

# Alain Kirili

WITH ROBERT C. MORGAN

On the occasion of the current exhibit *The Drawing Show: Lines in Charcoal, Ink, Watercolor, Galvanized Iron and Black Rubber* (January 3 – June 30, 2012), the sculptor Alain Kirili and Contributing Editor Robert Morgan paid a visit to the *Rail's* headquarters to talk about his life and work.

**ROBERT C. MORGAN (RAIL):** What was your motivation in coming to New York City in the '60s?

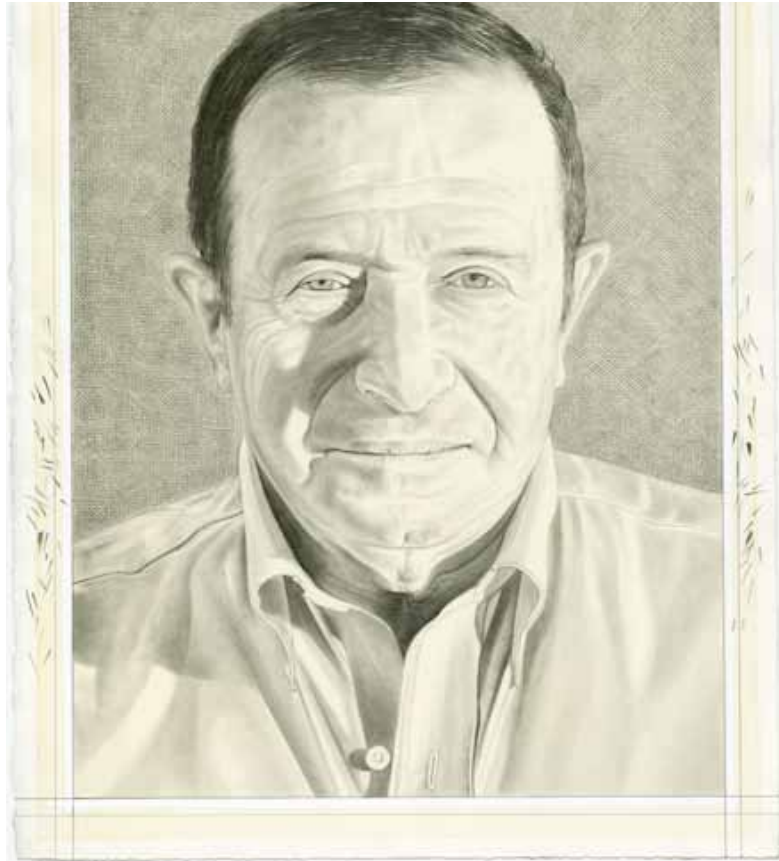
**ALAIN KIRILI:** I was born in 1946, so I belong to the first generation of artists after the Second World War. In fact, when I reached the age of about 18 or 20 years, I felt that the major artists in France were writers and philosophers. The milieu that stimulated me the most was really Tel Quel and Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva, all of whom became my very close friends. I collaborated with them on many projects, so Paris gave me the best exposure to literature and philosophy. Slowly I became familiar with the American art; I mostly heard about Jackson Pollock.

**RAIL:** I know that David Smith was a major influence on you. Did you ever meet him?

**KIRILI:** No, but in 1965 I saw my first David Smith sculpture at the Musée Rodin in Paris. In fact, it was that series of sculptures, *Cubi*, that made me decide to go to the United States. I thought that if a country could give such a thing as *Cubi* to the world I should probably go to that country; I felt they were the most important sculptures I had ever seen in modern art. When I received my B.A. in 1965, my parents gave me a trip to the United States as a gift.

**RAIL:** I recall that you traveled extensively throughout the United States during that visit. You didn't just come to New York; you were interested in discovering what the country was about.

**KIRILI:** Yes, I traveled to different cities on the Greyhound bus.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**RAIL:** And what impressed you the most during those travels?

**KIRILI:** That it was impossible, at least I felt, to be a French artist if you had not been to America. When you discover the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, Detroit Institute of Art; when you see "La Grand Jatte" and "Les Grandes Baigneuses" or the whole room of Marcel Duchamp in the Arensberg Collection, you wonder what it means to be a French artist if you have not seen those masterpieces. That was my first shock in the U.S.

