

Rewriting Sculpture

In his 'texts forged in space,' Alain Kirili would like to rescue the older values of 'statuary' for contemporary sculpture. 'To be modern,' he says, 'is to never disconnect yourself from tradition.'

BY CYNTHIA NADELMAN

ALAIN KIRILI SEEMED TO BE IN THE wrong place at the wrong time last summer. As America focused its attention on a major example of 19th-century French statuary in New York harbor, this 40-year-old French artist, who lives in New York, was in Paris, where his book *Statuaire* (Statuary) had been published in June by DeNoël. At the Pompidou Center, an exhibition called "What Is Modern Sculpture?" answered its own question by virtually excluding the statuary tradition, the nude and modeled sculpture. This response did not satisfy Kirili, and he did not let it go unchallenged. His battle with the show's organizer, Margit Rowell, began with an article he wrote for the newspaper *Le Monde* entitled "The Death of Sculpture," and it continued in a debate between the two on French radio.

Happily, not all was dissension. Kirili's own sculpture *White Commandment* (1985), a forest of short white iron shafts of various configurations commissioned by the French government, was officially dedicated in the Tuileries Gardens on July 2. This abstract sculptor so enamored of 20th-century American art added to his equally beloved Paris statuary tradition an outdoor sculpture whose dark, smaller prototype was the first major work he completed after moving to the United States in 1978.

What does the sculptor mean by "statuary"? In his book, a collection of his own writings on sculpture as well as essays by others about his art, Kirili explains that his sense of the term derives from its Latin root, *stare*, meaning "to stand." Thus statuary for him means sculpture that is free-standing, vertically oriented, with an echo of the human body, a nobility. In this century, Kirili feels, relief sculpture, planar and constructivist sculpture, environmental sculpture and the decline of modeling, as well as statuary's lapses into cliché, have all contributed to the weakening in prestige of the statuary tradition. Kirili would like to see it put back on its feet: "Give us a break. A sculpture by Reuben Nakian is no less modern than one by Rodchenko."

Kirili's spirited disquisitions on the glories of past statuary

usually culminate in a verbal tour of Paris, the city he calls "the capital of statuary." He begins with the Cathedral of Notre Dame, located a few blocks from where he was born. "Gothic art is the French Pop art," he laughs. "It's what everyone grew up with." He proceeds chronologically to the sensuously curving draped female figures of 16th-century sculptor Jean Goujon from the Fountain of the Innocents and to other figures by the artist on an outside wall of the nearby Louvre; to François Rude's dramatic *Marseillaise* relief on the Arch of Triumph and his 1853 statue of the saber-wielding Marshal Ney; to Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's mid-19th-century fountain centerpiece called *Four Continents* and his *Dance*, created for the exterior of the Paris Opera (for high reliefs of great power and circular motion Kirili makes exceptions to his statuary rules); to Rodin's *Balzac*; and to Maillol's *Night*.

In addition to stressing the statuary element, Kirili is concerned with exposing the element of Frenchness that informs these works and his own. "To understand what is specifically French, it is helpful to think of Nietzsche's definition of France as *le carrefour*—the crossroads or meeting point—of northern and southern Europe," he says. "France is a Roman Catholic country, and even if you don't practice that religion, you are surrounded by the notion of art in the service of God, beauty in the service of God, by the whole Catholic iconography. In the northern, Protestant countries, the crucifix is portrayed bare, stressing its geometricity, its cruciformity, if you will. It's basically an iconoclastic representation. In the Latin, Catholic countries, like France, the cross is portrayed with flesh, with a body."

There is a femininity in French art, Kirili feels, that derives historically in part from the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary. "Beauty, joie de vivre, *luxure, calme et volupté*—to quote Baudelaire—happiness, sensuality, even frivolity, the *principe* of pleasure: these are major issues in French art. In recent art, the esthetic of ugliness, morbidity and sexual violence has had much more credibility. If your work embodies the former principles, people say, 'You're so French,' or even, 'You're *too* French.' But I believe that

modern is to never disconnect yourself from tradition." Kirili's own contribution to modern sculpture has been his unique way of using forged iron as a medium. A work such as *Cortège II* (1982), in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, is an important and evocative example. The almost depictive or narrative iron sculpture consists of a flat iron slab supported by a grouping of single and doubled-over upright and leaning shafts with bends in the upper portions. It is powerful in its contrast of hard, minimal elements with soft, bowed ones, a testimony to Kirili's control of the moment when his malleable, incandescent iron is the right temperature to be shaped and to the expressive effect of this process on the end sculpture. Speaking of this piece, which epitomizes his work with sculpture groupings, Kirili mentions that he wanted to tie in with the traditional notion of the group in sculpture, from classical portrayals of the

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ALAIN KIRILI/ALICE



Concert, 1985, is one of a series of ensembles in which Kirilov shakes up the categories by mixing forms and materials.

