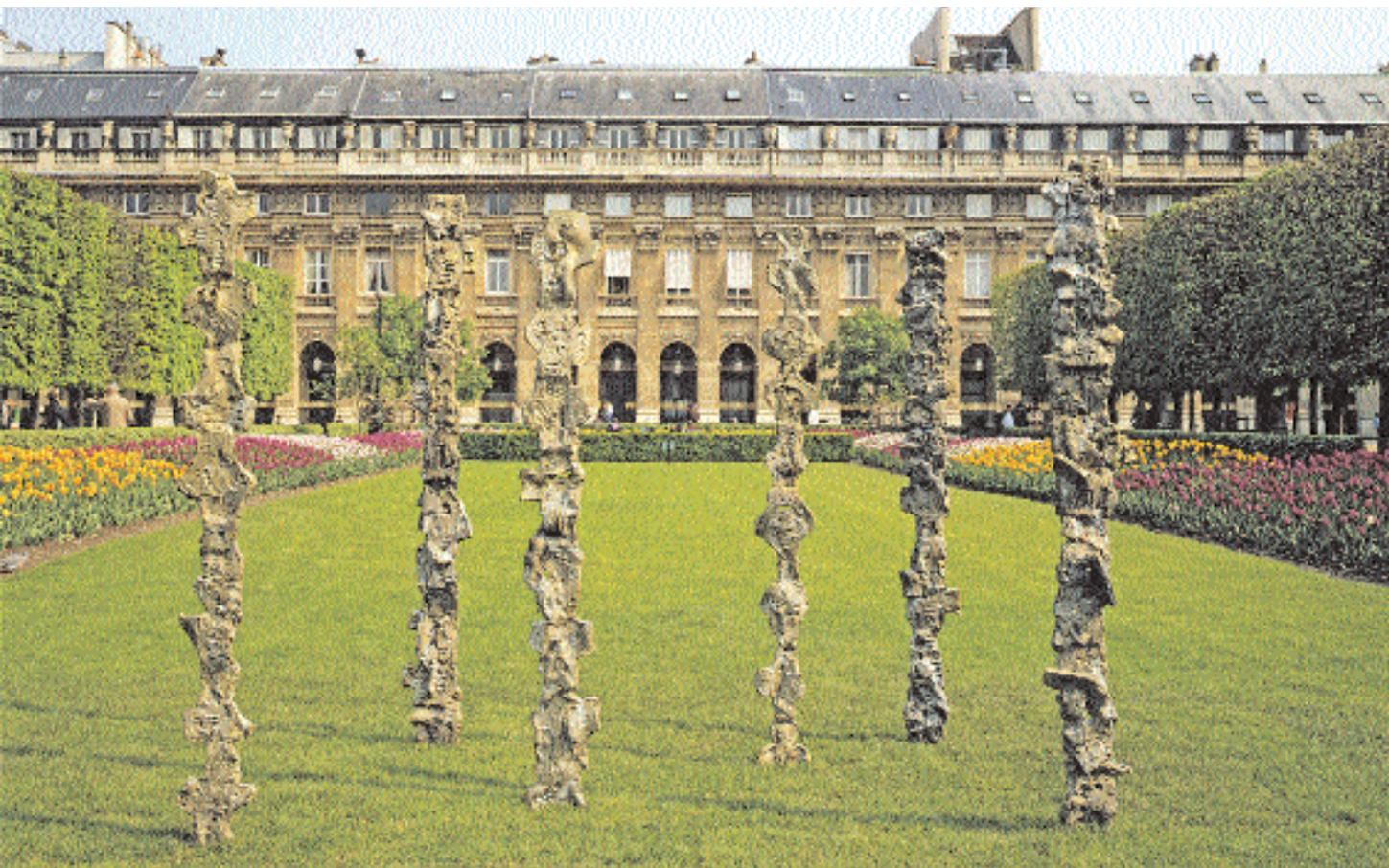




The Sculptural Body

Alain Kirili



BY CARTER RATCLIFF

Artists are urban creatures, especially in youth, and they nearly always choose one metropolis in preference to every other—the grainy immediacies of New York, for example, or the refinements of Paris. Alain Kirili is perhaps the only artist of his generation to belong to the art worlds of both cities. Born in Paris, in 1946, he traveled to the United States for the first time in 1965. The object of his trip was to visit museums in New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, and elsewhere. He showed his sculpture for the first time in 1972, at the Parisian branch of Ileana Sonnabend’s New York gallery. By 1976, he had exhibited at the Clocktower, in Manhattan, and two years later, he had a show at Sonnabend’s SoHo headquarters. As the new decade began, Kirili and his wife, the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, moved into a loft in Tribeca. They did not, however, give up their residence in Paris. For nearly three decades, they have divided their time between the two cities.

Kirili works in bronze, steel, aluminum, and such non-metallic mediums as terra cotta and concrete. From a certain angle, his works look like quasi-alphabetic objects. Examining his work in detail, one often seems to be on the verge of deciphering an encoded message. Nonetheless, it would be an error to bring a cryptographer’s motives to these sculptures. Kirili is not a puzzle-maker. The slightest change of viewpoint gives each work a fresh configuration, thus a new and provisional meaning. There is no riddle to be solved once and for all. Eventually, one sees that meaning originates in the forms’ resistance to any narrow understanding. Kirili is an artist of art’s inexhaustibility.

Even at their most abstract, his sculptures have a strong bodily presence. As Kirili works his materials, his forms acquire skin and musculature, joints and a capacity for gesture. He

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Opposite: *Segou*, 2004. Forged iron.
Above: *Totems*, 2005. Bronze. Two views of exhibition at the Jardin du Palais-Royal, Paris.



Levitation II, 2003. Forged iron, 97 x 55 x 32.5 in.