**RAIL:** As a sculptor, did the outdoor landscapes and magnificent natural structures you must have been exposed to while traveling have an impact on you?

**KIRILI:** Not really, but the museums and jazz clubs did.

**RAIL:** Jazz, of course, being so much a part of your work for at least 15 years, maybe longer. I remember when I first became acquainted with your work, partly because there was a book called *Conceptual Art* edited by Ursula Meyer, published by Dutton (1972), and you were one of the artists it featured. As you know, I eventually wrote a dissertation on conceptual art; at that time in the early 1970s there wasn't that much material on the subject. Then sometime in the late 1980s, I believe it was in SoHo, I immediately recognized you as the artist who had done this work, but obviously this kind of analytic, conceptual mode of thinking—which, as I recall, had a lot to do with mathematics and numbers—eventually that moved into another direction. At the time we met, I think you were pretty much on the direction that you have pursued ever since. Would you recall how you shifted from this kind of analytic approach to a more, shall we say, expressive content in your work that you've been involved with and evolving ever since?

**KIRILI:** I was involved in the first wave of deconstruction in France through Roland Barthes's *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Also a great exhibition of conceptual art (Konzeptim/Conception) at the Städt Museum Leverkusen had a great influence on me.

**RAIL:** Yes, that exhibition was in 1969. Were you included in that show?

**KIRILI:** No, but I went to see those shows. At the time, the most advanced shows featuring North American artists in Germany, France, and Belgium showcased conceptual artists, who were of incredible interest for me: Robert Barrv. Douglas Huebler. Sol Lewitt. Lawrence Weiner. Carl Andre.



Aria I " 2011 Galvanized wire and rubber. 14 x 12 x 12" Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York



Man in front of "Commandment" drawing series by Alain Kirili at Akira Ikeda Gallery/NY 2012. Photo: Takuma Kanaiwa.



Steve Lacy, 1999. Photo: Ariane Lopez-Huici.



Left to right: William Parker, Thomas Buckner, Maria Mil... Photo: Ariane Lopez-Huici.

...ested in this idea of deconstruction, but suddenly I could not survive if I did not have tactility. I could be satisfied only with a conceptual approach to art. I needed incarnation. I discovered that conceptual art was really a puritanical approach. The de-materialization was too prudish for me. My first reaction was to make a piece of clay and model it in an abstract way, which was reproduced later in the catalog of my first show at Ana Sonnabend in New York in 1978.

When you were working with clay, were you thinking in terms of form and tactility?

Yes. There was no vessel or anything like that, it was just a gesture of expressive gesture? There was no narrative whatsoever. It was a world of tactility. I slowly started to understand the relationship of the body with sensuality, sexuality, which were and still are very important to me. I could not survive without these elements.

Again, you began with an analytic idea in relation to conceptual art, which paralleled your interest in *Writing on the Wall*, in order to develop a "conceptual: visual/verbal counterpart." Then, later in the process, you discovered the expressive power in revealing the touch in the material, which you felt was a natural transition in your work. And by working abstractly with terra cotta, were the things that occurred to you at the time?

I gained a greater understanding and deep appreciation of the beauty of the gesture in art. I then began to use very old techniques alongside blacksmithing and modeling in clay.

And then you moved from terra cotta to metal?

I was working on both mediums simultaneously. In fact, they complement each other. I also have studied calligraphy with Korean artist Lee Ungno. Later I was able to translate those calligraphic gestures into blacksmithing and clay modeling. I perceive myself, in some ways, as a calligraphic sculptor.

The linear aspect of your work is still very present in the drawings and sculptures in your current exhibition at Akira Ikeda. There is a calligraphic measure in relation to an expressive content. This was also true with your work in forging. I wanted to mention forging and when you started working with iron.

my first forging piece at the inauguration of PS1 in '76.

**RAIL:** Then you developed the practice of placing the sculpture on the floor in a series of forged iron works, all approximately the same size, which was the beginning of what later became the *Commandment* series.