Three Graces to European funerary sculpture. "A group complexities space," he asserts. "In group statuary, the space in between elements is as important as anything else."

BORN IN PARIS IN 1946, KIRILOV BELONGS TO the first generation after World War II. His self-described joie de vivre has never blinded him to grave historical realities. "It's not easy to be born into a country that has been culturally destroyed," he says. "I have always had a sense of the terrible fragility of culture." Kirilov's father, who owned a textile-manufacturing business, and was Jewish, may have unwittingly sown the seeds of his son's future with the family outings he would organize to visit such monuments to France's cultural heritage as Chartres Cathedral. But the plan was for Alain to enter the family business. "My family has been constant in its disapproval of what I am doing," he says. "There was nothing in my background that would lead one to predict that I would become an artist, move to New York and learn to express myself in a foreign language."

In 1965, the artist took off in his own direction. That year, the Musée Rodin in Paris was host to "American Sculpture of the 20th Century," an exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art's International Council. Kirilov saw the show and was hooked. He visited the United States for the first time that year. Taking to heart what had become for him "the crucial words" of writer André Malraux—

"*L'art est un anti-destin*" ("Art is an anti-destiny")—the 19-year-old decided to become an artist and created for himself an "anti-name": Kirilov. It was composed from the names of various characters in Dostoyevsky novels. The artist's identity has become so tied to his created name that he prefers not to divulge his family name.

Although inspired by the sculpture show, in the beginning Kirilov concentrated on painting. On that first trip to the United States, he studied the Abstract Expressionists in museums, and on his return to Paris he enrolled in a course in Chinese calligraphy. That course and a year of drawing the nude at the Ecole de Dessins Municipale in Paris are the extent of his formal art education.

What was hot in France in the early 1960s was the art of the *nouveaux réalistes*, including Yves Klein, Arman, Jean Tinguely, César, Christo and others, but Kirilov was not impressed. While this work was related to certain manifestations in American art of the time—the Pop art of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, for example—Kirilov found inspiration in the already somewhat enshrined American art that was at least a decade removed. This was probably a reflection of his identification with earlier streams of European art. "American art was the connection to the best art that had been done in the Western world," he says. "It was as simple as that."

In his own early work—abstract paintings with a few, mainly horizontal strokes and spare sculpture that referred

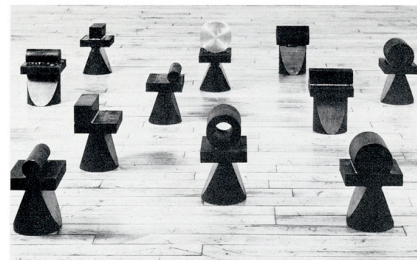
to its own materiality but always imposed itself in some way on space, whether lying flat on the floor or sending thin wires from the floor to the wall—Kirilov picked up the simplicity and minimalism that had grown out of Abstract Expressionism and into so-called Minimalism itself. "Later," he says, "I began to establish my own identity and to let the French tradition emerge in my work, contributing a cosmopolitan quality."

In 1972, Kirilov had his first exhibition at the Sonnabend gallery in Paris. For the next ten years or so, he would show regularly with that gallery, which had branches in both Paris and New York. Though Kirilov has gone for a few years without a major one-man show in New York (he has shown at the Galerie Adrien Maeght in Paris), the hiatus will come to an end this October with a large exhibition of his work at the Holly Solomon gallery.

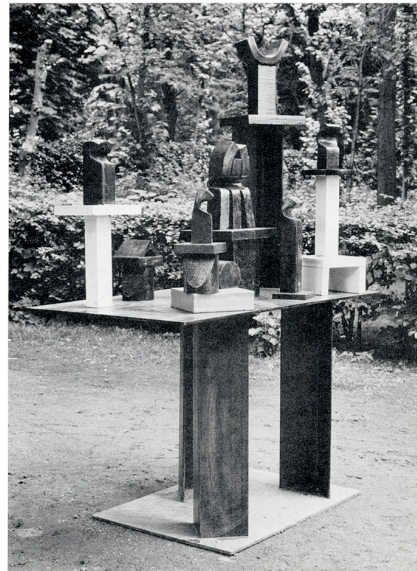
By the mid-1970s, Kirilov was making sculpture exclusively and learning iron-forging techniques. His metal sculpture was distinctive in its tall, thin verticality, even if it wasn't always freestanding. In 1977, he showed some of these sculptures at Documenta 6 in Kassel.

