

Statuary Versus Idols

Alain Kirili

The desire to sculpt in full relief, to elaborate a vertical monolith as a statue, raises the question of what had originally forbidden this desire. What is the origin and nature of the opposition to image? A full understanding of the way in which Modernism carried on a certain iconoclasm benefits from an examination of the biblical treatment of statues, or, more accurately, the question of idols. Here lies the root of a form of puritanical censorship in the formalist reduction of sculpture to its own problematic. The dramatic conflict inherent in becoming a Modern sculptor has been extraordinarily expressed by David Smith in various interviews and in his work itself (*Puritan Landscape*, 1946, *Spectre of Mother*, 1946).

It was with the birth of monotheism that the statues worshipped by the cults of idols were destroyed. Everyone who worshipped an idol, everything linked to magic, to superstition, to animism, and to fetishism was in contradiction with the written law as passed on by Moses. But the earlier attitude as represented by Abraham advocated the destruction of idols, not statues. This distinction between the two conceptions of statuary (sculpture as presence as opposed to the earlier objects of adoration) is necessary to point out in any analysis of the evolution of Modern sculpture. For example, from its recognition we can then begin to understand what it means, say, when we speak of Barnett Newman's sculpture as conveying Presence without representation, or of presenting the Will and not the image of the subject of the Will.

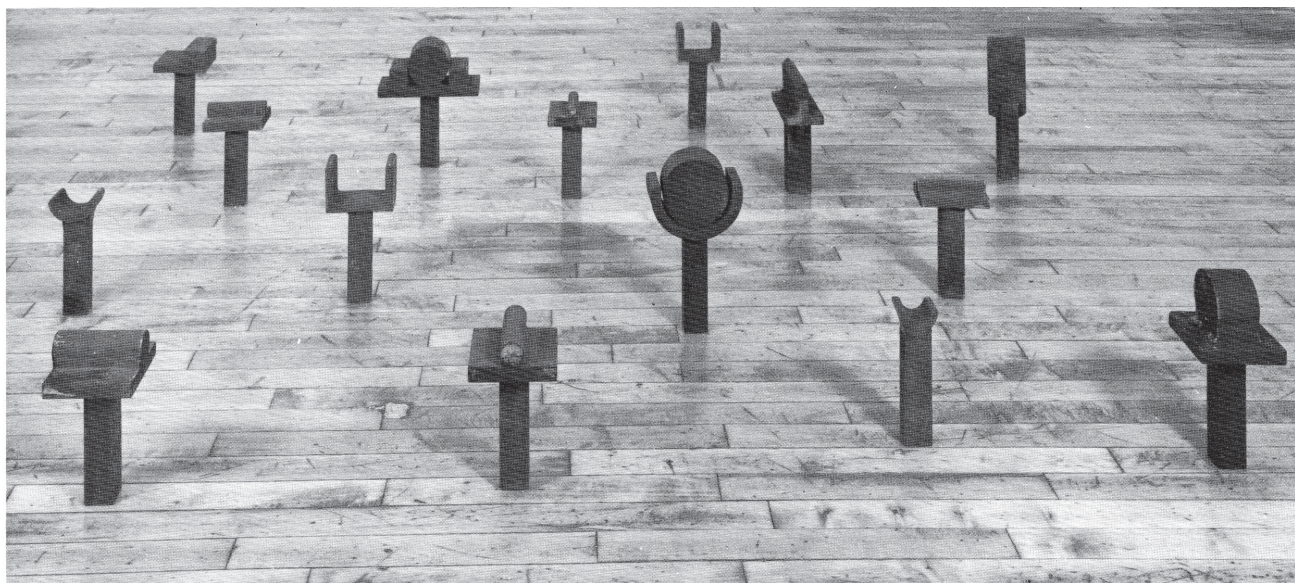
The second commandment exhorts us not to worship painted or carved images. (A radically iconoclastic interpretation of this commandment was supported by influences foreign to Judaism such as Islamic thought and the Protestant Reformation. After the destruction of the Temple at the time of the Diaspora, Judaism itself frequently adopted this restrictive tone on art.) The artistic expression of Judaism was limited if not actual-



A. Riedel, pair of Rimmonim, ca. 1875, silver, 15¾ x 5¼". Collection of the Jewish Museum, New York.

ly forbidden by local non-Jewish authorities at this time. Thus Jewish liturgical objects were often manufactured by Gentiles, since the groups of artisans and guilds were off limits to Jews. But the actual prohibition against creation, against the presence of art in the place of prayer, is a restriction foreign to the Old Testament. The cause and nature of this restriction is tied to a later view of art as sin, as a fundamental distraction. It is a question of a form of Manichaeism or puritanism, of a moralism that arises frequently in history under different guises; the fear of laxity brings with it an excessive moralism.

