

THE EYE OF HITLER

By Robert O. Paxton

Alain Kirili's sculpture installation was partly inspired by a famous photographic image. On Sunday morning, June 23, 1940, Adolf Hitler, flanked by two companions, stood looking out on conquered Paris. Hitler's photographer Heinrich Hoffmann took a picture of the three men that has become one of the iconic representations of the Nazi era.

This was Hitler's only visit to Paris. France had just accepted his terms for an armistice the day before. Hoffmann's photograph shows Hitler looking at the city with the eye of a conqueror, triumphing in his vengeance over the nation that had defeated Germany in 1918. At this moment Hitler has Paris and France in his power.

Hitler is also looking at Paris with the eye of the artist he claimed to be. He is said to have told Arno Breker, his preferred sculptor, in the spring of 1940, "I will not enter [Paris] with generals. I will enter with my artists."¹ And so he did. Standing on Hitler's right is Breker, a hyper-realist sculptor whose principal theme was the perfect Aryan male body. Standing on Hitler's left is Albert Speer, the Führer's favorite architect, devoted to

¹ Breker told this story to Jean Cocteau in May 1942. See Cocteau, *Journal 1942-1945*. Texte établi, présenté, et annoté par Jean Touzot (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 128.

grandiose neo-classical nationalism. Their presence shows that Hitler intended to act as a conqueror in the arts also.

As these three Germans posed on the Trocadéro in June 1940, Hitler had already begun taking vengeance on the cultural establishment that had rejected him in his youth. He knew that art was essential to a people's cultural identity, and he intended to shape German art according to his own taste, and make it serve national agendas of chauvinism and conformity. He had already announced his intention to destroy what he called the "decadent art" of the modernist pioneers and non-conformists.

Kirili's installation is called "Geste de Résistance." Alain Kirili resists and effaces Hitler's image with three vertical figures that stand in absolute contrast to the three German victors. Whereas the "verticality" of Hitler, Speer, and Breker in the famous photograph stands for domination, power, and the imposition of a new order, the "verticality" of Kirili's installation is uncoercive, open, receptive, but resistant. His three figures do not impose an order. They invite the viewer's response in a creative exchange. They evoke liberty and dialogue and independence of spirit. Alain has told me that "the energy of my verticalities comes from the same modern and affirmative force as the famous 'Zips' and the *Here 1*, *Here 2*, and *Here 3* sculptures by the painter Barnett Newman. Newman is the vertical antidote to Fascism and its kitsch."

It is entirely appropriate that Kirili's "Geste de Résistance" should be installed in Caen. One of the most thoroughly devastated of French cities during the campaigns of Liberation, Caen was also a city of resistance. Inhabitants of Caen scouted the German units stationed there for Allied intelligence services. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, sixty-nine resistance fighters imprisoned in Caen by the Germans were massacred by their jailers. Caen is one of the eighteen communes in France that were recognized with the Medal of the Resistance.

Caen is also a city with a powerful sense of history and memory. One of the decisive battles in the war against Hitler was waged here. At the edge of the city stands the Caen Memorial, which presents that war to visitors in such a way as to preserve its memory without any trace of nationalism. Alain Kirili's sculpture is installed within the walls of the castle of William the Conqueror, restored and newly opened to the public after the bombardments of 1944. The castle now shelters a Musée des Beaux-Arts and a Musée de Normandie, as well as a modern and contemporary sculpture park.

To gain another perspective on Alain Kirili's "Geste de Résistance," let us return to the Trocadéro. Just a few metres to the west of spot where Hitler and his two associates gazed over Paris as conquerors, stands the Musée de l'homme. The government of Léon Blum created the Musée de l'homme for the World's Fair of 1937, *L'Exposition*

internationale des arts and techniques dans la vie moderne. Under the direction of Paul Rivet, the Museum was beginning to replace an older colonialist ethnography – as represented by the Colonial Exposition of 1931 where “native peoples” were on display – with the gradually emerging view that every culture and every language has the same intrinsic value, that there are no “higher” and “lower” civilizations. Rivet’s student Claude Lévi-Strauss was to bring that new consciousness fully into being.

Alain Kirili works spontaneously within this new consciousness. He feels deep kinship with the African artisans and sculptors among whom he worked in Mali and Burkina Faso, with their frank acceptance of sensuality, their feeling for textures and colors, and their skill as artisans. All of his work resists the domineering nationalism of Hitler’s aesthetic. Where Hitler is triumphant and chauvinistic, Kirili is a “rooted cosmopolitan,” to employ the term of Anthony Appiah, engaged in free artistic exchange with other peoples without losing his own identity.

The Musée de l’homme relates to Kirili’s *Geste de Résistance* in an even more direct way. In the summer of 1940, the linguist Boris Vildé and other scholars attached to the Musée de l’homme established one of the very first movements of the French Résistance. Working in the Museum’s basement, they gathered information, arranged for the escape of Allied prisoners and downed pilots, and published a mimeographed journal entitled *Résistance*, whose purpose was to keep hope alive and provide information

contrary to the official propaganda of Vichy and the Germans.

Unfortunately an informer infiltrated the Musée de l'homme group. Vildé and his colleagues were arrested in early 1941. Emprisoned at first at La Santé and then at Fresnes, Vildé read voraciously, studied Greek and Sanskrit, and kept a prison diary in which he came to terms with death as an appropriate end to a life in which risk and adventure had been central; with the gift of his wife's love; and with the possibility of an afterlife. As he wrote in his final letter to his wife, "Il est beau de mourir complètement sain et lucide, en possession de toutes ses facultés spirituelles. Assurément c'est une fin à ma mesure qui vaut mieux que de tomber à l'improviste sur un champ de bataille ou de partir rongé par une maladie."²

Vildé and six of his colleagues were shot by firing squad at the Fort du Mont Valérien, in the Paris suburb of Suresnes, on February 23, 1942. The execution team had installed four stakes for the seven condemned men. Vildé insisted on being shot among the last. Alain Kirili's vertical figures remind me powerfully of these men standing at their stakes, upright and defiant in a final "geste de résistance." Their gaze at the firing squad annihilates utterly the gaze of the transient victor of June 1940.

² Boris Vildé, "Journal et lettres de prison, 1941-1942," *Les Cahiers de l'IHTP*, Cahier No. 7 (février 1988), p. 130.