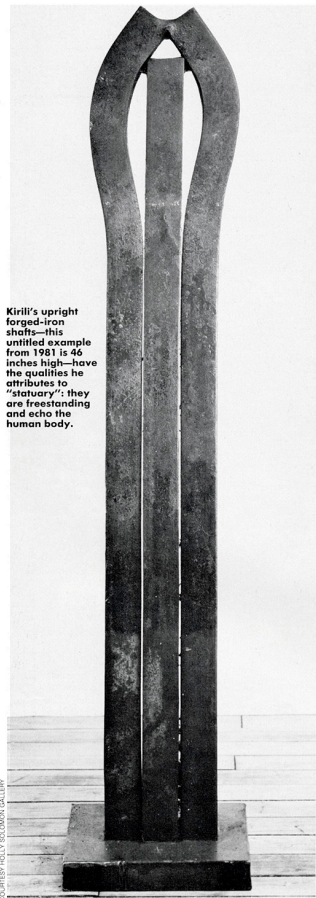
That same year, standing in front of the Delacroix Museum in Paris, he met his future wife, French photographer Ariane Lopez-Hucsi. They were married within the year, once in Paris and once in New York, since Kirilov's regular visits across the Atlantic had practically made a New Yorker of him. In 1978, he and Ariane moved to New York. Around the same time, Kirilov, who had studied iron forging with master blacksmiths in Austria and the United States, began to make his breakthrough works in forged iron. He had also been working in terra-cotta and cast plaster and even bronze, and it's likely that these techniques prepared the way for the almost modeled quality of his upright, forged-iron sculptures of 1978-80. In these works, tall or short iron shafts are pinched by gentle indentations or undulating tucks; separated by a hairbreadth from nearly identical, parallel elements that may join them at one or both ends; or given sensuous bulges. In 1980, Kirilov created a wealth of these works, which then became his signature. He has been refining and adding to this initial outpouring ever since.

Within his oeuvre, the "Commandment" series, begun when he moved



ABOVE Commandment V (detail), 1981. The title of this series reflects the artist's concern with religious meaning; BELOW Generation, 1985, is like a sculptor's table covered with a capsule history of Kirilov's work.





Kirili's upright forged-iron shafts—this untitled example from 1981 is 46 inches high—have the qualities he attributes to "statuary": they are freestanding and echo the human body.

COURTESY POLLY TOLONI/GALLERY

to New York, has a particular distinction. The sculptures, of which there are now ten, consist of fields of short forged-iron shafts topped off by scooped, shelved, cylindrical or other shapes that appear to have symbolic significance. *White Commandment*, in the Tuileries Gardens, was scaled up for the large outdoor space and painted white in order to stand out against the surrounding grass. Most of the other "Commandments" are black.

The very title *Commandment* is a clue to Kirili's concern with religious, even biblical, meaning. It was only after completing the work that he discovered the closeness of the resulting forms to the tassels-like objects decorating the ends of Torahs. Having described his environmentally acquired connections to the Catholic heritage of France, Kirili explains, "I came to be involved in Judaism on my own." In trying to identify what might be Jewish contributions or traits in art, he has pinpointed a "scriptural quality." He continues, "Hebrew letters have a sculptural quality that comes from biblical writings having at one time been carved on stone tablets." (In a properly French, semiotic vein, Kirili has elsewhere referred to sculpture as "a text forged in space.") An artist studying religion, he cautions, must guard against being too much of an archeologist or an ethnographer and eliminating the spiritual and personal aspect, such as the relationship with the rabbi. Kirili is also interested in ecumenical art, citing the work done by Jewish artists such as Jacques Lipchitz, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko in Christian contexts. Kirili himself recently created a crucifix for a Catholic church in Burgundy.

ALTHOUGH KIRILI IS BURLY IN A SHORT, stocky way, he eschews the image of laconic, strong-man ironworker. "At first," he says, "I was attracted to the tough-guy image of an artist, but I cannot look like that." In fact, he is at pains to explain that the only time strength is called for in forging is in the lifting. With his rimless wire glasses, his casual but always neat attire and his thoughtful way of expounding on art, literature and other matters in a language in which he protests he is still not entirely comfortable, he seems almost professorial. He does teach a class at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, the last course before the awarding of the B.F.A., in which he helps students determine their future directions, their "artistic personalities."

As for Kirili's personality, one would describe it as bubbly. His voice rises to a high tenor in greeting. He gives the impression of someone who enjoys company, good food, excursions with friends to look at art. His and Lopez-Huici's loft in downtown Manhattan is filled with his latest work, her photographs, objects from their travels—especially from Asia, which they have visited several times—and piles of books in French and English.

