

## In the latent breath of Kounellis

Tradition, as it is idolised by the social conventions of the public sphere, seems very far from being a real “politics of memory”, on the contrary, it reveals itself to be a media-orientated deposit from which we draw fashions and styles that might be useful in building a world of artificial identity. A fictional construction of cultural panoramas that are presumptively unassailable, planetary and accompanied by a progressive increase in claims of the «little nation» sort. This developing field of sense of identity is like a folkloristic simulation which offers no liberty other than that of being a part of it: a world where the only thing that counts is the spectacularisation of experiences. An environment made of transmittability and telecommunications, within which the consensus does not regard things, but their representation, the persuasive efficacy of the media. The result of this is that communities are often reduced to a refractive mirror of the televisual discourse which celebrates the description of the world. Yet, the collective life, the origin of the subject as such, has always been the refractive mirror of mythical and religious discourse, and also a faceted sphere open to discussion and to historical novelties through the act of aggregation around piazzas and pulpits.

As a strong bond with nature and with history, each identity should be the necessary background from which to move outwards, allowing the emergence of those complex and prejudicial senses of identity

which, as well as shaping the destiny of ethnic or national minorities, also establish the sense of difference between peoples and traditions in our times.

Kounellis, too, is convinced that man is like a theatre-space within which there echo diverse imperatives, values and voices, at times incompatible or in conflict with one another, originating in a psychic and living dimension of our belonging to determined territories, territories impregnated with references to the great stories, the scenarios of our cultural inheritance.

We need to confront those cultural processes, collective in nature, which are the result of historical processes of socialization, crisscrossed with the formation of classes and casts, religious communities, political organs and schools of thought. We need to succeed in focalising the basis for an ideological place, an itinerary for the sense of identity in which the other is present, avoiding the effects of the growing geo-cultural uniformity, where the recognition of our own roots dissolves into a mire of financial capital and processes of production. We need to discredit those vacuous public systems, with neither summit nor confines, that have come to the forefront following the collapse of «real socialism», the breaking-up of the Soviet empire and the rise of the American and Asiatic multinationals.

Kounellis effects a “concrete” appropriation of the signs sedimented in every cultural area, seeking to give weight to the social sense as much as to the public. He feels the urgent need to fragment reality’s various fields, exploring our knowledge of things. He acts within spatial structures that are solid and present, elaborating material-rich organisms, where fragments of boats and furniture or parts of other objects enter into osmosis with shelves and surfaces in iron and with coal-filled hessian sacks. He creates choral assemblies that confront the drama of loss and the abandon of any hope of totality or unity in existence. So, keeping the critical tension active, Kounellis is of the opinion that “nothing that has been shattered can be recomposed”. In this context, he declares, “Amid the fragments of emotion and form, I seek history’s deviations. I am, dramatically, in search of a unity, for all that this is unattainable, utopian, impossible, and for these very reasons, tragic”. From the linguistic ruins of the early 1970’s, fragmented signs and alphanumeric traces painted on canvas, to the pieces of statuary

in plaster arranged on a table (Galleria La Salita, Rome, 1973) and the more recent fragments of the cross, his work becomes a diagnosis of the great questions of our civilisation: life and death, memory and oblivion, separation and redemption, mystery and poetic revelation.

Kounellis' actions break, in a drastic way, into that vague and superficial life in which man's sensibilities and ideas «might be nothing but the ephemeral products of the currently-playing comedy

of individuality, rather than forces capable of determining and defining identity» (Zygmunt Bauman).

Kounellis recognises the urgency of conserving an archetypal and anthropological relationship with the physical world, so that it might keep us at a distance from the pleasures of bewitching visions, from the spell-binding simulacra of easy aesthetic consumption. He well knows that with the passage from the mechanical to the microelectronic and the information-society, we are thrown, frequently, into a reality of virtual entertainment, a limitative space mixing filmic and televisual animation, within which the innocence of the image coincides with the emptying of its contents, of its imagery. So, he counters the perception of extremely realistically rendered virtual objects with the perception of the objects themselves in the context of a determined space. With the real and tangible presence of the materials, with the physicality of the elements, he draws the spectator's attention to a weave of references to the Mediterranean world, to its network of cultures, religions and zones of origin.

