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Vincent Barré

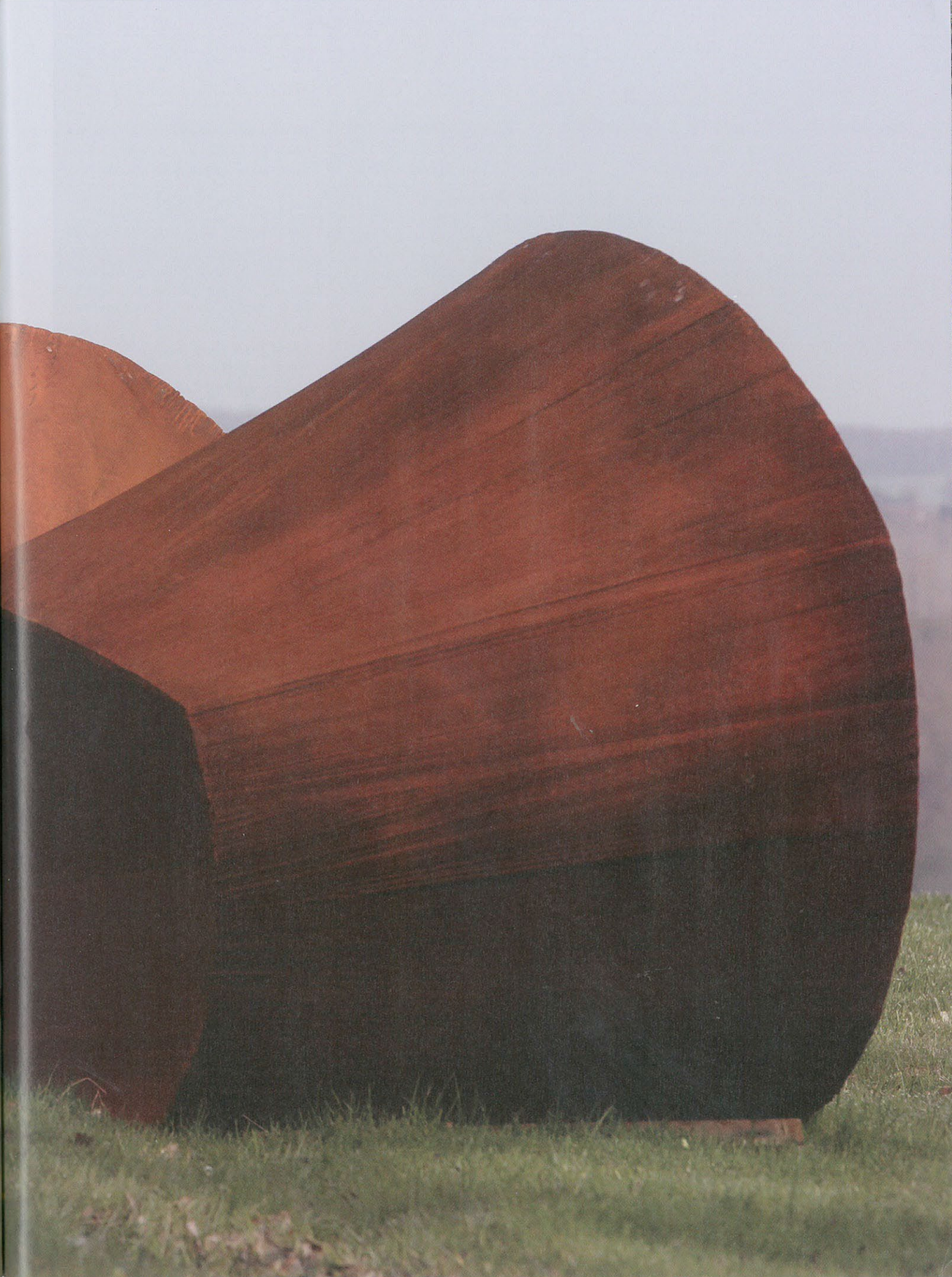
Forms of Humanism

BY KAREN WILKIN



ETIENNE SANDERS FOR THE DOWNTOWN DE CHAUCRELL

Chaos, 2013. Iron rings, 6 elements, decreasing in size from
140 x 100 x 160 cm.



