


Florian Rodari

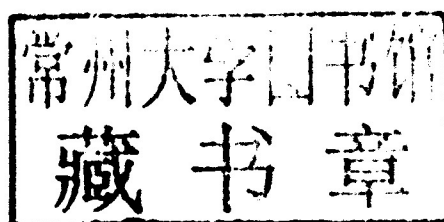


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Translation: Michael Taylor

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# Contents

A Man of Many Ways **7**

Everything Is in the Head **19**

Toward a Flatter World **55**

“La Bagnole” **73**

A Fine Blade **87**

Reliefs and Constructions **105**

Pairs and Twins **119**

Encompassing the Void **137**

Biography **161**

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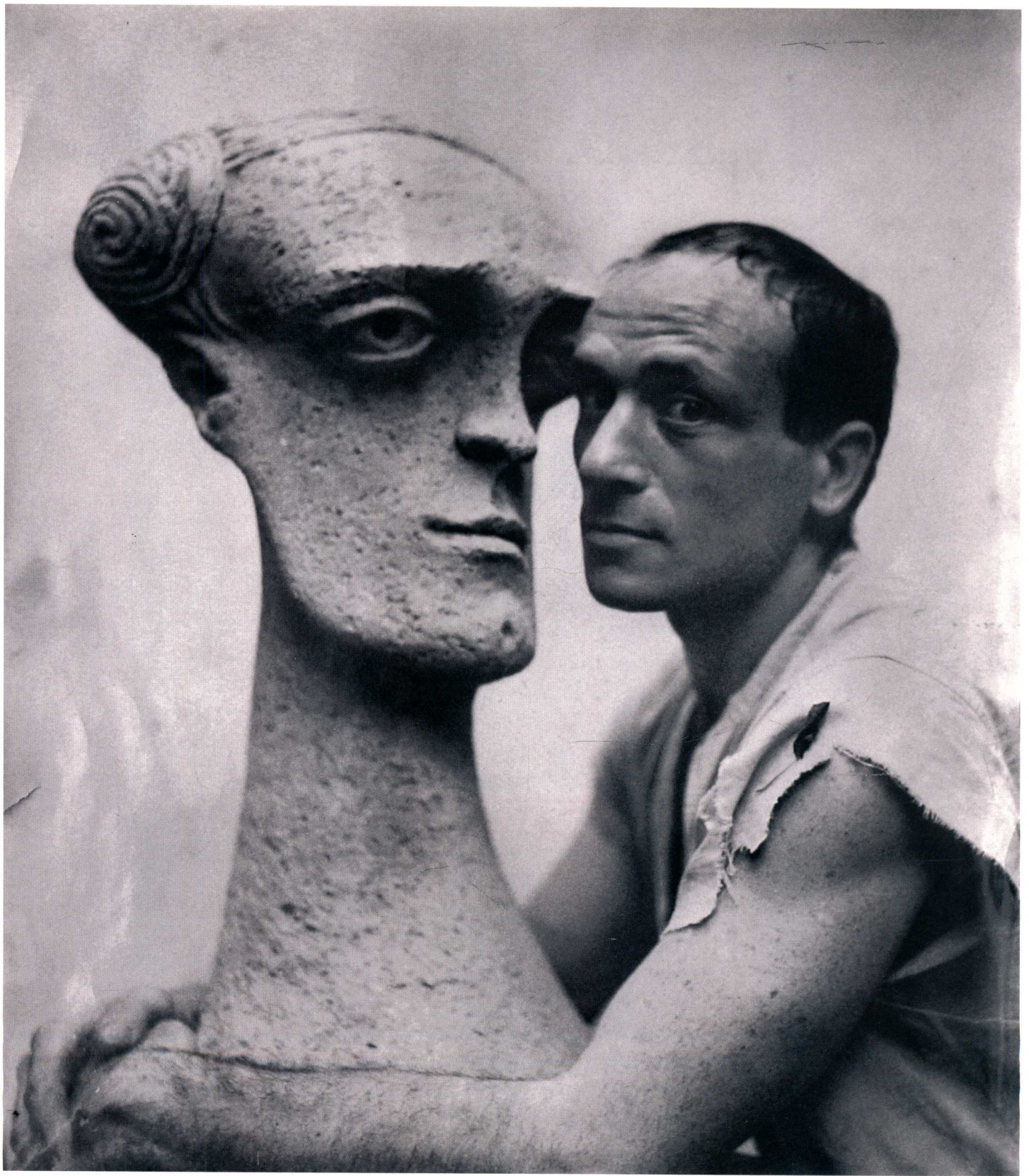
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Self-portrait with Pauline, 1958