His vocabulary runs from what is linked to the perceptible, to the life and heritage of man, and comes to touch on the essential parts of the lived-experience, the atavistic signs of places. It is fuelled by a primary imagery, a long way from any decorative satisfaction, typified by the combination of hessian sacks and old furniture, piles of coal and iron beams, objects with practical uses (sewing machines, knives and fishing nets) and clothes (hats, shoes and coats) assembled together with sheets of metal.

As a real presence in a real space, Kounellis' work polarizes in itself the contradictory extremities of art's social nature. Two solutions face it: the environmental work of art and the work of art as event, one open to space and the other open to behaviour, beyond the statics of its elements. The artist participates in the first with large material/object-based interventions, and in the second with living forms, whilst he orientates the collective dimension towards a disturbing and impetuous chorality, accompanied by the social and sensorial charge of the natural, the plants and fires, the stones and coal and the animals.

Kounellis is interested in revealing himself depository of a culture rich in symbols, values, shared memories, secular and religious rituals, an inheritance that cannot be consumed in a moment. The cultural patrimony is his indispensable travelling companion, through which he gives expression to forms that contain within them references to the historical face of Europe, a jumble of revolutionary lives, those of Luther and Giordano Bruno, Leonardo and Caravaggio, Kant and Leibniz, Marx and Gramsci.

The artist works with "structures of resistance" which have a certain weight, and elude the vague and the suggestive, structures that restore power and sovereignty to the common substratum.

Sometimes they are doorways or wide windows filled with stones or books, occupied by fragments of sculptures or stone columns. On other occasions they present themselves as walls of sheet-metal furnished with shelves on which there rest full or empty sacks, iron beams that meet one another cross-like. They are structures that testify to an hypothesis of filling and of consolidating the spatial scene, in favour of a plastic grafting, based on pure presence "Clay is material, iron is material, paper is material, we need to widen the idea of material: material means drawing, material means acquiring a meaning, acquiring a sense. A hundred pounds of coal: not plastic

painted to look like coal, not an abstract weight. The weight is that which hides its own history, its own morality. Things become more real" (Kounellis).

The material reveals the intrinsic inclination towards the maintaining of a weight, in part metaphoric and in part real, an inclination towards "courtly investitures" and symbolic valencies. In order to comprehend the meanings of the materials, and to highlight their esoteric capacity, it is always worth observing their evocative capabilities, the possible literary references that might be found in their presentation. A hundredweight of coal tipped out on the floor (Rome 1967) flaunts, at first glance, its own gravity, its own material, its own colour, following which it suggests a series of references to spheres of the rural world, or to industrial contexts in the nineteenth-century style.

In other cases, the quantity of the elements shakes-up the act of viewing and signals uncertainty and disturbance: following the route through the columns of Piazza del Plebiscito in Naples (1996) the viewer experiences the visual impact with a rich copse of wardrobes, chests of drawers, dressers and trunks hung from the ceiling; in Cologne at the Museum Ludwig in der Halle Kalk (1997), the viewer stops short in front of a variety of suspended structures, elements held on ropes of steel, that levitate in the air.

Each one of Kounellis' installations occupies an exhibition space that is not indifferent to it. Each is realised in relation to the existing architecture, coexisting with the layout of the perimeters. Often its presence tends to produce a situation of spatial pressure so incisive and pressing that it channels attention towards the centre of the perceptive dimension, augmented by fixed points of reference in the form of corners and walls. For the Castello Colonna in Genazzano (2000), or the Palazzo delle Papesse in Siena (1998), the installation is created in such a way as to polarize the spatial forces and amplify their pathos, their tragic impact. In Genazzano groups of metallic nets recombine, in an unexpected and simultaneously primordial form, a dormitory of disturbing packages, dotted with cuts/wounds, like sleeping bodies. The great sheets of iron rolled up above the beds, under the cover of woollen blankets, stir the memory of a touching humanity, rich in profound suggestions. Meanwhile, in

