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Alain Kirili

# Hands-on Metal: Alain Kirili

**Alain Kirili** pours, pounds, penetrates, pinches, massages, and erects his objects into being. His sculptures, made of bronze, brass, forged iron, aluminum, and clay, derive their metaphorical weight not only from their form - a characteristically totemic and phallic verticality, with all its manifest sexual symbolism - but at least as much from their manifold registration of the artist's hand on their surfaces, ranging from directly hand-made marks to the tool-mediated impact of, say, a steel bar hitting steel.

**Kirili's** sculptures typically rise from the ground and into the sky, often above most people's eye level, at once grounded in the earth and looming overhead; thus they manage to project the hieratic hauteur of totems all the while being the subject of touch, each of them a harvest of touches cast into metal, their skins inviting you to come close, with the haptic promise of all the marks that have impressed the surface and defined the form. (Touching the work is allowed and even encouraged.) Converging in these works are the attrib-

This and following pages: sculptural installations by Alain Kirili at the Palais Royal, Paris, Spring-Summer 2005.





utes of recent icons, of classical Modernist sculptural objects - think for example of Brancusi's finely honed verticals - as well as of the High Conceptual non-object, the product of "process." They celebrate emotional immediacy, tactility, sensuality, sexuality and pleasure.

**Born** in France in 1946, as a young man Kirili first found his intellectual orientation around his association in the late Sixties with Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva and the Tel Quel literary group. He began to make sculpture in the early Seventies, and in 1972 had his first show at Sonnabend in Paris. Kirili went on to exhibit at Sonnabend both in Paris and then New York, where he met luminaries like Robert Rauschenberg (whom he credits with inviting him to New York), Robert Morris and Robert Ryman.

**The** work he exhibited at Sonnabend in 1972 echoed the impersonal industrial esthetic of the moment (Kirili himself describes it in his CV as "a sheet of cold-cut zinc."). Like many artists looking for a sense of form and direction in the mid-Seventies, in the immediate wake of the High Conceptual moment, Kirili seems to have been initially influenced by Conceptual esthetics; but also like a number



of artists emerging in the Seventies, he ultimately grew dissatisfied and began to search for a different foundation for his work.

**Kirili** effectively declared his independence from a Conceptualism whose icons include all the famous figures of the Sixties and Seventies, from Smithson and Serra to Lewitt and Matta-Clark, et al, and who together established a putative 40-year (and counting) reign of critical and theoretical imperatives over, if you like, "affirmative" imperatives - sensuality, eroticism, ritual, celebration. We've seen this sort of thing before in the history of the 20th century experiment with esthetic radicalism, with artists like Giacometti and Guston, who adopted and in many cases innovated the most cutting-edge esthetics of their time before reverting to work that was both more conservative and more individually felt. Kirili's trajectory offers certain parallels a generation or two later. Having found the rule and games of High Conceptual art wanting, Kirili quit playing for the team, and looked for another way.

This and following pages:  
Alain Kirili working on a lost-wax sculpture at the Atelier Susse in Paris. (Observing is the philosopher Paul Audi.)



**Sex:** Perhaps there is so much sexuality in Kirili's work in part because when he began to make art, sex had been so rigorously expunged; just try to find it among the usual main suspects of Minimalism and Conceptual art. Kirili first produced his tributes to erotic exuberance in the mid-Seventies. He was not of course alone or first in taking this direction - he had lots of female company. A number of artists emerging in the Sixties and early Seventies, notably women (Eva Hesse, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke) had been making work with pronounced sensual, sexual and erotic dimensions, and variously informed by psychoanalysis and feminism. Like them, Kirili developed an esthetic position and a body of work out of an underlying sense of resistance to and repudiation of the prevailing avant-gardism. Like them, he went on to formulate his own esthetics grounded in sexuality and the body. The great difference is that Kirili developed an "esthetics of ecstasy" with a decidedly masculine cast, which invokes the brawny lineage of Rodin, Picasso, Brancusi, Matisse, Giacometti, Julio Gonzalez, Barnett Newman, and David Smith.

