

CONVERSATION WITH **ROBERT T. BUCK**
PUBLISHED AT THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION
AT MALBOROUGH CHELSEA, 2000

TELLEM

ROBERT BUCK: You chose to forge metal and to model clay in the early seventies in a period when fabrication and casting were more usual way to work. Could you discuss why the forging of the metal?

ALAIN KIRILI: Forging is similar to modeling. The activity is gesture-like and calligraphic, or like using a brush. The act of making metal red hot is over quickly. It is an act that has deep rhythm and reveals the inconsistent marks of abstract expressionist painters or sculptors, such as David Smith.

RB: But is a very old craft. It is rather anachronistic to use it in a time when welding and fabrication of sculpture are preferred. Monumentality today can be achieved by the use of every sophisticated technology and computers. Do you feel yourself out of step at all?

AK: I am very aware of my challenge to associate creation with such tradition. The talisman of my activity gives me the confidence to avoid a superficial approach and do something new right away. I am involved in something personal that goes deep into the past activity of humanity regarding clay. Also, to heat and to carve metal attracts me by ancient associations, in particular blacksmithing is still alive as a privileged activity in African tradition and by going to the Dogon villages, I learned from Africa how respected this activity is.

RB: Why did you decide to go now on Mali?

AK: There is a big Malian community in Paris, where I live for half the year. I have a lot of contact with the musicians and artists. In New York, many people speak French today in Harlem. My Senegalese, Ivorian, and Cameroonian friends often meet at each other's activities. Recently, I was very moved when a woman from Senegal selling handbags on Canal Street once stopped me and asked what I was doing in New York, because she heard my wife Ariane and I speaking French. I told her I was a sculptor. She made me this amazing remark: "but you should meet my son, he is a percussionist. He does the same job as you." I was totally stunned. Last May, I saw Sophocles' *Antigone* at Peter Brook's theater, "Les Bouffes du Nord", performed by the Mandéka Theater of Mali, which was founded by the great actor Sotigui Kouyaté. It was a major event in Paris, something as exceptional as the first time Bob Wilson came to perform. I discovered that the Malians are the

Greeks of today. I invited them to my home to celebrate, they saw my sculpture, and they invited me to visit to introduce me to Mali. Et voilà!

RB: Could you be specific about what you saw in the Dogon village? Did their art concern you as well as their way of life today?

AK: I acquired my first Dogon sculpture almost thirty years ago. It was a granary door. The repetition of the motif presented had a resonance with the repetitive aesthetic of my own work. I researched some into their ancestors from the eleventh century, the Tellem, who lived before them on the site of Bamako. Their statues with their raised hands, with surfaces covered by sacrificial materials, let a “string of light” appear between their arms like I did myself in the way I bend a bar of iron: the vertical monolith where I bend the metal but do not allow either part to touch. There is a slight separation that lets light appear through the monolith. It creates a spiritual feeling that is related to the spiritual dimension of the Tellem and the Dogon. For me, it is as if my culture combines with theirs in this instance, as if the gothic and the Tellem meet.

RB: But by going there, I am sure you have been exposed to great experience?

AK: Yes and foremost because the Dogon are well and alive with great pride in their traditions and creativity. And your question is important because in the Western world, we are not well enough aware that they are still creating today. Artists such as the sculptor Dolo, or other Malians artists such as Abdoulaye Konate in painting and Malik Sidibe in photography do outstanding work. It is important to understand that Dogon, Bambara, and Senufo are not archaeological history but lively communities from which we can learn crucial aspects of creativity and ways of life. That’s why I proposed to place a Dolo sculpture in the Tuileries Garden in Paris. It will be the first large, outdoor sculpture by a living Dogon artist in Paris.

RB: Alain, could you elaborate more on your aesthetic position of cooperative interaction? What do you mean?

AK: Bob, you have been quite often to my studio to listen to musicians play in dialogue with my sculptures. I did not do a performance, neither a concert. But an act of communion: the relation between Morton Feldman and Mark Rothko is a good example. But most of all, the animated side of society in Africa and in particular that in Mali teaches me how music, dance, story telling, poetry, mask making, and sculpture are never separated out as in our Western world. In fact, a blacksmith is also a carver of masks, a musician is also a sculptor, a dancer is a tailor, etc. The interaction of activities is not a performance but a deep way of life with spiritual union, a cosmogony – Dogon did meet North American tribes in a sense because they share the same problems. As I do my sculpture, my close relationships to some artists, musicians, dancers, etc. should be understood in a

spiritual perspective. The way the American baritone, Thomas Buckner, uses his body to relate to his own personal sound and the freedom of movement he employs has an evocation to me of the animist ceremony. I have the same feeling with the accomplished Afro-American saxophonist, Joseph Jarman, when he crawls on his back on the floor playing his instruments between the element of my sculpture, *Commandment*, which was performed March 1999 at the Musée de Grenoble, France during my exhibition there. To me it is the ultimate union of sound, rhythm and form. In Mali, all of that is very alive today. It is a scandal that collectors in the West could spend millions of dollars on tribal art and still not consider acquiring the great contemporary artists of Mali. There is no exposure besides a few shows which happen occasionally in major galleries in New York. I continue to learn and I am always more stimulated by Africa. I always want to return and continue this direct dialogue with the Malians.

RB: Now about the sculpture *White Fire* and *The Letters* that you will show at the gallery. What guides this new impulse in your vocabulary with the deep cut drawing on the surface of the metal?

AK: The obviously recall the use of scarifications which signifying attributes, personal identifications on the African body. But you find those on Songhais masks which I have collected for many years, along with photos and painted bodies from Africans and Indians. It gives a deeper singularity to each sculpture, a rich complexity. I mark, wound, and burn the clean factory-made surfaces of the bar with a torch. Those pieces need a lot of space around them allowing to appear in solemnity. Visitors should be able to circulate around those totemic verticals. Those pieces represent a breakthrough for me: the vertical rhythm with those deep cut lines add something which stays a mystery for myself but satisfies me enormously. I don't pretend to be able to explain all I do. That's why for this show I need a griot, a storyteller from Mali like Sotigui Kouyaté. He will come into the gallery and in the Bambara language, contribute to reveal something synaesthetic with his customs and its trademarks. I think that will be significant. It is better than a theoretical explanation.

RB: Can you comment about the sparseness of the installation ?

AK: I could saturate the spaces like a "forest" of Giacometti or favor a space spiritual environment like Barnett Newman. I am an heir to both in many ways: celebration of verticality, of an abstract verticality, connecting with works like Newman's *Here I*, *Here II*, *Here III*. The isolation of the sculpture creates a meditative immensity without sculpture being abusively monumental itself. The installation of Barnett Newman at Betty Parsons Gallery with *Here I* and with the painting *The Wild* have that powerful impact through simplicity or juxtaposition. I like to maximize spiritual effect with as little material means as possible: in search of the essence of sculpture. I always love looking at the installation by Franz Mayer at

Basel Kunstmuseum of *The Foot* by Giacometti at the end of a very long corridor and opposite to the stainless steel sculpture Newman's *Here III*. The power of the sculpture is in intimate relation with the amplitude of the space. The magnitude of my installation depends on the willingness to do such a sparse installation.