the Palazzo delle Papesse the other, dark-green, canvases, held up from within by sheets of metal blocked in place by piles of coal, continue the dramatisation of the place; together they interrogate the gaze of whoever draws near as to the paradigmatic character of the concealed content. The perceptive impasse also remains obsessive in the holes entirely occupied by stones, some painted black (Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld 1984). Gestures aimed at marking an act of negation, against the advance of the individual with no consciousness of values. Barricades that imprint vigour and severity on the architectonic enclosure in which they act.

The sense of the human drama inhabits these interventions, full of the tumultuous and tormented world of existence, from which there is unleashed the warning of the contingencies, the hidden voice of the human anxieties. This itself becomes a condition for new impulses, promoted by the jolts of a poetic and secret composing force. So every reference to a personal life is stirred and disturbed not only by the theatrical organisation of the space, but above all by the magical ciphers of the (often visionary) presence of the materials. Journey, exchange and transfer are at the heart of Kounellis' plastic reflections. The exhibition site is converted into a "place of transit and of waiting" within which to deposit clothes or chairs in a circle, or to lie down on metal plinths and nets. It takes on the shape of an area (profane and at the same time magical) suitable for conserving rolls of lead, combined with fabrics, between long iron beams (Montevideo 2001), or for storing black-wrapped objects concealed in dark blankets (Schwäbisch Gmünd 1992). The space that is recreated in this way designs a

mythical environment in which we encounter mute and inscrutable bodies, in which we hear the collective murmur of old kerosene lamps (London 1990), in which we meet “old acquaintances, not too familiar”.

Installing himself, through his compositions, in the architecture, Kounellis traces out confines along the tracks of which the logics of identity are redefined by unexpected interruptions: relationships with the echo of the industrial past, with the imprint of the artisan culture. For example, the encounter with the bombastic refrain of toy trains on a circular track, wrapped around tens of pillars (Chicago 1986). The ‘con-fine’ recalls the sense of a breath shared with that of phenomena: the confine not simply as limit, but as shared limit. Relationships that confer the characteristics of a journey-to-the-edge, where what becomes crucial is the redefinition of the seen and the unseen, the private and the public, of the past and the present.

The horses arranged in a gallery (Rome 1969), or the vibrating flames of the pipes running from gas cylinders arranged on the floor (Turin 1971), open up a scene animated by the senses as much as by the mind, by corporeal energy as much as by cultural

energy. The physical presence of the flame, an allusion to suffering and vivification, to warmth and to the spirit, forms the basis of a network of ancestral references, which unites the biological myths of birth and death and the historical references to the body and the world. In the tangible essence of its factual reality, the representable potential contributes to the creation of a scenario fecund with sensations, pregnant with memory, a horizon that fears neither conceptual damp nor ideological mould. It is a case of perceiving that objective and earthbound “giving of itself” by the event/ installation. On the occasion of the 1993 Venice Biennale, Kounellis leaves the talking to old fishing boat sails that act as scenery for the staging of a voyage (the artist’s and our own), the route of which will encounter a tempest of correspondences to the symbols of transport and trade, anamnesis of discoveries and colonisations. Assigning priority to man’s elementary material, to his commodities, means restoring the residual value of a simmering corporeality: “materials have a memory and they have a future because they have this memory” (Kounellis).

The history of visual representation or literary narration has always been marked by the necessity to embellish the world through man’s fable-making skills. Nowadays the idolised manipulation of reality is vanishing, and so a tragic event, a simulated tragedy and a publicity-generating effect all run alongside one another in the same distracted and uncritical perception. In leaving the picture frame and exalting the physical aspect of the pure mass, Kounellis reclaims the concentration of time and of history, the past rendered current in the present: that moral attitude of concrete adherence to reality, Neo-Realist in stamp, different from the realism of the mass media. The plastic configuration is “responsible” for the knowledge which is both external and obscure and which regards common and multiple existence.