**KIRILI:** That's right. The first "Commandment," which is in the Ludwig collection in Germany, is from 1980. The piece, which is comprised of 15 individual units, uses the floor as a support; the units were placed on and off the grid, asserting different calligraphic gestures, yet they all articulated the unity of the sound and movement of the wall. Although when I did the first "Commandment," it gained enormous complexity. It became a piece that went beyond what I could even comprehend as I made it. It took me quite a long time to find a title for it. I found "Commandment" when I visited the Jewish Museum in New York and saw pieces called *rimonim*, Torah finials. There were many of them in the window; they were somewhat similar to my iron sign. I was so impressed with the connection that I went to visit a rabbi on White Street to ask him why the objects were named *rimonim*, and he told me it was the Hebrew word for pomegranate; they were so named because there are as many seeds in pomegranates as there are commandments in the Torah.

**RAIL:** The point is that just because something ascends upward it is not necessarily transcendent. In the '80s, a lot of artists became concerned with the ground and the perceptual field in relation to the writings of Merleau-Ponty, and I think the *Commandments* relate to that. Also, there are other works produced as aggregates or multiple forms that also rise up from the ground. For example, I've seen installations of yours in ecclesiastical environments in Europe. One appears on the cover of the Flammarion book I published on your work in 2002. There is a field of columns as opposed to a singular form stationary on the ground. What is your idea about that kind of multiplicity where you have columns that in some way relate to the work of Barnett Newman who was interested in relating to the standing figure?

**KIRILI:** I spoke earlier about how crucial the body incarnation was to me; it is true that I feel tactility to be necessary, but there's something else I can't resist: my profound love of verticality. Anything that is too much on the ground depresses me. I need verticality; it's part of my means of survival, of my dignity even. It's true that paintings in prehistoric caves were among the first marks of creation, but the earliest people also erected vertically raised stones.

**RAIL:** The menhirs.

**KIRILI:** Yes. Those were very important celebrations of human life and its dignity. Enormous weight was used to pull them vertically, so their creators were vertical in the idea of the vertical. But the vertical I am concerned with is a vertical around which you can turn. The mystery, for which I can provide no explanation, is this pattern of circumvolution in art and reality—something that seems to occur naturally in human life. Human being will circumvent around a verticality, like a church in procession. There is circumvolution in the Torah in the synagogue: inside the synagogue everyone kisses the Torah so that everyone kisses. Circumvolution, verticality, and tactility are fundamental driving forces in human—and in my art, too.

I would like to mention Barnett Newman. I saw him very early at the Guggenheim; *The Six* exhibition in 1966 was very important. Then in '71, at the Grand Palais in Paris, I saw the retrospective, organized by Thomas Hess.

I wanted to meet Thomas Hess, so I went to Paris. In the U.S. We had lunch together and built a friendship through conversations about verticality, particularly verticality in Barnett Newman's work, in his painting as well as in his sculpture. Because Hess was also a collector of Giacometti sculptures, we had the most fabulous conversations in which we compared the zip and the energy of Newman with those of Giacometti. Newman and Giacometti are the two poles of my work. Those conversations defined my Franco-American identity: the fragility of Circumvolution and the affirmation of Newman.

The idea of sublimation also interests me very much. Two beautiful pieces made in the 20th century are "Pithecanthropus Erectus" by the bassist Charles Mingus and "Vir Heroicus Sublimus" by Barnett Newman. They're a real inspiration for me. They're two extraordinary

**RAIL:** One of the stories you mentioned when I visited Akira Ikeda Gallery a few weeks ago was that you tried to convince Mr. Akira Ikeda that your recent rubber pieces were in fact drawings in three-dimensional space. I wonder if you could talk a little more about that.

**KIRILI:** I didn't have much convincing to do, but I can anticipate that wire was a way to draw in space. I find an instant quality I find in charcoal. I use wire like I draw with ink; if I use galvanized wire, I have a tension that creates a dialectic with the black rubber mats and absorbs the light. The wire takes shape and becomes supported by the wire without



Commandments, Series 1 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.



Alain Kirili, "Commandments, Series 2 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. 8.5 x 10.9". Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.



Alain Kirili, "Commandments, Series 3 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. 8.5 x 10.9". Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.



Commandments, Series 4 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.



Alain Kirili, "Commandments, Series 5 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. 8.5 x 10.9". Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.



Alain Kirili, "Commandments, Series 6 of 6," 1987. Charcoal on paper. 8.5 x 10.9". Courtesy Akira Ikeda Gallery, New York.

When you're talking about support, are you talking about visual, physical, or both?  
Visual and physical. I had to do my best to convince that wire is a way to be a calligrapher.

