

Morgan, Robert C. and Ratcliff, Carter. "A Tribute to Alain Kirili," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2021.



Michael Attias, Quartet Nerve Dance, 2017. Cover art by Alain Kirili.

Carter Ratcliff

In reading the tributes to Alain, I was happy but not surprised to find such a high degree of unanimity. As his friends say, he was charming, sophisticated, and brilliantly creative. He was generous not only to other artists but to musicians, dancers, and poets. He believed in high culture, not as a marker of superiority but as a down-to-earth good that he and his wife Ariane Lopez-Huici did their part to make available to everyone. Though this is not a complete list of his lovingly remembered virtues and talents, I would like to focus on one that was mentioned only in passing: Alain was an impressively original writer. In "Statuary versus Idols," an essay published in *Artforum* in 1983, he confronts Moses's prohibition of idolatrous imagery: a Scriptural doctrine potentially troubling not only to Alain and other Jewish artists but to every artist in the Western tradition.

"Really?" you might ask. In a secular art world, who worries about idolatry? Well, Alain did, for he understood that works of art can become fetishes worshipped for their seductive auras of wealth and/or hipness. He did not, however, inveigh against the artwork-as-idol. Instead, he praised artworks—in particular, sculptures by David Smith and Barnett Newman—that have "Presence." "Statuary versus Idols" revolves around this idea, which is, in his monumental devotion to it, less an idea than an intuited reality. And a red flag to those who lurk on the academic wing of the art world waiting to pounce on any deviation from orthodoxy. For the use of "Presence" with a capital "P" breaks a taboo derived from

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Jacques Derrida's argument that the word is the privileged half of a binary opposition built into Western metaphysics in all its patriarchal oppressiveness.

The unprivileged half of this opposition is of course "absence." Other binaries are nature/culture, mind/body, and speaking/writing. For the tradition that began with the pre-Socratic philosophers and persists even now, these oppositions reflect transcendent truths prior to anything we might say or write about them. For Derrida, they are artifacts of our talking and writing—socio-linguistic "constructs," and so the process of showing how they work came to be called, aptly enough, "deconstruction."

Derrida's aim was anti-authoritarian. Rather than reverse what we might call the power dynamics of these binaries—to privilege "absence," say, at the expense of "Presence"—he showed that their parts are equal and interdependent. But genuine anti-authoritarianism is a rare thing. The opportunists among Derrida's followers saw in deconstruction a chance to reconfigure patterns of power and put themselves in charge of the new configurations. Outlawing the word "Presence" by turning it into shorthand for traditional inequities, they condemned anyone who dared to write or utter it. The crucial point is that Alain understood all this, not as a theorist but as a widely read artist with a knack for serious conversation with a wide variety of interlocutors. Thus he wrote admiringly of "Presence" with complete indifference to any tendentious indictment that might be brought against the word.

Underlying this indifference was Alain's sense that, just as old binaries are not fixed, neither are the meanings of words—a point made by Derrida and, before him, the American pragmatists. Meaning is shaped by contingencies of two kinds: intentions and contexts. In the context Alain and Ariane created for themselves and so many others, you could always be certain that he intended, with everything he did and said, to celebrate possibility, fruition, sensuality—in a word, life. And "Presence" was the accolade he applied to whatever has the peculiarly intense life of matter shaped by a powerful aesthetic intention.

He did this in the belief that his audience, everyone from immediate friends to anonymous readers of his essay, would understand the word in the generous way he meant it. This belief showed deep confidence in life's power to win out over forces of orthodoxy—the intellectual rigidity akin to the puritanism Alain saw as life's enemy. His confidence was sustained by the courage we find at every stage of his life and of course everywhere in his art. His work didn't merely have "Presence." He always put its "Presence" at risk, thereby challenging himself, constantly, to give it new life.

Robert C. Morgan

To Discover Alain Kirili: Words given to the Artist

The opportunity to read these memorial statements on the persistently brilliant Alain Kirili, has been both a pleasure and an undeniably moving experience. Written by friends and colleagues of the artist, these commentaries represent what might be considered a culminating reference taken directly from the professional art world.

While in the process of going through these curiously diverse reflections, I discovered a host of thoughtfully expressed emotions delivered in various styles of inquiry. In several cases, those who met Kirili on a professional level would eventually develop a friendship with the artist, perhaps less on formal grounds than on feelings of kinship with a sculptor who has moved beyond the threshold of sculpture as a purely static entity.

Given the fact that he modified his loft into a working studio, there was always new art to be seen over the course of several visits. Mary Jones has commented on "Alain's insistent resolve to live in an atmosphere that was creative and positive." The implications are that given the artist possessed these qualities, why not transform one's space into who one is?

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From a similar perspective, the artist Rebecca Smith noted that Kirili, even at an advanced stage in his career, encouraged drawing from the nude—"maintaining that it was essential to making abstract sculpture." How many artists would have seen this connection? In a similar vein, Michael Attias recalls Kirili's phrase as he was in the process of finishing one of his sculptures, that his work represented "the final assault against puritanism." This, in fact, was an ongoing theme in the work of the artist.