In 1986, the French cultural ministry, then under the direction of Jack Lang, commissioned Kirili to produce one of his multi-part works—*Grand commandment blanc*, a sprawling yet orderly array of geometric shapes in white-painted steel. A decade later, the work was installed in the Tuileries, the formal garden at the heart of Paris. In his dedicatory remarks, Kirili expressed pleasure at being able to introduce his sculpture into a setting primarily populated by works from earlier centuries. Would it not be a good thing, he asked, if past and present were to meet more often in the Tuileries? Hearing these words, the current Minister of Culture, Philippe Douste-Blazy, suggested that Kirili oversee the placement of 20th-century sculpture in the Tuileries. He accepted the challenge, and over the years, he has installed a number of large works on various prominent sites—among them a reclining figure by Henry Moore, a towering piece by Jean Dubuffet, and a *Large Woman* (1960) by Alberto Giacometti. Clearly, Kirili has not played national favorites, nor has he tried to promote his own aesthetic. Instead, he has enlisted the cultural bureaucracy of France in the project of displacing art from the art world into the shared, public spaces of the city. Kirili is perennially alert to situations that offer the possibility of overcoming traditional differences—in this case, the conflict between popular tastes and the preferences of aesthetic elites.

charges the “linguistic” qualities of his art with a lush and resourceful sensuality. The traditional Western distinction between mind and body is often attacked—and deservedly so—and yet it endures. Mind, we still assume, is the realm of concept, and the body is an inarticulate, merely physical thing. Kirili’s art proposes a fresh

understanding of the body as articulate and the mind as sensual—or, better, of body and mind as indistinguishable aspects of one another. Acknowledging differences only to overcome them, he places art at the center of his life not to isolate it but to give it a relationship with all his other concerns—historical, social, and political.



Uccello IV, 2007. Forged iron, 8 x 5 x 14 ft.

He has an eye, as well, for resemblances of the kind that open onto differences. Everyone can see that Auguste Rodin’s *Balzac* (1892) is a towering emblem of male creativity—the prolific, even promiscuous writer as an overbearing phallus. Kirili is among the few who have seen a female counterpart to Rodin’s monumental portrait in *Nude with a Coat* (1912), a bronze figure by the Franco-American sculptor Gaston Lachaise. Battered and glowering, *Balzac* is, of course, much larger than life-size. Lachaise’s *Nude with Coat* is only 10 and a quarter inches high, and yet this figure, too, has an imposing presence.



