

PARIS JOURNAL

IN THE GARDEN OF BIEN ET MAL

How a movie star and a sculptor started a war in the Tuileries.

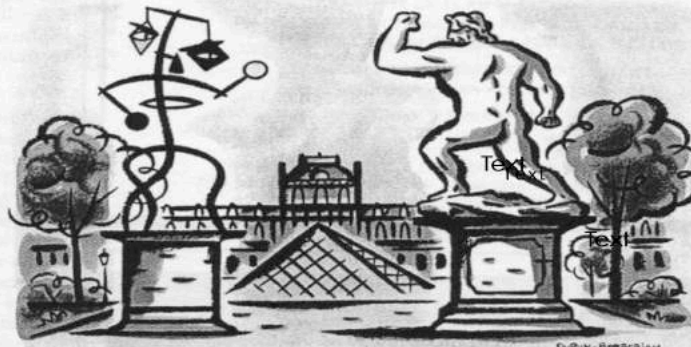
BY ADAM GOPNIK

THE sculptor Alain Kirili has prepared an official report, modestly called "For the Installation of Twentieth Century Sculptures in the Tuileries at the Dawn of the Third Millennium," that puts the recent problem in the Tuileries gardens in stark, diagrammatic form. At the end of the report, which explains a plan Kirili has devised to install modern sculpture all over the Tuileries, there is a photocopied map of the gardens, with two small added black dots representing the problem and two long accusatory lines pointing at them, above the legend "Implantation of two sculptures by P. Belmondo." The two implanted sculptures are called "Jeannette" and "Apollon"; they are bronze nudes, about five

and a half feet high, in a muscular pseudo-heroic style that an American art historian might call Debased Rockefeller Center or Thigh Master Moderne. They arrived at their place in the Tuileries last May when no one was looking, and were placed at the very edge of one of the lawns, a step away from the main allée, and they have been there ever since. "Apollon" is scowling, staring out defiantly; "Jeannette," a few steps behind him, stands demurely, with her hands just so. Their placement makes them look as though they had just been discovered making love in the grass by a *surveillant*, and the god had risen peevisly to protest the intrusion, while his girl looked around for her clothes.

The problem, though, is not their indecency. The problem is that most people believe they are in the gardens not because of what they are but because of who they know, and that they prevent

anybody else from putting the sculptures that ought to be there there. Even before they arrived, people were arguing over what kind of sculpture ought to be in the gardens and who ought to put it there. There were the "moderns," led by Kirili, and the "ancients," led by the art



Statues take center stage in the debate over French modern art.

historian Anne Pingeot (the mother of the late President Mitterrand's daughter). For both, the implantation of the two Belmondo sculptures was like one of the little nails that are driven by an Earth First! protester into a giant redwood: small as the nail may be, it prevents anybody else from timbering the tree.

P. Belmondo is Paul Belmondo, the father of the film star Jean-Paul Belmondo. Although the son has a reputation as a rough-and-ready blue-collar type, Paul was a noted academic sculptor of the thirties and forties, and two of his works were "Jeannette" and "Apollon." Jean-Paul gave them to the French government back in 1988, when Jack Lang was the Minister of Culture. The French state accepted the gift, but then kept the statues in a discreet part of the gardens, like a wedding tchotchke from an important friend

that sits on the hall table under the phone messages. In the week before the legislative elections last spring, Belmondo *fits*, who in recent years has been openly unhappy about the decline of his career—for which he blames the American stranglehold on French movie theatres—and more and more attached to the memory of his father, mysteriously got permission from a higher-up to move the sculptures anywhere he wanted. He chose to move them to the "triumphal way"—the main drag of the Tuileries, which runs from Napoleon's arch to the giant Egyptian needle.

Kirili began to react. He is a passionate, snowman-shaped sculptor, with an international reputation for his sublime, phallic, forged-iron work. He believes in a physical and spiritual art, and he thinks that the three movements that come closest to his ideal are American Abstract Expressionism, Gothic sculpture, and free jazz. A book he has published on jazz and sculpture includes a concordance of great jazzmen and the artists their music resembles, which ranges from the self-evident (Charlie Parker and Jackson Pollock) to the


occult (Meade Lux Lewis and Mondrian). Combining his three ruling passions, he arranges concerts at which post-bop and beyond-bop musicians are brought in to play percussion on his sculpture in great Gothic religious spaces. ("We did one in Cologne," he once explained cajolingly to the abbé of a Paris church. "It was very beautiful. We installed a piece of mine on the altar, below a Rubens altarpiece of the crucifixion of St. Peter. So there was St. Peter's head." Alain twisted his head upside down to indicate the position of the Saint's head. St. Peter, of course, was crucified upside down, out of modesty. "There was St. Peter's head and my piece, all in the same sublime plane.") About a year before the implantation, during the dedication of a large piece of Kirili's on the fringe of the gardens, near the Orangerie museum, Philippe Douste-Blazy, who was then the Minis-

ter of Culture, had, in a fit of cultural *extase*, asked Kirili if he would undertake the task of bringing modern sculpture into the Tuileries, and Kirili had jumped at the chance. During the election campaign, however, Douste-Blazy was stabbed in the back—literally, by a guy with a knife. (Luckily, it happened at Lourdes, where Douste-Blazy is the mayor, so he was O.K.) Understandably, he lost interest in the project.

