

In Concert, by Raphael Rubinstein

Published in Art America, december 1996.

In recent years, Alain Kirili's sculptural vision has led him to develop several different bodies of work, more or less simultaneously. Depending on mood and occasion, he moves among dramatically vertical sculptures of forged iron or aluminum, vigorously modeled terra-cotta forms and more architectonic structures made from bent and welded sheet metal that has been painted white or black. In addition, he often presents sculptures in groupings where pieces of marble, painted stones, irregularly shaped scrap iron or twists of modeled terra-cotta are placed on low pedestals of wood or metal.

A French-born artist who divides his time between New York and Paris, the 50-year-old Kirili has progressed from the thin, filamentlike forms of his 1970s work to a generally more robust and expressive style. He likes to describe the contrasting geometric and organic elements in his work as an interplay between northern restraint and southern sensuality. Embracing contradictions, he is proud to draw equal inspiration from Barnett Newman, whose *Broken Obelisk* is at the origin of the forged-iron sculptures, and Jean Baptiste Carpeaux, the 19th-century French sculptor known for his exuberantly modeled figures. Such concerns are explicitly evoked in *Nord Sud* (North South), a 1992 work in which each of nine upright iron beams is crowned with a chunk of granite painted rust orange.

While the title *Nord Sud* is easily readable in terms of the sculpture's juxtaposition of cold rectilinear iron and warm organic rock, there is another interpretation which points to a completely new aspect of Kirili's artistic career. In an essay for the catalogue of "Open Form Sculpture," an exhibition of Kirili's work that traveled around the United Kingdom in 1994, British critic William

Jeffet pointed out that the French avant-garde journal *Nord-Sud*, for which the piece was named, was itself a reference to a Paris Metro line. As Jeffet observed, the North-South line was the one which "the poets and writers living in the quarter of Montmartre took to the cafes of Montparnasse, where they could see performances of American jazz music and could visit the famed Bal Nègre cabaret." The "underground" connection Jeffet uncovers between the jazzophile Parisian avant-garde of the Teens and Twenties and a 1992 sculpture by Kirili is hardly accidental: for the past four years Kirili has spent much of his time on collaborative projects with American jazz musicians, among them some of the most respected composers and performers of recent decades.

A longtime jazz fan whose childhood memories include hearing the great clarinetist Sidney Bechet playing in his parents' kitchen, Kirili first became involved with jazz as a sculptor in 1992 when he began a series of exchanges with the American saxophonist Steve Lacy. (Before moving to Paris in 1970, Lacy had played with Thelonius Monk, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor; he also has a long-standing interest in trans-medium collaborations, having frequently worked with Swiss singer Irene Aebi in creating musical settings for texts by Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs and Robert Creeley.) When Lacy and Kirili met in a Parisian jazz club, Kirili, gratified to learn that the musician knew his work, invited Lacy to perform at an upcoming vernissage. In June 1992, at the opening of an exhibition of Kirili's sculptures at the Daniel Templon Gallery in Paris, Lacy walked among the sculptures while playing his soprano saxophone (a straight, clarinetlike instrument which is rarely favored by jazz musicians). Seeking to translate the works' physical presence into melodic lines, he also elicited their unexpected acoustic properties by placing the mouth of his horn inside the volumes of the metal sculptures and letting the tones reverberate. Both artist and musician were excited by this unorthodox concert for saxophone and sculptures, and have since repeated the event in New York and elsewhere.

Kirili's next jazz collaboration, in October 1992, involved a shift of instrumentation. Kirili invited legendary drummer Roy Haynes to set up his drum kit in the sculptor's New York studio. As Haynes played, Kirili, standing at a nearby table, began to rapidly model a series of abstract forms in clay, using his hands to shape three-dimensional responses to Haynes's percussive rhythms. The videotape documenting this encounter, *Jam Session* (1992), shows 16 minutes of the two men trading riffs across the boundaries that divide their two mediums. Part of the excitement of *Jam Session* is in seeing the juxtaposition of two art forms that, in the normal course of things, one would never have associated. I'm willing to bet that the Haynes-Kirili encounter is the first time in modern history that a drummer and a sculptor have worked side by side, though a similar combination must surely have occurred during earlier epochs of human existence. Yet while it is fascinating to watch a consummate musician exercise his art and equally illuminating to see the surprising speed and near violence that goes into the making of Kirili's modeled sculptures, the experiment is ultimately unsuccessful because it pits a seasoned performer, Haynes, against a visual artist whose creative process is essentially private. Kirili seems to have understood this, for his subsequent projects have been structured differently.