In observing musicians performing amidst the sculptures in Kirili's studio, Ned Rothenberg metaphorically observes "a multiplicity of parallel lines in the creative process of musical improvisations and visual artists." Critic Barry Schwabsky keenly observes on another occasion the presence of "linear sculptures in forged iron mounted atop blocks of color painted on the wall." Whereas drawings on large sheets of paper have accompanied Kirili's sculpture in the past, Schwabsky notes in this installation the manner in which the painted forms on the wall unite with the forged iron, thus bringing sculpture together with painting and architecture.

A further observation of interest is offered by poet Vincent Katz who makes a reference to the studio performances, remarking on how "the intelligence [Kirili] and Ariane brought to these soirees remains inspiring years or decades after the last note has died out." Perhaps Katz is correct—that performances combined with the stillness of material held the propensity to re-define one another. Indeed, this was the origin that brought this series of evening events together. Kirili would envision the intervention of musicians, dancers, and poets as becoming part of the work, thereby, further enlivening the space in relation to the presence of sculpture.

For nearly 40 years, my relationship with Alain Kirili maintained a vivid, if not vital closeness despite the occasional complexities and professional conflicts likely to occur in any long-term relationship. The most prominent of which occurred shortly after the publication of my book on Kirili's artistic career with Flammarian in Paris. Although the reason for his temporary withdrawal was never made clear, I always felt that Alain considered our relationship of primary importance. I can say that in the final stages of organizing the book, we were both inextricably and interactively tied to the artistry of what we were doing. For Kirili, participation in art on any level provided the necessary link that kept a friendship intact. In this context, we remained actively involved up until his final days.

Amanda Millet-Sorsa

Alain Kirili was a sculptor, an artist, a friend to many, a mentor, a lover of life, and an optimist, who exuded warmth while fighting for joy with every inch of his large being, and shared his journey with photographer, artist, and life partner, Ariane Lopez-Huici. He believed in forming personal and familiar relationships with a large community of people, and as I worked and partook in the vast activity flourishing in Alain and Ariane's studio on White Street for past decades, he and I developed a close friendship in the last 10 years as well as a relationship as mentor and mentee, which as a young artist for me was very formative and essential. As Parisians who urgently felt the need to move to New York City over 40 years ago, they made their White Street loft their home, a place free from the expectations of French society, and at the center of the New York downtown art scene. He loved America for its optimism and fervently chose happiness as his *raison d'être*, as he welded together a life in America while retaining close ties with his home country of France.

Together, Alain and Ariane formed an artist couple dedicated to a life fueled by sculpture; drawing; photography; experimental free jazz; and a community of artists, curators, collectors, and philanthropists such that in 2014, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen in France first exhibited the artist couple's work together in *Parcours croisés*. For 40 years, Alain and Ariane have hosted experimental free jazz concerts in their loft in parallel with visual art, dance, poetry readings, and world music providing a meeting place for artists from all walks of life. He embodied the term *bon vivant* and showed us all what it meant to live a life to its fullest. As Alain sought a communion between his sculpture and music, it sometimes seemed that he spent more time with musicians than with visual artists. In his studio Alain often worked on sculpture in series accompanied by drawings or collages after a period of listening to music intensely. I witnessed the steady decade long evolution of the "Aria" (2012) wire table sculptures, to the development of "Iron Calligraphy" (2013-16) wire and forged iron wall reliefs and

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sculptures in the round, and eventually the monumental wall installations (2017-19) that combined colorful painted walls with forged iron sculpture into musical and minimal creations. After a long four-year battle, he is another one lost to cancer. Until his very last day he garnered the strength to create a series of ink works on paper and passed away peacefully in his studio surrounded by his art works and Ariane's tender presence.

Italy was one of Alain's many loves. Alain and Ariane would travel to Italy like so many artists passionate about the rich cultural, humanist history we inherited from this country. To know Italy feels like a rite of passage in the maturity of an artist and on a recent trip to Venice, I was reminded of him and the good times he must've had in one of Italy's finest. The Church of Saint Sebastian in Venice was one of his favorites and as a born flâneur, I could imagine Alain wandering the tiny streets of Venice at a slow pace making his way to this church to spend some time sitting there admiring the Veronese, Tintoretto, and Titian oil paintings and frescoes in situ, flanked and framed by the different colors and geometric shapes of stone in rose, red, maroon, and green designs next to the classic white marble.

I could almost hear his enthusiasm, as one often did, as I myself sat for the first time in this church, so loved by the Venetians and almost empty of tourists. There is an extraordinary loft on the left side, a three-dimensional structure containing the church organ, that is designed with paintings by Veronese, both outside and inside the structure, displaying his strength and clarity through vivacious blocks of color. These striking paintings are on the organ loft shutters: outside is *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* and inside the shutter is the *Miracle at the Pool of Bethesda* from the 16th century.