Lopez-Huici shares Kirili's interest in sculpture as a subject. She has created a striking photographic series contrasting erotic images of women in Indian sculpture with images of present-day Indian women on the street. An earlier series consisted of close-ups of 19th-century French sculpture of ferocious animals, which through her lens become mythical yet lifelike creatures with strange skin textures. She adds a different dimension to the study of sculpture, creating, as Kirili puts it, "a new distribution of surfaces to focus on."

The studio attached to Kirili's loft is used only for coloring his small plaster pieces, which he draws on with oil

stick, ink or graphite. He also has a studio nearby for working on large-scale charcoal and black-paint drawings. All of his other work is done farther away from his home. The forge he has used for seven years for his work in iron and, more recently, in aluminum is a commercial one located in Trenton and run by a family of craftsmen of Ukrainian extraction. He has done bronze casting at the Johnson Atelier in Princeton; plaster casting is done with congenial Italian *mouleurs* (molders) in Manhattan. "I like the challenge of working with the different workers in the different atmospheres," Kirili says, waxing especially enthusiastic about the dark old forge with its "accumulations of old iron." The terra-cotta pieces he works on only in France. The sensual, easygoing, somewhat vague nature of the material seems to him more suited to the summers he spends there than to New York, with its fast pace and "crystal-clear atmosphere."

In Paris, he and Lopez-Huici have an 18th-century house with a garden courtyard near the Louvre. Kirili makes a point of keeping up with current cultural and intellectual developments in France and stresses the importance of "staying in contact with my writers. . . . To be at ease in my language provides a link with reality," he says. He has a particularly creative friendship with the French writer and editor Philippe Sollers and his wife, Julia Kristeva, known for her writing on philosophy, psychoanalysis and language. (Kristeva's characterization of Kirili as a calligrapher-black-

smith—an *calligraphe-forgeron*—in a catalogue essay she wrote especially pleases the artist.) Says Kirili: "They are my oldest friends in France, my early supporters there." It is Sollers, a novelist and founding editor of *Tel Quel*, the influential French intellectual magazine of the 1960s and '70s (now reborn as *L'Infini*, with Sollers still the editor), with whom Kirili seems to have the most fun. The two have collaborated on videos, articles and interviews, often undertaken in an irreverently comic spirit, sometimes with Kristeva and Lopez-Huici looking on or even acting as straight women. When he and Ariane are in Paris, the four of them—with frequent additions of fellow artists and writers—have a tradition of Saturday lunches at the *Closerie des Lilas* in Montparnasse.

Kirili and Sollers recently collaborated on the text for a book of previously unpublished erotic drawings by Rodin (brought out in March by Gallimard), and both came to the subject with relish. Kirili has written about Rodin's eroticism in earlier articles. A



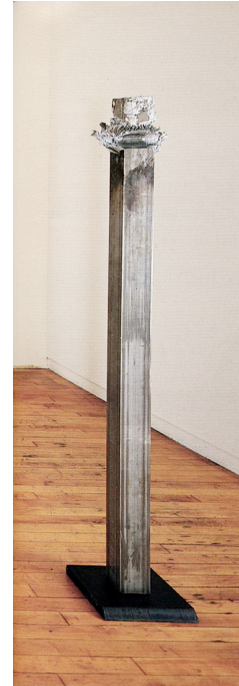
ABOVE *Meditation II*, 1985, forged iron and terra-cotta, 17½ inches high. BELOW "A group complexifies space," Kirili says of *Cartège II*, 1982, forged iron, 71 inches high. "The space in between . . . is as important as anything else."

1985 videotape made by Sollers and Kirili called *Le phallus mis à nu par ses non-célibataires mêmes* (The phallus stripped bare by its bridegrooms/husbands even)—a play on Duchamp's Dadaist title, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*—depicts the two men in animated conversation in front of one of Kirili's arguably phallic modeled sculptures, *Small Nadir* (1985). The artist's interest in eroticism in sculpture has also extended to the connections between sexuality and spirituality in certain Indian sculptures, about which he has written.

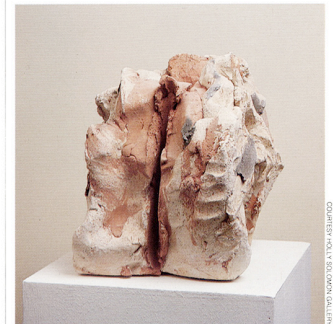




LEFT Studio installation of six forged-aluminum sculptures, 1986. The tops of these pieces seem to have been ripped off, leaving jagged, splintered ends.



