

Jannis Kounellis
Seven Works
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by Sergio Risaliti

To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.

Karl Marx

Quick though the earth itself churns, / changing like cloud formations, / each fulfilled thing returns / to ancient foundations. // Beyond changing and passing, / freer and higher, / your prelude is alone lasting: / god with the lyre. // Grief is beyond comprehension. / True love has never been learned. / Nor do we know by what agency // we are to death interned. / Only the song over the land / yields blessing and commemoration.

R.M. Rilke

A new exhibition of the work of Jannis Kounellis (Piraeus 1936 – Rome 2017) should be greeted as a great event from both the emotional and the formal perspective. His works still speak to the present, with an indubitable and inescapable force, and their iconic and yet so communicative magnetism still remains shrouded in mystery for us. The death of the artist in 2017 has not left a void, for his presence is maintained by the reverberations that his artistic and human gifts still generate in this space today. The relationship between Galleria Christian Stein and Jannis Kounellis is a long-standing one, dating all the way back to 1967 when the artist took part in the group exhibition *Confronti* at the Turin branch of the gallery on Piazza San Carlo, where he showed a large canvas with colored letters. Subsequently, in 1974, Kounellis staged his first solo exhibition at the same venue, *Tre stanze: la morte, la danza, la vita* ("Three Rooms: Death, Dance, Life"), followed in 1979 by *Hotel Louisiane*. Then he was the protagonist of a series of equally unforgettable exhibitions at the Galleria Stein's new branches in Milan, first on Via Lazzaretto and then at the spaces on Corso Monforte and in Pero, where his last retrospective was held in 2015. On that occasion, the artist, in close dialogue with Gianfranco Benedetti, decided to present such crucial works as the "coal container" and the "parrot on the perch," the large canvas with roses and birds, the "fields" of cactus, the "cotton container," the row of coats hanging from hooks and other emblematic works produced from the sixties onward.

The energy that you feel in this room is in no way a reflection of the past. Once again art repudiates entropy, maintaining its force unaltered, and in their form of modern icons these works elude the ephemeral character of the postmodern. Kounellis always tackled experiences like suffering, migration and death head on and it is this existential charge that powers his forms, always so essential and dramatic both in their lyrical and elegiac dimension and in their symphonic majesty. I am reminded of Kounellis's own words, spoken in that Mediterranean 'language' of his, that of a free citizen, champion of a humanism that was at once enlightened and romantic: "I seek lost history in fragments (emotional and

formal). I look in a dramatic way for unity, even though hard to grasp, even though utopian, even though impossible and for that reason dramatic.” Expressed in this way the drama is of a disconcerting topicality: the farther we go into the digital and virtual age, the more the conflicts between people and societies grow bloody and unshakable, and the more these works, made of things, of humble materials, of memories and archetypes, shine a light for us, opening up a “clearing” in which it is still possible to think about our humanity and our responsibility in history. Fragment after fragment, the artist moved through time and space in constant search of a lost unity, in an attempt to mend the shattered relationship between form and content, between men and gods, between the personal and the collective. Kounellis embarked on an epic journey, a poetic and artistic nomadism in search of the centrality that first classical and then Renaissance art had been able to identify and achieve before the modern era. Greek by birth, he had found again the measure of the classical world in Masaccio’s humanism, the sense of Greek tragedy in Burri’s torn sack. We seem to be able to still hear his voice today, making those radical declarations, paradigmatic statements about an artistic project whose outlines were recognizable right from his earliest actions and works, when he was already responding to the proposals of his Italian, European and American colleagues with a series of values on which tradition is founded in the awareness of an irreversible crisis in those very models, those ideological structures: “Space as motion of the infinite, dogma as compositional order, the hermit as opponent, suffering as a journey toward purity [...], the conquest of freedom as search for the reality and boundaries of a culture, the boundary of the meter [...] the return of the people and the invention of form [...], form as dignity and as meeting point... centrality and the errant, the concept of heresy and intellectual dignity in the face of conformity... the centrality of a humanist text in a society that favors mass production, melancholy as a historically recognized tendency... the point where the divine and the human have the same interests.”

