

## Pyrotechnic Sculpture (Leeds, 21 Nov 2013)

Leeds, Henry Moore Institute, Nov 21, 2013

Deadline: Jun 14, 2013

Kirstie Gregory, Henry Moore Institute

Conf: Wednesday 21 November 2013

This one-day symposium coincides with the Henry Moore Institute exhibitions: Dennis Oppenheim; Thought Collision Factories, Jean Tinguely: Spiral and Stephen Cripps: Pyrotechnic Sculptor. All three of these sculptors pushed the boundaries of sculpture not only by employing purpose-built mechanised objects and kinetic contraptions, but also through pyrotechnics. Each of them turned to fireworks, explosives, flares, fires and other kinds of combustibles and detonations to make temporary sculptural works, the sparks of which shone brightly across the landscape of contemporary sculpture in Europe and North America throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Fire, flare and smoke were all harnessed by these artists for visual, sonic, material and spatial effects, in fascinating, ambitious and imaginative ways, with associations and meanings that extend well beyond their more literal 'dematerialising' qualities.

The increasingly elaborate mechanised sculpture-constructions of Dennis Oppenheim (1938-2011) are well represented through his 'Firework Series' from the early 1980s. This body of work includes large and complicated welded steel sculpture-contraptions such as 'Second Sight for a Staircase' (1981) (incorporating sparklers, rockets and Roman candles), 'Launching Structure. An Armature for Projection' (1981-82) (using butane gas ignition systems, rockets, ricochet shields, arc lights and spinning blades) and 'Formula Compound: A Combustion Chamber: An Exorcism' (1982) (comprising flares, rockets and fountains). These works are situated both indoors and outdoors, 'events' as much as 'objects'.

Oppenheim's sculptures were indebted to those of Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) who began experimenting with mechanical sculptures in the 1930s. Welding scrap metal, spinning motors, celebrating chance and staging self-destructing machines, Tinguely unleashed a new kind of kinetic sculpture onto a public more familiar with the idea of sculpture as static and monumental. His 'Homage to New York', the machine that destroys itself, as it was advertised in 1960, was one of his most ambitious fire-starting sculpture-performances, staged in the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art. Cripps wrote his student dissertation on Tinguely. His exploration of fire and flare was complex, allied to installation, performance and experimental music as explosions and detonations were harnessed for their sonic as much as visual effects. As Anne Bean recalled of his 1979 Modern Art Oxford performance: 'there was a tremendous air of expectancy with the hanging of gongs and cymbals, odd bits of machinery, suspicious-looking explosive devices, buckets of water, strange suspended alien-looking horn-like instruments, as well as malicious-looking bags of unknown substances.' Many of his pyrotechnic performances were one-off experimental works, and were audio-recorded as well as filmed and photographed.

We welcome thirty minute papers that look at examples of pyrotechnic sculpture found across the modern and contemporary period, both before and after the work of these three artists. We are seeking new and original research on this kind of work, interested in its deployment of kinetic sculptural form and use of activated assemblage, its accounts of temporality and ephemerality, its collision of object and event, sculpture and performance, its modes of staging, display and re-display, and finally, in the on-going life of this kind of work today, as well as its recent history.

Please email a 250 word abstract and a copy of your CV, by Friday 14th June 2013, to [Kirstie@henry-moore.org](mailto:Kirstie@henry-moore.org).

Reference:

CFP: Pyrotechnic Sculpture (Leeds, 21 Nov 2013). In: Arthist.net, May 15, 2013 (accessed Apr 19, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/5344>>.