

**JULIA KRISTEVA**

ALAIN KIRILI:  
THE  
LIVING  
BODIES  
OF  
STATUARY

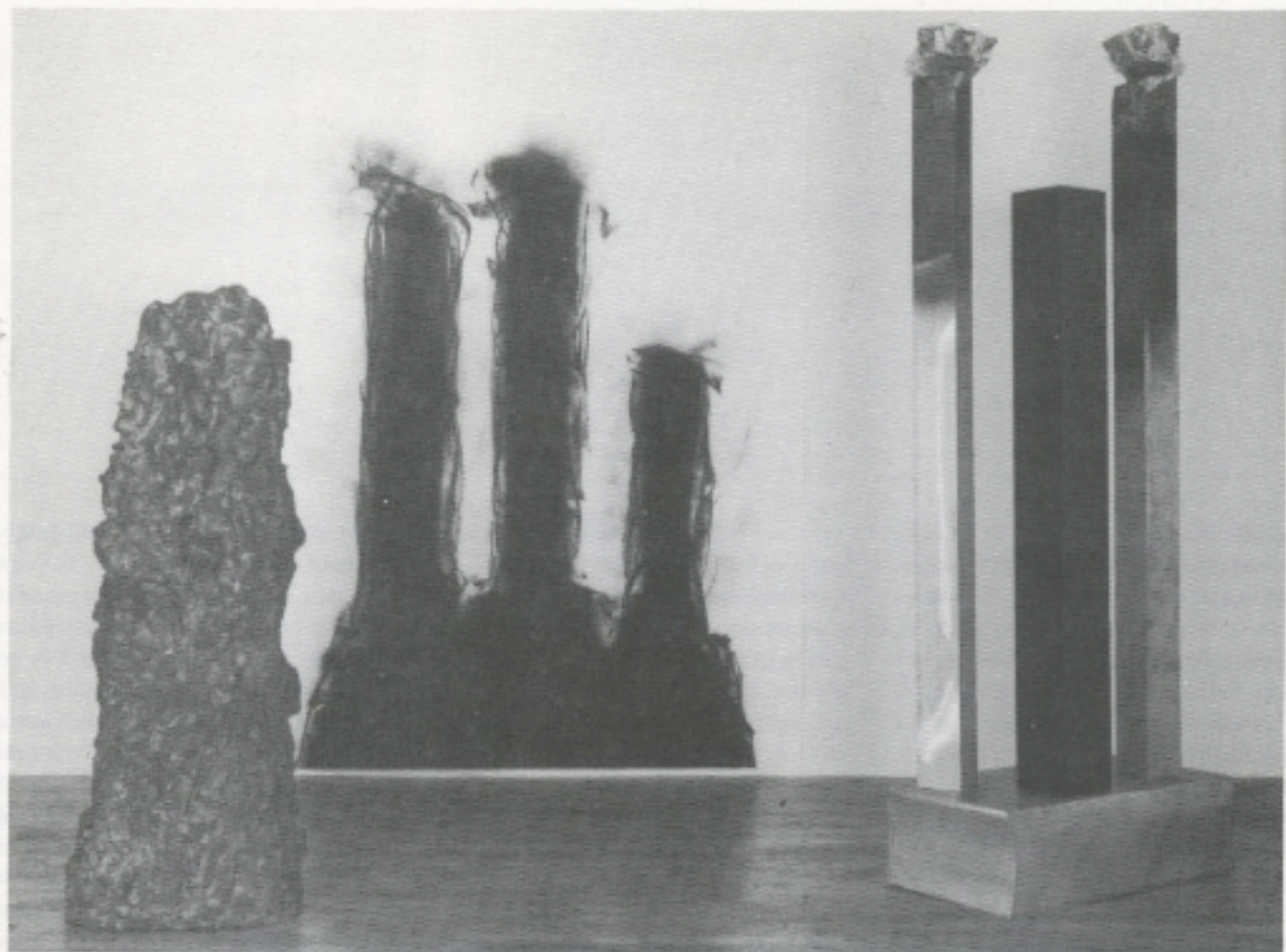
The meeting with a sculptor is the occasion for a voyage within our unsuspecting body towards another space, which without doubt has waited for us, but which opens abruptly with our look, our skin, our sense of hearing.

The first works of Kirili (which I had the chance of knowing from his sculptural beginnings) have constituted a fierce imposition of verticality. From the bases, minimal but solid, obstinate straight lines somewhat menaced and always te-

nacious, obliged us to straighten our spinal columns and to hoist up our thoughts. The space of galleries and museums that we believed we knew, suddenly opened themselves up towards the height, more proud, as if by the gesture of a blacksmith-calligrapher. In this way the rigidity of iron once made supple by the hammer, its refined line, has cut through the air, tightened like a sound.