Kounellis’s vocabulary of form presented in the exhibition is the one we are all familiar with, a vocabulary which has become part of the history of 20th-century art, represented by images that can now be found in the manuals circulating among students and in museums. Back on the walls and the floor are the metal plates, the coal, the smudge of smoke on the wall, the burlap, the bell and the coat of cheap cloth, along with less common elements in his production like the crucible and wax. Works that we don’t just look at. They are the works of a modern painter—which is what the artist always called himself—that emerge from the frame and invade real space with their substance as things. Like St. Thomas, we would like to touch each of these works to make sure they are real, that they are things and not phantoms of things. We can even smell the odors of these materials, which stir memories that belong to our individual and collective experience, to the history of the West, and which constitute a vocabulary of latent images capable of bringing a lost time back into the present. ‘Dirty’ life with its substance, concreteness and bulk, the gallery; the viewer is obliged to share the “space of representation” with the work, which invades our world, projecting itself outside the canvas without decorative frills or allegorical embellishments. Yet the *raison d’être* of the material does not begin and does not end solely in the dimension of the real, i.e. of the present. For Kounellis in fact, the work is both something real (tautologically speaking coal is

coal) and image (i.e. iconography—coal has a moral and cultural weight). In other words, in Kounellis's work an iconic function "resists" that delivers the language of his art from both the sociological entropy of Pop and from the low materialism of the Informel, from both the deafness of the Minimal and the rhetoric of conceptual art. Kounellis's picture—those famous pictures with letters—seems to have been related to sculpture and performance from the start. With Kounellis in fact painting claimed the right to three-dimensionality and the public dimension of theater. This exit from the frame was so radical that the horses of Giulio Romano and Géricault were lifted from the surface of the picture and put into the real space of a gallery in Rome, Fabio Sargentini's L'Attico. It was a matter of seizing reality for what it is: thingness in the place of optical appearance, of a mimetic image. Nevertheless, every element of the work was taken from the *panta rhei*. Its time was and remains the present, although we can speak of a presence whose duration cannot be just that of a moment. When we look at that piece of burlap, that coal, that black smoke on the wall and that bell, we see with our own eyes the presence of reality, the thing in its mere material existence. They are all objects and instruments of this world, but art gives each of these elements and materials a temporality which is that of mythical truth and cultural memory. Things are at once things and images. They stand on a threshold that unites and separates becoming and being. While the image is welded to its nature as a thing, the latter gives rise to a close dialogue between archetypes and ourselves. In fact, Kounellis's original experimental motivation was always fundamentally Socratic: his approach clearly entailed a search for exemplary images that could awaken viewers' consciousness and sharpen their sensitivity. The significance of the work can waver between the individual and the collective, between the familiar and the remote, between the surreal and the real, in order to establish a public rite (the journey in art and the one with art) in which the humanistic function of the artistic language is decisive. As Katerina Koskina has written: "Kounellis has succeeded, in the course of a difficult struggle and a constant onward journey, in providing his own definition of the artist as a tragic and contemporary hero. The whole of his work is marked by continuous to-ing and fro-ing between memory, history and realistic actuality, with prolonged silences and moments of tortured poetic exaltation, in which are to be encountered carefully selected elements capable of stirring up the memory, of extolling the measure of man, of revitalising the myth and of employing archetypes and moments from the European culture of the distant and recent past."

Like other humble elements, the coat has a strong symbolic value: it has its own precise moral weight that must not get lost in the form. "The coat is an image full of literature, a very direct image." The coat, we should remember, was hung from a rack together with a hat in 1975. The title of the work was highly emblematic: *Civil Tragedy*. For Rudi Fuchs—art historian and director of great museums, as well as a close friend of Kounellis's, with whom he appears in the photo used as an invitation to this exhibition—something in this work reminded him of Russia: "of a certain way of perceiving reality, of observation of detail, of describing an incident, as in the stories of Pushkin. The piece is extremely refined, in the quiet, elegant manner of the 19th century *haute bourgeoisie*. Look at the hall-stand with the dark hat, the fashionable coat. But what about the little lamp? What about the golden wall: so opulent, mystical, mediaeval. An encounter, it must be, between two histories. A tempting enigma. Maybe it is

Pushkin paying a visit to Andej Rublov.” The coat has appeared in other circumstances, always used to represent the human figure, at times its place taken by a suit or a jacket, or even by a hat or pair of pants. In New York, at a solo exhibition staged at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1988, the coat was squashed by a girder, squeezed between iron plates—or in a coulisse linked—to the narrative character of the work, where the large sheets of metal are also pages of a story that has no end.” On Kounellis’s journey these elements of existential fragmentation became traces of a personal and social *sparagmos*: a dismembering of the physical body of the artist-poet-bard that incarnates the struggles between classes and peoples. Coat, pants, hat, jacket and shoes were presented on a wall in a room of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in 1990, in a triptych that was undoubtedly an evocation of the Crucifixion and the arrangement of the crosses on Golgotha. Finally, hung up high like the bodies of hanged men or figures in a Last Judgment, a row of coats loomed over the actors in Heiner Müller’s *Die Mauser* (Deutsche Theater, Berlin, 1991). In the current exhibition, the coats are squashed by metal plates. Two plates, three coats and three smaller pieces of metal that press on each garment. A powerful gesture that makes us think of something dramatic, extremely violent. Something that evokes in us not just the sacrifice of Christ and the two thieves on the cross, but also civil tragedies, executions of the defenseless, of rebels, partisans and poor workers.

