

Art in America

MAY 2015

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

TAKIS

Palais de Tokyo

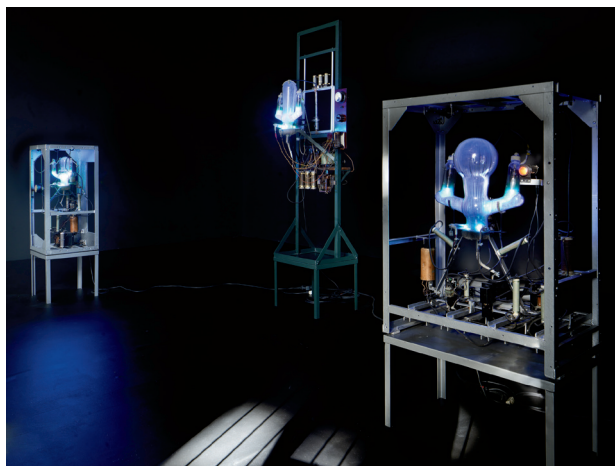
The sculptures of Takis (born Panayiotis Vassilakis) have waned from view over the past 20 years. Now, simultaneous exhibitions—a compact one at the Menil Collection in Houston and a comprehensive one at the cavernous Palais de Tokyo in Paris—offer welcome overviews of his work.

Takis was born into a large, poor family in Greece in 1925. At only 20, he was sent to prison for six months for his involvement in the youth wing of the leftist resistance. The year 1954 was pivotal: Takis learned to forge and weld iron, a working process that allowed him to move his sculpture away from a derivative figuration, and he moved to Paris, as little intellectual life survived the brutal German occupation of Greece and the economically devastating civil war. There he quickly encountered Yves Klein and the other artists who became known as the Nouveaux Réalistes. Soon after, he met Gregory Corso and through him befriended expatriate American Beats, whose radical social views and passion for talking and performing meshed with Takis's own. In 1969 he tried to physically remove one of his sculptures from a group show at MoMA in New York to protest a number of the museum's policies. His action precipitated the founding of the Art Workers' Coalition. Though peripatetic, he has always remained connected to Greece, and now lives there.

Among the earliest works Takis exhibited, in a 1955 London show, were modestly scaled sculptures of odds and ends attached to the top of reedlike rods, which he called "Signals." Returning from London, he had a long, unplanned wait at the Calais train station, where the appearance of signal poles in their variety and profusion struck him; over the next five decades he constructed scores of much taller "Signals" by welding objects, or sometimes electric lights, to the upper ends of steel poles sprouting from low steel bases. Twenty-eight of these, dated 1955-76, are on view together at the Palais de Tokyo. Most bases anchor two or three stems, which often list slightly. Takis even mounted fireworks atop a couple such pieces and used them in adventuresome street performances. The tallest *Signal* in the Paris show reaches 15 feet high, and eight are surmounted by randomly blinking lights. The ensemble forms a grove of indecipherable signs.

Magnets, both ordinary and electric, figure in many of Takis's pieces, starting in 1958. He called magnetic force a fourth dimension, offering a metaphysical rationale for inventiveness. In the simplest works here, magnets are placed behind bright monochromatic canvases hung on the wall. Five small sheet-metal cones, tethered by fine threads to a high ceiling beam, hover in space just in front of each painting's surface, wittily embodying Zeno's arrow paradox. In his kinetic *Électromagnétique* (1966), a black fiberglass sphere, 45 inches in diameter, is suspended above a strong electromagnet. When the magnet is activated it repels the sphere, which hypnotically bobs, jerks and swings around the magnet in a stately, unpredictable dance.

Takis combined magnetism and cathodes in his brilliant "Télé-



View of the exhibition "Takis: Magnetic Fields," 2015, showing three works from the series "Télé lumières," all 1963; at the Palais de Tokyo.

lumières," begun in 1961. In each of the three shown in Paris, he surrounded a blown lab-glass vessel—resembling in shape a dwarf saguaro cactus and containing electrical components and liquid mercury—with the menacing high-voltage parts powering it, setting the ensemble in an open, cabinet-size steel frame. The vessels emit an uncanny blue light when the works are turned on and the mercury darts about like crazed, Jell-O-ish pinballs. Idols of the electric age, powerfully animate, these pieces radiate energy. Yet only two of them were working when we visited the show, raising the confounding but familiar question: who will succor obsolete technologies?

Many of Takis's works are modular, and thus adaptable to differing spaces. At the Palais de Tokyo, two six-part works, dated 1970-2002, from the "Musicales" series are combined. Twelve white panels are placed at regular intervals on a 90-foot-long, curved, black wall. Each 101-by-40-inch panel has a taut guitar or violin string running obliquely across its width and a roughly foot-long needle hanging vertically in front of the string. An electromagnet set within the panel attracts the needle, which strikes or grates on the string, whose vibrations are caught, amplified and then emitted by a hidden speaker near the panel's top. Each panel produces a different sound depending on the type and tuning of the string, the position and weight of the needle, the strength and duration of the magnetic force, and the volume setting of the amplifier. The elegant and spare installation produces an aleatory and unbroken sound field.

Today many artists, dealers and collectors take production values for granted. This show reminds us that before the '80s, modernist artists rarely sought a vacuous perfection. Takis's rough craftsmanship empowered him to create daring and unexpected sculptures. But he's an artist sometimes susceptible to his own passionate confidence. The show includes two very eccentric life-cast bronze sculptures from his mid-'70s series "Érotiques." In *St. Sebastian* (1974) the bizarre ithyphallic nude, headless and with truncated limbs, sits atop a black sphere; three magnetically attracted "arrows" threaten his torso. But even in such jaw-dropping works, Takis jubilates, and that's a fourth dimension few can resist.

—Wade Saunders and Anne Rochette