

A Game for Two or More Players: Kirili, Steichen, Mallarmé by Raphael Rubinstein

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In many respects, Alain Kirili is the ideal artist for the Musée d'Orsay's "Correspondances" series of exhibitions. Over the last several decades he has repeatedly sought to bring his work into concrete dialogue with his illustrious predecessors. Many artists think deeply about their relationship to art of the past but it is rare to find a contemporary artist who is so enthusiastic about having his work share physical space with works made in previous decades, in distant centuries. Rather than being an expression of any nostalgic affinity for other historical periods, Kirili's insistence on juxtaposing his sculptures with older works is a radical act of recontextualization. "Kirili resists the linearity of an art history that would keep each artist snug in his own time," as Anne Rochette and Wade Saunders observed in an article on a 2002 exhibition that brought together works by Kirili and the 19th century French sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux.'

As Kirili himself observes in the accompanying interview (see p. 26), he was drawn to Edward Steichen's photographs (ill. 2,16 and 17) of Rodin's *Balzac* for this project because of the relationship that sculpture and photography have to light, and also because of the verticality that his sculptures share with Rodin's monument to the great novelist. While there are indeed affinities between Kirili's work and Rodin's masterpiece, Kirili's privileging of verticality, which is so evident in the present sculpture, also draws on other sources. Although Kirili was born in France, began his career in Paris and remains closely involved with the French art scene and proud of the European heritage that his art draws on, it is impossible to fully understand his achievement as a sculptor without acknowledging the crucial impact of American art.

Since the early 1970s, when Kirili made the shift from a conceptually-based practice to one focused on freestanding abstract sculpture, the work of Barnett Newman and David Smith have been crucial to his artistic development. Kirili's erect shafts of forged iron, for instance, are clearly related to the vertical "zips" that punctuate Newman's fields of color. Kirili also learned from the sculptures of Willem De Kooning, at a time when few people were paying attention to that aspect of De Kooning's oeuvre.

Rather than viewing Abstract Expressionism as a closed historical chapter, Kirili recognized it as a foundation for further breakthroughs, a project to be continued and never completed. In New York, Kirili developed in tandem with a generation of painters and sculptors of his age that arose in the wake of Minimalism. If, initially, these Post-Minimalists were biased against the object, in the 1970s artists such as Joel Shapiro and Richard Serra, as well as Kirili, embraced a new physicality in their work. It is one of the great strengths of Kirili's work to draw on diverse sculptural approaches. In works such as his *Commandment* (ill. 12) series he employs the scattered field associated with Post-Minimalists such as Barry Le Va, and the serial imagery of Minimalism, while simultaneously engaging the Cubist-derived formal invention that reaches back to David Smith and Julio Gonzalez.

Painting, too, has been important to Kirili, and his sculptures benefit from being considered in the context of several generations of New York abstract painters, from the elegant materiality of Brice Marden, to the restrained geometry of Robert Mangold and the philosophical biomorphism of Jonathan Lasker. As abstraction in painting and sculpture has come under increasing pressure during the last quarter century, or longer, artists such as these have continued to argue, forcefully and without nostalgia, for its importance. And nowhere, perhaps, is this more evident than in New York.

Over the last three decades, Kirili has contributed to, and thrived on, the city's unique blend of broad esthetic community and individual artistic ambition.

"For Rodin, I feel, much more than admiration, a deep creative affinity. The Rodin Museum has been the site of inspiration in Paris for me during my childhood, my adolescence and my life as an artist."²

This is only one of the many occasions on which Alain Kirili has spoken about the importance that Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) has had for him as an artist. This trans-epochal affinity has found concrete expression in two previous exhibitions: in 1985, Kirili exhibited three of his own sculptures in the gardens of the Musée Rodin in Paris, and in 1999, the San Francisco Museums of Fine Art mounted *Alain Kirili: A Dialogue with Rodin*, a show that juxtaposed Kirili's sculptures with Rodin's as well as works by Carpeaux, Picasso and Monet.

This exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay is, thus, the third time that Kirili has had the opportunity to signal and explore his passionate relationship to his great predecessor. Because Rodin's work is present through Steichen's photographs, a third artist, as well as another medium, joins this party. And through the title that Kirili has given his multipart, polychrome, forged-iron sculpture, *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais la sculpture* (ill. 1) (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Sculpture*), a fourth figure, that of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, is also summoned to this temporary feast. Mallarmé (1842-98) and Rodin were great friends and enthusiastic supporters of each other's work as, it's worth noting, were Steichen and Rodin. When the sculptor was under attack for the Monument to Balzac, Mallarmé wrote a letter to him in praise of the work and joined a committee to raise money to buy the sculpture after it had been refused by its original sponsors, the Société des Gens de Lettres. In the early 1890s, Rodin gave Mallarmé a plaster *Faun* and *Nymph*, which was on display during the poet's famous Tuesdays, and planned to do his bust.

Upon Mallarmé's death in 1898, Rodin lamented, "What a great, noble man he was! Poets and artists, we are overwhelmed." He was one of the 30 people who attended the funeral.

