

## ***Morale Construite*, par Philippe Dagen**

Catalogue Alain Kirili, Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint Etienne, 1992

"A preface to Alain Kirili? " What a strange idea ... He doesn't need one!

-No need? What do you mean by that?

-Not the slightest need, I assure you. Is it not typical of solid works that they should easily do without comment and gloss? Nudity and silence suit them to perfection. And remember, if you please, that nudity is not a word I use lightly since it is the title given to several sculptures.

-It is quite true ... But the accepted custom ...

-Custom seems a paltry argument - paltry and uncalled-for. Look at these terra cottas, these plasters, these marbles, these pink stones, and concede that it would be an offense to try and subjugate them to common custom, as they stray from ail habit -and do so unostentatiously, without deliberate provocation, but naturally, because it is impossible for them to do otherwise. Because they must do so. Plaster is usually immaculately white? Kirili sets it off with pastels and charcoal. Terracotta has its rules - should it be hollowed out and thinned? Through a process he experimented with, Kirili knows how to bake masses of abnormal volume and weight. Marble has fallen out of favor with the so-called modern sculpture; it is reserved for official monuments and for palace facades? Kirili ignores it. Indifferent to interdicts, he takes hold of this material which has become suspect, and creates remarkable effects from it. Stone hasn't been carved for decades ? He would go to a quarry and tear red hematite steles from it... Indeed these works cleared of ail conventions, of praticians conventions as well as those -all the more formidable- of theoreticians and critics, definitely do not need to be defended.

-In modern art, though, it is standard practice to preface ...

-I see ... In modern art you said. May I venture to remind you of what Gautier once wrote, about having no knowledge of any feature articles concerning Andrea del Sarto, and that no paper had accounted for Michelangelo's progress? Both, he went on, have nonetheless completed their masterpieces, without the support of any press, without granting an interview, without posing for magazines.

-But Gautier himself, wasn't he an art critic, and one of the most prolix and influential?

- I shall grant you that. Note though that he was principally a poet and a writer and that his critical articles were based on a general esthetic. The opposite has prevailed over the last decades -discord, indifference of arts to other arts. Painters, sculptors and writers hardly talk to one another, hardly know each other. Do they understand each other? Not in the least. Alain Kirili is an exception to the rule – how many others are there now?

-Do make yourself clear.

-Baudelaire and Delacroix thoroughly knew what reunited them, as did Zola and Manet, Huysmans and Degas or Apollinaire and Picasso. It is a different matter today. Would you like an example of this division? Here we are then: it seems alarming to me that art should surrender its voice to professional glossators, to analysts of processes, to specialists in details, nearly ail of them incapable of being somewhat open-minded. They don't dare to appeal to esthetics, nor to coldly, confess their tastes.

-But these details are fascinating.

-Fascinating and fairly pointless. Take a look at Kirili: you must have conversed with him several times. Do you remember him explaining in detail the techniques he perfected and altered? Did he inform you about the density and origin of the clays he kneads and martyrizes? Has he related in detail to you the types of aluminum that he made explode, the temperature it required, how he corrodes iron, how he heats it, for how long? Never, I presume?

-I must admit... Hardly ...

-You have visited his studios in New York, Paris, Nice... That is enough to know he is satisfied with a kitchen knife and a piece of wood when he models and cuts the damp clay. That is enough for him. Why? Because what is essential to his art owes nothing to his tools, nor to his materials, however careful he may be, though, in choosing them in conformity with his purpose. He simply does not talk about it, or does so somewhat reluctantly, vaguely, as he would for minor subjects.

I suspect that his reticence is thought-out, and I rate him more highly because of it. For he has seen too many of his colleagues committed to a less diversified art, retreat into a process -into the meticulous description and promotion of it to the extreme of an intangible principle- Kirili realized what trap he had to avoid, that of lowering himself from the rank of a sculptor to that of a mere pratician. Most of today's sculptors are precisely mere skilled praticians -the first one excels in welding, the second works wonders with floated wood, the third in twisted ropes and ail are content with their petty speciality. As if this were enough to be considered art!

-Judging from what you say, there would hardly be any artists!

-Complete artists? Not so many, indeed! Do tell me why should the y stand in greater numbers? Why, thanks to what wonder, should our era be richer than the preceeding ones, why should the public be more educated, the critics more discerning? Should the opportunity arise, be curious enough to skim through a booklet of last century's Salons. There were hundreds of painters, dozens of water-colorists, sculptors in close order, and as many engravers. Exhibition rooms were not sufficient; paintings were hung in staircases, marbles put aside in entrance- halls, etchings exiled to gloomy corridors. And among these, how many artists still remain? Half a dozen painters per Salon, two or three sculptors at the most. As for others, art sociologists, auctioneers short of goods and curators are about the only ones who still care about them. As I hardly believe in the progress of the human mind, I am inclined to think that in France there are no more talented men than there were one hundred or one hundred and fifty years ago. Fortunately, for you and for me, Alain Kirili is one of them. That's all. There is nothing left to say.

