

EMBODIMENT AND LANGUAGE: ALAIN KIRILI'S CALLIGRAPHY IN THE ROUND

Back in 2004 I organized a pocket-sized retrospective for Alain Kirili at the New York Studio School consisting of a mere dozen works ranged across his then thirty-year career. From the installers point of view, what this selection lacked in volume it made up for in density and mass. Especially irksome to them was *Summation*, 1981, a squat totem pole in forged iron of a little over four feet high that nonetheless weighed a ton. Strapping tattooed building crew had to heave it onto blankets, an inch at a time, their collective toil accompanied by much cursing.

The artist came by the next day to inspect my placement and announced himself delighted. But he did want *Summation* brought out into the room more. Taking a deep breath I prepared to summon the teamsters, but Alain already had his creation in a bear hug and with a couple of deft twists of his frame, and barely so much as a grunt, had the piece exactly where he wanted it. A short man with the sweetest smile, Kirili is nonetheless, as a friend of mine said about his own father, "built for violence."

This body image tallies readily enough with an artist who, in hands-on collaboration with traditional artisans in Virginia or in Mali, works the ageless craft of smithery, beating into piping hot extensions of metal his desired bends and kinks. And yet the same frame and muscle are equally responsible for the exquisite filament of weightless wire or the almost draped arrangement of rubber hose in the *Aria* series. Adjacent to *Summation* at the Studio School was *Indian Curve*, 1976, a work in the same series as MoMA's *Curve Number Three*, 1977-78, whose elements are a terracotta base and the eponymous curve of steel wire whose shape is solely secured through corner placement. Kirili-*lite* makes one think of Morton Feldman whose friends remarked upon the cognitive dissonance of an awkward, corpulent, earthy man issuing notes of great delicacy and poise from the piano. Weight always seems significant in Kirili's work, whether it asserts itself through absence or presence.

Though he works in many different materials, Kirili essentially has two expressive concerns: embodiment and language. Much has been written and theorized about the language of sculpture since he came up as a sculptor in the 1970s, in an era, furthermore, intellectually dominated by linguistics, structuralism and post-structuralism. In the late 1960s, in Paris, he was associated with writers around the journal *Tel Quel*, including Julia Kristeva who has written movingly about his work on a number of occasions. In New York, where in the 1970s he began to divide his time with Paris, he connected with pioneers of conceptual and minimal art and their champions, amongst them Carl Andre, Keith Sonnier, Joseph Kosuth, Lucy Lippard and Marcia Tucker. His closest affinities, as a sculptor, were reserved for artists who, like himself, while accepting the logic of reduction nonetheless found ways to invest their practice with personal

expression, traces of creative process, and socially inflected meanings of craft. Jene Highstein, Martin Puryear and Joel Shapiro fit this description.

The anti-illusional aspect of the late 1960s aesthetic and the priority placed on process hold an enduringly central place in Kirili's outlook. He attaches considerable significance, for instance, to the fact that his work in this current exhibition will be executed on site, perhaps in direct response to the formerly industrial surroundings.

Beyond a generational concern with the *language* of sculpture there is also, in Kirili, a particular acuity towards what could be called the *sculpture* within language. By this I mean a physical, dimensional sensation of language, whether uttered or written. His extensive *Commandments* series, to take one example, makes concrete an embodied relationship with script. The artist was moved by an encounter with a scribe on the Lower East Side of New York in which he discovered the link between the font used in Torah scrolls and ancient stone-carved lettering, vindicating a sense of the letter as a sculptural form. In the *Commandments* series – a tangible realization of the ideographic origins of alphabets – henge-like formations of low-to-the-ground, individualized sculptural glyphs convey the simultaneous autonomy and interdependence of signs.

Long predating his attraction to Hebrew script, Kirili has an intimate creative rapport with Chinese calligraphy. As a student in Paris he took up penmanship with the legendary Korean-born artist Ung No Lee, lessons that manifestly continue to animate his very distinctive mode of drawing, whatever material is being used. But sculpture is his mode, and in sculpture he has taken calligraphy into three dimensions.

His response to masterpieces of calligraphy is instinctual, but as with his relationship to Jewish art, African tribal art, traditional smithery, and the art of old and modern masters from Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and August Rodin to Julio Gonzalez and David Smith, Kirili's approach always combines artistic affinity and scholarly investigation. With the Chinese masters he was particularly moved by the legends of ecstatic drunkenness on the part of practitioners of cursive script, thinking perhaps of the Tang dynasty calligrapher Zhang Xu, also known as Bogao, who was said to become so drunk that, to his own astonishment, he would find on coming to that he had used his own hair as a brush. Drink was a way to release the spirit, to allow the brush to "gallop" across the page, as Zhang put it.

Kirili, though he has a Frenchman's nose for wine, doesn't emulate such practices, but clearly what excites him about these legends is the sense of the body being present and the mind not getting in its way. It is telling that a late 1980s series of highly expressive, *fa presto* wire and terracotta pieces that revisited, in terms of basic materials but with an entirely new expressive energy, his austere creations of the early 1970s should have been titled *Ivresse*

(drunkenness) in homage to the creative principles of Rimbaud and Baudelaire. Kirili is in many ways a romantic (however that might undermine his postminimal and post-structuralist credentials) almost seeming to share Michelangelo's notion of liberating the body within the block. Except that in Kirili, there is no Platonic archetype, no *a priori* image or form. Instead, process itself is the embodiment of release. He is very fond of the term "incarnated" in speaking about sculpture and this goes to the heart not only of his idea of sculpture but also sculpture's relationship to music and dance. He and his wife, the photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici, for as long as they have lived in their Tribeca loft, have hosted performances of free improvisation jazz and dance, often pairing the performance with their own works or that of guest artists. This is no mere sideline or hobby for Kirili, no "*violon d'Ingres*," but goes to the essence of his sense of the erotics of creativity.

While Kirili rejects the Cartesian duality of mind and body, there is, in his Arias, an almost fugue-like relationship between elements chasing and embracing each other like lovers. The black tubular rubber and the steel wire of the sculptures on view here dance a duet, as do the lines and smudges of charcoal in these works on paper. The thicker material is voluptuous, curvaceous, forced to acknowledge its own bends and twists, and it is weighted, pulling the sculpture towards the ground. The wire, on the other hand, seems weightless, and spirals upwards like smoke. Musically, the tubes are like slow, low notes, the wire fast, high ones. In a similar vein, art historically speaking, the tubing recalls Robert Morris's sheets of felt, exploring the phenomenology of embodiment, while the wire brings to mind those sculptors who pursued the idea of drawing in space, like Picasso, Calder or Smith. In Kirili's notion of three-dimensional calligraphy, language and the body are one.