When looking up at the ceiling, one can see two dramatic foreshortened horses in a tondo galloping towards us in front of a pink flag with the soldier's strong knees on display in *Triumph of Mordecai*, and in a different panel a woman clad in deep greens surrounded by velvety pink and deep reds for *The Banishment of Vashti*. The *plat de résistance* of Saint Sebastian's muscular body faces us at the altar, he is pierced with arrows and looking up to the sky at a Madonna and Child. They are in the heavenly golden company of angels playing their instruments where we can revel in their multi-colored wings. Veronese's prowess in lush colors and clarity of execution are amongst the high points of Venetian painting. I could see why a sculptor, who loved Venetian painting, would like this church in particular.

Alain often invited me to go to churches, the Stone, Roulette, and other cultural spaces in New York to listen to concerts with music by Arvo Pärt, Johann Sebastian Bach, William Parker, Ned Rothenberg, Joe McPhee, Roscoe Mitchell, Michaël Attias, Daniel Carter, Henry Threadgill, Ralph Samuelson, Thomas Buckner, Jordi Savall, John Zorn ... I remember that one of our first outings was to the Bronx for the funeral of trumpeter Roy Campbell Jr., who died tragically young. It moved me as I saw that Alain was part of a very tight community of musicians and performers, and I also came to understand that some of the best funerals are for musicians—as all of Roy's friends started to play their instruments in his memory. Alain was allergic to perfection, to formal thinking, and if a performance lacked heart and guts, he might even storm out to then find the best place for spaghetti al nero di seppie, omakase, a burger and beer, or pickled herring. Though the gourmand that he was, it was clear that for him the best restaurant in New York was Ariane's kitchen.

He absolutely adored sculpture and spoke passionately of Auguste Rodin, Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, David Smith, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, the Yoni-Lingam Indian sculpture, and many others, often writing about, giving conferences, or exhibiting alongside his artistic heroes. He was also equally in love with painting and some of his favorite paintings were by Venetians, notably the two versions of *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* (ca. 1555) by Titian. He marveled how the organ player would be looking straight at the mound of Venus lying fabulously naked and her energy transformed into the musician playing his organ. With Alain, the conversation always took a turn towards the erotic. Next time I pass by the Boulevard Raspail in Paris, it would be impossible not to sit at a café and laugh, thinking of Alain contemplating Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1891-97), one of his pervasive topics of discussion. Alain would marvel at Rodin's inventive hand in sculpture and how cheeky it was of him to erect this public sculpture to Balzac, a fellow epicurean. Balzac stands over all of us and ponders his next literary move, as he gets busy under the covers playing with the seeds of creativity. Life for Alain and Ariane is to be filled with eroticism, tactility, virility, verticality, and ecstasy, all of which manifested

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equally in his daily practice, similar to how he admired his fellow artists who would undertake to overcome themselves for the sake of impurity and urgency in their life and work. His legacy and spirit will live on.

Barry Schwabsky

I must have met Alain around the time I began editing *Arts Magazine* in 1988, and I got to know him as a writer in tandem with my discovery of his multifarious work as a sculptor. His contributions to the magazine were noteworthy: Among them were his interviews with Louise Bourgeois and Philippe Sollers, as well as several articles, not all of which, for some reason, are listed in the bibliography on his website—am I wrong to recall a marvelous essay on Medardo Rosso? In any case, all of his writing was animated by what, in titling his Bourgeois interview, he called "the passion for sculpture." But there are all sorts of passions, and what struck me was how Alain's artistic passion was always involved in *verbal* as well as material expression; his implicit belief was that the artist is also an intellectual. Other lessons from Alain dawned on me more slowly.

One was never to forget that art is in essence a convivial undertaking, something made to be shared. His studio was not only a place to make art and to show it but also to gather in its presence for the enjoyment of life. His passion for sculpture was matched by his passion for music, and in particular, for free jazz. In the loft he shared with his devoted partner, Ariane, he hosted performances by musicians renowned and obscure alike, but always brilliant and challenging. These events brought two different, almost separate worlds together. The art people who attended may have been far less steeped in music than Alain was, but they listened (and watched) attentively, learned, and enjoyed.

Horizons were widened. I'd like to think the musicians, too, benefitted from presenting their work to a different audience than usual. The idea was always to open things up—to be expansive, not exclusive. His generosity of spirit stood Alain in good stead during the years of poor health before his death. The last time I went to see him, some time before COVID-19, changed everything: I was amazed that he was making some of his most beautiful, concise, and powerful work—linear sculptures in forged iron mounted atop blocks of color painted on the wall—despite his pain and weakness. I couldn't help but think of Matisse with his late paper cut-outs: the conquest of vision over physical circumstance. These works spoke of strength amidst fragility and joy despite constraint. He shared generously until the end and his art will continue to kindle the passion for sculpture—and for life.