In 1951, Barnett Newman's *Here One* had already chiseled space by two verti-

cals, one thin and impeccable, the other wide and in overflowing, letting one guess the plaster underneath the bronze. Kirili had interpreted Newman's ultimate intention of juxtaposing minimal regularity with the negligible detail; the bearer of disorder, of elusive emotion. His hammered irons leaned slightly or disengaged themselves imperceptively from the base as if to suggest a possible vertigo or a menacing disequilibrium which is, however, held back by,



ALAIN KIRILI GRANDE NUJITÉ (L.T.), UNTITLED DRAWING, REDISCOVERED KINGS (R.T.)

one should say, a will of iron, of straightness.

This experiment finds in the pieces exposed today, an accomplishment in the 1984 series—*Palancia*, *Belur* et *Solares*. Here, the verticality of the metallic bar curves itself, twists itself, and leans. It is a braid, a beginning of a human silhouette (if you want to think of this abstraction as anthropomorphic). At any rate it is an extraction of movement starting with the most opaque and resistant fixity. To this minimalist play is added inclinations which render the composition mobile, somewhat ironic or catastrophic. The imminent fall causes laughter, or fear. Finally, in the slot, between the two verticals of iron, a surface slips in, its edge hammered, finely irregular, sensually irritating, and which bursts forth with color, blue, or white, or red, or yellow.

#### THE TOUCHED EYE

This intrusion of color into Kirili's sculpture is not only an aesthetic syncretism adding painting to sculpture. Addressing

itself to the eye, color's clarity which is at once pure and aggressive invites the body to another pleasure, to a space already put in movement by the disposition of the pieces. It adds another dimension and a new acceleration. The visual chromatic seizes as in a profound archeology of archaic distinctions where before the hand might be capable of discerning forms to touch, the eye is overwhelmed by the already distinguishable sparks of a rainbow. The deep coating of pleasure superimposes itself on the joy of manipulating, of forming, of dominating the rebellious material which is iron. Blue with black (*Palancia bleue*), or black with red and white (*Solares blanche*), or yellow, white and red inserted in black (*Belur* 1985) achieving this other dimension of perceptive enjoyment in adding planes and disconnected chromatics to the form already worked by hammering, troubled with intrinsic movements. Thus, these sculptures acquire a cinematic rotation—the spectator being invited, in short, to become the body and the

eye of a movie camera in movement, x-raying the form of the composition in kaleidoscopic sections and layers.

When the base itself is colored (the red on which is posed the black and white pieces of *Solaris rouge*), the mass seems to raise off the socle and the movement of playful verticality receives a supplementary dynamism which pushes it home into the subterranean depths or even propels it up vertically, but at any rate tearing it from its foundations.

Kirili's experiment seemed to me to find one of these most important realizations in *Méditerranée* (1985). The sculpture integrates known processes of the artist. The slight disconnection between the bases gives an activity to the two parallel bars. The introduction of a new flat vertical surface recalls some elements of the Hebrew alphabet utilized before in *Commandment*. This arrangement on several levels, these divergences between the pieces and the precise dose of the elevations of the bars recall *Makom* (1985) *Cîteaux* (1982), *Enoch* (1983), or

the very beautiful *Cortège* (1982).<sup>1</sup> You can see there the transformation of Indian lingams, which Kirili was the first to discover for modern Western sculpture, or a recollection of Gothic statuary of Burgundy which places these bodies in a historic and evangelical story.

But with *Méditerranée* an oblique vertical surface appears. It is cut in two inverse triangles, joined and colored in sky blue. This perforated surface which because of the oblique causes a cool current to flow in the composition, centers itself around a diagonal tempered wall. Matisse's Cut-outs seem to have found here their mass and their mobility. *Méditerranée* invites the spectator to dive in. We move in the air and the water, on high and down below, from right to left, with halts and references, in a continual peaceful movement.

The sculpture finds here its destiny to beacon, not the temple, the cathedral, or the museum, but the outdoors. The open space of gardens and streets waits for us to see it. It does not reveal itself if the artist does not place references there. Remember the uniform blocks of New York University, downtown. Only the sculpture of Picasso posed in the middle of the street a tortured and delighted woman and has you suddenly perceive all the libido with which the entire city is filled. Kirili's excursion into the exterior space, in his most recent expositions and notably at the Rodin Museum, affirms this ambition of the artist to pit himself against the stereotypy and neutrality of the outside. He utilized not only monumental composition, but also a richness of arrangement, color, and materials.

### TIMBRES

Another direction of work presented includes painted plaster assemblies with pieces of forged iron and wood. These plasters extend Kirili's terra-cotta works (*Ivresse* 1983, among others) and the series of painted plaster works, *Nun* (1984). Like *Cordoba* (1985) and *Tendresse* (1985), *Méditation* (1985) exposed today, integrates a molded plaster piece which could evoke by a leaning "head," by the movement of a drape, and by the interlaced arms of a little coiled body against the chest—a reply of the madonna. This quasi-figurative post-modernism takes its entire meaning in the totality of the composition where the disengagements of the surfaces for which the sculptor has an affection and for which, without a doubt, a geometrical version of circular baroque instability adds itself to the assembly of different materials, plaster, iron, but also wood. For me, this technique brings a supplementary element to Kirili's sculptural syncretism, the timbre. I hear the sounds of diverse material of these pieces. The opaque tone of wood, the hollow deafness of plaster, and the sharp cry of iron. To the movement of my body is added the excitement of looking at the painted plaster, and finally to my ear activated on diverse levels, bestows a melody of timbres to this dynamic *Méditation*. The incongruous bodies in association, the disparate pieces which take form in my movement around the sculpture, in my eye which follows the inclinations and colors, and in my ear, to finish, which unifies these elements and makes them

resonate, multiple and convergent, a *Méditation* in effect.