# A Man of Many Ways

In the little film that shows one of Yves Klein's famous performances of "painting" with a flamethrower, one discerns a fireman standing next to the artist, sporadically squirting water from a hose whenever the canvas threatens to ignite. This anonymous firefighter acting out his part with deadpan seriousness, notwithstanding the comical side of the situation, is none other than Kosta Alex. The sculptor's brief helmeted appearance sums up the posture he maintained throughout his life: his sense of humor and impressive resoluteness, his availability for his friends, his know-how and his proficiency in hiding behind a mask, his refusal to take himself seriously while at the same time accomplishing his tasks to perfection.

Jean Planque, the collector and art consultant for the Galerie Beyeler, reports in his journal that he was briefly misled about Alex. It was only after a few months had passed that he came to realize that the deft builder who, with his team of cheerful and singular co-workers, had refurbished his apartment in a trice, was in fact a genuine artist. Despite his gusto for life, Alex, he discovered, was someone who also toiled doggedly at his real work in the solitude of a studio.

There are reasons for not wanting to proclaim straight off and to all comers that one is an artist. To begin with – and this may reflect a certain wisdom, if not caution – despite the evidence, one is never altogether sure that one is and will durably remain an artist. Then too there is something that holds one back, keeping secret an activity that concerns no one else, when all is said and done, except oneself. It is never possible to tell exactly which of these two attitudes prevails, but one thing is certain: everything about Alex inclined him to reject the "arty attitude." He refused to don the cloak of the inspired creator with his airs, prerogatives and self-importance. Yet this did not prevent him from recognizing that his was not only a precocious but also an absolute vocation. "I did not become an artist," he explained to interviewers in 1971; "I **am** an artist, I've always been one," adding that art must not be limited to an individualistic adventure centered on an overblown ego: "We're a whole gang, whether we do it with movements, words, colors or shapes. We have something to say and we leave a kind of message for those who follow us."

Keenly aware of the eternal return of the cycles of art and life, he viewed the turmoil of the world at a distance and would not bow to fashions or be roped into pursuing some external cause. He was notorious for his indifference to the political issues that agitated the post-war circles he moved in. Throughout his life he was protected by a wit that combined a keen sense of irony with a defiance briefly cultivated in the practice of boxing. It was like a shield or mask for him. At public meetings, gatherings of friends or gallery openings (which, in fact, he seldom attended) he would occasionally raise his voice and launch into a long speech. He was fond of using colorful comparisons and whimsical statements designed to bewilder his audience. But this manner of distancing himself from high seriousness and stereotyped ideas by no means precluded depth. Of course, whenever someone questioned him too closely about his work, he replied with a witticism or wriggled away from the trap that had been set for him with a dazzling non sequitur. Alex knew that the true answer could only come from inventions shaped by his fingers, with the result that against this background of evasiveness there soon stood out the commanding figure of an artist fully aware of his power, confident about his choices, who could be hard with others but never as demanding as he was with himself.