The three spirits that Kirili has summoned are key figures in the history of modernism (even if Steichen's achievement is not quite on the order of Rodin's and Mallarmé's). The sculpture itself does something of the same kind by creating a lively artistic dialogue with 20th-century art. Made of four freestanding elements when I first saw it at Kirili's New York studio in the summer of 2005, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Sculpture* initially broke into two pairs: two narrow sculptures that are formed of a repeating oval-and-shaft motif, and two wider sculptures that use similar oval-and-shaft forms near their bases but then spread out into thinner, flatter, more irregular shapes. If the narrower elements seem like turbulent descendents of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, the broader sculptures, with their frontal presence and cut-out contours, evoke the sculptures of David Smith. But this coupled arrangement was not to last. In the fall, shortly before the sculptures were to be shipped to Paris, Kirili urgently invited me back to his studio: he had added a fifth sculpture. It also possesses cut-out contours and Smithian frontality, but is painted a vibrant red and stands taller than any of the other pieces. It was immediately evident that this fifth element broke the symmetry of the earlier 2-plus-2 structure. *A Throw of the Dice* features other aspects that work against symmetry and sameness. In particular, the paint that has been applied to the surfaces of these tall forged-iron works invites us to view each sculpture as a unique presence. One is red, one is white, one a rich yellow, one shiny silver and one a mixture of pink, white and gray. Not only the colors but also the handling of the paint varies from piece to piece. The most dramatic difference is found in the pink paint, which has been applied with vigorous brushwork, in startling contrast to the smoothly applied paint on the other three pieces. If this sensuous paint is meant to evoke the human body (and, not

incidentally, Rodin's erotic watercolors), it also can remind one, especially near the base, of veined marble. The sculptures of the ensemble also differentiate themselves in their range of reflective qualities: the silver form throws off light almost like a mirror; the yellow piece seems to soak up color from the surrounding air like a sponge; the white sculpture, which looks like it has just emerged from a vat of thick milk, seems at once reflective and opaque; the deep red seems to open a vivid fissure within the surrounding atmosphere.

Closer inspection of the painted-metal surfaces reveals still more differences. The flat areas of the yellow, red and white forms display a pattern of 3-to-4-inch-long hammer marks made during the creation of the work, while the silver and pink/gray elements possess smoother, though by no means mechanical surfaces. Another sign of their handmade quality is evident in the slight crookedness of sculptures which subtly lean and twist as they rise up from their bases. In his acceptance of these "imperfections," or rather by defining his sculptural practice in such a way that the innate properties of the materials and techniques are allowed to persist in the finished work, Kirili has undoubtedly been influenced by his recent sojourns in Mali, where he has worked alongside local artists. At the same time, by enthusiastically applying color to these sculptures he has rejected the notion of "truth to materials" that many Western artists embraced in the 20th century. Actually, this quest for formal purity goes back further than the 20th century, especially in sculpture. One thinks of those chilly Classicists who either didn't know or conveniently forgot that Greek marble statues were originally painted with vivid colors.

Kirili talks about realizing, after he had finished *A Throw of The Dice*, that the forms of the narrow sculptures are reminiscent of Early Cycladic art, specifically the "violin" figures where the forms are somewhere between a musical instrument and a female body. Given Kirili's long and passionate involvement with jazz, it's no surprise to also learn that this connection was deeply pleasing to him. In fact, his own sculptures have frequently been utilized as unorthodox musical scores by some of the most respected jazz musicians of our time, and it's entirely possible that one day *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Sculpture* may also contribute to the universe of human sound. Actually, it already has, thanks to the hammer blows that were required to make the sculpture. If the striking of a hammer in an iron forge seems to have a tenuous relationship to music, listen to Kirili's mid-1990s description of how, with his mind on David Smith and Charlie Parker, he went to his studio to hammer a few shafts of iron. "The anvil is the secret origin of music and of deep sculpture. I'm going to record my hammer blows in the brief instant of the incandescence of the red-hot iron."³

So, the hammer blows that activate the surfaces of two sculptures in *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Sculpture* are imprints, even primitive recordings of sound. doesn't mean that Kirili creates sculptures for their musical properties. On the contrary: speaking about several sculptures with musical titles, the artist wrote, "It's only in studying them by touching the surfaces of these sculptures that I discovered their resonances. My sculpture does not refer to any musical instrument: it is not functional."⁴

Kirili also saw connections (again, after the fact) to Picasso's *Bathers* (1956), a group of flat sculptures that in their ensemble create volume. An even closer relationship can be traced to one of Kirili's own sculptures, *Concert I* (1985). An important work in the artist's development, *Concert I* consists of four variously sized abstract elements of bronze, terracotta, forged iron on a low wooden platform. Like *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Sculpture* (and like Picasso's *Bathers*, and Giacometti's ensembles of *walking figures*), *Concert I* is a group of forms that exist in relation to one another, a family of bodies in space. As such, the spaces between them take on just as much importance as the individual forms themselves.

And here, of course, we come back to Mallarmé's revolutionary poem that has given this sculpture

its title, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*⁵. Breaking with all convention, Mallarmé, at the end of the 19th century, arranged the isolated phrases of his poem to be read across the pages of an open book. In his introduction to the poem, he likened it to a musical score. Some pages of the poem contain only three or four words. The typographical layout leaves the reader free to navigate among the words, thus inaugurating the idea of the open work that would only come to full fruition in the middle of the next century. Celebrating that great freedom and extending it, Alain Kirili continues to explore the spaces between sculptural forms, as well as the interaction of artists working in different mediums. Nothing will abolish sculpture, he promises us, nor, by extension, any of the other magical tools that we claim, and invent, as human beings.

1 Anne Rochette and Wade Saunders, "Keeping Company," *Art in America*, December 2002, p. 67.

2 Alain Kirili, *Statuaire*, Paris, Denoël, 1986, p. 89.

3 Alain Kirili, *Sculpture et Jazz*, Paris, Stock, 1996, p. 67. _4 Ibid., p. 69.

5 Written in 1897 and published in 1914, Paris, Nouvelle Revue française.