David Cohen

There is so much I could say about my dear friend Alain Kirili. He and his amazing, incomparable life partner Ariane Lopez-Huici have been a significant force in my life for the best part of three decades, surrogate parents almost, my own being thousands of miles away. They were way too much fun for parenting to be the operative concept, but they nonetheless cared and worried and smothered with generosity as only parents can. Alain was a full personality in so many senses. There was so much food and music and so many introductions, ideas—and always, curiosity.

Alain lived large: Gregarious, epicurean, touchy, difficult, jolly, complex, learned, and silly; giving and greedy in equal measure; as voracious intellectually and culturally as he was in pleasures of the table; snobbish but never excluding anyone unfairly; relating to working people who might otherwise, indeed, feel overlooked; Jewish and secular; he was a character of Proustian multi-dimensionality. The way he faced off illness in his last years, with a lust for life in the face of mortality, making sure to pack every moment with pleasure and meaning, will remain a moral touchstone for anyone who witnessed it. Even when his full and open personality was at its most testing, he was totally adorable and impacted an extraordinary array of people of different ages and activities. He lived and breathed the arts, and most of the people he gathered about him were visual artists, musicians, and intellectuals. But they could include students and down-on-their-luck artists as well as powerhouses of influence and prestige, all valued as individuals and rubbing shoulders in the unique latter-day salon that the Kirili loft in downtown Manhattan became in legendary evenings of free improvisation and other forms of jazz, world music, or spoken word.

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If I were more prudent, I'd stick here some insights and anecdotes of the fun and the friendship that Alain brought into my life. There is so much to recount—his maverick personality is a gift to any writer. Acknowledging his plentiful largesse is reason enough to recuse myself from a professional opinion of his artistic worth. I have no doubt that this *Brooklyn Rail* tribute will abound with testimony to his warmth, his solitudes, his ability to connect artists in France and the United States, his deep knowledge and insights into art history, his pivotal role in bringing music and dance before an art world audience, his mentorship of young artists, and so on. Everyone will acknowledge, I'm sure, that his overarching commitment to sculpture bound all the rest together. But the actual product of that labor really needs fresh attention, and I'll be damned if I'm going to resist this opportunity to offer it. It might even be, in fact, that his capacity for friendship, his busyness on many cultural fronts, and an avuncular personality that rubbed some people the wrong way, all distracted from just how strong, rich, resonant, and accomplished his actual achievements were in the studio, the smithery, the forge.

Kirili didn't train in an art academy but studied privately with a Korean calligraphy master, learned on the fly with artisans who helped in the production of works, and—in his own telling—did his MFA by talking with downtown friends in the 1970s art scene. Conversing with the likes of Dorothea Rockburne on a SoHo street corner was better, in his estimation, than enrolling at Yale. And as for critical theory, he had been friends in Paris with the *Tel Quel* crowd, numbering Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes as mentors and supporters. Again: the university of life. The significance of all this for his work is that he was born as an artist and maker. His scope—relatively free of prevailing fashions—was global, deeply historical, and as close to jazz as to art. His thinking was innately abstract and his notions of form literally hands on.

In 2004 I curated an exhibition of Kirili's sculpture at the New York Studio School. Rather than concentrate on one period or genre or his latest efforts within what was already a broad spectrum of achievement, I was determined, within the limited space available, to provide a chronological overview going right back to an early work from around the time he started to divide his year between Paris and New York. This was a similar piece, with the same title, to one held by the Museum of Modern Art: *India Curve* (1978). In its post-minimal restraint—a thread of steel wire suspended from the wall finding its way to a terracotta block on the ground—it was a somewhat aloof and intellectual ancestor of the more overtly exuberant, fulsome shapes and elaborations that would follow, with their insistent material presence, rich color, and sometimes monumental scale. But not so aloof, actually. What bound all the shapes and styles in the eclectic, whistle-stop tour of a then 30-year career on view at the Studio School, an evolution told in just ten works, was the overriding importance of gesture. Whether slight or mammoth, purely linear or demanding to be seen "in the round," and whether a unique piece or an installation or grouping of pieces, a Kirili sculpture has striking singularity defined by gesture. Time and intention are frozen into their form. The originating hand, the impulse, the feeling behind the form, the feeling in and through the form, all constitute a vital presence. He was an "expressionist" in a pure sense, in a way that would make sense for Matisse, and not in any vulgar sense of the imposition of the artist's suffering or overly examined soul. On the contrary, he gave expression to higher, collective experiences at a remove from quotidian individualism. The artist's sensibility was as honed as its products.

Abstract could certainly mean linguistic: his "Commandments" series, like the example from 1980 in my exhibition, lent by the Jewish Museum and taking up the back half of the gallery, was a field of 17 elements, each around 15 inches high, in forged iron that has the aura of some kind of prehistoric stone circle, while also recalling an alphabet in the singular, yet schematic and consistent, complementary forms of each pictograph. There is a similar work on permanent display outside the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris where Kirili had famously curated outdoor displays of modern and contemporary American sculpture.

