

## **Duo Absolu**

***Barry Schwabsky***

Every marriage is an unwritten drama, a performance composed at once in conflict and complicity. Some are filled with dramatic incidents; in others, the passions run unobtrusively below the surface. The life partnership of Alain Kirili and Ariane Lopez-Huici is a production of more than thirty-five years' duration—no longer a common thing in our era of shallow commitment. Inevitably, it has also been an artistic partnership, but not one in which it is easy for any third party to discern the specifics of the give-and-take of influence. Above all, they are not one of those “production-couples” that the philosopher Klaus Theweleit discussed in his book *Object Choice (All You Need Is Love...)*, in which one partner becomes essentially the medium through which the other realizes his (usually his) artistic project. This marriage of true minds, rather, has been a duet of sovereign individuals whose projects have influenced each other by invisible gravitational forces.

For both Kirili and Lopez-Huici, a deep sense of the integrity of one's project does not conflict with but is in fact integral to the realization that this project flourishes through the encounter with those of others and not through some protective isolation. “I have never avoided the influence of others,” Henri Matisse told Guillaume Apollinaire. “I would have considered this cowardice and a lack of sincerity toward myself. I believe that the personality of the artist develops and asserts itself through the struggles it has to go through when pitted against other personalities.”<sup>1</sup> Kirili in particular has been clear in his loyalty to this Matissean ethics of influence. He has never tired of reasserting but also reexamining his fascination with the work of certain great precursors, above all David Smith and Auguste Rodin as well as the anonymous creators of ancient Indian yoni-lingam sculptures. Nor has he hesitated to exhibit his works alongside those of Julio González, Gaston Lachaise, or Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, or to invite such musical masters as Cecil Taylor, Steve Lacy, or Billy Bang to embroider their improvisations around their perceptions of his forms. And what is true at an individual level is also true at a broader cultural level; not only in his love for Indian sculptural forms and their attendant ceremonies but also in his collaborations

with American and African artisans, he is (as Robert O. Paxton has put it) “engaged in free artistic exchange with other peoples without losing his own identity.”<sup>2</sup>

As for Lopez-Huici, although her approach to photography has certainly never been such as to occlude her affection for her Pictorialist and modernist precursors, especially those whose studio practice emphasized a constructed, performative dimension. But her work’s openness to others has come most patently through her interactions with her subjects—who are much more than subjects in the usual sense. Although her early works were abstract, since the early 1990s her images has developed out of very close collaborations with a fairly restricted number of models with whom she works on an intensive and long-term basis, among them Daniel D., Aviva, Bill Shannon, Dalila Khatir, Priscille... a wonderfully diverse group of people who in realizing and revealing before the camera their own aesthetics and ethics of the body have allowed Lopez-Huici, in parallel, to articulate her own.

The aesthetics and ethics of the body—here is the terrain, above all, where the otherwise so different oeuvres of Lopez-Huici and Kirili find their common ground. But each one populates this territory in a distinct way. Some of the differences, of course, emerge almost naturally from the differences between sculpture and photography as material entities. A three-dimensional sculpture is already in itself a kind of body, occurring in real space. By contrast, a photograph is a flat sheet of paper with no ostensible figural being of its own; if it concerns the body, it can only be through an appeal to the imagination—but this is not to say that it must be imaginary. Rather, it always appeals an empirical presence (albeit one that is fixed in the past by the time the photograph has actually been printed). As Roland Barthes put it, the photograph “always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see.... The photograph is never anything but an antiphon of ‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here it is’; it points a finger at a certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.”<sup>3</sup> The photograph of a certain body is always, indeed, *of* that body. And it is not just that the photograph points at this body, but also that, in a certain sense, that body was also pointed toward the camera, and toward the eye of the photographer who framed it in her viewfinder before the resulting picture was ever framed on a rectangular sheet of paper; certain rays of light reflected from that body through the camera’s lens and onto the negative.

Undoubtedly this distinction between a real (but inanimate) body in sculpture and an imagined one (but empirically existent and living at the time of the shutter release) in the photograph is too simple. There are other nuances to consider. As Kirili well knows, for instance, the viewer's relation to the body of the sculpture may be inflected by a sense of the maker's body in action as the object was worked in time as it was created. In this sense the sculpture unexpectedly shares something of photography's reference back to a certain past moment; sculpture too has a "deictic" aspect. But by the same token, in Lopez-Huici's photography—as the late Jeanne Siegel wrote as long ago as 1990—"photography... identifies with a sculptural attribute," seeking to communicate a sense of three-dimensionality and of explicitly tactile sensations.<sup>4</sup> In her photographs of that time, Lopez-Huici often took sculpture as a source for her imagery. Over the last couple of decades, on the other hand, with her art centered on the collaboration with her models, it would not be inaccurate to say that she conceives of these models as living sculpture. This is her special sense of the body: That it is not primarily a material thing that is separate from the self. Rather, it is the creation and expression of the person. "The body is not a *thing*," as Simone de Beauvoir emphatically put it. "It is our grasp on the world and the sketch of our project."<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir's idea of the body as a sketch means: It is a work, but it is an (always) unfinished work. The same notion is present in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who could easily have been explicating Lopez-Huici's photography when he wrote that, "Whether it is a question of the other person's body or my own, I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it, that is, by taking up for myself the drama that moves through it and by merging with it. Thus, I am my body... and reciprocally my body is... a provisional sketch of my total being."<sup>6</sup>

This idea of the body as a sketch is present throughout Kirili's work as well. Marks of the gestures of modeling, of forging, and the like—the sculptor's "grasp on the world," to borrow Beauvoir's words—are, in the tradition of the great modernist manifestations of the *unfinished* as a positive value from Manet onward, traces of the process of making, reminders that the work is essentially oriented toward the ongoing present and not something sealed off in the past. But each of those marks is also the index of a moment, like the trace a certain light leaves on a photographic negative. The object is a kind of

body, but also the sketch of a possible body. The sculptor takes up the drama that moves through it, as Merleau-Ponty says; in a different way the viewer must do so as well. The point is that art exists in what is often called its medium—in iron, in plaster, or (as in some astonishing recent works by Kirili) in wire and rubber; in photographic emulsion on paper; in a living body in movement, no matter—only insofar as it participates in this drama, an encounter that shakes it, that puts an end to its stasis, that transforms it. Lopez-Huici has said it beautifully: “Whatever medium you use—painting, sculpture, photography, etc.—what is at stake is always the establishment of that very intense grappling, body to body, with what I would call the great themes of life.”<sup>7</sup> It is a great and solemn yet joyous performance, here over many years marvelously accomplished *à deux*.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, revised edition, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 29. Original in *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, ed. by Dominique Fourcade (Paris: Hermann, 1972), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Robert O. Paxton, “The Eye of Hitler,” [http://www.kirili.com/textesE/2011\\_09\\_Paxton\\_English\\_Caen\\_version.pdf](http://www.kirili.com/textesE/2011_09_Paxton_English_Caen_version.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, tr. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 3-4. Original in *La Chambre claire* in *Oeuvres complètes V: 1977-1980*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 792.

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Siegel, “Erotic/Fragment: Ariane Lopez-Huici’s Tactile Photographs,” *Arts Magazine*, November 1990, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, tr. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 46 (translation modified).

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 205. Original in *Phénoménologie de la perception* in *Oeuvres*, ed. by Claude Lefort (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2010), p. 887.

<sup>7</sup> “The exemplarity of the model: Conversation between Ariane Lopez-Huici and Paul Audi,” in *Ariane Lopez-Huici* (Valencia: IVAM, 2004), p. 42.