A week ago or so, I went to a concert at your loft which was a kind of homage to John Cage. I believe it would have been his 100th birthday. His former colleague, the composer Christian Wolff, was there, as well as the artist Tom Anastasi and a number of other people that were close to John Cage. I mentioned to you that from that stage point, as I was looking at the wall behind the stage which they were performing and I saw another of your wire pieces, I was convinced that it was flat. And after the concert, I had an occasion to move to the other side of the room, and suddenly I looked up and I saw the wire was projecting from the wall. The illusion was convincing. And I find that an interesting part of your work because I think illusion is something that was kind of emphasized during the, shall we say, high Minimal period. There was a reluctance to deal with illusion in Minimalism. I think that you're bringing this kind of linear content into your art now in a more extreme way—more extreme than we've seen in your earlier work—except for the wire sculpture you included in some of the terracottas in the '70s. These are the most complex bodies of works you have made in recent years. Which brings me to my next technical question regarding your vertical aluminum pieces from the early '90s: I remember when you were describing the process to me when you first applied the torch to the aluminum you got this kind of explosion, almost like a mechanical mechanism of some sort.

There is a sort of explosion when you heat aluminum. Forging it was a kind of technical discovery; you've never forged aluminum before. So when I did forging, I discovered the explosion, and found that it was a very expressionistic and emotional sign which

**RAIL:** In some of these forged aluminum columns that you're speaking of, they're shown as an ensemble.

**KIRILI:** Yes, but they can be individual too.

**RAIL:** You mentioned David Smith's *Cubi* series, which is his late work from '65, '66. During that period he was concerned with the base. From my point of view, he never really resolved the problem of the base. I'm wondering if the fact that your columns employ a support structure ever became an issue for you or if that is something that you simply accept.

**KIRILI:** It is something I accept. It's an issue for me, because the base is not only a form of support, it also has a symbolic function. That is why I like the Yoni-Lingam, because the yoni is a female sex; the yoni and the lingam together represent Shiva. It's a Shiva sign, but what is really extraordinary about the Yoni-Lingam, one of the great contributions of India, really, was to tell us that the base has a function as important as the vertical. I think it's wonderful to think of the yoni as this feminine representation of the female sex. In ritual, priests often drop water (or yogurt, milk, or other liquids) into it; everything would go into its canal. The Yoni-Lingam is a very sexualized sphere.

**RAIL:** So, this informs your idea of the base in relation to the vertical columns?

**KIRILI:** It reinforced what I already did before I discovered the Yoni-Lingam, but the base is very important. In the aluminum sculpture I used a base of hot iron to make a contrast between the two metals. Generally, all of my bases have a formal and symbolic function.

What has been extremely important to me as far as the relationship between sexuality and spirituality—something crucial in my work—is that in India, among Shaivites, they are very aware of the importance of Catholicism. They know that the Church of France and Italy is as important as their own temples: Chartres is on par with Tanjore.

**RAIL:** I think we should speak about your great sustained interest in jazz and the relationship you feel between jazz and your sculpture. This is something that you introduced to me to many years ago, long before we did the book. We've even talked about it in the interview from 1992, so it's back a long time, and you're still doing it. Can you give me a few comments about the connections you see?

**KIRILI:** One of the major reasons I love to live in New York is because of the large presence of those saints, those who are the improvisers of jazz. I say saints because the music is not about entertainment but spiritual experience. One of my first contacts in American art was Sidney Janis who came to play in the kitchen of my parents' house when I was a child. He was very impressive for me. He gave me a sense that I wanted to go to America, especially to New York.

Today I meet contemporary jazz musicians, the masters of today who like to play with my sculptures. I use them as partitions. Joe McPhee, Daniel Carter, Campbell, Thomas Buckner, and Cecil Taylor are the ones who come regularly to my studio and like to interact with visual arts. It's more than an interaction; it is a conversation.

There will be an evening at the current show at Akira Ikeda where my drawings will serve as a partition for a saxophone solo by Joe McPhee. New York has really offered me an exchange with poets and writers, translators, musicians and dancers. The African-American musicians give in their creation an emotional and a spiritual dimension that I need to support my work. That's why I and myself militantly open our loft to free jazz music in order to create a dialogue.