I have to retell a story about the installation of the show, which speaks volumes about Kirili in so many ways. The building staff had already complained about how heavy and unwieldy one piece was, requiring three of them, wearing protective belts, to maneuver it into place in my initial layout of the show. This was a vertical, bifurcated slab of solid iron, *Summation* (1981). Alain had left me to install

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alone and then came in to give his approval or correct as required. (The seating plan for guests at the dinner received more agonizing and attention!) Only one work needed to move, Alain decided, and of course it was *Summation*. Oh boy, I'll have to summon the super. Not at all, says Alain, who grabs his metal totem and in three or four defiant sumo moves, traverses the gallery with it, finding its optimum position. The physicality of his work, the "incarnatedness," as he liked to call it, of his abstracted forms, was a true extension of his own compact, full, life-embracing personhood. It made it all the more tragic for him and his loved ones to see his body so diminished, so ravaged by cancer and heart disease and anemia in his last years. But his resistance to mortality, astonishing his doctors, was borne of the vitality on display in happier times.

I gave some bias in my show to my own favorite idiom of Alain's, the squat terracotta slabs punctured by tools at hand and left there as elements of the finished sculpture. Or sometimes it would simply be one colored clay thrust into a cube of contrasting color and fired. An extensive series of these terracotta pieces, where more overtly than ever gesture defined form, were titled "Ivresse" (drunkenness), evocations of the exalted, yet all-too-bodily sensation that personified not just his sculpture but his aesthetic philosophy.

Works in this series had been on display in the first show of his that I saw, curated by my college friend William Jeffett at the Sainsbury Center in East Anglia, England, in 1994. I'd actually been introduced to the Kirilis by another Courtauld classmate, Kenneth Wayne and his wife the musicologist Olivia Mattis, in Paris the previous year, and it was my offer to host an evening in my London apartment with sculptor friends that initiated the "banquet years" of our subsequent friendship. When I stayed in Alain's studio one hot summer in 2017, he'd left examples of this series on stands in what was likely a curated welcome. The solid blocks of the "Ivresse" series, meanwhile, found ultimate expression in magnificent monuments he created to France's Second World War resistance movement, including one in Grenoble specifically dedicated to women of the resistance.

In the period following his Studio School show many new, rich veins of sculptural exploration opened up. We see his sensibility meandering between wall and floor, open and closed form, linear and volumetric expression, bold color and no color. And still everything is bound together by his unmistakable, protean primacy of gesture.

Africa, and the arts of the African diaspora, were central to his aesthetic, but in a way that miraculously avoided colonialism, despite Alain's fearless plunging in where his gut took him (or his ear: his lifelong investment in jazz came from hearing Sidney Bechet play in his parents' kitchen late one night after all the restaurants had closed and his parents took the hungry musician home with them). Sarah Lewis, then an intern working with Robert Storr who recommended her to the project and who is now of course the leading voice behind the Vision & Justice project at Harvard where she teaches, contributed a deft essay to the Studio School catalogue that delved into Kirili's rapport with Africa, a subject Maria Mitchell has also explored in tribute panels to Alain at the *Rail* and at *artcritical*. Rather than mimic or appropriate the look or feel of African artifacts—although as a student and collector of African art, the forms inevitably permeated his visual thinking, along with all the other stimuli in the unceasing curriculum of stimulation that was his life—Alain engaged with African smithery directly, making sculpture with acknowledged masters in Mali in a back and forth of artists getting work done.

Segou (2004), a grouping of three vertical motifs, spectacularly nestled by the circular staircase in the Studio School (previously Whitney Museum) entrance foyer, is permeated with the fruits of his Mali collaborations. Fifteen years later Kirili titled his first show with Susan Inglett Gallery "Who's Afraid of Verticality" (emulating Barnett Newman, whom he revered), and at a ceremony in his Tribeca loft at which he was awarded the highest rank in the French Republic's Ordre des arts et des lettres in his penultimate year, Kirili spoke of verticality in ways that somehow insinuated it into the company of such abstractions as *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, melding aesthetics and civics in a uniquely, provocatively Alain Kirili-kind of way.

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Joachim Pissarro

I remember every single studio visit I did with Alain. Each was like an individual poem. These rich, sensual visits included a dialogue between the man, the artist, and the works, an experience that transcended most others. There was something theatrical about the presence of these intricate, eerie, quasi-magical abstract figures that were oozing with life. And then there was Alain himself: the orchestrator, the stage director of these visits. And Alain's warm voice and his unshakable French accent set the tone for this choreography between the sculptures. He had an almost mythical attachment to the Medieval art that he resurrected, reinvented, and rekindled in so many fresh and provocative ways. He mastered the art of wrought iron, and he's the only artist I can think of who did so. The idea of him going to the smith to forge these pieces is incredible. From this crazy technique came something unique.