The Bible, not only in its content but in the very form of the letter of its writing, conveys plastic force: the Hebrew letter was carved in stone. The Torah, the major sacred object of Judaism, bears the mark of this, perpetuated by the calligraphic and spiritual qualities of the religious scribe (in Hebrew, the *sofer stam*). If, for example, the ink fades and cannot be restored, the Torah is buried—it cannot be destroyed. A similar concept was referred to by David Smith in his interview



Alain Kirili, *Commandment III*, 1980, forged iron, 15 freestanding pieces each ca. 14½ x 8¾ x 5", overall ca. 11 x 10'. Private collection.

with Thomas Hess, "The Secret Letter," in a catalogue from the Marlborough Gallery, New York, October 1964. Smith expressed his interpretation of a certain passage from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as being that a red hen scratches the ground and unearths a letter. This passage explains the cryptographic origin of certain of Smith's sculptures.

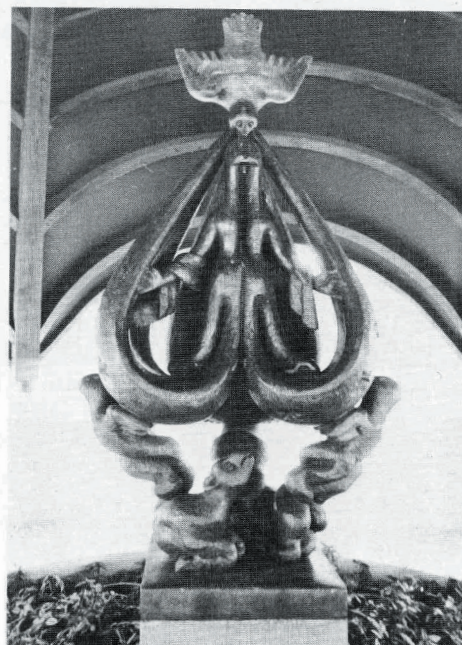
This symbolic dimension of the force of the letter arose when Moses broke the tablets of the Law; the tablets were broken, but the letters flew away, conveying the indestructibility of writing. This same force can be found in mosaic art in the floors of many synagogues from the early centuries after Christ. Rather than being flat, these mosaics are utterly sculptural in their potential for a three-dimensional elevation. I deal with a scriptural, three-dimensional fiction of "the pavement which rises" in my series of sculptures "*Commandments*," 1980–82. In effect, its elements have a reproducible quality, like the handwriting of the Torah, which allows for no subjective effects. It was thanks to the work on this sculpture that I later paid

his visual translation, in the body of Saint Theresa, of her description of her experience of ecstasy. Though not directly religious in nature, this strong sense of the sexual aspect of statuary appears pointedly in a youthful work attributed to Bernini which is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and has been titled *A Faun Teased by Children*, ca. 1616–18, and which I love particularly for its beautiful feeling of rotation and of life. The figures are all male; the faun, however, has lost its phallus, which has been replaced by the branch of the tree. This now functions as the central axis of the group, producing the axis of the statue's elevation. This splendid work conveys the entire Counter Reformation program in favor of sensuality and luxury in art for the Church, which gave Western sculpture an exceptional impetus, a freedom and an ethic that could be valid even for the Modern art of the 20th century.

Modern art is frequently associated with a cosmopolitan concept; its spiritual dimension, indeed its ecumenical dimension, is more rarely approached. The political question of social emancipation was in-

close attention to the mosaic floors and to the epic dimensions of the legend concerning the liturgical objects the sculpture resembles. The ex post facto association helped me to understand the epic effect of sculpture's multiple signs. For example, the silver objects placed at the summit of the Torah, which are called *Rimmonim* in Hebrew and are translated in English by the name of the fruit "pomegranate," evoke the legend that the pomegranate has as many seeds as the Torah does commandments: 613.

Jewish mysticism ties its experience closely to language and writing (it spread principally in the south of France and in Spain between the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, "and is most fully revealed in its most famous book, the Zohar). The Cabala makes the "letters" of the Hebrew alphabet privileged objects of meditation and contemplation leading to ecstasy, freeing the subject and permitting communication with God. This relationship confirms a particular definition of ecstasy which is splendidly illustrated



Jacques Lipchitz, *Notre-Dame de Liesse*, 1958, bronze, 75" high. Photograph taken in situ at Roofless Church, New Harmony, Indiana, by James K. Mellow.



Letter of a square Ashkenazi script, 1272, from Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Worms Mahzor/I, folio 127 recto (detail). Courtesy Alpine Fine Arts Collection, Ltd. Photo: David Harris.

Lema Sabachthani—Why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?

This is the passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer.

With this Newman makes it clear that he has no intention of simply representing a series of anecdotes in “fourteen sentimental illustrations” but that he wants instead “to stand witness to the story of each man’s agony.” This objective is reinforced by the way in which he painted the central theme of the Resurrection in his painting *Be II*, 1961–64; the uniqueness of the painting is magnified by his change in the use of the color orange—Christ’s body having left the tomb represents the second stage of Being, implying the creation of a new chromatic verticality.