Removing himself from the role of performer, Kirili gave the musicians more freedom to interact with his sculptures. In a series of public and private performances, chiefly in New York and Paris, the objects have served as visual settings, musical instruments and even dancing partners. While not every musician is prepared to enter into such unconventional situations, Kirili has met with an enthusiastic response from jazz drummers, sax players and pianists of several generations. But it is above all in the iconoclastic pianist and composer Cecil Taylor that Kirili has found not only a ready collaborator but also an emblem of artistic freedom.

Kirili and Taylor first met in 1992, through Steve Lacy, and since 1995 have been involved in a number of artistic exchanges. Taylor, who has been performing and recording since the mid-'50s, is known for his marathon concerts during which single atonal compositions can last for two

hours or more. In an observation that seems to predict Taylor's later collaboration with Kirili, *New Yorker* jazz critic Whitney Balliett once compared Taylor's powerful playing technique to forging. Taylor, Balliett wrote, "is a hammer and the keyboard is an anvil."¹ This analogy helps suggest why Kirili, a sculptor for whom the forge and the hammer are central, would be responsive to Taylor's performances. Another thing Kirili finds inspirational in Taylor's playing is the musician's physical and visual presence. "It is imperative," Kirili has written, "to hear and see Cecil Taylor. His sonority is linked to his movements and his whole body. His performance begins with his entry from the wings and continues until he leaves the stage. I see him as a continuation of Nijinsky, a pianist Nijinsky."²

One evening in June 1995, Taylor performed at the Knitting Factory in New York. For the occasion, the stage of this downtown music club was filled with Kirili's sculptures. Unlike Steve Lacy with his soprano sax, Taylor, seated at a piano, could not move among the sculptures during his performance nor interact with them directly. The relationship between art and music was more abstract, as Taylor played while surrounded by four 6-foot-high works of bent and welded metal. But when unencumbered by a piano, Taylor doesn't hesitate to take on the sculptures more directly. A 1995 film titled *Ifa*, made by Kirili in collaboration with Chrystel Egal, captures 25 minutes of Taylor's improvised dancing in an installation of Kirili's sculptures in the musician's backyard in Brooklyn. Dressed in his usual sweater, scarf, loose-fitting pants and running shoes, Taylor executes a series of lyrical, playful gestures as he dances among the sculptures, which were similar to those that had graced the stage of the Knitting Factory.

A more ambitious version of the Knitting Factory performance was mounted last summer in Paris at the Cité de la Musique. There, on June 28, in Christian de Portzamparc's distinctive building, Taylor danced, read poetry and played piano among three of Kirili's large sheet-metal sculptures. The Cité de la Musique concert, which was attended by between 400 and 500 people, was the culmination of a series of jazz-and-sculpture events. At the beginning of the month, Kirili published a book charting his involvement with music and musicians. Titled *Sculpture et Jazz,*

Autoportrait (Sculpture and Jazz, Self-Portrait), it's a 250-page valentine to jazz written in a French that sometimes aspires to what Jack Kerouac called "bop prosody": "*Qu'est-ce que la vitesse? Haiku! Alto break! Martelage! Modelage abstrait!*" The book is also filled with Kirili's comments on his own work:

I discovered that in order to model clay I made ambidextrous motions like a be-bop drummer. I warm the metal and when it has become incandescent, I strike it and release a form at once at once bent back and exploded. In aluminum, I succeed in separating the fibers of this material which, suddenly, comes to resemble wood. Whatever materials I'm working with, my actions are done rapidly, with intensity and without correction. As in jazz, the first take is crucial. On the second, there's already a risk of frozen repetition. The feeling of risk is the link between sculpture and jazz. To play jazz, to forge and to model are direct attacks. My blowtorch is a saxophone.³

In some 30 brief chapters, Kirili sketches an esthetics of exchange or what he calls "*transversalité des arts*," citing the activities of Beat Generation writers and independent American filmmakers as similar to his own. Part manifesto, part autobiography of an artist, the book is also a history of jazz, complete with discography and a "*tableau de recontres*" that pairs musicians and artists according to stylistic similarities. Two chapters are devoted to Cecil Taylor, who Kirili characterizes as "excess incarnate." Appropriately, the cover of the book shows Taylor, lying inside one of Kirili's sculptures, using a drum mallet to beat out a rhythm on the sculpture's metal surface.