There was a link between his life and his work, a shared message deepest in the hearts of both. He often said that today's society, especially in America, sorely lacked sensuality. He was a pillar of life, a force, a lightning rod in the contemporary art world—especially in New York—with works represented in many major museums. Despite that, he felt isolated and marginalized because minimalism was so rigid and unable to embrace warmth. Alain echoed this message in every visit and I cherish his words. I once brought my graduate seminar from Hunter to Alain's studio, and the students who were in attendance still thank me years later for the divine visit. He started speaking to them about the New York art world in the '70s and '80s before moving into music—he managed to cover every aspect of life and every dimension of the art world, in its totality, passionately. Many people went back to visit him separately. They became friends with him. Alain Kirili was an extraordinary human, and humane, being.

Mary Jones

REMEMBERING ALAIN KIRILI



Mary Jones and Alain Kirili, High Noon Gallery, February 7, 2019.

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I am remembering a garden lunch with Alain and Ariane in the summer of 2020. He was ebullient as always and fully engaged—we talked about art and literature, James Joyce, Alain's time in Mali, blacksmithing, and music. These were among the things that mattered most to him. Alain looked good even though, at this point, it had been difficult for him to walk from the street to the garden. He was terminally ill unless something remarkable happened.

Our lunch ended with some vanilla ice cream. This was his favorite flavor (and mine) and according to Alain, a true test of quality. I don't know why, but I was surprised—maybe at that moment it seemed simple and American somehow—and I realized I thought of Alain as fundamentally French in his appetites.

I first met Alain in the early '90s, reviewing a show of his for the now-defunct magazine, *Tema Celeste*. He was so gracious about it, so appreciative, and although we didn't become close friends until later, when I ran into Ariane and Alain at shows they were always enthusiastically friendly. Around the time they were showing with Hionas, our circle tightened and I became much closer to them, and I'm so grateful. It was inspiring to observe how they valued and tended to their relationships, how open and accepting they were.

Alain's insistent resolve to live in an atmosphere that was creative and positive—he philosophically stated this at times—had enormous benefits to him and everyone around him. It was a choice. This was especially clear at the evenings of jazz that he and Ariane held in their loft, evenings that were nothing short of mind bogglingly fabulous. I went whenever I could and heard amazing music by all kinds of jazz, Indian, and new genre musicians. It seemed incredible that these people would come down to Tribeca and perform for a small group of artists, that he and Ariane could organize such a feat, and amazing that they even knew all these remarkable artists, yet it was completely organic for them. It felt like some kind of welcome throwback to the heyday of the avant-garde SoHo art world of decades past. Ariane and Alain were personally stepping up to keep this white rhino alive and all you had to do was go. Usually the loft would have a new installation of their work, which was a great way to encounter it and to understand the social dimension of the ideas that motivated them. I realize that I'm talking about Ariane as much as Alain, but their remarkable marriage, an old one by any standard, and comfortable to be around, flourished through their intertwined, productive lives. They were inseparable. Recently becoming American citizens, they even managed to be positive about America.

Alain frequently attributed the impact of Barnett Newman and jazz as a reason to leave postwar France for NYC. If sometimes this era seems to belong irrevocably to the past, I was surprised and encouraged to hear young South African critic Sinazo Chiya (b. 1993) in an online lecture cite Barnett Newman's *Onement VI* as a favorite painting, for reasons much like those that were formative for Alain: "Ideas that existed then, and resonate many continents later, many decades later, just go to show that when we're willing to see work, that to really look at things, not just with the eyes but with the senses, to be willing to be engaged from a sensory perspective by the ideas themselves, it's less about our limitations and powerful to encounter as human beings."

I interviewed Alain for *artcritical* in 2018 and by this time he was quite ill. In his loft, he was surrounded by new work, which was changing to accommodate his limited physical circumstances. He absolutely hated being weakened physically. We talked about Matisse, a mentor for late life work, for color, lightness, and an elevation beyond the pain and boredom of terminal illness. Alain's colorful series on paper belied any sense of suffering, just as he'd intended. I wish I'd asked him more about himself personally, about the name Kirili being a pseudonym, an early declaration of his artistic identity—the adventures of his many travels (he couldn't have made work all the time!). During the quarantine we bonded over all the great French shows on television, he especially loved Louis Malle's *Phantom India*. Like Malle, he'd also spent time in India during the 1970s.

So when last May, I planned a visit to Alain, I packed the artisanal vanilla ice cream that he liked. Arriving at 9:00 a.m., I'd not looked at social media the night before. Ariane, showing no surprise, graciously allowed me in. I saw an empty hospital bed against the wall and saw that Alain wasn't there. In total denial, I assumed a health aid had taken him out for a walk. Then I got it. The loft was full of his

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work, the dining room table was covered with a dropcloth, beautifully splattered with colors. It was as if he'd just stepped out, and in fact he'd been busy working the day he died. Ariane told me there'd been lots of laughter that day, too. Araine made some coffee and we sat together for about an hour. Then the phone began to ring. France was calling.

Michaël Attias



Michaël Attias performing at the opening of Alain Kirili's *In the Round*, Hionas Gallery, Lower East Side. Photo: Alain Kirili.