-That's all ! Just imagine such a preface! Two single lines! Is that all?

-Two single lines, indeed. They could be sufficient. What is a preface? A personal declaration of esteem or else mere chattering. Supposing the prefacer considers the artist he wishes to present as one of the best of his time, he has no need to hum and haw -he must proclaim it. I am always struck with astonishment and suspicion when I read the prose of catalogues in which the author develops -a propos of a painter- obscure reflections, half-philosophical, half-historical. This is not his duty. If he has agreed to write something, he must feel inclined to do so. If not, it is only a mercenariness of texts, occasional and complacent writings -mere trifles, in short. As for me, I can only consider as introductory prose that which declares the most coldly, without false pretences nor delay: "It is true, I like the works that you are invited to observe. I consider them way above the majority of those that are usually presented. I am right. And if I am mistaken, at least I am honest." It would be cowardly to proceed any other way in order to avoid the risk of being judged, to carefully handle everyone and to please the public.

-Terrible man, think for once ...

-I only want to think about the proof of what I put forward. Have you read the preface that Apollinaire

once wrote for Georges Braque? An admirable text and how stunning. It seems to me it was in 1908, an exhibition at Kahnweiler's, Braque's first; no one had heard of him yet. Do you remember what Apollinaire had had printed? Just this, no more, no less: "*Here is Georges Braque. He leads an admirable life. He passionately strives towards beauty and he achieves it effortlessly, so it seems.*" And he also wrote this which should be learned by heart: "*One should not at ail come here to look for the mysticism of the devout, the psychology of literary hacks, nor the demonstrative knowledge of scholar*". Once in a while I would like to read this sort of aphorism in the newspaper -and such resolute judgments. And if you persist in writing your preface, why not base it on this model? Alain Kirili passionately strives towards beauty and he achieves it effortlessly, so it seems. Wouldn't it be true?

-True, most certainly ... He achieves beauty, indeed. He knows how to arouse it and how to harmoniously develop it. This is beyond all question... However...

-What else?

-This word, "beauty" ... It makes me feel uneasy. Doesn't it seem too old-fashioned?

-Old-fashioned? Yes. Old if you fail to free yourself from the commonplace of the present time which feigns to appreciate only that which is derisory, vulgar and ephemeral. You know how I feel about that. We are living under the law of an official academicism which is solidly constructed. It weighs as heavily on the artists as the Pompierisme of the 1880s, it likewise rules over art schools and museums, it is nourished by State purchases, or we may as well say by the decrees of a civil servant class. It has been a fatality for the arts in France ever since the monarchy has claimed to protect them, and the Republics and the Empires after it ... This academicism reigns supreme and, like every academic art -in other words politically inconsequential- it privileges that which is indigent, inexpressive, decorative, everything that cannot threaten civil peace or market law, nor the numbing of brains overwhelmed by empty communication. Thus Duchampism is the ideal instance, that which professes the inanity of original creation, the uselessness of invention, and last of all, the death of art. Such morbidity pleases institutions. This is why it is essential that you write that Kirili's sculptures are beautiful, that they provide pleasure, that they invite us to experience pleasure, and they bear witness to the pleasure of their author. How these works deserve to be labeled erotic and amorous ...

Do you know what we called a blazon in days gone by? A poem which celebrated a woman's charms. A sonnet was devoted to each breast, another for the thighs, for the stomach, the shoulders, the eyes ...

-Well, what about it?

-Well, I want a poet to dedicate blazons to the clays and bronzes which have seduced and captured his eye.

-Poems?

-Baudelaire and Apollinaire did not make use of them, in any other way. And Molière before them. And Mallarmé. They did not think that there was a better way to pay homage to a painting or a statue than by dedicating verse or poetic prose to it.

-But still...

-This admirable practice survived until the sixties. It seems to me, the last to have justly used it were Char and Michaux. For a bronze, a poem is the exact measure and the only way to evoke the sensations that a work arouses -exquisite delight, sometimes even ivresse (ecstasy)... It is the same with Kirili. Moreover, "Ivresse" is one of his titles. When you hold one of his terra cottas in your hand, what do you feel? You feel the weight of a body, do you not? You have the impression that you are tightly hugging a

human body. Immediately your fingers examine it, your palms cup around its curves, your phalanges try to penetrate the cracks and crevices. Your skin feels the grain of the clay-smooth, cracked, sandy, mineral- all the textures, all the nuances of roughness and softness. It is another matter with the iron works, a different kind of sensation -the coldness, the resistance, the cracks, the bulges, the hammer marks. Aluminum alternates between velvetiness and metallicness. As for marble and limestone ...

I shall not say anything about them, it would take too long ... The cracks, the bevelled edges, the sharp fractures, the jagged or smooth edges, the smoothness and the graininess, the scars of the pickaxe and the cut of the saw ... Poems, I tell you, this is what we need. And notice that I did not say anything about visual or olfactory sensations.

-Olfactory? Do you really mean it?