The same could be said of the bell dangling “like a hanged man” from a rope that supports its weight. The bell is wedged between two iron plates, forced into a corner. The knot is very violent, rugged, muscular. The bell is painted half black. A black that smacks of mourning and oblivion, that drowns in sorrow and anguish the sound of the bell, the voice of time marked by its clapper, the sense of a ritual that has defined for centuries the community, the relationship between people, space and nature, between light and darkness. Even the angle that makes the bell stay in that position has a symbolic value. The corner was of great significance for Jannis Kounellis. The story of its discovery, which had occurred in an almost ghostly manner in his childhood, is very evocative: “The discovery was made one evening long ago, when I think I must have been ten years old and the quivering light of a candle in front of the figures of the Madonna and St. George on the dresser offered me a glimpse at moments of the corner of the room in which I was sleeping. Perhaps it was fear that made me notice the mysterious sign of the corner, as if the window and door next to it had lost their importance and escape were impossible. The presence of that corner grew bigger and bigger in my mind and was so frightening that the memory of it still fills me with terror today.” The story continues, with the focus shifting onto the plane of artistic practice: “it’s clear that this dominant sign which unites two walls and holds up the roof, wants to be, on the one hand, an interior that hosts life between its four corners, in a very long maternal pregnancy, a Noah’s ark that saves exhausted and defeated seafarers from the flood, while on the other it is clearly the primary invention that gives mobility and dynamism to the cave.” A corner that protects and guards, that opens up to an exchange with the outside world and life. A corner, however, that can put you in a state of anxiety, and that may represent the last possibility of defense, as when you are cornered or pushed into a corner. But the force of the corner lies in its almost liturgical nature, given the way in which the corner is used to trace a sacred space in a secularized society: “The corner inhales darkness,

channeled into the sacred point where forces meet and live an eternal static existence, reaching out toward the sky where the point of support resides and where their birth and their fate is written.” At the end of this story, Kounellis declares that he considers himself lucky because “on that night long ago, thanks to the quivering light in front of the image of the Madonna, the corner was revealed in all its tragic grandeur. From that moment on windows and doors lost their importance and the angular walls, an extended labyrinth, no longer let me go out to enjoy the sunset.”

In conclusion, we think it useful and correct to turn to something else that Kounellis wrote, reminding us once again of his presence among us and his voice in this room: “Clay is material, iron is material. Everything is material. We need to broaden the concept of material: material to be molded, material that takes on meaning, material that becomes significant. A hundredweight of coal, not plastic painted to look like coal, not an abstract weight. A weight is what it hides, its history, its morality. For the artist a hundredweight of coal is the moral history of an aesthetic. Things become more real, truer. True in a moral sense, not imitation, citation, realism. Realism is always falsity and even what is concrete may not be very real. Material that acquires meaning: finding the sense of material and the obligations that this entails tells us what can be done in the face of a culture. Linguistic obligations, for not everything is permitted. The possibility of making things more real, truer, depends on the relationship with tradition. Truth lies in the relationship—even if simple, elementary—with tradition. Tradition, not illustration, citation. Tradition has vast aspects, it cannot be located in any one place. A localized tradition becomes politically exploitable. Tradition does not signify exaltation of the past but the necessity to set our actions in order so as to have a present and not an ambiguity. Credibility stems from the values that are revealed within an operation conducted in the present. An opportunity for interpretation, for a vision of tradition. Vision and tradition: tradition is visionary. The way we interpret it and take it in is visionary. No tradition is detached. The great visionaries are passionate interpreters of tradition, and therefore of meter.” It is clear that in this “visionary” character the concept or practice of conservation assumes a special and complex meaning: “Being curious, loving enough to be able to comprehend the signs of tradition, the great extent of the phenomenon... In this operation the bases have to be firmly anchored, or you lose yourself, you are no longer an interlocutor. [...] All this has to be inserted in a code—even a rigid one—otherwise you run the risk of superficiality. The initial receptiveness becomes sentimental and loses all the weight it potentially had. Receptiveness, tension, even in moments of the greatest crisis, openness in order to find what is probably not going to be there tomorrow. Conservation is not mummification. Conservation is an active factor, not one of decay. There is no other way to conserve than to raise the level, not to accept the rule of decay but to try a higher road...”