Top and detail: *Colonne de rameaux*, 2014. Bronze from lost wood, 240 x 80 x 80 cm. View of installation at the Assemblée Nationale, Paris.

compelling and intimate, layered with complex meanings. Barré says that he wanted to pay homage to everyone who took part in the Resistance, to the people who acted, he says, “with perception and courage, with great moral force.” Only an abstraction was equal to this self-imposed task, and Barré has succeeded admirably, giving a richly metaphorical face to those who, in his words, “knew how to say *no* at a serious moment in our history. No to the moral and political weakness of France, no to totalitarianism and servitude to Nazism.”

Set near a wall inscribed with the names of the 1,038 Compagnons de la Libération—a group of specially recognized participants—*Colonne de rameaux* is, essentially, a circular “cage” constructed from stacked rings of branches, cast in bronze from real specimens that Barré gathered in the countryside and subtly altered. The resulting openwork structure, declaratively singular but clearly made of many separate elements, retains a powerful sense of the hand. From a distance, the sculpture appears to be delicate and invites close inspection, yet for all the apparent fragility of the individual branches, their multiplicity also carries the implication of strength through unity. Imposing but still human in scale, the vertical, open volume is vaguely anthropomorphic, becoming, as we study it, a confrontational sentinel. This human resonance is an important part of the sculpture’s meaning. As was frequently noted during the dedication ceremony, the story of the French Resistance is a familial one that touches countless people. Barré’s own history is typical. Born in 1948, in Vierzon, and raised in Paris after the end of the war, he had no direct experience of the movement, yet it is not remote from him. His father and uncle were active in the Resistance, and to expand the connection, his long-time gallerist’s father’s name is inscribed among the Compagnons.

Colonne de Rameaux also provokes many other relevant associations beyond human presence. The open cage structure, for example, has overtones of both impris-

AURELIEN MOLE, COURTESY GALLERY BERNARD JORDAN

May 27, 2014 saw the official inauguration of La Journée de la Résistance—Resistance Day—in France. The newly established holiday honors the heroism of those individuals, celebrated and anonymous, who, in the words of a speaker at the dedication ceremony, “chose liberty over barbarism,” during the World War II Nazi occupation of France. Some time earlier, a competition was held for a sculpture celebrating those

brave men and women, some of them young teenagers. The winning work, Vincent Barré’s *Colonne de rameaux* (*Column of Branches*), was unveiled at the event. Permanently installed in the lobby of the Jacques Chaban-Delmas building of the Assemblée Nationale and visible from the rue de l’Université, the elegant, restrained, eight-foot tower provides Paris with a nuanced and poetic public monument, at once



Above and detail: *Monument aux fusillés de la Nivelles*, 2003. Iron and stone, columns, 245 x 50 x 60 cm. each.; wall, 40 x 80 x 1200 cm. View of installation in Amilly.

onment and release. The irregular forms suggest rough growth, perhaps the *maquis* in particular—the scrubby wasteland that became synonymous with the activities of the Resistance fighters hiding there. The leafless branches can be read as emblematic of winter—“the long winter endured by France, Europe, and the world,” Barré says—but they also carry the hopeful promise of an inevitable spring. And to reinforce the importance of refusal—the “no” so crucial to Barré’s concept—there is an inscription on a horizontal ring, set at eye level so that we discover it when we approach, taken from the poem “Psalm,” by Paul Celan, in French and the original German, a meditation on the impermanence of life.

