* and the theatrical atomic tests that it restaged. In the opening chapter, entitled "From News Gathering to News Making," he outlines the progressive blurring between real and manufactured news, and the "thicket of unreality" it introduced. The "pseudo-event," he explains, possesses distinct properties. For instance, it is "planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. [...] Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. And, its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity." [32] Pinning down the "underlying reality" of those atomic tests from the 1950s and 1960s that were structured with spectatorship specifically in mind—captured most often by reporters amassed at News Nob, a rocky outcropping adjacent to Yucca Flats—is particularly tricky. These events were at once "scientific" experiments, enactments of potential wartime scenarios, showcases for the latest technological developments (in both weaponry and imaging devices), and dramatic performances intended to stir awe as well as improved "preparedness" on the part of viewers. According to Boorstin, the "rising tide of pseudo-events" that characterized the period—with these atomic spectacles being a penultimate manifestation, I would assert—not only "[washed] away the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' news," but also shuffled "our roles as actors and as audience," leading to a "new intertwinement of subject and object."[33]

The critic Susan Sontag, in her well-known writing on photography from the 1960s-70s, was similarly concerned with the shifting relationship between experience and representation in a world that was becoming ever more defined by images and the photographic impulse:

> Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. [...] Today everything exists to end in a photograph.[34]

This condition—of the complex and often inextricable entwinement between the world and the image-world—has only become more extreme in the decades since Tinguely staged his mediagenic sculptural performance. We need only think about the rise and dissemination of "fake news" and its power to shape actual politics and imaginaries; or the ways that AI-generated imagery is built from existing but largely untraceable data sets, with no concrete or singular reference points in the physical world;[35] or the extent to which most images today are created not for human eyes, but rather for machine-to-machine seeing, constituting a situation in which we are subjected to, and entrapped by, new and largely invisible forms of data extraction and policing.[36]

Tinguely's own production, piggybacked into primetime television, confronts viewers with the double-absurdity of an artist enacting a slipshod reproduction of an atomic test in front of national audiences. Rather than emphasizing the critical dimensions of the project, however, the press couched its coverage in much the same terms used for *actual* atomic tests, suggesting a (false) continuity between Tinguely's endeavor and the AEC's. One article opened, "Two years and three days after Jean Tinguely ended his world in New York, he brought Doomsday to the Nevada desert."[37] Most reporters focused on the technical details of its execution, as in this passage, which could be mistaken for describing the aftermath of an official detonation:

Atomica: Photographing the Nuclear World, edited by John O'Brian (London: Black Dog Publishers, 2014).

[32] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 11. This book was originally published as *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

[33] Boorstin, 23, 29-30.

[34] Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), 24.

[35] For an excellent analysis of the relationship between photographs and AI-generated imagery, see: Amanda Wasielewski, "Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photographs," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 51, no. 1 (Autumn 2024): 1-29.

[36] On machine seeing and the "invisible visual culture" characterizing our present moment, see: Trevor Paglen, "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)," *The* New Inquiry (Dec. 8, 2016): https://thenewinquiry.com/invisible-images-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/

[37] Bernard Lefkowitz, "Goodbye, Cruel World—Hello, Las Vegas," *New York Post* (March 22, 1962): page numbers unknown.

> Dynamite and plastic bombs buried in the cracked earth blasted clouds of dust 300 feet up into the 20 mile-an-hour winds. One hurled a 3x4-foot piece of sheet metal the distance of a city block, narrowly missing a parked car. A fireworks pinwheel showered debris 400 feet away, denting at least one auto.[38]

While Tinguely's piece aimed to rupture the spectacularization of atomic tests, in the end, the media largely flattened his re-enactment into a familiar, if mildly confusing, repetition.

The "age of television" had dawned only shortly before Tinguely's use of the medium. More than half of all U.S. homes installed a television set between 1948 and 1955, with a similar rate of adoption in parts of Europe.[39] [Figure 4] By 1961, the average American viewer watched an estimated two hundred minutes a day, and young children spent as much time in front of television as in the schoolroom.[40] Some worried about the deleterious effects of this trend on the national intellect and psyche, while others battled over who should control the airwaves. Such debates were vividly articulated in a speech made by Newton Minow, the newly appointed Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under John F. Kennedy, to leaders of the broadcast industry in 1961:

> Ours has been called the jet age, the atomic age, the space age. It is also, I submit, the television age. And just as history will decide whether the leaders of today's world employed the atom to destroy the world or rebuild it for mankind's benefit, so will history decide whether today's broadcasters employed their powerful voice to enrich the people or to debase them. [...] When television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day [...]. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.[41]

Minow urged his audience, "the most powerful voice in America," to be more responsible in fulfilling their public service, providing diverse programming to educate, inspire, and "make our people aware of their world." Again and again, he stressed the *public* nature of the medium, demanding "imagination in programming, not sterility; creativity, not imitation; experimentation, not conformity; excellence, not mediocrity." He was particularly critical of action-adventure shows and repeatedly condemned the cowboy Western genre, which dominated American primetime television in the period.[42] One of his concerns was the impression such shows would make overseas, as international television was then imminent: "What will the people of other countries think of us when they see our Western bad men and good men punching each other in the jaw in between the shooting?"[43]

From our standpoint in the 21st century, Minow's faith in television's democratic potential seems depressingly naïve. Indeed, as art historian David Joselit has argued, the medium of television has most often served to *impede* democracy: to "discipline public speech," to consolidate private interests and capital, and rachet the society of the

[38] John Flynn, "Jean Expresses Happiness as World of Junk Explodes," *Las Vegas Review Journal* (March 22, 1962): page numbers unknown.