Earlier Chagall had created crucifixions, and executed a number of stained-glass windows; Soutine painted *Chartres*, 1933, and Lipchitz sculpted a Virgin for the Church of Assy. On it he wrote “Jacob [his biblical name] Lipchitz, Jew, faithful to the religion of

his ancestors, has made this Virgin for the better understanding of human beings on this earth so that the Spirit may prevail.” The inscription on the sculpture was a condition that Lipchitz set and that Father Couturier, who commissioned the work, enthusiastically accepted. The project for this sculpture was proposed to Lipchitz during an opening at the Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1946 by an envoy of Father Couturier. The artist himself recalls this important dialogue in his memoirs: “I said, ‘but you know I am Jewish?’ The man said, ‘If it doesn’t disturb you, it doesn’t disturb us.’” Father Couturier was a painter before he became a Dominican friar. He was a central figure in the coordination of religious art after the Second World War: the Church of Assy unites the works of artists of widely varying faiths and origins in the Catholic liturgy. Father Couturier had required artists of all denominations to submit their works for this church to the rules of the Roman Catholic tradition, just as Matisse had bowed to this liturgy at the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence. Lipchitz created *Notre Dame de Liesse*, 1953–55, for Assy—to which Chagall,

influential in reliberating Jewish artists’ desire to create. The participation of artists, critics, and historians of Jewish origin in the radical transformation of Western art is specific to the 20th century: Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz And this development in our era transpired concurrently with the interest these artists demonstrated in the New Testament. This ecumenical phenomenon is to be found in Mark Rothko’s painting *Crucifixion*, dated before 1936; this “crucifixion” is one of three paintings Rothko first showed in Paris. When he wrote of John and Dominique de Menil’s commission to create a nondenominational chapel in Houston he did so in these terms: “The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me.” (January 1, 1966.) In the same year, Barnett Newman wrote in the Guggenheim Museum catalogue that accompanied his exhibition of his series of paintings “The Stations of the Cross,” 1958–66:



Germaine Richier, Fernand Léger, Matisse, and Georges Rouault had also contributed. I believe Father Couturier's role in the art of our period should be better known.

If the Church of Assy¹ is a perfect example of cosmopolitanism and ecumenicism, so also is the Rothko chapel, with its installation of his paintings and the magnificent placement of Barnett Newman's sculpture *Broken Obelisk*, 1963–67, in a pond where the water offers a moving, transparent, almost immaterial surface. The spiritual quality of the chapel exists through the beauty with which these artists endow it, without using specific iconography, and also through its adoption in worship by Hindus, Jews, Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, etc., each of whom can use the chapel in their own "Time of Prayer." This remarkable chapel provokes the question concerning the relationship between Modern spiritual art and liturgy; the art offers a paradox by being spiritual without being religious.

Since the time of David Smith most contemporary sculptors have not referred creation to religion, ethics,

and sexuality together, as if, in a time of a commitment to plastic radicality, those references were anachronistic. By and large contemporary sculptors (of abstract as well as figurative work) have not been willing to brave Modern taboos and liberate major issues connected to their own identities. The commitment of Julio González to Gothic art, for instance, is the source of the great difference between him and Smith. The mystical and graceful quality of González's sculpture emerged from his love for maternity, which derives from the cult of the Virgin and the art of the cathedrals. Smith, as a Calvinist, was in conflict with the Catholic Church and its representation of the female presence. Throughout Gothic art, sculpture reinforces its autonomy, plays with light and develops qualities of exceptional grace, through the cult of the Virgin. Statuary of the Virgin attained such a forceful spiritual expression of intensified muliebrity that in our time it has inspired sculptors as different as González and Lipchitz.

No one can argue that there has not been a direct relationship between the richness of a liturgy and the

richness of the art associated with it—statuary in Gothic art reached the third-dimension expression of a theology of light. Art under Abbot Suger of St.-Denis led the monks of the 12th century from the created to the uncreated, from the material to the ineffable. Anagogy lends the strength of fiction to creation; statuary can in this way detach itself from being literal representations of divinity. To express a spiritual presence in statuary today is less a matter of liturgic representation than a challenge to every kind of barbarism, dogmatism, and authoritarianism, in order to pursue Lipchitz's ideal: "that the Spirit may [still] prevail." ■

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Translated from the French by Jamey Gambrell.

1. William Rubin has written about this church and the evangelical spirit that governed its creation. "The revival of religious art which took place at Assy could not have been generated from within the ranks of Catholicism alone." And elsewhere, "Side by side with works of the pious Catholic Rouault one saw those of Jews, atheists, and even Communists—a revolutionary situation that struck the keynote of a new evangelical spirit." In *Modern Sacred Art and the Church of Assy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.