Colonne de rameaux is not Barré’s first monument honoring Resistance fighters. In 2002, together with his long-time collaborator, architect and designer Sylvain Dubuisson, he completed an installation on the outskirts of Amilly, south of Paris. Located just a few kilometers from the former farm where Barré has his main studio, the work is erected on the site where four young members of the movement, most of them local boys, were captured and later executed by the Germans. Here, Barré abstracts the tragedy into four hollow iron

columns, larger than life but still evocative of the human figure. Each column is opened on one side with a vertical slot. The spaces are too narrow to enter, yet they turn the columns into emblems of secret but inaccessible places of refuge, an apt metaphor for the young men’s clandestine Resistance activities and their inability to escape their enemies. Placed in a grassy field by a river, three columns are grouped fairly close together; the fourth, closer to the riverbank where one of the young men was killed as he tried to flee, extends the narrative. At the edge of the field, a low stone “bench,” inscribed with quotations and pertinent facts, completes the ensemble. Like *Colonne de rameaux*, the Amilly monument is at once reticent, highly suggestive, hieratic, and open-ended in its allusions.

These terms could be applied to most of Barré’s work since the early 1980s, when he abandoned a promising practice as an architect—a profession practiced by several generations of his family members—and began to concentrate on sculpture. (His projects, however, still involve architectural elements and, because of his training, he is extremely sensitive to the relation of his sculptures to their settings.) The multiple associations provoked by Barré’s work reflect his wide-ranging enthusiasms.



Deeply knowledgeable about Western art and architecture, he has degrees in architecture and urbanism from several French institutions and pursued additional graduate studies with Louis Kahn, at the University of Pennsylvania. Barré is also widely traveled—he is fond of trekking through remote, sparsely populated Himalayan regions—and he has studied art and artifacts from the ancient past and from many cultures. The archaic and the utilitarian vernacular speak eloquently to him. As



attested by the ravishing drawings that have filled his notebooks over the years, he pays equal attention to ancient sculptures from the Far East, devotional paintings from the early Renaissance in France, contemporary architecture and urban design, domestic objects from rural, non-industrialized regions, and Romanesque sculpture and architecture. His affection for these wide-ranging sources drives his forms, suggesting points of departure while enriching his inventions and improvisations. The common factor among these apparently diverse inspirations is that they are all manmade. Barré sometimes draws people and dramatic landscapes, but there's no evidence of this kind of observation in his sculptures. While he occasionally takes works of art—or more accurately, particular aspects of other works—as his starting point, other things made and used by human beings are the most crucial stimuli for the formal conception and scale of his work.

For example, Barré's small cast bronze sculptures from the last 15 years seem to reflect the fundamental character of humble utensils, useful objects, and expedient tools—functional things scaled to the hand and made by hand. While these intimate works are resolutely abstract and ultimately resemble nothing but themselves, they trigger associations with everything from Chinese ritual bronzes to ancient Greek helmets, to primitive cooking pots. It's as if Barré has distilled the most irreducible elements of utilitarian things scaled to the body and produced endless variations on

their essential qualities. Some of these works are wall hung, but others invite variable placements, a contingency that demands the action of the hand. The hand is similarly present when Barré works in two dimensions. His large, silhouette-like drawings, done directly on the wall or on paper, bear witness to repeated, rhythmic gestures that transfer pigment to surface. This need for evidence of human intervention in the form of touch may echo Barré's long interest in ceramics. From his first forays into sculpture until the present, he has periodically worked with clay, a notably tactile medium. Yet he approaches clay in surprising ways, assembling forms that reflect Modernist notions of sculpture as construction, even though they retain a memory of traditional methods of making useful vessels.