It seemed likely that the arrival of the new Socialist government would end the plan altogether, since incoming governments rarely have time for the cultural ecstasies of outgoing ones. But the Socialists and their new Minister of Culture, Catherine Trautmann, who are far more skilled at cultural politics than their predecessors, shrewdly saw that this was a way to have a maximum of cultural effect with a minimum of outlay.

PEOPLE in New York talk about "cultural politics" a lot, but artistic conflicts in Manhattan tend in fact to be medieval: sieges between feudal powers or staged battles between mercenary armies, which are settled with gold just before the massacre. In a commercial society, power runs right down from a billionaire patron through a court of advisers and artisans. If someone wanted to bring sculpture into, say, Bryant Park, it would be necessary to court a wealthy patron who would be willing to pay for it, and who had sufficient clout with the Mayor to get it done. In Paris, the capital of a centralized bureaucratic state in which cultural power is widely dispersed among a functionary class, real politics—that is, skilled coalition building and manipulation among an array of counterpoised and relatively equal forces—really takes place.

Although Alain Kirili already had the official commission, it was a little like being nominated for office. He still had to run for it. He began to gather letters of support for the project from curators and critics and collectors in America and France. He also began to think about which modern sculptures would look good in the gardens. One of the ones he wanted was Picasso's "Homme au Mouton," the "Man with a Sheep," from the mid-forties, which lives at the Picasso Museum. This he



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knew would be a problem, because the director of the museum was the conservative Jean Clair.

For Kirili, the politics was necessary to support a higher, quixotic end. "I want to defend modern art in the Tuileries," he once said forcefully at the café La Palette. "Not postmodern art. *Modern* art. At a time when the extreme right is pressing so hard on culture, I want to say yes, we are the capital of modern art. My conception of sculpture is tactile and emotional and sexual. I want the gardens to be a place where the pleasure of touching is possible again. I want to defend physicality. For me, Fragonard and Charlie Parker are in the same band. Carpeaux and Rodin and Cecil Taylor and everyone who asserts the primacy of the physical as a gateway to the sublime—for me, they're playing in the same band."

Then he outlined some of the political difficulties he faced. As so often in Paris, what looked like a public space turned out to be a patchwork of private domains. "We are working within constraints," he said. "The left side of the Tuileries is given over to the children's pony rides and the carousel, and it is said that Mme. Giscard d'Estaing has a special concern for them." Mme. Giscard d'Estaing is the wife of a former President. "Then, of course, on the other side of the gardens, Anne Pingeot, the nineteenth-century historian, has drawn up a plan, and it argues for nothing but nineteenth-century sculp-

ture. That is a concern. And there are the Belmondos. The facts about Belmondo may be useful, but they may not." He did not need to add that Mme. Pingeot had been the mistress of President Mitterrand, or that her special claim as a kind of second widow might weigh heavily on a Socialist government's feelings about public sculpture. And he did not add that the "facts" about Belmondo's father, which had been published in *Le Canard Enchaîné*, were that he had been close to the Nazi sculptor Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite, and had gone to Berlin in 1941, as an official representative of French art.

THE project to bring modern sculpture to the Tuileries arrived at a moment when everyone agreed that a century that had begun with Paris in an indisputable lead in the visual arts was nearing its end with Paris lying flat on her back, the finish line far away, and looking around to figure out what had happened. What is startling to an American is that, while in New York the debate about modern art is between modernists and post-modernists, in Paris it takes place between modernists and anti-modernists: This makes the debate in Paris at once more shallowly conservative—there are people who think it would have been better had Picasso never been born—and more interestingly radical: there are people who think it would have been better had Picasso never been born!

Jean Clair embodies the conservative sensibility at its most refined. Clair is the author of a new book, "The Responsibility of the Artist," which traces, as the book jacket says, "the perversion of a perversion." The perversion is modern, or at least contemporary, Americanized art. The director of the Picasso Museum argues calmly that not only is the avant-garde modelled on the political utopias of the extreme left and right but it furnished the principal articles of their faith. "All I want to understand is why the students of the Bauhaus built Auschwitz," Clair says, in his apartment off the Place des Victoires. "Well, it's the same taste: for the tabula rasa, the massive remaking." It has seemed odd to many people that, given his views, M. Clair should be the man in charge of the museum devoted to the most famous modern artist, and Clair confesses to having "ambiguous" feelings about Picasso. "Yes, I do not admire Picasso the destroyer," he says. "Picasso the man who broke things apart, Picasso who ate all, devoured all. But I think there is another, more coherent Picasso, whom we can find, who remade, too."

