

THE EYE OF HITLER

By Robert O. Paxton, april 2010

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Alain Kirili's sculpture installation powerfully recalls a different image of the same spot. At this very place, early on Sunday morning, June 23, 1940, Adolf Hitler, flanked by two companions, stood looking out on conquered Paris. Hitler's photographer Heinrich Hoffmann took a picture of the three men that has become one of the iconic representations of the Nazi era.

This was Hitler's only visit to Paris. France had just accepted his terms for an armistice the day before. Hoffmann's photograph shows Hitler looking at the city with the eye of a conqueror, triumphing in his vengeance over the nation that had defeated Germany in 1918. At this moment Hitler has Paris and France in his power.

Hitler is also looking at Paris with the eye of the artist he claimed to be. He is said to have told Arno Breker, his preferred sculptor, in the spring of 1940, "I will not enter [Paris] with generals. I will enter with

my artists.”¹ And so he did. Standing on Hitler’s right is Breker, a hyper-realist sculptor whose principal theme was the perfect Aryan male body. Standing on Hitler’s left is Albert Speer, the Führer’s favorite architect, devoted to grandiose neo-classical nationalism. Their presence shows that Hitler intended to act as a conqueror in the arts also.

When Hitler stood at this spot in June 1940, he had already begun taking vengeance on the cultural establishment that had rejected him in his youth. He knew that art was essential to a people’s cultural identity, and he intended to shape German art according to his own taste, and make it serve national agendas of chauvinism and conformity. He had already announced his intention to destroy what he called the “decadent art” of the modernist pioneers and non-conformists.

The new cultural order that Hitler envisaged for Paris was a subordinate one. Not that Hitler disregarded the artistic value of Paris – Charles Garnier’s Opera had inspired his youthful dreams of being an

¹ Breker told this story to Jean Cocteau in May 1942. See Cocteau, *Journal 1942-1945*. Texte établi, présenté, et annoté par Jean Touzot (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 128.

architect. But he was tempted in his moment of triumph to destroy the city.

That same evening Hitler said to Speer, “Wasn’t Paris beautiful? But Berlin must be made far more beautiful. In the past, I often considered whether we would not have to destroy Paris. But when we are finished in Berlin, Paris will only be a shadow. So why should we destroy it?” Hitler then ordered Speer to work even more urgently on his plans for rebuilding Berlin in “the style commensurate with the grandeur of our victory.”²

As they worked out Hitler’s project in detail, the Nazi occupation authorities envisioned making France a “Suisse aggrandie,”³ devoted to tourism, light entertainment and fashion. Germany would deal with the weightier aspects of art and science. Above all France should cease claiming any cultural superiority over Germany.

² Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 172-173.

³ Stéphanie Corcy-Debray, *La Vie culturelle sous l’occupation* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), p. 45.

Kirili's installation is called "Geste de Résistance." It resists and effaces the Hitler image with three vertical figures that stand in absolute contrast to the three German victors. Whereas the "verticality" of Hitler, Speer, and Breker in the famous photograph stands for domination, power, and the imposition of a new order, the "verticality" of Kirili's installation is uncoercive, open, receptive, but resistant. His three figures do not impose an order. They invite the viewer's response in a creative exchange. They evoke liberty and dialogue and independence of spirit.

Alain Kirili has chosen to install his sculpture in one of the most-visited places in the city of Paris. On the morning of June 23, 1940, however, it was empty in a strange and sinister way. Film footage made of Hitler's visit shows streets that are empty except for a couple of gendarmes and a hurrying priest. It is early Sunday morning, but this emptiness is more radical. Much of the city's population has fled. Political power has been evacuated with the government to Bordeaux. The city is awaiting its unknown future. Kirili's installation, by contrast, affirms the vitality of this place bustling with tourists, flaneurs, busy Parisians, and a maximum of human interchanges.

The place of Kirili's installation also sets it in dialogue with the Musée de l'homme, situated just to the west in the Passy wing of the Palais de Chaillot. The government of Léon Blum created the Musée de l'homme for the World's Fair of 1937, L'Exposition internationale des arts and techniques dans la vie moderne. During the Exposition, on the Champ de Mars, in the direction of Hitler's later gaze, stood a grandiose German pavillion, designed by Speer, confronting an equally bombastic Soviet pavillion.

The Musée de l'homme, under the direction of Paul Rivet, was beginning to replace an older colonialist ethnography – as represented by the Colonial Exposition of 1931 where “native peoples” were on display – with the gradually emerging view that every culture and every language has the same intrinsic value, that there are no “higher” and “lower” civilizations. Rivet's student Claude Lévi-Strauss was to bring that new consciousness fully into being.

Alain Kirili works spontaneously within this new consciousness, He feels deep kinship with the African artisans and sculptors among whom he worked in Mali and Burkina Faso, with their frank acceptance of sensuality, their feeling for textures and colors, and their skill as

artisans. All of his work resists the domineering nationalism of Hitler's aesthetic. Where Hitler is triumphant and chauvinistic, Kirili is a "rooted cosmopolitan," to employ the term of Anthony Appiah, engaged in free artistic exchange with other peoples without losing his own identity.

The Musée de l'homme relates to Kirili's Geste de Résistance in an even more direct way. In the summer of 1940, the linguist Boris Vildé and other scholars attached to the Musée de l'homme established one of the very first movements of the French Résistance. Working a few meters from this place, in the basement of the Musée de l'homme, they gathered information, arranged for the escape of Allied prisoners and downed pilots, and published a mimeographed journal entitled *Résistance*, whose purpose was to keep hope alive and provide information contrary to the official propaganda of Vichy and the Germans.

Unfortunately an informer infiltrated the Musée de l'homme group. Vildé and his colleagues were arrested in early 1941. Imprisoned at first at La Santé and then at Fresnes, Vildé read voraciously, studied Greek and Sanskrit, and kept a prison diary in which he came to terms with death as an appropriate end to a life in which risk and adventure

had been central; with the gift of his wife's love; and with the possibility of an afterlife.

As he wrote in his final letter to his wife, "Il est beau de mourir complètement sain et lucide, en possession de toutes ses facultés spirituelles. Assurément c'est une fin à ma mesure qui vaut mieux que de tomber à l'improviste sur un champ de bataille ou de partir rongé par une maladie."⁴

Vildé and six of his colleagues were shot by firing squad at the Fort du Mont Valérien, in the Paris suburb of Suresnes, on February 23, 1942. The execution team had installed four stakes for the seven condemned men. Vildé insisted on being shot among the last. Alain Kirili's vertical figures remind me powerfully of these men standing at their stakes, upright and defiant in a final "geste de résistance." Their gaze at the firing squad annihilates utterly the gaze of the transient victor of June 1940.

⁴ Boris Vildé, "Journal et lettres de prison, 1941-1942," *Les Cahiers de l'IHTP*, Cahier No. 7 (février 1988), p. 130.