The world according to Tinguely
Denis Kessler

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Jean Tinguely's machines are well-known in the art world. They are complex mobiles in which an element
is set into motion through a series of actions and reactions that have an impact on many parts connected
by a variety of different mechanisms. The work is in motion, but the means which contribute to this motion
are strange, unexpected and obscure. Cogs, rods, springs, balance wheels, weights and counterweights,
belts and pistons; a range of different parts all come together, bizarrely, to drive the machine. Tinguely's
sculpture *Méta Maxi-Maxi Utopia* is a perfect example of his art. In his fountains, water suddenly gushes
forth without us knowing where from and which strange path it took.

Deepening globalisation means that the whole world has become like one of Tinguely's machines. The
interconnection of all markets, all products and all capitals has generated unexpected effects. Interactions
produce knock-on effects that can support themselves, cushion each other and disappear, or conversely
gather in pace and become explosive. These interactions are becoming increasingly numerous and
different. The construction of globalisation leads to instability, volatility and imbalance, as any shock to
supply or demand will spread across the planet. Yet the way in which each effect spreads is in part
random, stochastic, and therefore unpredictable. The same reasons do not necessarily cause the same
effects. A shock on a raw materials market may lead to monetary fluctuations, which in turn spark off
capital movements, causing changes to interest rates, etc. This was true at the scale of a country, but now
the increased number of countries interconnected by economic and financial relationships will increase the
knock-on effects, making the movement perpetual. Most observers consider the effects of these
fluctuations to be pernicious and unwelcome as most cannot foresee them despite them being an integral
part of any open and interconnected market system. All sorts of economic and monetary policy measures
are taken to fight or eradicate these effects but because they are rarely coordinated efforts they can
themselves fuel or even worsen the instability they were supposed to curb.

Natural catastrophes affecting a country are among the shocks that set the global machine into motion.
Their initial consequences are known to all. Yet they may lead to a variety of indirect repercussions when
they are combined with other variables of the global economy. Therefore, the drought and fires that hit
agriculture in Russia and the Ukraine last summer led to their governments placing quotas on grain
exports. This led to a rise in grain prices of more than 60% from July to December 2010 on the world
market. Wheat-importing countries, including many North African countries, suffered from these changes
directly. The spike in the market price caused this basic foodstuff to rise dramatically in price. At the same
time, the prices of other foodstuffs, oil and sugar in particular, also rose by 60%. The reaction of those
who have been hit hard by the increased prices of these basic foodstuffs is understandable. In addition, the catastrophic floods in Pakistan led to an increase in cotton prices on the global market of more than 75% over the same period. Energy prices also soared at the end of last year. A natural crisis can lead to an imbalance on a product’s market and may affect countries differently depending on whether they depend on imports, ending in social tensions and political unrest…

Let us not over-simplify this mechanism. Tinguely’s machines show us that there is no immediate causality. Nothing is linear, unequivocal or direct. Naturally, there are small and large cogs in the machine, but some are seized up while other unobservable ones work very efficiently. It is often this partly random combination of a series of factors that starts major movements. Potential synchronisation, phasing, many changes play a key role in rising tensions and crisis outbreaks. The relationships between nature, the economy and society will remain alchemical whether we like it or not. One of Tinguely’s fountains which puts too much water in one place, leading to floods, and not enough elsewhere, leading to drought, will set into motion another of Tinguely’s machines that can create wealth here and despair elsewhere.