RIGHT *Ivresse IV*, 1983, terra-cotta, 11 inches high, has a soft, exploratory intimacy and warmth.



In addition to general writings on sculpture, Kirili has published articles on the work of Bernini, Matisse, Picasso, Gonzalez, Giacometti, David Smith, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning and Reuben Nakian in a variety of publications, ranging from *Artforum* and *L'Infini* to the *Washington Post*. Many of these essays and articles are to be found in his book *Statuaire*.

The list of art historians and critics who have written about Kirili is impressive. Catalogue essays and interviews have been penned by—among others—Robert Rosenblum, Steven Nash, Kirk Varnedoe, Donald Kuspit, Phyllis Tuchman, Peter Weiermair, Sollers and Kristeva. Many of these writings served as accompaniments to the various one-man exhibitions Kirili has had in Europe and America—at institutions such as the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, West Germany; the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; the Frankfurter Kunstverein; the Musée St. Pierre in Lyons; and the Musée Rodin in Paris.

126 ARTSNEWS

IN RECENT YEARS, KIRILI HAS BEEN MIXING HIS materials and forms in various combinations to create sculptural ensembles of a rather retrospective nature, some small, others quite large. In his 1984-85 "Generations" works, terra-cotta and plaster pieces, as well as single elements from the "Commandments," in either iron or bronze, appear on tabletop- or workbench-type iron surfaces. The results are somewhat reminiscent of David Smith's "Voltri" series, if not of every sculptor's studio-generic sculptors' tables, covered here with capsule histories of Kirili's work. "Generations" is an apt appellation.

Both in individual iron pieces and in these combinations, Kirili has for some time been painting sections or entire elements of the iron in bright primary colors. The artist has also added new materials to his vocabulary: wooden planks and platforms and other found pieces of wood and, notably, forged aluminum. The tops of a new series of vertical aluminum pieces seem to have been ripped right off, leaving

jagged, splintered ends. Referring to their dynamited look, Kirili has said, "Maybe it's because when you reach 40, you just have to explode!" The effect of the painting and the new materials and new placements has been to lighten things up and add complexity. In material and form, the artist's terra-cottas and, to an extent, the plasters have traditionally had a soft, rounded, exploratory intimacy and warmth, while the iron sculptures have had an innate gravity, without being stark or forbidding, or even really minimal. Now, with the artist bursting through to aluminum and mixing and matching forms and materials within individual works, all these categories have been deliberately shaken up.

To some of the larger combinations Kirili has given the title *Concert*. These sculptures include terra-cotta, plaster and bronze elements, as well as the arguably modeled (as opposed to welded or bolted) forged-iron or forged-aluminum parts. The contrast of the weathered wood planks and

platforms serves to emphasize all this modeling, all this facility. "If it's only visual," says Kirili, "it's not about sculpture." Each of the "Concert" pieces includes some variation of the recent modeled sculpture *Large Nudity* (1985), originally shown in its full-scale form at—appropriately enough—Kirili's summer 1985 exhibition at the Musée Rodin in Paris.

"I want to defend the stream of modeling in sculpture," Kirili once said, and he went all out with this large (even in its smaller form) piece of pure, upright, hands-on clay modeling cast in plaster or bronze. The full-scale version of *Large Nudity* (not *Nude*) is, literally, the measure of Kirili's reach—above his head, downward and to the sides. In this respect, like most of his standing pieces, the work reflects the human body. (The smaller modeled pieces are entitled *Small Nudity* and *Maternity*.) Nevertheless, just as the late Henry Moore claimed he was always a figurative sculptor, even in his most abstract-looking works, Kirili maintains that his sculptures are abstract.

Kirili is a whirlwind of sculptural energy, a compendium of sculptural knowledge and opinions. If the many recent references to earlier stages of his own sculpture as well as

to the sculpture of other artists may lead to a sense that he is thinking hard about art history, the work comes through with its freshness intact. The artist has deliberately gambled on reworking certain themes, on injecting an unambiguous dose of nostalgia into the ensemble works, and the gamble seems to have paid off. The ensembles illustrate, both to those who have followed the sculptor's work and to those who are just becoming familiar with its various twists and new manifestations, Kirili's ability to go backward and forward at will in leaps of varying length. Speaking of the placement of *White Commandment* on a lawn in front of the Orangerie in Paris, where it can be visited on the way to or from seeing Monet's *Waterlilies*, he says: "At the Tuileries, the 20th century begins with *The Waterlilies*. My sculpture is both homage and extension. An invitation to go farther."

Cynthia Nadelman, a writer and critic, is a contributing editor of ARTSNEWS.