A Throw of the Dice will never abolish sculpture, 2006. Painted forged iron, view of installation at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

With a rib cage like the hull of a galleon and earth-mother breasts, Lachaise's broad-shouldered woman displays none of *Balzac's* grand irascibility. She is calm. She is approachable. As Kirili has said, "What Lachaise is telling us is that verticality can incorporate the power of a woman. *Nude with Coat* is an amazing representation of the pride of a woman."¹ In much of Kirili's sculpture, verticality stands for the pride, the sexuality, the very being of the male. Thus resemblance becomes difference: vertical form that counts as male in most instances is female in a sculpture by Lachaise.

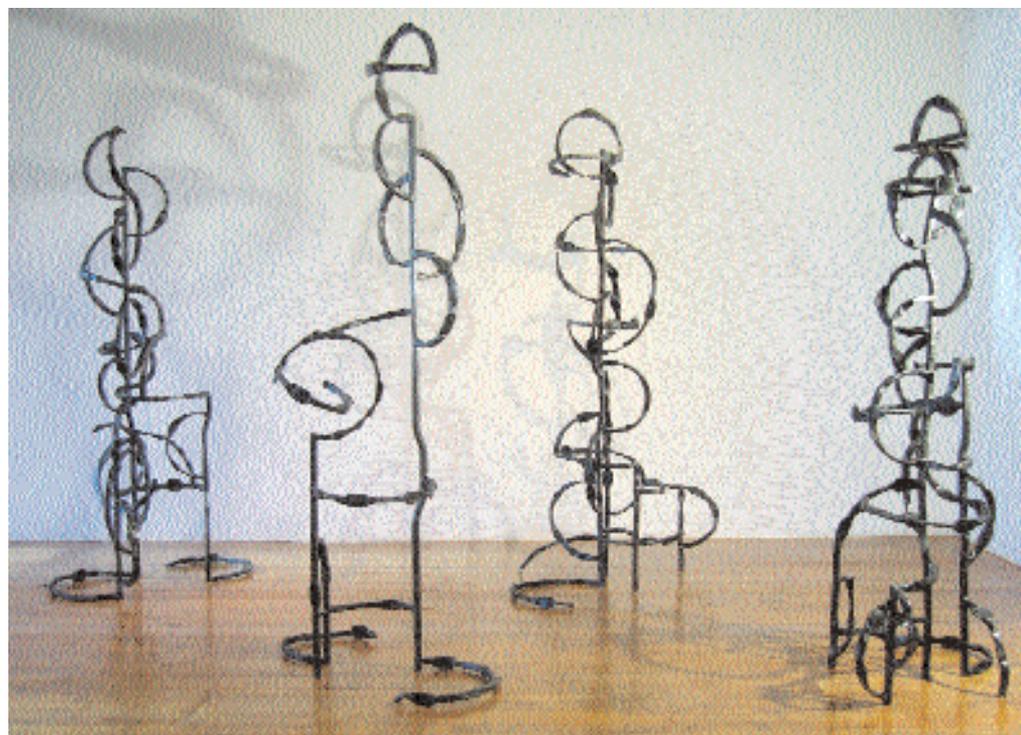
Kirili's comment about *Nude with Coat* appears in the catalogue of a show that he organized last spring at the Salander-O'Reilly Gallery in New York. "Alain Kirili & Gaston Lachaise: Sculptures" included seven bronzes by Lachaise and six forged iron sculptures from Kirili's "Nataraja" series (2006). Nataraja is the name of Shiva, the Hindu god of creation and destruction, in his dancing posture. Each of these sculptures developed from a central rod of iron reaching up from the floor. Slim but firm, this spine is usually straight,

Nataraja, 2006. Forged iron, view of work in Kirili's studio.

though it sometimes displays a subtle undulation. Along its length, other rods curve out and back with a lanky, languid sensuality, visual echoes of Shiva's limbs.