**Kirili's** turning away from High Conceptual esthetics also took him on a singular trajectory outside of the Western tradition - toward India and then Africa. Kirili in 1978 traveled to India, where he came face to face with Yoni-Lingam sculptures, and where he began to work with combinations of terra cotta and iron. The vaginal/phallic forms of Yoni-Lingam sculptures offered Kirili both a formal template for his subsequent work and contributed to the intellectual underpinnings for the development of an explicit "esthetics of ecstasy," which Kirili now championed both as an artist and a theorist: in 1979 he lectured on "Ecstasy





in Baroque Sculpture" at the Museum of Modern Art to mark the museum's first acquisition of his work, the sculpture Indian Curve. In 1980 Kirili and his wife the artist Ariane Lopez-Huici moved into a loft on White Street in New York.

**Since** those formative years Kirili has guided himself by his esthetics of ectasy, and particularly, I would say, by the nexus of the sexual and the sacramental that is to be found in some Indian and African art. He has returned to India, to photograph Yoni-Lingam sculpture in a temple at Tanjore (Thanjavur), and he has gone to Western Africa, where he comes into contact with and draws from traditional indigenous sculptural techniques and concepts. In recent years Kirili has been casting and forging his bronze and iron totems in either of two workshops; one is the famed Atelier Susse in Paris (where, Kirili points out, Picasso and Matisse cast their bronzes); the other is a village foundry in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Recent work sessions at both the Atelier Susse and Ouagadougou are documented in the accompanying selection of photos.



Work on paper, 1996.



**In** late April 2005 Kirili installed two sets of his sculptures, one in cast bronze, one of forged iron, on the grounds of the Palais Royal in Paris. "I wanted to create a dialogue with the gardens and architecture, which constitute an acme of French taste," wrote Kirili about this recent outdoor installation. "I chose the lawn because my hymn to verticality and lightness accompanies the architectonic and landscaped ensemble. In fact, it's a matter of personal survival in opposition to all the expressions of disenchantment, moribund heaviness, and negativity that our era labors to impose. This dialogue is a gesture that is both artistic and profoundly political."

**It** may be surprising to hear Kirili invoke politics in regard to an installation of abstract sculptures, but in fact Kirili's activities as an artist are political in many ways. Active as a sculptor since 1972, Kirili has a history of realizing public art projects in Paris under the auspices of French cultural institutions. In 1996 he was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to develop

This and following pages:  
Casting bronze sculpture in a foundry in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.





installations of sculpture in the Tuileries; he is currently working on a sculpture project for the Massena neighborhood in Paris in collaboration with architect Christian de Portzamparc; and Kirili's series "Correspondances" will be the subject of an exhibition at the Musee d'Orsay this coming January. Politics, in the sense of navigating political and bureaucratic processes, is of course essential to such projects, and Kirili has proven himself exceptionally adept at it. Having seen and lunched before them, I can report that Kirili's totems, with their opulence of material, sensuality, and affirmation of a now-classic legacy of modernist abstraction, cut charming figures within the formal majesty of a French garden. They looked like rough-hewn dandies ushered into the parlor of a very formidable lady.

Robert Knafo







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# Open's Open.

It's a great pleasure to announce to SV readers the launch of Open Gallery, a private gallery of contemporary art. Open is located at 62 Leroy Street, NYC. The launch exhibition (June 24 - through August 12) featured work by Bodo Korsig. The first Fall 2005 exhibition at Open features new paintings by Cindy Tower. **Cindy Tower: Site 128 Paintings of the Brooklyn Navy Yard** runs from September 7 to October 1.

Upcoming fall-winter 2005 exhibitions at Open will feature new work by Paul Pagk, Doug Henders, and Kenny Hunter. Please watch for Open Gallery email announcements, as well as ads in forthcoming issues of Modern Painters magazine. SV readers are cordially invited to visit Open.

Best,  
Robert Knafo  
*Director*

**Open is open by appointment.**

**For more information please call 917.340.3760 or email [office@studiovisit.net](mailto:office@studiovisit.net).**

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