

Essay by Paul Audi  
 Published at the occasion of the exhibition  
 Alain Kirili,  
 New York Studio School, 2004.

## *In the name of creation*

### Paul Audi

Clifford Still liked to label his works "Untitled". Barnett Newman and David Smith, different though they were from one another, shared the fact that they did not. Alain Kirili belongs to the latter school. Up till now, he has given his sculptures titles that are strong and dazzling, eloquent. "Messenger," "Adam," "Commandment," "Black Fire," "White Fire," "Stare," "Times of Prayers," "Generations," "Cortege," "Clinamen," "Canticle of Mountings," "Sonority," "Nuptials," "Spirit of Mingus," "Nudity," "King," "The Wave," "Gunpowder," "Transfiguration," "Aleph," "Calvary," "Celebration," "Partition," "Mediterranean," "Improvisation," "Laws," "Oratorio," "Segou," "Solo," "Sound of Sculpture," "Fa Presto": These are only a few of his magnificent titles.

Titles reveal the Presence that is the work, though without recourse to symbolism. Thus a title tends not to represent what the work is, but to "presentify" it in its Presence (to make it present, that is) and to reveal it as it will appear after it has been "subjectivised", as Kirili calls it. The title of his most famous series of sculptures, "Commandment" is a case in point., insofar as it reveals a quality that pervades not only his work, but surely Modern Art itself. To quote a maxim of Mark Rothko that could serve as a "theorem of modernity": A painting is not the image of an experience, it is the experience itself." [1] One could say just as well that a work is not a representation, but a Presence. Better still, it is an act. Which is to say, in essence, that it is far less signifying than signified.

In the same way, a Kirili title doesn't designate what a work is supposed to represent, as an image of an experience. Rather, it is the experience itself and, as such, the experience in its entirety, but one that we cease to take into consideration as soon as we see the work as a material object and not as an act of subjectivity. What the title indicates is not the work itself, as material endowed with form ; nor is it the meaning that certain people believe they can or must attribute to it. Rather it is that deep-rooted source, that fundamental experience on which the work's creation is based and which is always tied to life, vitality, corporeality, to that incarnated and sexualized individuality that is the artist, who invents himself by creating. In a word, if the work has a name, that name essentially attempts to suggest its connection to reality through the motion or

motivation or mobilization, through the unconscious, corporeal, propelling, affective, fantastical dynamism, that will engender the work so that it can offer itself up to the esthetic enjoyment of anyone who takes pleasure in contemplating and touching it...

If, as I indicated, the title refers not to the fact that a work "represents" something formally, but to the fact that a work "presents" itself as experience intensified in the very act of creation, then the spiritual element, the "spirit" in which this experience takes place, should be signified by the title with as much force and aptness as possible. Thus "Spirit of Mingus," expresses the spiritual state that presided at the creation of the work.

Thus "Segou" names the spirit of the place where the sculpture was conceived....But the title can also designate the main inspiration for the work. For instance : "Prastinas" alludes to the frontality of the Cycladic statue that Kirili chooses to salute, and by this salutation, to rescue from its remote antiquity. All the same, it often happens that this inspirational source is not at all present in the sculptor's mind at the moment of creation. Only after the fact, as he contemplates the finished work, can he recognise and identify it for what it is, with as absolute a certainty as if he'd been conscious of it while sculpting.

And so it is with his sculpture "Commandment" , comprising multiple wrought iron elements that appear as so many indecipherable letters rising three dimensionally from the ground to a height that is rarely in excess of 40 cms. The title has nothing to do with any "Law" that might be made visible or tangible through the sculptor's experienced touch. Rather it refers to the fact-as Kirili himself has stated very well-that when Moses smashed the Tablets of the Law, "the letters flew away, as befitted their eternal powers and their indistructibility." [2] Which is to say that the title "Commandment" refers to the escape or dispersion of the letters, with all they bear witness to. It refers to that fertile dissemination, with all the force and creative energy it contains for the future. But it does not refer to the biblical commandment itself.

In a way, Kirili seems to be saying that the important thing for him as an artist, the important thing for art, is the "spiritual context" engendered by the breaking of the Tablets of the Law, and not the axiomatic content engraved upon them. Thus, the most important thing as regards artistic creation is the revealing of an infinite number of possibilities that can be set in motion, the safe-guarding of creation's inexhaustible potential. This is shown in the single letter Aleph (from which Kirili derives the title of one of his sculptures) and not in the totality of the combinations of Hebrew letters that are in essence objectified. That would seem to be the point of a passage from Gershom Scholem's discussion of the Kabala, as quoted by Edmund White in a text devoted to the Commandments: "One could say that the Aleph is the mark of the entirety of its articulation, or at least the Kabbalists have always

believed that it was the spiritual root of all the other letters and that it included within itself the entire alphabet and thus all other elements of human discourse." [3]

And so it is with all the other titles : "Inebriation," "Marriage," "Gun Powder," and so on. Their point, in effect, is not to treat the work as a representation of an experience that stands before or behind or above the work. They express nothing in relation to creativity, even as they differ from that creativity by being its results. In fact, their meanings aspire to subvert the supposed "representativity" or "antropomorphism" of the work (to the extent that it leaves itself open to such things.) In other words, properly understood, they impede that mimetic character that one always risks attaching to the form of a work of art, thus cristallizing it.

And so, contrary to the words of Gospel, Kirili uses the letter of the title to give life to the work of art. Otherwise it would be nothing more than a matter of form and material or a combination of the two. Thus, by rejoining the work of art to that creative, affective and dynamic experience that engenders it and remains constantly relevant, the title allows the "marriage" of spirit and flesh. As Kirili perfectly expresses it in a commentary on Barnett Newman's "Here one, white sculpture": "The title Here translates the artist's force of decision into an insistence upon place : which serves to subjectivise the sculpture.." [4]

"To subjectivise the sculpture": there you have, in three words, the heart of the matter, the site and formula, the primordial stakes, of the act of Nomination. For this act makes possible the function-primitive, almost magical and animist, superbly incantatory and deeply moving-of invoking Presence before that capture-or Captation-that is made possible by the objectivizing machinery of representation.

Paul Audi is a writer and a philosopher based in Paris. He is the author of a dozen works devoted, for the most part, to the encounter between ethics and aesthetics in European culture.

translated from the French by James Gardner

[1] quoted by David Anfam, **Abstract Expressionism**, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, p. 22

[2] A. Kirili, **Statuaire**, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 32.

[3] Cf. Edmund White, « Les Commandements : les fontes mystiques d'Alain Kirili », trad. B. Hoepffner, in Catalogue **Alain Kirili** (exposition du 31 janvier au 5 avril 1999 au Musée de Grenoble), Paris, Ré-union des Musées Nationaux, 1999, p. 30.

[4] A. Kirili, **Statuaire**, op. cit., p. 129.