

Jean Tinguely's Cyclops

New DVD revisits artist's dream

by Karin Luisa Badt, Jun 28 2005



"Cyclops" peeks through the trees in Milly-la-Forêt...
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The one-eyed Cyclops, that flesh-burping giant who chewed up Odysseus' men still lurks as lawless as ever. He lives on in the Essonne, on the southern outskirts of Paris, although now his eye is a mirror that catches the blue skies, and his monstrous 600-ton frame is composed of machine gauges, pulleys, and secret doors...

Relocated to modern times, he is a joyous monster — children can even launch huge iron balls down chutes that whip through his black iron intestines and land in steel-claws.

Today, rather than Odysseus' men, it is more likely that families, out on picnics in Milly-la-Forêt, will come upon this glittering monster, rising 30 meters into the sun, with a lake — yes, a lake — on the top of his head. Way before they stumble upon this freak, they will hear him: his gurgling, his crankiness, the metal sliding through metal, creaking as loud as a host of industrious leprechauns toiling in the midsummer woods.

The "Cyclops"— a bizarre experiment in metal and movement — is the life achievement of Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely, a project begun in 1969 that took two decades and required the playful collaboration of a dozen or so artist friends, among them fellow sculptor Bernard Luginbuhl and his whimsical wife Niki de Saint-Phalle, famed for her Pompidou Center fountain and Tarot garden in Tuscany.



Filmmakers, Louise Faure & Anne Julien
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It would have remained unheeded hidden in the woods, if not for a documentary, just released on DVD, by French filmmakers, Anne Julien and Louise Faure.

The two directors came across the Cyclops by accident, years ago, on a Sunday outing. "What joy, what liberty, this monster had," they both exclaimed, as we drank orange juice at the Café Beaubourg. "We came back many times, to stroll through."

Indeed, the "Cyclops" was the first location they thought of when deciding where to shoot the film that focused on women dying of AIDS. Rather than showing HIV-positive women in relatively depressing settings — washing dishes in their kitchens, for instance, Julien and Faure chose to give them a sense of dignity suggested by this fantastic space: they invited them down to Milly-la-Forêt to be interviewed inside the Cyclops.



Inside the "Cyclops"
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The documentary, entitled "*Une Contamination Secrète*" (1997), alerted the general public to the little publicized (higher) AIDS risks facing women. It also made the Swiss-based Tinguely Museum aware of the inspired nature of the work of these two artists, a quality reminiscent of Tinguely's own approach. Subsequently, Anne and Louise were contacted to produce a documentary on the making of the beast.

"*Le Monstre dans la Forêt*" is the result. In keeping with the "anti-museum" spirit of the project itself, this artsy documentary proffers no biographical facts, or theoretical explanations. Rather it makes the Cyclops come alive via interviews with the artists, wearing funny jester hats or blue overalls, and through lingering visual caresses highlighting the monster's body. You never see the Cyclops entirely. You catch a glimpse of it, viewing it as a compilation of shining metal and water, merging with the trees. All this, to original music composed by Louis Sclavis.

"My task was to render visible the anarchy," said François de la Patellière, the cameraman. The directors didn't want this to be like a museum visit, with the camera standing in for the typical tourist. No, the camera — they found — would be more effective strapped up and swung down one of the chutes, like an iron ball. And, in another perspective, it could hang over the trees, attached to a crane, peering, like Odysseus, into the Cyclops'eyeball.

"Tinguely stands for the 1960s," Anne said, explaining her own admiration for the artist. "He was totally engaged in his creativity, oblivious of utility, of financing." As Tinguely

himself says in the film: "We threw so much money in the air, I don't even know how much." The artist would invite his friends every summer to forge metal to help him "make his dream," while hosting barbecue feasts in the woods. His wife Niki once made the crew wear phalluses and masks, and filmed them in a Dionysian fertility ritual.

Both Anne and Louise — energetic women in their fifties, sporting motorcycle helmets, sparkling white shirts and trim black suits — feel very close to the Cyclops. Since 1988, they too have been engaged in a number of eccentric projects, celebrating the unusual. Originally from Madagascar, Louise came to film at age 30, enrolling in the Louis Lumière school. Afterwards she took off for an adventure in Guyane, where she landed a job as a camerawoman for public television.

Then one day she invited a friend she had met at a Paris reggae concert to visit. This was Anne, who had run off from her château-vineyard roots in the Languedoc, to apprentice herself to Parisian filmmakers. The partnership was formed and what ensued were a variety of projects, from a piece on a Guyane boxer to a documentary about a rock garden, and now the *"Rêve de Jean"* DVD.

Unlike Tinguely, the two directors found the production process difficult, macho and unyielding to creative efforts. It took them seven years to finish the "monster." First, the financing didn't come through; then the producer went bankrupt. There were also unmentionable bureaucratic run-ins.

"But I have always felt protected in my art," claims Anne. "I think it's my own passion coming back to me." One miracle was the donation of archival footage from Luginbuhl, which constitutes one third of the actual film.

What is the role of the Cyclops today? How do these women see the "artist" in contemporary society?

"I regret to say I am pessimistic," said Anne. "Rather than being a window on the world, the media are turning us into consumers in a small box."

"Tinguely's era is finished," ponders Louise. "Today's artist cares more about pleasing the businesses that fund him."

But, the Cyclops is not. His head— adorned with the final touch of Niki de Saint-Phalle, an ever-moving mirror that catches the sun— turns on and on, transmitting the energy of the artists who labored in the woods to make it.

"Le rêve de Jean" DVD: Artès, 135 rue St. Martin, or www.tinguely-dvd-cyclops.fr
(available in English, Spanish, Italian, German or French)

"Le Cyclope" de Jean Tinguely Milly-laForêt, 50 km from Paris. Open weekends, not open to children under 10, guided tours May-Oct. Tourism office: 01 64 98 83 17