

Alain Kirili: Sculpture as Living Dialogue

by Ginger Danto



In Paris in the late 1970s, following the publication of his critical text “Julio González: Transparencies, Orifices, Holes” in the French review *ArtPress*, Alain Kirili found himself invited, by way of thanks, to the home of the Catalan sculptor’s heirs on Rue de Rivoli.¹ Then, as now, the elegant avenue bordering the Tuileries harbored a pedestrian arcade, with private residences overlooking an orderly vista of gardens, a strip of the Seine, and, beyond, the horizon of the Left Bank. Here, in the apartment of Carmen Martínez, Kirili encountered a surprising collection of González’s sculptures.

Among the quietly intimate and powerful pieces arrayed in the Martínez home, one in particular riveted Kirili, like a recognition, but of something he had not seen before. It was González’s *Head with Halo* (1932), a small metal sculpture consisting of a flat, chiseled profile suggestive of the veiled Virgin set within a spartan ellipse. The spiritual quality of the relief and the deep themes emanating from its deceptively shallow planes struck Kirili as ingenious and as further evidence of the rich dichotomies already apparent to him in González’s approach: those, for example, between the corporeal and the spiritual, feminine and masculine, shadow and light, variously reconciled by the sculptor’s hand, as well as elegance and silence, as Kirili said recently, standing before *Head*.

Head ranked among the key pieces in the exhibition “Homage to Julio González” curated by Kirili and recently shown at IVAM, the Institut Valencia d’Art Modern. IVAM opened in 1986 as Spain’s first modern art museum, and it currently houses the most complete collection of González’s works. Inviting a living artist to show alongside his work complements IVAM’s mission to stir a contemporary consciousness in this art-rich city of the Costa Blanca. Along the way, it argues for the importance of González in the still unfolding canon of 20th-century sculpture.

The project was the realization of a longtime dream for Kirili, who through a career on two continents (he lives both in his native Paris and in New York) has forged a diverse body of work under the conscious influence of artists he admires. Along with González, these include Rodin, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Monet, Giacometti, Barnett Newman, David Smith, and, increasingly, artists outside the Western canon. While hardly confined to one generation or style, these disparate artists share (in addition to Kirili's passionate endorsement) a deep comprehension of a medium from which they systematically wrested something new. This newness—Rodin's weaning himself from classical norms to convey a rawer emotion in the human body, González's discovery of the unexpectedly graceful properties of iron, the melancholy inherent in Giacometti's figures, and Smith's virtuosity with found parts—enabled each medium to move forward, embrace radical notions, and become part of the sculptural vernacular. Kirili will eagerly remind anyone of such insights and advances on the part of his predecessors, and he has made a secondary career of curating shows in their company in a kind of solitary campaign to stir their variously dusty legacies to life. He calls these exhibitions "dialogues," and they foster a wordless form of communication he describes as "the wonderful vibration of works in the presence of one another."

"Memory cannot be merely virtual: it must be physical and tactile," he says of the typically private relationships artists have with their idols. While many artists keep reproductions in the studio as a personal gallery of references, it is rarer for their work to encounter the objects of its inspiration. This was not always so, argues Kirili. "There is

a deep tradition in the great museums, such as the Louvre, the Prado, of inviting artists to live and work and 'mingle' with the old masters. It is regrettable that in the 20th century, the modern art museum was conceived to the exclusion of all else. It invites an amnesiac vision of art history, to separate art from the rest of the family," he says with some distress, as if speaking of families torn apart by some terrible destiny. As a remedy, Kirili has drawn on his experience and clout to unite art across centuries, in unexpected ways and in varied venues where, as a result, "risks are taken, new reflections are made, and a space of freedom is created that mirrors the birth of art itself."

Few colleagues might better serve Kirili's premise than González, whose works harbor the intrinsic immortality of icons in a church, which for viewer and artist alike hearken back to profound memory. Referring to *Head with undiminished enthusiasm* in the IVAM catalogue, Kirili writes, "Such great intensity with such economy of means. Making a circle and a metal plaque enter a mystic dimension is almost a miracle."² Meanwhile his own work, so eclectic in its use of materials (zinc, iron, terracotta, modeled clay, plaster, and paint), form (from massively land-based to nearly airborne like a kite string), and size (from tabletop miniature to monumental), is often an expression of the sacred.