With Flowers in Mind, 1966  
glueline drawing  
47.5 × 38 cm

Until the very end of his life Alex thought only of working. He was entirely focused on, immersed in, the desire to recreate life with his hands, his body, with gestures devoted without reservation to serving his dynamic thought. Indefatigable in the studio, he brimmed with an exceptional *joie de vivre*, a need to savor the fruits of life, no matter where they came from or what shape they took. He delighted in laughing, singing, extolling the beauty of women and the world. In an attempt to describe for a film the joy he derived from his work as an artist – pointing out that “I really get the feeling of pure joy, or real happiness, when I create, when I work” – Alex began to dance. In a sequence that was absolutely natural and enhanced by a distinctly Pan-like gracefulness, his body appeared to escape gravity and it seemed as if the limits of time had been abolished. Later in the same film, seeking to recapture the memory of a lost work, he started to sketch it by gesturing in thin air, and his hands moved as swiftly as birds gliding through space; gathering together his fingers quivering with blind energy, he shaped a vividly detailed recollection of a face. For, like Henri Matisse replying to Father Couturier, Alex was able to state, “I understand God when I’m creating.” In his case, God was a potter.



Potter, 1941  
clay  
20.5 × 20 × 22.6 cm

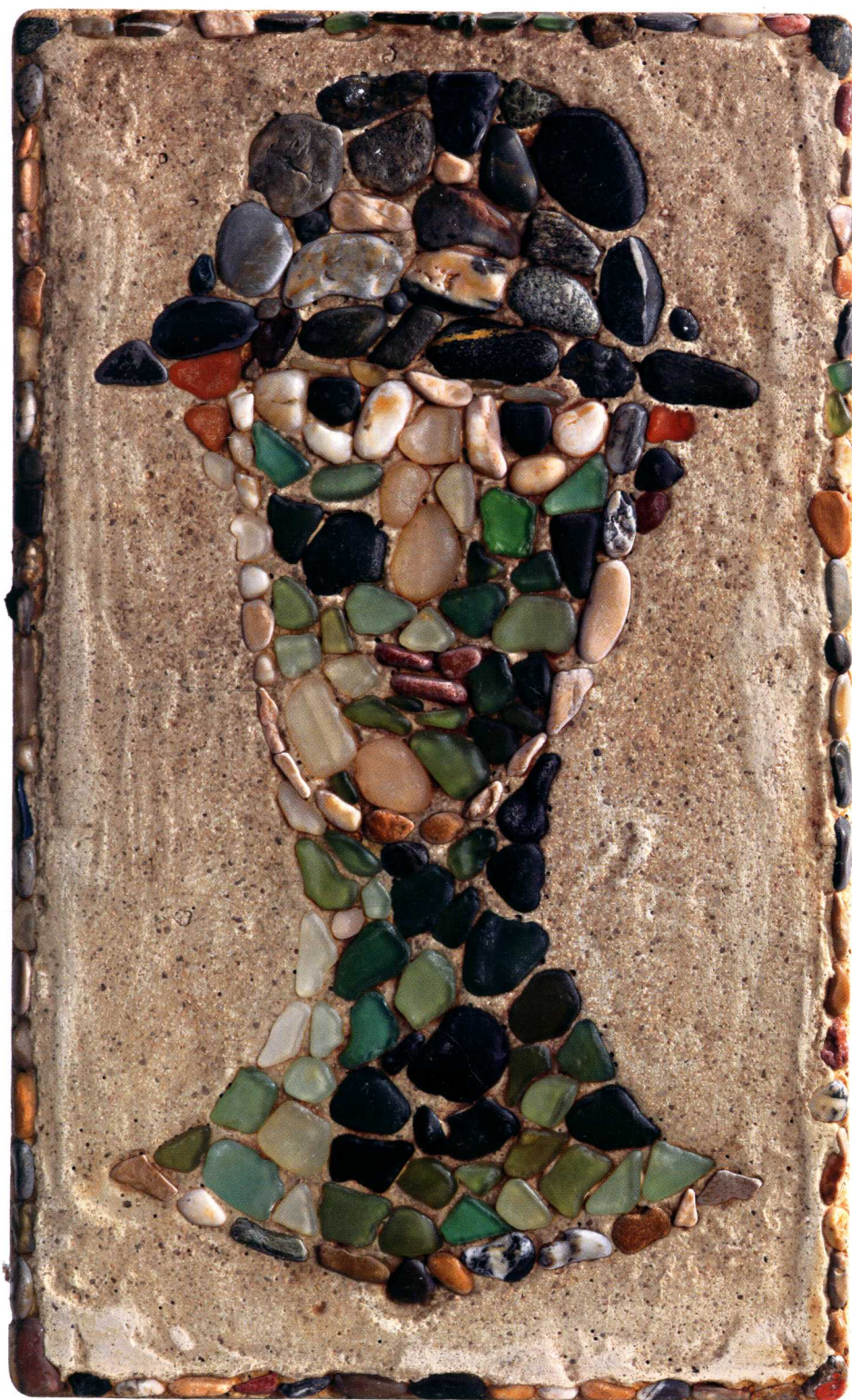


"With flowers in mind"  
Kosta Alex  
1966



Everything that Alex said and created radiates a sort of inborn gracefulness. Sheltered from constraints, he gives one the feeling that he approached events unthinkingly, that his responses were improvised, and one senses that, once gripped by the urge to create, he surrendered to it blindly. He was as fascinated, if not more so, by the face of an ordinary dishwasher in a restaurant as by an artwork by Benvenuto Cellini (whom he referred to familiarly as "Old Ben"). He recognized no hierarchies and paid no attention to the class struggle, though his hard-working and impoverished childhood naturally inclined him to feel close to the underprivileged; but again this was more a matter of instinct than of choice. The motifs in his work were never dictated by fashion or history – and still less literature. His staple food was the spectacle of ordinary life, the flavor of street culture, the urgency of current events that break into one's thoughts and give new energy to day-to-day conversations. Again and again he repeated that an artist must seek inspiration from "life." The everyday is an open book in which the artist who seeks to understand the world surrounding him discovers meanings that the rest of humanity does not care to know about or does not even suspect. This being said, however, the subjects of Alex's work are never mere anecdotes; on the contrary, as a true inventor he drew universal images from every circumstance, even the smallest detail, to suddenly greet his eyes.