On the subject of "Homme au Mouton," Clair was implacable. "I'm completely opposed. First, because it is part of the coherent collection. And, second, because of the vulgarity of the idea that somehow the public will be struck, opened up, given some miraculous capacity, just by looking at works of modern art in a public space. If we're going to move sculptures, spend money on these things, let us have sculpture that was meant for the place it is going, instead of moving things out of their real homes in order to cheaply serve that demagogic notion of instant education by art."

Clair's chief opponent in the ideological art war—to which most of an issue of *Le Débat*, the leading French intellectual magazine, was devoted—is Philippe Dagen, the art critic of *Le Monde*. Most people in Paris believe the decline of the city as an art capital began in the nineteen-forties, when the Nazi occupation forced artists



"Are we there yet?"

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to emigrate or go into hiding, leaving the field to mediocre neoclassicists like Paul Belmondo. This is one reason that the "implantation" was so offensive to so many people. It wasn't just bad art; it was the kind of bad art that had helped diminish Paris.

Dagen has a subtler theory, which traces the decline to the twenties, when in the aftermath of the war many of the leading Parisian painters, Picasso first among them, retreated into a neoclassical style. He feels that the real enemies of art in France are not the outright reactionary followers of Le Pen but the nostalgic neoclassicists, like Clair. "For Clair and others, this decade of the twenties was almost invisible, until recently," he says. "Now it has become their favorite period—a period of good, national, classically based modernism." Dagen, a tall, intense fortyish man, sees the crisis in French art as a series of refusals that began in the twenties: a refusal of collectors to collect contemporary art, the permanent lag of the French state in addressing modern art (it fell fifty years behind in the nineteenth century, and has never recovered), and above all the refusal of intellectuals to overcome a "bitter nostalgia" that sees questions of art in national terms. "It is scandalous that we are still catching up; the project in the Tuileries is just a moment of honesty, a chance to make amends before the end of the century."

EVENTUALLY, the Ministry of Culture stepped in, and decided to apply the philosophe Fontenelle's rule for a happy life: Everything is possible and everyone is right. In a meeting in February, the Ministry declared that all would have prizes. Modern sculpture would be moved into the Tuileries, but the question of the "Man with a Sheep" would be saved for another day. Letters would be sent to Alain Kirili, promising him the full support of the Ministry, and to Jean-Paul Belmondo, promising him that nothing would be done.

Pierre Encrevé, a sub-minister at the beautiful Ministry of Culture, in the Palais Royal, insists blandly that there was never any polemic about the sculpture in the Tuileries. "No, there was no polemic, no debate," he said recently. "Everyone was in accord. Everyone was in agreement. It's a natural extension of

the great renovation of the Louvre that began in President Mitterrand's time. There is no real polemic about art here. We are simply bringing the concord of traditional and innovative culture another step forward. Look at the Pyramide." He meant I.M. Pei's glass entrance to the museum. "Look at the Pyramide and the Louvre. They live in harmony. This project will, too." He paused for a moment, and then he announced, "*On va recréer une continuité qui a toujours existé depuis longtemps*"—"We are going to re-create a continuity that has always existed for a very long time." It was a perfect French ministerial sentence, a sentence you could walk around and admire from every angle, like a statue in the park.

Alain Kirili has already begun to plan his installation, and has picked out his favorite pieces—a couple of Calder, a Smith, a Sol LeWitt, and a Martin Puryear. On the other hand, "Jeannette" and "Apollon" are still there. Kirili at least has the good words of his supporter Dina Vierny. She is the director of the Maillol Museum, on the Rue de Grenelle, and she came by her role in the best way anyone could: she posed for all the sculpture. She is the original of all those splendid, wasp-waisted, hippo-hipped, swan-necked ladies who decorate the world's museums, and, in her seventies, is still the sexiest museum head in France, in touch with the mixture of sensuality and refinement that is French civilization. ("We ate roots," she said once, apropos of nothing, in the midst of a meeting about the project. "During the war, Maillol and I ate roots. He cooked them, of course. He made them sublime. That's when I knew he was a true genius. Everything he touched was touched with genius.") Her words were simple and terrific. "*Bon courage*," she said to Kirili once when he was concerned about the politics of the gardens. "We are both already there." She meant, of course, that Kirili was there, alongside the Orangerie, while she was all over the place, in her own beautiful younger form, naked, in bronze, and for good. ♦

A THOUGHT FOR THIS WEEK

[From the Milford (Mass.) Daily News]

Passover is best known because its story was conveyed in the movie, "The Ten Commandments."