I wanted to say that he was a bridge, but a bridge does not move, and he, like his sculptures, was always in motion. A smuggler perhaps? But there was nothing covert about Alain, he worked in plain sight, no better place to hide the intensity of a joy that makes you vanish to those who respond only to the kitsch of misery and shame. "Encore un coup des puritains!" The connections he made between worlds were revelations of thought, quick and evident as lightning. He had a spinozist instincts for all that was good. We shared a love of Rodin's erotic drawings, John Coltrane, Soutine, de Kooning, Barthes, Miles Davis, Steve Lacy, Cecil Taylor, Fragonard, Bernini.

The graceful zigzags of his energy and attentions, the calligraphic purity of his affirmations in every medium—word, terra cotta, iron, ink and dozen others—drew incandescent dotted lines between (a non-exhaustive list follows):

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Europe America Mali, Sculpture et Jazz (the title of one of his books), music and literature, kitsch and fascism, improvisation and sexual energy, Mingus and Barnett Newman, sculpture and everything else: language, Judaism, sound, rhythm, collage, drawing, painting etc...

He welcomed and gave precious hospitality to the zigzags and enthusiasms of others. His generosity was huge and all-encompassing and unfailingly elegant, never familiar or belittling. I was elated by the enthusiasm he expressed when I wrote him that while looking at Soutine landscapes in a museum in Haifa I had heard Coltrane's sound erupt from the canvas, the fracture of its monumental verticality at the place where body and spirit-meat "liberate the cry", Soutine ascending amid the Dogons. He wrote back (I translate from the French): "Priapus upright and proud: touch him, sing him, wail. Soutine and Coltrane are involved with transubstantiation: matter become flesh, verticality is presence, presence is not anthropomorphic or architectonic, it is flesh. Vie [sic] Heroicus Sublimis. Pithecanthropus Erectus, merci Mingus." (July 17, 2019)

He had just finished installing his last exhibit, entitled "Who's Afraid of Verticality?" In the same letter he called it his "Final assault against puritanism, against every puritanism."

Favorite memories among many:

Visiting the de Kooning exhibit with him at MOMA, experiencing it through his eyes and physicality. Playing at his openings, the first time impromptu was at the Hionas Gallery: I was on my way to a gig, he saw I had my horn and asked me if I would be willing to baptize (his word) the new piece—for him a sculpture was not complete until it had elicited a musical response—the experience was for me electrifying, it was as if the sculpture was playing me. The gift he made me of the drawing that is on the cover of my album *Nerve Dance*, the original regally hangs on the wall above my piano. The pleasure he took and shared in meals, drink, conversation, clothes. The righteous anger at any falsification of history and every form of fascism.

Two more memories: arriving at the loft where he and Ariane shared their life of love and work soon after he'd received the diagnosis that his blood was damaged and seeing an entire wall painted magnificently red. The beautiful papiers-collés of the end, the black line that crossed the edge of one colored paper to the next, a perilous and courageous leap I told him and he smiled...

Ned Rothenberg



Still from *Concert without Public: Ned Rothenberg, Alain Kirili and Ariane Lopez-Huici*, 2021. Courtesy Roulette Intermedium.

Alain Kirili was a man with a passionate appetite for *the extraordinary* (add charming French accent here), whether it might be found at home in Paris or New York or far away in a place like Bamako. He was a huge fan of creative music and saw a multiplicity of parallel lines in the creative processes of

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musical improvisors and visual artists. He used the phrase "free jazz" enthusiastically, a term much less culturally loaded for Europeans than Americans like me; for him it emphasized freedom to experiment and work outside accepted norms.

Alain and I puzzled over trying to figure out when we met. I think it was during the '80s when I often played at the Alternative Museum, which was located on the ground floor of Ariane and Alain's building. Wherever it started, our relationship grew much stronger in the last five years of his life and I was so happy to be able to collaborate with him on what—in a way—may have been his last performance, where he made beautiful brush paintings while I played in his loft, surrounded by his sculptures. It was all captured by a marvelous production team from Roulette and is available [here](#). The production also recalls many of the wonderful evenings of music that were hosted there by Ariane and Alain with a live audience of fellow artists. So often the various artistic disciplines of art have been forced further apart by the differing economic realities of the worlds of music, performance, and visual art. Alain was a great spokesperson for the idea that all these things are an expression of a common aesthetic enterprise and need no segregation. Performances in his loft always had a wonderfully mixed audience of painters, sculptors, critics, poets, choreographers, and of course musicians. It really felt like a magic space of creation. I feel Alain most wanted to create fertile ground, both for his own creative inspiration and to engender a broad sense of community with his fellow artists.

Rebecca Smith



Alain and Ariane in Bolton Landing, 2018.