- I mean ... Terracottas smell of warmth, of coal, and sometimes brick -it is enough to conjure up images and reminiscences. Each piece works like the names evoked by Proust, names of towns which release imaginary perfumes ... Iron also has its own scent. Marble smells like quarries and caverns. You are laughing ... What strange incredulity. Haven't you ever smelled a sculpture from Africa or Oceania ? However clean they may appear, even the best ones smell like the hearth or moist earth.

- You are alarming me ...

-As for sight, you will surely grant me that a sculpture is only worthy as long as it is not monotonous. The slightest glance, a turn of the head, and it is different. The most minute change in lighting, and it metamorphoses again. It no longer is the same color, nor has the same volume. The reliefs either burrow deeper or fill themselves up, the empty spaces are filled with shadows or deepened by a ray of light... And so on and so forth, until the infinity of optical sensations, the infinity of suggestions and metaphorical allusions, the infinity of tones and textures, the infinity of clays that change color when they are baked, the grays become white and the reds become pink. To say this, to even speak about part of this, scientific prose is useless, that which ignores all correspondences, that which believes to see, pretends to measure and exhaust appearances, when appearances -like they say- cannot be exhausted.

-Correspondences?

-Yes, naturally. "Correspondences", the Baudelairean word, which some have tried to reduce to a little symbolic game when it stood for something totally different, the unintelligible mechanics of the affects and of the sensations that the presence of a work of art incites.

-One would think that you no longer know what year it is and that Baudelaire has been dead for one hundred and thirty years. What purpose should the "Correspondences" serve for art today?

- What purpose? Simply for this reason which refers to Kirili once again: to me, a work of art is an object which generates correspondences, sensations and ideas. Any object that does not fit this definition, I shall willingly examine it, but only as if it were a symptom, or a theoretical product, a consumer good.

-Is that what you call a principle?

-Yes, I fear so.

-An esthetics?

-Well, yes ... Wasn't I just talking to you about the necessity to dare to speak once again about esthetics, about judgments, preferences, beauty, and taste?

- What irrelevant doctrine ...

-Irrelevant and all the more precious. I confess that I am extremely attached to it.

-At least prove it.

-Certainly. I already told you how little esteem I have for contemporary ways, the historicist turning in on oneself of overly learned quoters, the narcissistic criticism of academic followers of institutionalized Duchampism, the iconoclasm of ignorant people who are spared from every artistic education by the myth of the rupture and who would not know how to tell a Veronese from a Corregio. I consider Alain Kirili as one of the few opposed to this decomposition -one of the few who does not turn amnesia into virtue and who nevertheless does not succumb to the appeals of pastiches. He has seen Rodin and Smith, Clodion and Picasso, and yet does not irritate a one because he has his own personal subjects.

-His subjects?

-Bodily sensations, the vast expanse of space in depth and height, material and its metamorphoses - stories of alternating aggregations and disaggregations, desires and repulsions. And man, his upright position, his movements, his gestures, his stature ... I insist: his subjects. The word displeases you, I imagine, but I do not want to use any other. As for me, I cannot contemplate his sculptures without feeling inside of me their efficiency, without experiencing sensations, which are sometimes contradictory. Without them conjuring up stories inside of my head.

-Stories?

-Naturally. Contrary to almost all contemporary art - I shall tell you the other exceptions some day- in opposition to this elementary and precocious art which is satisfied with a frontal and rapid vision, an automatic Pavlovian recognition of the signature and the quoted value, it takes time to appreciate this statuary.

-To walk around it?

-Not only that. To turn, to follow the variations of light on the reliefs and in the cracks, to get closer to it, to stand back, to hold out one's hand, to feel the weight of it in one's hands if need be, to contemplate in turn the base, the sides, the top, the whole and its parts. While these operations are being carried out, I would greatly be surprised if a tale does not amass inside of you, that you do not rediscover the emotion which gave birth to the work, that you do not uncover confessions and maxims.

-Maxims?

-On the part of the author of the *Commandments*, it is only logical. *Commandments*, have you ever thought about the density of this word, about its nobleness, about the exigence, firmness and concentrated power it suggests? Each one of the *Commandments* calls me to order. It reminds me of the need for reason, of a clear and thought-out conception, of a calculated -as much as is necessary- execution, equally free of expressionism and dogmatism. These are lessons in rigor administered with grace which are projected into space and solidified in iron, clay and marble.

-Lessons!

-Indeed, do you want me to explain it to you in one word that will horrify you? These are lessons in morality. Lessons about honesty and rectitude. About morality, in short. Admit that the case is not very

frequent...

-Morality ...

- I knew you would not understand. Considering the actual state that the arts and society are in today - generalized corruption, dereliction, irresponsibility- your incomprehension is excusable. It is typical of today.

-You are making fun!

-Unfortunately not... Have you read Stendhal? He was known to have written in the History of Italian painting, that "*painting is only constructed morality*". Baudelaire repeated the words with delight. Excuse my using it, I would not know of a more appropriate one. Kirili's sculptures are, indeed, "*constructed morality*".

Translated by Murielle Humbert-Labeaumaz and Kris Knepper