La Plongeuse de chez Louissette, 1968  
painted cardboard relief  
38.5×37.5 cm



Head, 1963  
mosaic  
42 × 25.5 cm

Alex was never in any sense an intellectual, a word rather mindlessly used whenever somebody does something other than surrender to his or her drives. None of his intimates would have called him this. Yet he was a person who thought. What is more, he never stopped pondering – wondering about what he saw, about passers-by in the street or people sitting on a café terrace. He enjoyed glimpsing items in a shop window, reacted to news posted on bills or broadcast over the radio. He was forever astounded by colors, shapes, movement. He was an observer and, as he observed, he sought to understand where whatever intrigued him came from, what it meant and, above all, how he as an artist could render it. Perhaps one could say that he was an “intellectual” in the sense that Odysseus, whose crafty and inventive mind was never at rest, has been called an intellectual. Both Greek, both men of many wiles clever at seizing hold of the most trifling opportunity that presented itself, Alex and Odysseus were both skilled at taking advantage of the least thing that life cast their way and, whether pressed or given leisure to reflect, both relied on their wits to make the right decision. Beholding one of Alex’s works, one experiences an immediate attraction to it, in spite of the apparent sparseness of his technical means: behind his constructions there lies both pleasure and impishness. The artist, one senses, was a smooth talker. One pictures him rising naked from the sea and addressing a modern-day Nausicaa, who has just come upon him in this state, with a speech combining the kind of charm and naturalness that dispel awkwardness and sweep away all obstacles.

This is why his work, somewhat in the manner of fifteenth-century wood engravings, speaks to children and to those whose minds have not yet been warped by voguish and conventional thinking. A folk art in the noblest sense of the word, it expresses itself in broad strokes and opts for immediate effects. But this does not mean the artist adopts a simplistic rhetoric. Far from it, his approach, which at first sight strikes one as somewhat facile or playful, actually cloaks an extremely intricate interplay of articulations, inversions, mirror images, gaps and lags, *trompe-l’œil* and transparency elaborated in countless studies, sketches and reworkings which accompanied his creative labor. The essay that follows is an attempt to decipher some of its effects.

Man Who Has Just Made his Second Million, 1969  
painted cardboard relief and pasted paper  
96 × 76.7 cm