[39] See Lynn Spigel, "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955," *Camera Obscura* 16 (January 1988): 11. Spigel offers a compelling analysis of how the new medium reconfigured spatial relations, for example, in its "ability to bring 'another world' into the home," and by providing people a "way of 'going places' without even the expenditure of movement, to say nothing of money" (p. 15). Although telecommunication technologies had before aimed to "conquer space," television uniquely "promised to bring to audiences not merely an illusion of reality as in the cinema, but a 'sense of being there,' a kind of *hyper-realism*," she adds (p. 22).

[40] Newton N. Minow, "Television and the Public Interest," delivered May 9, 1961, to the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, DC. The full text of this speech – considered by some to be among the greatest of the 20th century – is available at: http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/minownewton/minownewton.htm. Minow's words, especially those excerpted here, were widely publicized and discussed at the time.

[41] Ibid., no pagination.

[42] The production and popularity of cowboy Western films and television series peaked in the 1950s and early 1960s, their action most always set against the mythical backdrop of the 19th-century American West. At the time Tinguely and Saint Phalle appeared on NBC, the three most popular programs on the American air were all Westerns. Many historians have interpreted the genre and its widespread appeal in this era in terms of its thinly veiled and highly biased enactment of Cold War politics. For more on the genre's boom in the mid-late 1950s, see *Time* magazine's cover story, "Westerns: the Six-Gun Galahad," from March 30, 1959 (*Time* 1959). Interestingly, the Western movie phenomenon was global in character, with sub-genres emerging in Italy, Germany, and even the Soviet Union in the 1960s.

[43] Minow, no pagination.

spectacle to ever more perverse levels.[44] He writes:

> Television [turns] light into private property; it haunts art history as the commercial doppelgänger of art's experimental advance toward information since the mid 1950s. Art stands against television as figure stands against ground, and television, in its privatization of public speech and its strict control over access to broadcasting, stands against democracy.[45]

How, then, should we interpret Tinguely's action? Was he among the first artists to redirect television to critical ends? Or, was his own intended intervention swept up into the disorienting forest of pseudo-events described by Boorstin and Sontag? Reduced, by television, to a gag? Certainly, any iconoclastic aspects of the piece were muddled by the conventional trappings of Brinkley's show.

In mimicking the spectacle of atomic destruction, Tinguely relayed his own artistic gesture into the mainstream media that was his partial target. His was a simulation of simulated ends carried out over and over again on a desert flat to the north, relayed, like its original, to the American public via television. Critic Lucy Lippard, in her well-known account of the dematerialization of the art object from 1966-72, writes that conceptual art signaled "artists' attempts to escape from the frame-and-pedestal syndrome," resulting in a remarkable expansion of art's limits "after Minimalism closed down on expressionist and pop excesses."[46] The work she surveys re-casted art as an "idea" or "action," in which "the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or 'dematerialized.'"[47] Tinguely's, of course, is a somewhat different story, from a slightly earlier moment. However, his work, too, addressed dematerialization: in the sense of technology's potential to radically transform one's way of being in the world. Moreover, it evoked the "un-grounding" of location itself as a result of the expansion of electronic media—an unprecedented condition of *zero ground*. On Jean Dry Lake, he explained to one reporter, "[…] 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?"[48]

At the start of Brinkley's show, Tinguely steps alone onto Jean's cracked surface, into the desert's void, and we witness the seemingly plain image of a man in the landscape. In the black and white version of NBC's footage, the over-exposed lakebed emits a blinding white glare, partially subsuming the artist's figure, as if the two together are dissolving into ether or, alternatively, rendered spectral in a sublime nuclear flash.

Note

This essay stems from an unpublished chapter, "Desert Testing Grounds: Jean Tinguely's Study for an End of the World No. 2 (1962)," in my PhD dissertation, "Wasteland: American Landscapes in/and 1960s Art" (UCLA, 2010). Also see my essay, with a separate focus on the apocalyptic orientation of Tinguely's piece: Emily Eliza Scott, "Desert Ends," in Ends of the Earth: Art of the Land to 1974, eds. Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon, 67–85. Los Angeles and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art and Prestel, 2012.

[44] David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2007), 28.

[45] Ibid., xi.

[46] Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1973), viii, xiii.

[47] Ibid., vii.

[48] William R. Byron, "Wacky Artist of Destruction," *Saturday Evening Post* (April 21, 1962): 78.

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Figure 1. Universal Studios Universal-International News newsreel: “A Day in History: Telstar Brings World Closer” (1962); 3 minutes: https://www.c-span.org/program/vignette/1962-telstar-newsreel/356100

Figure 2. Jean Tinguely, *Study for an End of the World No. 2* (1962); installed and then destroyed on Jean Dry Lake, Nevada, on March 21, 1962. A single image of this artwork appears in an art historical entry on Jean Dry Lake, where the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone’s *Seven Magic Mountains* has been permanently installed since 2016: https://sevenmagicmountains.com/timeline_topics/land-art/. Additional photographs are held in the archives at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland, and various news and other popular outlets from 1962, although these are not readily available online.

Figure 3. Media gathers at “News Nob” in anticipation of a nuclear weapons test, Yucca Flat, Nevada, April 22, 1952. U.S. Army photo, held in the Atomic Energy Collection at Oregon State University Libraries: https://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/coll/pauling/peace/pictures/energy1113-newsnobmedia-19520423.html, https://nnss.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/DOENV_774.pdf

Figure 4. Magnavox television advertisement (1951): https://repository.duke.edu/dc/adaccess/TV0664

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