“I am a painter, and I defend my initiation into painting. Since painting is a construction of images, it cannot have one technique or style of reference. Each painter has his own visions and his own methods for constructing the image” (Kounellis). So the agglomeration of the materials produces visions coming into being, like the landscapes of pieces of coal «stitched» onto sheets of iron (1994), sequences of black coats knotted around long iron beams (Paris 1998), the embrace of clothes with iron wires sticking out of large holes (New York 2006). Kounellis’ work contains the fundamental teaching of pictorial technique, in as much as essential and revolutionary structure. The classical model of composition remains an indispensable human attribute in the conceiving of visual formulae capable of rendering the space poetic. The use of something heavy and massive

recalls Massaccio's investigations into perspective, research which transgressed the norms of the idealised image, giving weight and

harmony to the figures represented. Nevertheless the Greek artist's compositional act also arrives at the "static propping-up" of places, mounting, on columns made of wooden beams, all the load connected with the lived-in (stones, furniture, sewing machines), over the prop-supported antique remains of the beams of Pulheim (1991). The "picture space" is elaborated according to dimensions that refer to the human being. This anthropometrical procedure keeps to the dimensions of the table and of the bed, where the sheet iron or furniture adopted might suggest the surface of the human figure. Recently in Paris (Galerie Lelong 2007), in a tower of wooden tables mounted on sheet metal, from which portions of the legs have been cut away, Kounellis introduces a turbulence of inclined planes, that advances following the disconnected and broken rhythms of a dance, "to the measure of man". The canvases black-painted, stretched drum-like on both table frames and on spring mattresses, increase the senses of falling and of imbalance generated by the scene.

In the Torrión Passari the visionary capacity of the composition enters into dialogue with the hidden heart of a massive sixteenth-century defensive bastion. The first room (considered an antechamber to the tower) seems transformed into a sort of "agora of remini-scence", into a piazza in which it is possible to feel the call of patriarchal times, and of all that was consummated in them.

Kounellis realises the piece following an almost liturgical practice: he begins with twelve old wooden chairs arranged along the three walls of the room, and on each he places a sack of blackened hessian filled with stones taken from the dry-stone walls of the Puglian countryside, then he continues with sacks meticulously folded to form supports for large terracotta bowls into which, finally, he pours water and, in some, goldfish.

The open structure would appear to re-evolve the circular scenes of wedding ceremonies or funeral rites. It celebrates that "humanistic breath" passed down to us in the rituals of the rural world, the gathering and the assembly, the funeral wake. Here, as in other installations, there is repeated the liturgical and symbolic treatment of the object of everyday use. In 1989, at the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, animal blood appeared, poured into wineskins, and in Barcelona, Espai Poble Nou, great pieces of meat hung from butchers' hooks evoked a state of sacrificial tension. The blood that dripped slowly from the quarters of beef, recalling the work of Soutine, clearly bestrides a disturbing visibility.

However the reference to liturgy and religiousness is never didactic, it does not resolve into a narrative image. It is entrusted solely to object-elements that constitute an echo of the sacred. The naturalistic elements (the water, the fish, the stones) result inseparable from the unexplored backdrop of the mystery, vivid with the «spirit» of

the plate and of the chair, of their oracular background. On one hand the chair offers "food" for a secular consumption, on the other the plate/holy-water stoup presents the arcane ingredients – the water and the fish (reference to Christ) – for a recovery of sacredness, the indecipherable fount of existence which is man's background and provenience.

This immobile and severe event, united with the austere and choral arrangement of the chairs, passes from the secular creed to the mystery of rituals (the religious content of which includes the traditions of both western Christianity and of the Orthodox world), and to the call of the archetypal images of the earth. All care for a limp reading of the significance disappears. The installation does not bear the signs of a clear and certifiable semantic project; on the contrary, it opens up in a magical/sacred atmosphere that hovers between devotion and

the artisan world, between belief and ideology. In contrast, at the Fondazione Pomodoro (Milan 2007), where the circle of chairs closes around a great stain of black enamel, one breathes an atmosphere of more dramatic implications.

