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Bambara Rhapsodies

By Sarah Lewis

Alain Kirili's method of creating the 2003 "Segou" series is as direct and responsive as improvisation. Done in Segou, Mali, with Bambara blacksmith Toumani B., the forged iron sculptures feature a visual composition, begun without any prior drawings, that results from an unrelenting rhythmic activity. In heating the iron and quickly beating it to create the desired circular and scarification-like forms, Kirili and Toumani produced a distinct

auditory rhythm. After the completion of the work, Kirili invited Toumani Jabati, a Bambara master of the kora, to play in several concerts at the Centre Culturel Français in Bamako, surrounded by the thin vertical sculptures.

Kirili's current engagement with Bambara culture is linked to his 1990s work with the African-American derived culture of jazz. In jazz, syncopation depends on a forceful downbeat. Kirili's sculptures consistently require an analogous force to compose their totemic structure—several quick strong blows to the hot iron create a pattern of staccato accents along flattened and irregular circular planes. His various 1990s sculptural series that prompted jam sessions with musicians such as Roy Haynes and Cecil Taylor made clear the corporeal analogy between the musical and the visual process of facture.

Kirili's sculpture, created over his three-week stay in Segou, also astutely reveals the temporal inaccuracy of the term "traditional" African art. Before the past two decades of scholarship, African-studies specialists were preoccupied with African objects valued for their antique status. Their initial ethnographic classification as artifacts and then artworks inaugurated the idea that culture from sub-Saharan Africa is an antecedent to, or a source of, modern culture and not contemporary to it. Kirili's iron sculpture series offers a

visual reminder that these works belong to cultures that still use them today. Art historians such as John Picton, Salah Hassan, Okwui Enwezor, and Olu Oguibe have aimed to dismantle the inaccuracies of the traditional/contemporary binary, but it is rare to find such conscious statements in the facture of a work of art itself.

Kirili was inspired by the Bambara culture of animism and its material forms infused with spiritual meaning. Working within this framework offered Kirili felt it offered an antidote to the cerebrality of the postminimalist sculpture. He created his series in the spirit of compaignage, travel and artistic collaboration, having previously worked with blacksmiths in Austria and wood carvers in Italy. However, the cultural specificity of the Bambara collaboration held a strong significance for the French sculptor. Kirili's work incorporates the sensory and the haptic-the works are meant to be both evocative and tactile. In his combination of sensory elements, done also through musical collaborations, Kirili approaches a reverence for the Bambara culture that inspired the work.

Kirili is not uptight about his artistic practice engaging with Mali, despite postcolonial theory constantly on the lookout for neo-primitivism, negrophilia or exoticism. This surveillance has only become more pronounced for French artistic practice since Jean-Hubert Martin's infamous 1989 exhibition "Les Magiciens de la Terre." No anxiety is necessary as Kirili's work is not one of appropriation, or 'affinities' as William Rubin proposed in the 1984 survey "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." To engage in a discussion

here about primitivism would miss the mark. Kirili does not aim to undermine the subjectivity of the Bambara blacksmiths. His is not an appropriation but collaboration, just as he collaborated with other western European blacksmiths. Kirili's process of collaboration shows that Bambara animism is not a fossilized culture, but contemporaneous to his own.

Kirili worked with a Bambara blacksmith accustomed to making objects ranging from the ceremonial to the functional, never creating abstract works as he did with Kirili. Only through generational lineage may Bambara men may be able to become blacksmiths. Here, tradition is conceived from its Latin etymology tradere; the skill is "handed over" from father to son, using the same tools, ranging from knife to hammer. The material of the sculptures, made from iron culled from recycling stations containing car and bus parts in Segou, reflects a contemporary method of handing over. By putting Bambara blacksmith skills in the service of iron sculptures, Kirili draws our attention to works often overlooked through a focus on 'traditional' African art.

The historical focus on African objects with 'age-value' and 'authenticity,' particularly Bambara objects, is in large part due to the heightened status of artifacts with significant historical findings and ethnographic scholarship. Pioneering archaeologists Roderick and Susan McIntosh discovered the importance of Mali's archaeological treasures to the history of the extinct Middle Niger society through their late 1970s excavations. Due to extensive ethnographic research on culture groups in Mali beginning in the early 20th century, Malian material

culture has had a high valuation on the African art market, increasing into the early 1990s. Of the most coveted objects are Bambara and Dogon carvings and iron works.

So highly valued are Malian ritual objects that vandalism and pillaging of archaeological sites has plagued the country since the 1970s. Certainly, the loss of archaeological and ritual objects is a widespread concern internationally. Mali has endured such an acute loss that it has become the subject of national and international concern. In 1993, the United States imposed emergency import restrictions on antiquities from Mali in an attempt to help curb vandalism. The frenzied looting activity prompted the Malian government, with assistance by the World Bank, to increase efforts to protect the country's cultural riches.

Many of Mali's cultural heritage programs only reinforce the Western valuation system whereby "authentic" and "traditional" significance are crucial to the object's worth. For example, Mali's most significant cultural heritage initiative, the micro-credit institution known as the Culture Bank, uses certain cultural objects as collateral for small business loans. For the duration of the loan, the objects are displayed in the Culture Bank museum. This program subjects African objects to a Western notion of value, as the degree of object worth is determined not by Malians themselves, but by outside economists concerned with age-value. Kirili's work shifts attention to Mali's contemporary works, in a cultural landscape dominated by the country's antiquities.

Kirili has continually extended the

boundaries of postminimalist sculpture, especially through his engagement with art forms such as jazz. His engagement in Segou further enlarges the scope of his oeuvre. Through a visually innovative sculptural collaboration, Kirili also manages to highlight that Bambara traditions are contemporaneous with our own, offering a necessary and more accurate conceptualization of the term 'traditional' African art.

Sarah Lewis is a curatorial assistant at Tate Modern in London and a graduate student at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She received her MPhil in Economic and Social History from Oxford University, writing her dissertation on contemporary art from Mali that is being edited for publication. She was an undergraduate at Harvard University where she majored in History of Art and Social Studies.