

## THE IMAGINARY SENSE OF FORM

### Julia Kristeva

**W**e were in the midst of the Gulf War. Our ears were glued to the radio, our eyes to CNN. Each of us was trying to imagine this new electronic theater of so-called surgical death, to get a glimpse of the still improbable scene of a new world order. Death and resurrection, death or resurrection? As chance would have it, at the same time Alain Kirili was exhibiting his *Commandment XI* in Paris: 18 elements of forged iron rising from a polished wood floor—tombstones or buds about to flower, cemetery or springtime, implacable mourning and the intense eruption of a promise of life. This mixture of Hebrew characters, Passion crosses, and phallic verticality summons my phantasms and then soothes them.

I do not think that sculpture consists of pure space, a play of surfaces and volumes, a catastrophe of abstract intensities. It lends its geometry to our projections, body and soul. For, precisely, overwhelmed as it is by stresses and viruses, bombarded by images and missiles, given up to solitude and the crowd, does the modern body still exist, has it not parted with its soul? Disseminated and fragmentary, yet endowed with a tender violence, a new body is being born in Kirili's sculpture, one that signals to our intimate imaginary, and resonates with the tortures and joys for which we still have no words but nonetheless feel in dreaming. Kirili's sculpture is contemporary because it is frankly oneiric. What does this mean?

Consider *Méditerranée* (1985), which brings together an entire series of the artist's earlier procedures: rising parallel bars and the intervals that separate them, height creating new horizontal surfaces, a few touches of the biblical alphabet—a verticality at once grave and playful that seems inhabited by Indian lingams when it's not referring to Burgundian Gothic statuary. But here an oblique surface appears, inverted and juxtaposed triangles colored an azure blue. As if Matisse's paper cutouts were infiltrating the realm of volume, setting it in motion, summoning the eye even more than the touch, and thereby inviting a body, excited from the retina to the flesh, to plunge into the blue matter of a northern sea. Air and water, left and right, high and low, the locus and reference-point of an undulation restored to me by my reverie, according to my own aggressive or peaceable rhythm.



Alain Kirili, *Grande nudité*, 1985, Bronze, 81" high.

*Méditation* (1985) combines wood, plaster, and forged iron, perhaps evoking a Madonna suddenly lowered into an uncouth, austere urban space, her "head" leaning to one side, the movement of drapery, the arm surrounding a small body huddled against the breast. The heterogeneous and clashing materials resound with different timbres: I hear them more than I see them, and the libido they provoke soon involves all my senses in a series of *jouissances*, of complex pleasures now opaque, now soft, sharp, hot, porous, cold, condensed . . .

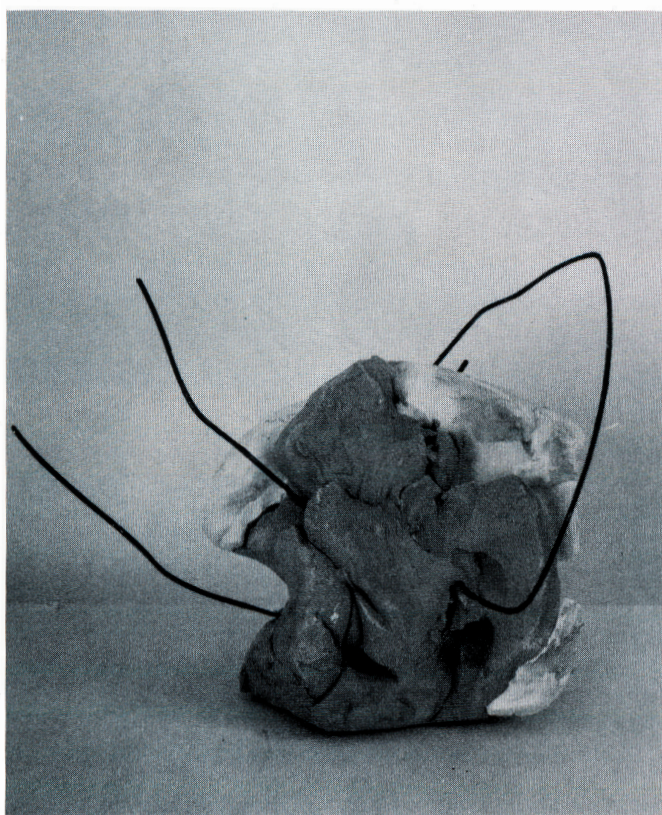
But still my dream has been of a body without flesh, of fibers and muscles under tension, twisting, chiseled, clenched tight and then relaxed. *Grande nudité* and *Petite nudité* (both 1985) abandon the serene assurance of the Greek body, which every modern artist from Giacometti to Barnett Newman, David Smith, Isamu Noguchi, Mark Di Suvero, and John Chamberlain has envied and decomposed. Here, under Kirili's hand, an amorphous mass is at work, translating the secret dynamics of the artist himself, his drives flowing into an object that stands before me.

