

From: *Jannis Kounellis*, curated by R. Fuchs, J. Gachnang, C. Mundici, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 28 October 1988 - 12 March 1989), Fabbri, Milano 1989, pp. 63-65.

Radiantly fragmentary

Rudi Fuchs

... where there is no longer form, language inevitably becomes fragmentary - not incoherent, not that at all, for one can hardly say that about Cubism and Futurism, let alone de Stijl - not incoherent but, literally, fragmentary.

In order to clarify this, let me give an example from the life and the art of Kounellis, someone who never stops talking about form. Because he sometimes uses antique fragments and other things which also appear here and there in the romantic painting of the nineteenth century, the emphasis is not infrequently placed on the so-called mythographic character of his work; the fact that he is moreover Greek doesn't make it any better. But Kounellis is no Lord Byron. He talks about form, about the birth of a great form in the Renaissance and about the great form which expresses drama and intimacy, about the great form which is as supple and fluctuant as clouds in the sky and which is carried on after the Renaissance by Caravaggio and Bernini, by others, by Goya and David and Delacroix - and which begins to stiffen and become immobile in the grandiose, great, hopeless and desperate work of Cézanne.

It is well known that Cézanne was actually trying to paint a resounding apotheosis of Delacroix, the revered Master, something like Ingres had painted of Homer or Delacroix himself had painted of Freedom. The dream was there, the intent, also the will, but the form had become untraceable, vanished in the difficult, troublesome course of the nineteenth century. Cézanne comes no further in a drawing than a painter standing behind an easel on a little cloud. And only a short while later the idyll was over; in Cubism it began with the building up of a new language, at least the first building blocks and elements are put in place.

It remains to be seen whether this nature of phrasing was the end, a fall, the eventual shattering of the classical tradition, or whether it was the beginning of something new - something really new and not the beginning of a reconstruction, as there is nothing to rebuild.

This latter is something which I cannot emphasize enough: in these thoughts and remarks there is no form of melancholy or nostalgia whatsoever. Nor is there any in the work of Kounellis.

An artist, Kounellis once remarked, and let's just say every individual, has the right to lament; for in fact much has been lost. That doesn't release anyone, however, from the obligation to be absolutely and rigorously contemporary: the past is not a permissible escape route.

Ezra Pound, who knows a thing or two about the shattering of the flawless, glossy story (just like his friend James Joyce), said: «The touchstone of an art lies in its precision». I think that this means that the artist has to know exactly the expressive power and the scope and the applicability of the means which are being used. So if Kounellis thinks, and he has often asserted it in all kinds of terms, that the complexity and the dramatics of the twentieth century cannot be, or cannot yet be, expressed in a single painting or piece of sculpture, then this means something with regard to his way of doing things.

A sculpture by Bernini is still able to express the whole scale of emotions and rapture as this was experienced in the seventeenth century - and one is not ashamed to look at it, because it is a precise

expression of real feelings. When, on the other hand, something like this is attempted in the second half of the twentieth century, in socialist realism for example or in modern «ecclesiastical» art (in both cases, an unbroken view of the world is still envisioned), then one looks at it with a certain amount of embarrassment, because it is false, full of false pretenses, exaggerated, a lie - and in that sense not precise enough.

In that respect, the artist must never go too far; he must always exercise strict control over the means and the form. The experiment for the sake of the experiment is a dubious road to follow. Instead of Saint Theresa, even instead of Delacroix behind the easel on the cloud, as Cézanne tried to imagine him, instead of all of that Kounellis closed a doorway (and other things) with antique fragments: in all fairness, I understand that he can go no further - he cannot possibly put a whole, undamaged Apollo on his feet, just as Ezra Pound, in his *Cantos*, couldn't possibly arrange his fragments and debris in the cadence of Homeric hexameter. This is the most extreme form which Kounellis, in this case, can reach - the accumulation, the framing by doorway which, at any rate, guarantees a concentration and an intensity.

Language is too broken, art is too individualistic to permit further abstraction. What a work like this means, I don't exactly know. Or rather, from the structure and the form of the work, it actually already follows that it cannot mean something - it certainly cannot mean anything in the complete way that Bernini's *Theresa* does. I think that, instead of only meaning something in the present, certain modern works of art, such as those of Kounellis, also mean something for our past. That gives them, now at the end of the twentieth century, that peculiar weight. They tear the past open again, discover what still can be used, things whose eloquence is still felt today but are possibly forgotten. Art is also recollection. The door with fragments indirectly has to do with certain works by Munch and Ensor, surely also with the strange stiffening of old movement, that of Delacroix and Bernini, with a certain sentiment in Picasso and definitely in Pollock as well.

A work of art is never entirely alone, it keeps on looking up its relatives, it creates unexpected complexes around it, it drills deep into the bog - and in this way it releases the energy which, because it is released now, is contemporary. And that is what we have to be, contemporary. A work like the door with the accumulated fragments in it is the precise expression of the dilemma that no stable guarantees exist any longer in our culture for a formalized and usable, general language as such.

Because this is so, such works which are fragmentary, such concentrations of fragments, have an inescapable reality.