Often, the slender elements of these works bear signs of the forge—flattened spots that occur in irregular, syncopated patterns. There is also a feel of syncopation to the placement of curved forms on central spines. With spare means, Kirili generates complex effects. Yet the materiality of

the "Nataraja" pieces prevents them from drifting into the ethereal realm of sheer form. Kirili's evocation of Shiva is earthly, immediate, and quietly joyous—the god in his creative phase. The sensuality of these sculptures strongly implies sexuality. Implication becomes explicit in several of the works by Lachaise that Kirili included in the show. *Torso* (1935), a work from late in Lachaise's career, centers on a lushly rendered vulva.





Hommage à Charlie Parker, 2007. Burgundy pink stone, 5 elements, 98 x 55 x 51 in. each.

Sexuality is a constant—a generative—theme of Kirili’s art. And generosity is among its abiding qualities. It is not merely that he is disinclined to monopolize his themes. More than that, he is determined to show how they have been shared by generations of artists over the decades and centuries. The Kirili-Lachaise exhibition was preceded, in 2003, by two other collaborations with sculptural predecessors. At the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Kirili presented a selection of 71 drawings by David Smith. And at IVAM Valencia, he organized a show that included his own work and sculpture by Julio González—like Smith, a maestro of welded steel in the Modernist mode. In 2002, Kirili showed his terra-cotta improvisations in the company of *esquisses*—or sketches—by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, the 19th-century author of the grand and lyrical bronze composition that stands atop the fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens, in Paris. Carpeaux “sketched” in terra cotta, with lively, sometimes almost abstract results that prompted Kirili’s ventures into this ancient medium. “Kirili Dialogue with Carpeaux,” an exhibition of nearly 100 works, appeared at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, in Valenciennes.

Kirili’s edition of *Rodin’s Erotic Drawings* was published in 1987. Over the years, he has shown his work twice with Rodin’s (in 1985, at the Musée Rodin, Paris; in 1999, at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco). In 2006, Kirili exhibited a new work, *A Throw of the Dice will never abolish sculpture*, at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, against

the backdrop of Edward Steichen’s photographs of Rodin’s *Balzac*. During World War II, an example of Rodin’s *The Kiss* (1898) was looted by the German occupiers of France. After the war, it became part of a large collection of unclaimed artworks in the possession of the French government. In 1998, Kirili worked with the cultural ministry to have *The Kiss* installed in the Tuileries. The Tuileries, he felt, would benefit from the presence of a major work of art. Furthermore, said Kirili, it was possible that the sculpture’s unknown former owner might come forward. Here, an homage to Rodin became an act of social—and historical—responsibility.

Kirili has no interest in pure art, whatever that might be. Yet he is not political in any dogmatic, easily charted way. He pursues what might be called a politics of sensibility, sustained by the faith that art is integral not only to his own life but to all of our lives. On the occasion of the Kirili-Carpeaux exhibition in Valenciennes, Kirili was asked by Patrick Ramade, the director of the museum, why it was important for him to show his work in the company of Carpeaux’s sculpture. Kirili’s response began with a recollection of the events of 9/11, which had occurred less than a year earlier. He noted that his Manhattan loft is not far from the site of the World Trade Center disaster. As he sees it, that event signifies a fanatical hatred of the body in general and of female sexuality in particular. In the eyes of the terrorists, the United States and all of Western culture are to be condemned first of all for ideals of citizenship that

define women as equal to men and thus free to pursue their sexual, social, and political lives as they see fit. To resist this fanaticism, says Kirili, we must celebrate femininity and those refinements of the senses that enhance our sensuality. In the aftermath of 9/11, he thought of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Valenciennes as a place of “resistance.”