Maybe it happens to you, to wake up the disjointed body; the plaster head, the wooden limbs, the tongue, the forged iron genitals, for example. If you could take yourself in hand, you could look for the meaning of the "detached pieces": their meaning, their sound. You would then be able to adjust them, to assemble them, to compose them in heterogenic and however, harmonious volumes. The meditation of our decomposition could be the chance for a new life. A melody of timbres.

### FLAYED ALIVE

Kirili knows Rodin's *Balzac* well. The mass of bronze twists itself lightly with an unexpected suppleness and the worked body of metal carries the traces of the tactile joy of the artist. He scrutinized closely also the maximum cavities of the metallic materials in the thread-like sculptures of Giacometti. Alone, some residues of matter overflow the extended lines in order to signify an anguish at the limits of tension, however resistant. Modern sculpture, such as we have devised the avant-garde at the end of the 19th century, no longer retains from the body the full and happy mass of existence. With Donatello or Michelangelo, the stretched skin of the reborn bodies takes again with happiness the assurance we call sculptural, of Greek bodies. However, in modern times this skin crumbles, cracks, surrenders, in order to discover the amorphous mass, muscles working, forming or decomposing. The living dynamic of "jouissance" or of

death takes on a form then, which on a detached object translates the secret life of the artist himself.

*Grande nudité* (1985) and *Petite nudité* (1985) represent this tendency. The body is not only unclothed, but stripped of its surface. He lets the lines of force of his desires and passions appear. The clay is touched a thousand times, worked, sensualized as much as possible, absorbing the violence and the malleable joy of the artist beyond what is representable. Then a moulding in clay is produced which culminates in the version in bronze which you have before you. A flayed nudity, living its passion of the flesh.

Space is not only a volume that can be made geometric, as was well shown by formalism and its extension, minimalism. Space translates as far as the most inexpressible imaginary and symbolic capacities of the artist and the spectator. It is our projection, body and soul. There exists an unrepresentable space which modulates that which in my discourse and in my dreams stays unnameable. The space of unnameable joy at the borders of the impossible. It is probably the source of what is hidden, of the occult, which finds here the way in which to show itself to us. Space of pre-language or of trans-language, this nudity conducts us to secret movements where the body exults or comes undone—powerful, obscene, untouchable.

The dream reaches sometimes this unrepresentable body. The fever dream, without words, without images, without sound. Only the pulsing of organs, of muscles, of cells. Like the speechless fe-

ver's rising, neither painful nor ecstatic, but possibly both at once. And then language summons itself and the image comes about. The agglomeration of salvos, of throbbings, of atomic touches produces the representation of a violent hit. They are blows from a fist projected on a soft surface, like on terra-cotta. This visual and tactile realization of fever which climbs high during sleep, of the tension which aspires to relieve itself in the dream, passes thus into an object in front of me. It is absorbed by a surface detached from me in which it finds itself moulded. The Brownian movement of the body seething with discomfort translates itself, in this strange dream, in a gesture as aggressive as it is forming.

I remember this dream in front of *Nudité*. I imagine easily other variations of this arrival at the surface of the unnameable, more joyous variations, also more dramatic ones. *Nudité* makes us rekind, in our own rhythm, our sleeping sensualities.

#### THE REVEALED SINGULARITY

It is understood that in revealing the intimate life of our bodies, the sculptures of Kirili belong to the history of sculpture. Recent history first: they carry on a dialogue with the works of Barnett Newman, of David Smith, Noguchi, De Suvero, Chamberlain... global history too: they take much inspiration from India, from the gardens and their balletic statuary in Kyoto or Nara, and also from the cathedrals of Burgundy, passing by Rodin, Picasso, and Giacometti. However, his work concerns less influences than the selective assimilation of a mem-

ory of forms in the singular and autonomous experiment of post-modernism, which passes by abstraction in order to attain the imaginary meaning of forms.

But certainly, this meaning is personal because of the biography and because of the malleable specificity of the author. It is personal also because in the modern world we lack the universal communal bond capable of giving meaning or only one spatial conception to all the community. Such was, for example, the case with Classical art or Romanesque art or Gothic art. They were styles which expressed an ideological or religious totality.

In our context of disseminated and solitary individuals, an exposition is a sporadic and special event which permits us to establish, for a time of limited duration, a singular bond with our imaginary spaces that daily life obliterates or buries. We accord to an artist, here to Alain Kirili, the strange right to take our imaginary bodies in hand in order to awaken in us unknown dimensions: formidable, inhuman, sensual, surprising. Beautiful.

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1. Found in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

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Translated from French by Thomas Radigan.

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