From the latent breath of Torrione Passari there issues forth a hidden spirituality, following a circulation/expiration between remote bodies: the hessian bodies kept seated by the archaic weight of their ancient stone limbs.

In this sense the bodies are restored to the “ever living”, or, that is, transfigured into dialoguing presences. The hessian sacks, in osmosis with the chairs and the plates, transmit a chorus of voices and of whispers, a polyphony of past feelings and affections. Like Victor Hugo in “Les Contemplations” (1856), Kounellis dialogues with the profound conscience of History and of Humanity, and does not ignore the revolutionary ideals of the progressive proletariat.

Kounellis’ choral organisms constitute the call of a knowledge which does not belong intimately to us because, as in Greek drama, they take possession of the myth’s response, priming a reserve of new questions, within religious and philosophical thought. If, in the tragic poets, the choral comment suspended the recited action and forced reflection, so the theatrical in Kounellis, placed before the public, renders problematic the space and he who enters it. It is an “interrogating” scene, devoid of narrative plot, which exceeds the limits of the frame, respecting, however, the language of tradition. It is a distressing spatiality, redolent of all the pictorial intuitions that have marked the history of art, from the *chiaroscuro* of Caravaggio to the luminous violence of Rembrandt and from Goya’s *Caprichos* to Picasso’s *Guernica* and Pollock’s drip paintings.

After having collided with the secret murmuring of twelve chorus-members, now we know that they are breathing in the shadows, we can “suffer” the gesture of an impersonal human epiphany. The anchoring, in the circular chamber of the tower, of an old fishing

net, filled with used shoes. An obstinate action, bombastic and perhaps even cruel.

Hanging from the opening in the high circular vault, the net fixes the “existential weight” of the tower. Its configuration underlines the intensity of the gesture. Repeating itself here is the vigorous ostentation of Benvenuto Cellini’s bronze Perseus, realised in Florence in the mid sixteenth century. Like the Medusa’s head, the load of old shoes petrifies the self-assured viewer, it deprives him of his faith in the exteriority and the fixity of life. We are at the outer limit of the “collective sharing of experience”: the familiarity with the remains of human existence, rummaged out of the experiences of the territory, is equivalent to the loss of ourselves, to the fragility of narcissistic individuality.

The subject enters into delirium, and is asked to lose himself in the unexpected relationship with the other, with the traces of unknown and labyrinthine lives, irreducible to the private context. Only in recognizing the disturbing call of reality, the breath of human things, is it possible to proceed as far as the narration of our own existence, without any facile compensatory illusions.

Kounellis’ net solicits the participation of the onlooker, a participation which is, certainly, critical rather than contemplative. It unites fascination and excess, acceptance and refusal, drama and comfort: “From shoes there emanates the silent fear for the certainty of bread, the tacit joy of surviving need, the tremor of the announcement of a birth, the anguish of the nearness of death” (Heidegger).

The fishing net of hair, hooked to a great anchor (Rome 2004), also inaugurates a disturbing “sense”, the uncomfortable odour of human matter. A primary route which includes the access to the ultimate sense of a

«magic of extremes», transmitted by the liturgical theatre of the exhibition space, and projected, through the outline sketched by the work's objects, into the cyclical pathway of profane time. An experience that enables us to leave the fields of virtual visualisation, and place ourselves in a situation of constant proximity to the human vicissitudes, to the imprints of daily action, accepting the hypothesis of an «initiatory torment». The idea of a necessary transcending of the certainties of our experience through a relationship of interdependency between personal habitat and territory, between individual and collective identity.

The Greek artist's journey is towards an inhabiting of the existential drama, of the conditions of origin. No one can subtract himself from the biological/sacred myth of his own dwelling place, from the enigmatic character of the human condition.

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