The same week *Sculpture et Jazz* was published, the opening of an exhibition of Kirili's recent sculptures at Daniel Templon Gallery was enlivened with a performance by drummer Sunny Murray and sax player Urs Leimgruber. On June 21, an outdoor work by Kirili in the Tuilleries was the site of another performance. In a corner of the historic park near the Musée de l'Orangerie, where Kirili's *Le grand commandement blanc* (1986) was being rededicated after its restoration

and reinstallation, Murray, accompanied this time by renowned saxophonist Archie Shepp, improvised amid the sculpture's blocky marble forms on low pedestals.

The demanding music played by musicians such as Murray, Shepp and Taylor is very different from the brand of jazz that has been promoted by the so-called jazz revival of recent years. In contrast to the accessible, be-bop-derived styles which musicians like Wynton Marsalis have helped popularize, Taylor, Murray and Shepp remain true to the tenets of "free jazz," a movement spawned in the 1960s which favors lengthy, free-form, often dissonant improvisation; not the stuff of the jazz brunch.

Kirili's boundless enthusiasm for this radical form of jazz underlines the challenge his collaborative activities present to the traditional conception of sculpture. In a very direct way, Kirili is seeking a new role for sculpture by putting his work into as many different situations as possible. At a time when so many artists seem to be searching for new arenas, Kirili has also stepped out of the confines of the art world. And yet, in a striking paradox, he has done so while keeping within some fairly conventional boundaries: forging, modeling and so forth. Only if one looks carefully can the formal impact of the jazz experiments be detected. In the "Black Sound" series of sculptures (which are among the David Smith-influenced welded-steel works that Sunny Murray has used as percussion instruments) there are pianolike forms and volumes previously unused by the artist. It seems likely that the repeated sight of Cecil Taylor's piano among his sculptures has influenced these new forms.

The Smithian accents in these sculptures remind me of the first conversation I ever had with Kirili about art and jazz. It was a few years before his jazz collaborations began. Kirili had just made a visit to David Smith's former studio at Bolton Landing, New York. While visiting the studio of one of his idols, still preserved by Smith's children as it was when the sculptor was alive, Kirili made a point of looking through Smith's records. I recall Kirili listing the jazz recordings Smith owned and express his certainty that they had been important for Smith's art. On that occasion, I

also recall, Kirili lamented the fact that no American art historians seemed to have picked up on the importance of jazz for Smith and others of that generation.⁴ Kirili joins a long line of French champions of black American culture when, in *Sculpture et Jazz*, he writes, "I am deeply convinced that it's a great time to repay African-American culture and music for its immense contribution to the art of this century. I am not an art historian, but I feel it as a deep necessity in my everyday life."

Another necessity Kirili feels is to wage a struggle against what he sees as the great enemy of art in the United States—puritanism. Here again the genius of Bolton Landing turns up; as Kirili puts it in *Sculpture et Jazz*: "North America is David Smith. As early as 1965 I knew it was necessary to understand the obstacles he had to overcome: American Puritanism." (Kirili obviously has in mind Smith's 1946 sculpture, *Puritan Landscape*.) Repeatedly in *Sculpture et Jazz*, Kirili promotes jazz as an antidote to this perceived American puritanism, which he holds partly responsible for the "tragic lives of great American artists." For him, musicians such as Cecil Taylor are not only great creators, they also offer a distinctly anti-puritan approach to art and life. These adventurous jazz musicians embody the same unity of sensuality and formal rigor, the same insistence of individual freedom from convention, that he seeks in his own art. From this point of view, it is possible to understand Kirili's jazz collaborations as a logical outgrowth of his sculpture. Along with the sculptural heritage of Smith, Newman and Carpeaux, as well as Beat poetry and erotic Indian art (Kirili has written about Indian sculpture [see *Art in America*, May '82] and made a film called *100,000 lingams*), jazz is part of Kirili's recipe for bringing together, in his own promiscuously various sculpture, "north" and "south," geometric volumes and modeled forms, the cultivated sensuality of Paris and the relentless force of New York. In the process, he also seems to have invented a new genre of performance art and, last but not least, provided occasions for a lot of great music.

An exhibition of Alain Kirili's recent work is on view at the Centre d'art contemporain de Castres, near Toulouse [Oct. 16-Nov. 20]. Several of his sculptures will be featured in two evenings of jazz-sculpture interaction with Bill Dixon and others at The Kitchen, New York [Jan. 18-19, 1997].

1. Quoted by Francis Davis in "The Cantos of Cecil Taylor," *Outcats*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 42.

2. Alain Kirili, *Sculpture et Jazz, Autoportrait*, Paris, Editions Stock, 1996, p. 154. (All translations in this article by the author.)

3. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

4. He returns to the subject in *Sculpture et Jazz* (p. 206), linking it to racism.