In this institution, he said, “Woman is celebrated, and we are surrounded by the history of the physical body in painting.” Having invoked one of the major paintings in the collection of the Valenciennes museum, Rubens’s *The Descent from the Cross* (c. 1614–15), Kirili turned to a cluster of works by Jacob Jordaens, a contemporary of Rubens. Here, he noted, we see an artist delighting in “daily existence, in conviviality, the pleasures of all the senses, the body at every stage of life. Family, childhood, wine: everything signifying the fullness of life is united in Jordaens’s paintings, as in the art of Rubens. As in the works of Carpeaux.”²

As important as David Smith and Rodin have been to Kirili throughout his career, it may be that his connection with Carpeaux is more immediate. If the former two are father figures, or revered elder brothers, Carpeaux is more like a close friend. The liveliness of the 19th-century sculptor’s terra-cotta sketches prompted Kirili to produce his most lusciously, sensuously intricate forms, the ones in which his impro-

visatory impulses are the most frankly displayed. Fully alive to his own inventive energies, Kirili is free to acknowledge similar—one might say, reciprocal—energies in others. Hence the collaborative exhibitions he has organized in museums and galleries. In his loft and in performance spaces, he presents collaborations of another kind: events in which jazz musicians improvise in response to the Kirili sculptures that share their stage. Over the years, the performers have included such free-form luminaries as Steve Lacey, Cecil Taylor, and Billy Bang.

With these concerts, Kirili makes vivid what we all know but tend to overlook: sculpture is continuous with music, dance, and all the other arts. From this continuity flow others that we might label social and political. Though the boundaries intended to isolate art within the art world are carefully contrived and tended, they are ultimately not effective. No matter how inward our experience of sculpture and painting, music and dance, that experience merges, directly or indirectly, with the currents of our communal life. Thus the public realm benefits from those social, sensual, celebratory qualities that Kirili sees in the paintings of Jordaens and in the works of so many other artists. Or that is what he hopes. An optimist, he nonetheless has a vivid sense of all that militates against art.

Right and below: “Kirili Dialogue with Carpeaux,” 2003. Two views of exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes, France.

So he is unstinting in his efforts to bring art—his own and others’—into the light of our shared lives.

Two weeks after the Kirili-Lachaise exhibition closed in New York, another “dialogue” opened in Paris. Installed at the Orangerie, this show juxtaposed Monet’s *Les Nymphéas* (1914–17) with sculpture and works on paper by Kirili. Monet’s vast, late painting unfurls across the curving walls of two galleries; its composition is “open,” as Kirili puts it, “without beginning or end.”³ In sympathy with the openness of *Les Nymphéas*, its implication of the infinite, he built a variation on his “Commandment” series. Subtitled *Homage to Claude Monet*, it was installed on the banks of a pond near the Orangerie. Made of tinted concrete, its delicate colors shift as they flow through orderly ranks of low-lying geometry. The allusion is to the color flickering on water or drifting through the clouds of morning or sunset or the art of Monet, as well.

In this work, Kirili achieved a certain rapprochement with landscape painting. Even here, of course, he was still the sculptor, still devoted to the shaping of



forms in three dimensions. There is something sculptural even about his drawings. The ones he exhibited at the Orangerie, from the series “African Rhapsody” (2005), record the sort of gesture that in terra cotta or steel would produce an object, not an image. For Kirili, it is not a matter of according sculpture a special privilege. It is a matter of giving free rein to his own energies, desires, and beliefs and allowing the results—his sculptural art—to find an accord with the work of others equally free, whatever the medium in which they work. From that accord, endlessly improvised, come the values and the meanings—above all, the pleasures—that sustain our culture, which is to say: the lives of our embodied selves.



Notes

¹ Alain Kirili, quoted in Paula Rand Hornbostel, “Alain Kirili and Gaston Lachaise: Flesh in Ecstasy,” in *Alain Kirili & Gaston Lachaise: Sculptures*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: Salander-O’Reilly, 2007), p. 8.

² Kirili quoted in “La sculpture, *fa presto*,” a conversation between Alain Kirili and Patrick Ramade in *Kirili Dialogue avec Carpeaux*, exhibition catalogue, (Paris: Somogy éditions d’art, 2002), p. 31.

³ Alain Kirili, interview with Florelle Guillaume, *Magart*, on-line at <www.art-contemporain.com/magart>.

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