I first met Alain through his interest in the art of my father, David Smith. Over the years we became friends and had many conversations about sculpture, music, the state of art in the world, and our work as artists. He was a great companion whether in the studio, at a museum or art gallery, around any body of water in which one could swim, at a table, in the neighborhood, among friends and even strangers. One summer morning, visiting our neighborhood farmer's market, he bought raw scallops and ate them on the spot, savoring every bite. I vividly recall a visit I made to Alain and Ariane's home in Paris in 2000. Alain started the day by interviewing a woman who had trekked for days through the African jungle to interview pygmies about their music—to be used later in an article he was writing. Then he took me to an African neighborhood because I wanted to buy fabric. When I emerged from a shop he was deep in conversation with a man whose musical instrument strapped to his back was cause

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to make a new acquaintance. Alain and I returned home to prepare for a party at the Kirilis' home in which I was to meet the son of a historic artist wearing clothes the colors of ochre and cadmium red often used in that artist's paintings. His friends will all attest to the energy and wide-ranging projects of Alain!

Alain found qualities in my father's work that he prized—verticality, the erotic, and pleasure. Protesting the formalist bias my father's work had been subjected to, Alain, in his essay, "David Smith: The Cult of the Solar Nude," published in *Sculpture Magazine*, emphasized Smith's "genuinely heterogeneous body of work." He wrote that "Smith does not succumb to the obsessional effects of a repetitive, compact linear oeuvre" and that he made "paintings, drawings and sculptures that can be comprehended in terms of their idiosyncrasy and diversity." Alain described my father's practice of drawing the nude during the same period that he made the monumental, abstract "Cubi" series. I remember Alain speaking of his own experience in drawing from the nude and maintaining that it was essential to making his abstract sculpture. He also often spoke of the importance of music, drawing, and the art of other cultures to his sculpture. Alain had a vast, direct knowledge of the arts of India, Africa, and Southeast Asia by virtue of his many travels.

Alain's exhibition *Kirili dialogue avec Carpeaux* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Valenciennes was a magical moment for me. My then-husband Peter Stevens and I travelled from Paris with Alain, Ariane, their dog Max with his train ticket marked CHIEN, and a group of friends to the museum that is a major repository of the work of the great sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827-75) whose free, expressive, naturalistic challenged the then-popular classical style. Along with the cast bronze and carved marble sculptures there are many clay and plaster works created solely by the sculptor's hands. They feel immediate, free, expressive, natural, casual. The Kirili clay works deployed throughout the Carpeaux terra cottas and plasters supercharged the Carpeaux collection. It was the first time I had seen contemporary works installed as "interventions" in direct dialogue with the works of a historic artist. Time was vanquished; the shared emotion, vitality and improvisational impulse were alive to the viewer and the distance between the 19th century Carpeaux and the viewer evaporated. It brought home to me the constant communication with art through time and cultural differences that made up the expansive, expressive world in which Alain lived.

Art is time travel. There are no barriers between art across cultures and time and distance. Which is not to say that you completely understand the world in which an artist from another place and time lived, or how she thought. Yet through the object as perceived by you here and now you "get" something of that time. There have been several artists in my family—my father; further back, a celebrated actress; and even an opera singer. There are artists who have become my family of choice. Alain will always be one of them.

Robert Storr *In Memory A.K.*

What always impressed me most about Alain was his vigor. It came out in everything he did. The fervor of his speech, the depth and extent of his enthusiasm for the people and things with which he surrounded himself: especially jazz which is nothing more or less than interlacing, contrapuntal currents of human electricity; the work of other artists—like David Smith and Hans Hartung—whom he admired and with whom he "collaborated" in ritual juxtapositions of his work and theirs; the friends in Paris and New York whom he brought together and introduced to one another in order to foster synergy amongst them. Indeed, Alain and Ariane hosted one of the few true and enduring "salons" in Manhattan. It was a privilege to be invited and a pleasure to attend.

Above all, though, that vigor was present in his own work. His drawings are bursts of graphic invention; the best of his sculptures, whether as individual objects or as parts of ensembles, are uniquely vivid concentrations of energy. The miracle of art is that once crystalized by an artist truly committed to his vocation and his craft, such energy is seemingly inexhaustible and continues to flare periodically. Alain was such an artist.

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Vincent Katz



Vincent Katz poetry reading, with sculpture by Alain Kirili, May 21, 2009. Photo: Ariane Lopez-Huici.

Alain had one of the most generous spirits of anyone I knew. It was expressed in his art, the dinners he and Ariane Lopez-Huici hosted in their Tribeca loft, and in the multi-media events that took place there. I have long been a believer in the blending of the arts, so long as it is done with discrimination and a healthy dose of improvisation. The arts flourished in their loft. In particular, I was impressed by the evenings highlighting intersections between visual art and music, especially jazz. Alain was a connoisseur of many things, and the intelligence he and Ariane brought to these soirées remains inspiring, years or decades after the last note has died out, and the art has moved on to other abodes. In particular, the way they presented art, it never seemed to be about abstraction. The careful juxtapositions, the love and delicacy shared in those evenings, did not pit one thing against another, but rather brought us all together. When I think of Alain's sculpture now, its snaky lines and provocatively painted forms, I don't see them as abstract, but rather as life-forms, in just the same way a soprano saxophone solo by John Coltrane can be.