Kirili's titles—such as *Meditation*, *Levitation*, or *Commandment*, for a signature assemblage of stolid shapes connoting the Hebrew alphabet that he has re-visited over the years, *Symphony of Psalms*, for a burst aluminum triumvirate, or *Ascension*, for a vertical trinity in white resin—establish an exalted association that perhaps seeks to bestow on matter a more transcendent life. "It has always been difficult for me to have people appreciate that my sculptures are not objects," Kirili recently told a gathering at New York's Studio School. "What is sculpture if it is not an object? Yet I think that what I do is a living body. It is not just cerebral or conceptual. It is the result of a direct physical act," he said, referring to his often aerobic gestuary of forging the reaction of matter to motion, of investing instinct and sensation in shaping each work. Kirili's method of direct attack signifies not aggression but an intimate handling of material, without intermediaries. It is his dialogue with the work. "Sculpture," he told the audience of young artists, "is not inert."

Certainly González was of a similar mind, as Kirili confirmed to his delight that afternoon at Carmen Martínez's, in the presence of González's masterpiece *Woman at the Mirror* (1936-37). A linear figure that dominates space through orchestrated parts (illustrating the artist's notion of drawing in space), with spiky protrusions for hair and a geometric head tossed back before a hollow mirror, *Woman* conveys with cubistic grace the airy coquetterie of its self-enamored subject. Touching the sculpture by way of "reading" it in a tactile mode, Kirili found that the upper portion rotated on an internal axis that González could not but have intended.

Kirili sought to share the sculpture's "secret" with exhibition visitors via a brief film showing him turning Woman on itself. In the IVAM text, Woman is said "to express a lightness of spirit which was the ultimate consequence of González's artistic journey, having surmounted the heavy weight of stone, the stubbornness of iron, and the intransigence of bronze." This is a source of both commonality and difference for Kirili, who is fond of mass, weight, and the sheer *pesanteur* of sculptural matter. "González always works in the lightness of materials, in the poetry of lightness," he said; however, for Kirili, "the weight and density of materials achieve lightness through creation." By creation he means the often swift drama of seconds made available by the heat that renders a hard medium supple and that he describes as a deeply sensual moment, unique, finite, and irrevocable. That Woman is a sculpture still inhabited by movement, long after its moment of creation, is an aspect Kirili has assimilated in works such as *Sound of Sculpture* (2000-01), whose oblong metal stems, suspended within frames, deliberately swing under slight pressure. The fact that *Sound* harbors a shared secret with Woman is emblematic of the communion Kirili imagines between illusorily static pieces, fashioned at separate times, in distant lands, but which, united in the gallery, have something to tell one another, as well as an enlightened public. Elsewhere Kirili paired González's *The Lovers II* (1932-33), a compact, forged iron sphere in which positive and negative shapes connote the union of two bodies, with his emphatically vertical *Zahin* (1983), a split, hammered iron sheath sealed at two upper points, like those in which bodies join in coitus. Two visions of the same act, rendered from similar stuff, each enriching the perception of the other and giving the sense of an interpretive vocabulary as limitless as the lot of the individuals represented. Even working in different media, the two artists address the fleeting business of nature, in all its fragile beauty. Examples of González's jewelry-tooled silver stalks of jasmine, chrysanthemum, and other flora—occupy a display case beneath Kirili's sketches, whose monochrome fields of abstract knots connote blossoms. Finally, in almost irreconcilable contrast, interpretations of the feminine theme vital to both sculptors—delicate figures by González versus Kirili's abstract vessels—reveal two visions of one essential, eternal mystery.

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Kirili has pursued his calling largely on his own. His classrooms were the great museums of France and the U.S., studios where live discussion eclipsed the staid delivery of textbooks, and miscellaneous encounters with art. For this reason, his work is not derivative or beholden to one school that has shaped him, one movement whose context he might not reasonably escape. Thus, where Kirili's work appears Minimalist, it actually is ideologically closer, albeit in finely coded terms, to the most florid exuberance of the 19th century.

By the time he had his first solo show at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris in 1972, Kirili had embarked on his investigation into a score of materials, along with intellectual notions of space and the priapic impulse of sculpture, not unlike a kind of unleashed architecture, to invade it. Spare, cryptic yet forceful, the pieces in this seminal show betrayed an energy stirred by Kirili's experience of America and a defining encounter with the work of David Smith. Kirili uses the word *bouleversé*, which in French means "bowed over," to describe seeing Smith's work for the first time, in 1965, in the exhibition "United States: Sculpture of the 20th Century," which MoMA organized at the Rodin Museum in Paris. The affinity he felt with this foreign sculptor whose career and culture were alien to him, suggested a vibrant artistic life beyond France's borders, which Kirili was meant to seek.

Kirili's hunch landed him in the midst a now mythic moment in downtown New York, when artists such as de Kooning, Pollock, and Rauschenberg, in addition to their counterparts in avant-garde dance and music, were together kindling an epoch in 20th-century art. In embracing this body

of work, Kirili became part of a cross-cultural current between France and America, as locals stultified by a puritan climate sought foreign shores, and the French came to see what New York was about. Even without Smith, who perished in an automobile accident shortly before his arrival, Kirili found in the local ferment a sensibility in keeping with his own fierce energy, optimism, and conviviality.