A series of forged-aluminum pieces culminates in *Oratorio* (1988). High temperatures crumble the metal, which flowers before my eyes, becomes powdery, melts, or, on the contrary, crystallizes. The violence of the gesture with which Kirili hammers his iron pieces or kneads those of clay is here transmuted into an exquisite finesse that presents me with a delicately perishable, ambiguous material, a mass at once rough and flower-like.

Alain Kirili, *Petite nudité III*, 1985, Painted plaster, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 6".  
Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery.



**Sculpture lends its space to the most unsayable aspects of our corporeal experience.**



Alain Kirili, *Noces IV*, 1988, Terra cotta with burned wire, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  14"  $\times$  8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris.

The series of *Noces*, which follow or accompanies the previous series in chronological terms, weds terra cotta to the ductility of metal wire: a nuptial crown, the misshapen wedding band of our untenable yet tenacious unions, an alliance of yin and yang, an amusing, inseparable heaviness and grace.

One notes, then, that Kirili's work proceeds by series and repetitions: that its reprises give rise to spontaneous yet foreseeable variations that register the artist's style, but also his biographical and aesthetic evolution.

The cement pieces called *Ariane Messagère des Dieux* (1990) are thus a logical extension of this serial exploration of materials in which I read the projection of a body and its drives (*un corps pulsionnelle*). Like a synthesis of terra cotta and aluminum, ce-

ment—a profane material if ever there were one—can be both modeled and carved, subjected to the hand as well as to the hammer and chisel. Somewhat surprisingly, it responds to carving with the same fidelity as marble. In this respect I think of Le Corbusier and his chapel of Notre Dame de Ronchamp. And wasn't the original of Picasso's 1932 *Tête de femme en chignon* in cement as well? The plastic force of the *Grande nudité* is recalled here, muscular, pleasurable (*jouissive*), unshakable even when pierced by iron, as in *Ariane absente* (1990). But cement lends this violently beset yet placid volume a supplementary calmness and urbane indifference that was present in neither the terra cotta nor the plasters. Is it possible to make cement *jouissant*, to make cement give and take pleasure? I see these cement pieces, shaped by hand, serious and funny, as resonances of the sidewalks and walls that surround us and that we nonetheless miss as we dash from subway to subway, from job to job. Could Kirili be the sculptor of the pressurized yet pleasure-taking (*jouissif*) body of the city dweller? An exile in the cement sidewalks of Tribeca who hasn't forgotten the French 18th century and the voluptuousness of Rodin?

**E**merging from funerary cults and haunted by eroticism, the immemorial art of sculpture seeks its place in the modern city. It lends its space to the most unsayable aspects of our corporeal experience, to the frontiers of dream, of pleasure, of speechlessness, and of death. The rudimentary materials and extraordinary assemblages that Kirili produces address themselves to our secret imaginaries for which modern life has provided no signs! And which continue to preoccupy us internally while events continue to unfold outside: wars, markets, births, deaths. But ultimately where do the world's events take place? On the television screen? Or in the pneumatic spaces of our bodies, of our sensations, of our imaginaries which, in the final analysis, confer *sense on everything that comes to be (qui advient)*?

Rudimentary materials, extraordinary assemblages. I gaze at Alain's assemblages, I project my phantasms onto them, I lend existence to my passions. I imagine. And I also imagine that others are imagining. Our imaginaries meet or, on the contrary, flee from each other. Scattered and solitary, we try to establish a contact through this intimacy that everyday life is intended to destroy but without which there would nevertheless be no sensible time. Aluminum, terra cotta, plaster, cement: Kirili shapes the obscure sense of our bodies into form and matter before speech arrives to cast light on them. He gives the sacred a profane, robust, approachable existence. At the same time, informed as it is by the history of art and charged with words and myths, his apparent minimalism nourishes my senses and my associations. I love to sound out this moment when sculpture ceases to be a fetish object and unleashes my imagination as it integrates itself into my life. □

*Translated from the French by Philip Barnard*

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