Manmade precedents reverberate in Barré's work, animating and humanizing even his largest, most unequivocally abstract efforts. Such works are further enlivened by a tension between opposing conceptions of sculpture as a singular monolith and as an assembly of discrete parts. Construction and carving play almost equal roles. While Barré's small bronzes are clearly the result of handling relatively thin, planar materials and shaping them by folding, rolling, slicing, and reattaching, many of his large cast-iron sculptures begin as direct carving from polystyrene blocks. (A series of massive vertical columns had their origins in the trunks of fallen trees.) In his large works, Barré has developed a vocabulary of robust forms, some ovoid

Chaos, 2013. Iron rings, 6 elements, decreasing in size from 140 x 100 x 160 cm.

and tapering, some hollow and conical, some rectangular and arching like roof tiles. The members of this family of forms differ slightly with each iteration, but they are always distinguished by their "imperfect," subtly inflected geometry. Openings of different shapes and sizes in the ends—now large and oval, now small and round—warp the forms by virtue of their varying dimensions. The openings also force us to consider the interiors of the sculptures, reminding us that these sturdy volumes are not solid and contradicting the sense of bulk provoked by their size and the sheer mass of the reddish iron from which they are cast. Unlike the vertical *Colonne de rameaux* or the four "figures" of the Amilly monument, these substantial elements usually lie on the ground. Barré overlaps some, offers others singularly, and scatters others in variable groupings that respond to the particulars of their setting. Weighty forms, it seems, demand horizontal orientation, just as the disembodied shapes of his large drawings, which often conflate figure and ground, demand vertical orientation, often on large, visibly fragile sheets of paper.

During the summer and fall of 2014, overlapping with the dedication of *Colonne de rameaux*, Barré's work appeared in two additional installations, commissioned for the annual "Arts and Nature" exhibition in the park and outbuildings of the historic

Right and detail: *Couronne—à Jean Fouquet*, 2014.
Bronze and charcoal, sculpture 65 x 225 x 230 cm.

Château Chaumont-sur-Loire. In the park itself, *Chaos*, a casually disposed gathering of six open, tapering, cast-iron forms, stretched across a grassy space framed by tall trees, with a view of the Loire far below and, beyond that, distant fields and low hills. The generous size and delicately striated surface of each element turned the ensemble into an evocation of a ruined Greek temple with tumbled columns. The placement of the forms between the embracing trees also triggered unexpected but powerful recollections of those ultimate images of pastoral geometry: Cézanne's late masterworks of nude bathers, particularly the version in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This reference, it turns out, is not happenstance. Barré knew of the site's associations when he chose it. He says that he got to know the Philadelphia bathers very well when he was studying at the University of Pennsylvania, and he deliberately calculated the spacing of the elements in *Chaos* between the tall, bracketing trees to suggest a connection. Like the columns of the Amilly monument, the solemn, seductive *Chaos* seems at once to refer to the architectural and to the *presentness* of human form.

Barré's second work in "Arts and Nature," *Couronne—à Jean Fouquet*, was installed in the elegant 19th-century stables. Inspired by the crown of thorns in a glorious Pietà by the Renaissance master Jean Fouquet (installed in a modest church in a nearby town), Barré constructed a large ring of branches, thickened and altered them in places, cast them in bronze, and suspended this alluring, slightly threatening "crown" in an arched, brick-walled space above a circle of charcoal. The ring and the ominous expanse of charcoal—meticulously sized to the proportions of the stables—brought the entire space alive, creating a conversation between nature (the branches and the wood burned to create the charcoal) and construction (the brick vault). A clock on the wall above Barré's spiky ring emphasized the passage of time, a notion reinforced, in the next bay, by an accompanying video that conflated images of

the Fouquet Pietà and a Buddhist farmer, repeated with a varying soundtrack. With its multiple allusions to the history of art, to Western religion and Eastern spirituality, to past and present, *Couronne* (and its related video) reveals a lot about Barré and his passions. But, ultimately, what matters most is that *Couronne* is potent in purely visual, spatial terms. Like *Chaos* and *Colonne de rameaux*, *Couronne* fascinates with its solemn, economical forms,

forms that allow (or force) us to discover a host of personal associations. What makes Barré's recent work so compelling are the wordless qualities of mass and surface, the shapes and relationships of individual parts, how those parts embrace space and activate their setting, and the character of their materials—anything else is a bonus.

Karen Wilkin is a writer based in New York.