In 1982 Kounellis made a large, fascinating work in Berlin, again a construction of fragments, now in front of a window. In this work one can see, half-hidden between the wood and the stones which make up the structure (a structure which is something between a building site and a ruin - with a strange suggestion of recycling), fragments from the iconography of the twentieth century; not only plaster fragments but also pieces wrapped up in a blanket - and then a bat, the iron (possibly that of Duchamp), a lamp, the mandolin of Cubism, and elements from his own iconography, like the mattress. In this work things are brought together from very diverse origins, things from an industrial culture and from an idealistic culture - as in a compendium - but a compendium whose composition is not yet entirely overseeable. With this work I can't think of anything other than Duchamp's *Greatglass* and Leger's *Grande parade*; it is as if Kounellis tries to pick up a few historic threads which have been forgotten. But I also have to think of Schwitters and of Pollock, who make the elements of the handwriting disappear into something which somehow wants to represent a single image, a compendium, a complex image - an image in which one can see that, like the Berlin window of Kounellis, it has been achieved with great difficulty.

What one could take from this example is that Kounellis consciously tries to make contacts between differentiated, even contrasting areas of artistic phrasing; that he seeks, in the possible connection

of those fragments, a form which could acquire the power of a language. This is the European tendency in art, as opposed to the American one. He doesn't do this systematically, like a historian, but subjectively and instinctively, like an artist who has the right to ignore the objectivity of science, and therefore in partiality and exaggeration is able to achieve a great, visual power.

The artist, or rather the work of art, lives among other works of art with which it converses in its obstinate way - this might be the origin of a work like that of a woman wrapped in blankets, lying on a metal base, with a hissing gas flame attached to her foot. Again, I can't say exactly what this work means (that is to say, as iconography), but it is an uncommonly strong, unforgettable phrasing - an image torn away and irrevocably changed, I think, from a long painterly tradition of the woman as odalisque, an artistic archetype of the first order: from Velázquez and Ingres, via the painting of Modigliani and De Chirico - and then dissolved in photography with, for example, the famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe.

I don't intend to say that Kounellis's work would have been created precisely along this line. What I maintain is that the work, no matter how obstinate and strange and personal it is, attempts to uphold a certain relationship with fragmentary elements of the tradition.

At the same time, the tradition is also broken, swallowed up, absorbed - the new image is autonomous, as though the tradition has made a 180-degree turn.

That is to say that the work of Kounellis is not impulsive, not the whimsical product of inspiration, but is a product of intensive reflection. A work by Kounellis is always surprising and unexpected, not the product of style but of historical confrontation, of abrupt intervention in the apparently supple, balanced course of history. The succession of works is unpredictable but, in retrospect, not illogical. Jannis Kounellis is a Greek, born in 1936 in Piraeus, but he is an Italian artist. This ambiguity is essential. In 1956 he went to Rome, where he still lives. It is the transition from one cultural sphere, the orthodox culture in which the image has a different meaning than in the art history of the West which was formed by the Renaissance, and where the image has become part of a great and radiant history of discoveries. What is typical of the East European image is that it is slow, rigid and static; the West European image, on the other hand, is nervous and active.

For Kounellis there was another notable crosser of boundaries between East and West, one who also possessed an original and at the same time almost unfathomable quality, and that was Malevich. It is no coincidence that Malevich is the classic-modern artist whom Kounellis most admires because, in him, he finds an equal - another crosser of boundaries. In the years shortly before World War I, Malevich gave the world a riddle - his *Black quadrant* -, a painting which is abruptly modern and, in the speculative manner of the West, a brilliant invention - while at the same time it is slow like an icon.

It is absolutely new but also the product of an age-old tradition and recollection which it carries on in itself - and next to that other, unprecedented key work from the beginning of the century, Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, it is as solid as a block. In Picasso's painting we see the seeds of further development; by way of its open structure of variable elements, it is the possible beginning of a number of variations. That is the formal activeness which has always been present in Western art, from as early as the Renaissance when perspective was invented - perspective which could create a space in which the figures could almost actually move. But in the *Black quadrant* of Malevich there is no space: it is a severe, unforgiving surface sealed by a single shape. Although Malevich used several shapes in other paintings, the basic static shape continues to exist like a matrix or paradigm. Kounellis also linked himself with this tradition; he, in fact, could do nothing else.

Also his works are often unfathomably static and slow - in the first place, that is their basic, enigmatic form - but then he gives it something active, something which, in principle, is transitory - like the flickering candle flame in front of the softly gleaming icon. This element of activity makes

the slow, basic form all the more static and unfathomable - think only of the gas flame on the foot of the woman wrapped in blankets.

In this way the famous golden wall is static, whereas the hatrack with coat and bowler, the western touch of frivolous Toulouse-Lautrec, is the very opposite of this.

It is not yet the time to define Kounellis's artistic character in a few sentences - such as this will surely take place a hundred years from now in art history - because at this point there is no complete, finished overview. The diversity and the tension in his oeuvre is manifested in individual works. These works are, and that is perhaps a characteristic of a more general nature, all abrupt and surprising, related to other art but nonetheless absolutely autonomous - just as *Black quadrant* was; that is to say, there is actually no long series of variants to speak of, such as in the work of Picasso or Mondrian. Each individual work immediately phrases its own atmosphere and environment. What he does do is to take up fragments again in other works; in this way accumulations sometimes occur, in this way he seeks the phrasing of a form which can perhaps arrive at the density of a language - or can be the start of language constructions which strive for the stability of language. At the same time they are works which escape every definition of style.