"When I began to live in New York I understood it as a city that is intense, industrious; that America's New York was the cradle of art because it was much more violent, cerebral," he says, searching for adjectives to de-

describe his keen early impressions. In contrast, “Paris is a city that is very feminine, very delicate. Paris is the bed where the Gothic smile of the Virgin was born. The energies are very different. It is very important when one has the great chance to know both.”

After that initial journey, Kirili, along with his wife, the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, made his home in a TriBeCa loft, finding sites in nearby New Jersey where he could undertake forging. His work reflected themes of existentialism, reconciliation, alienation, and salvation, as well as sexuality and the momentary complacency that comes from satisfied sexuality. Titles such as *Birth*, *Longevity*, and *Summation* were ascribed to totemic forms, at once substantive and lean, leveled or pinched on top in a move that Kirili says is intended to direct attention to the summit. Always there is an inherent force, of something ceremoniously contained, not by fear but by some nobility of what it is to be human and male, and beholden to higher ideals of being. Such works answered the raw, yet profound civility of Smith’s work.

The intensely affable Kirili is not the heir one imagines to the reclusive Smith, whose oeuvre, Kirili wrote, “incarnates the great question of the rapport between tradition and identity.” Both favor obsolete technique and drawing lines across unexpected boundaries of language, culture, and materials. But unlike Smith, who littered his rural estate with future museum pieces, Kirili works in the sophisticated context of the transatlantic art world. He works in the here and now, with a stage, some fellow artists, and possibly a few sympathetic spectators, in mind. Acknowledging Smith within his gregarious vision, he orchestrated “*Drawings by David Smith: A Selection by Alain Kirili*” this past spring at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. According to Kirili, “It was the just return to show, after the influence of European art on American artists, the influence of American art on French artists like myself.” And, as Robert Storr’s catalogue essay noted, this was “the first in-depth exhibition of Smith’s work in any media to take place in a public institution in France.”³ Tradition and modernity are constantly confronted in France, often for economic imperative, as former chateaux and convents are converted into contemporary art spaces. Kirili doubtless considered the *Chapelle des Petits Augustins*, replete with religious masterpieces, an ideal context for the 71 drawings (1951-64) culled from Smith’s estate at Bolton Landing, New York. Indeed

a spiritual dimension emerges from works displayed in cases like González’s jewelry, in the position they were conceived, as Candida Smith explains in the catalogue: “My father was a large, heavily muscled man, though capable of great delicacy of movement. When he drew he would stand coiled over an ancient refectory table, leaning on one forearm, making gentle flowing movements with his wrist and brush, like a quiet violinist.” Some resemble calligraphy, some drafts of sculpture (notably Smith’s “Cubi” series), while others reflect the joy of an alternative medium, such as spray paint. “In drawing, weight and mass became metaphoric—a relief from the physics of wrangling metal for sculpture,” Candida Smith wrote: an idea that Kirili, whose studio is full of sketches, found close to his heart. Still closer to Kirili’s sensibility, in subject and execution, are two 1964 studies of nudes, in starkly sensuous poses. To Kirili, these echoes of Rodin’s erotic drawings represent Smith’s release from some personal torment, opening himself up to creative and sentimental possibility, through his rewarding relationship with his daughters.⁴ Candida Smith, in her essay, says, “Smith’s late nude drawings show his mastery of fast, free line with astonishing conviction. We look to the French for understanding here. These works still have the power to shock puritanical Americans. These muscular, unselfconscious female figures tremble or coil with their power. They assert their presence with vulnerable, combative, undeniable sensuality—very like David Smith himself.” So it took a foreign sculptor to see what a daughter saw and bring the work to a country where it might be celebrated. Meanwhile Kirili contributed two sculptural echoes: *Ascension* (2001), a white resin tower intercut with paint, like some three-dimensional version of paper and ink, and *Communion* (2002), a larger version of *Sound*, aptly titled for the circumstance.

In the Tuileries, once overlooked by Carmen Martínez’s apartment, Kirili has since 1996 been instrumental in creating a plein-air sculpture park, under the auspices of the French Ministry of Culture. Mingling with Rodin and Maillol are now a Smith, a Carl Andre, an Ellsworth Kelly, and Kirili’s own haunting *Commandment*, in cemetery white. Also included is a piece by Amaghiere Dolo, a contemporary sculptor from Mali, whose anthropomorphic forms in their transport recall the limbs of Rodin’s *Iris: Messenger of the Gods*—for Kirili, a timeless ideal of eros relevant to this day.

