

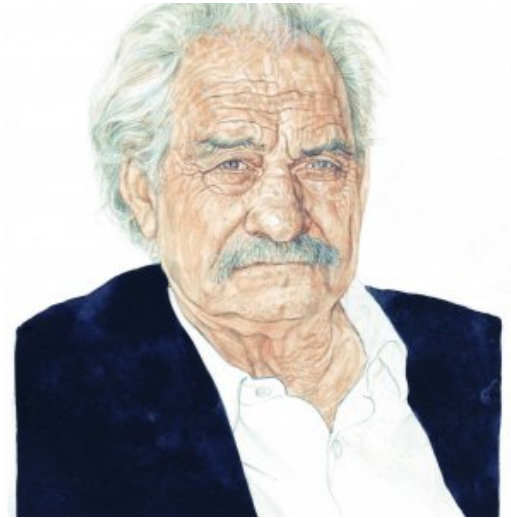
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Antonio Gnoli, "Jannis Kounellis: I'm an old Ulysses without Ithaca in love with the weight of art," *La Repubblica*, July 24, 2016

la Repubblica

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Jannis Kounellis: "I'm an old Ulysses without Ithaca, in love with the weight of art"



Jannis Kounellis

ANTONIO GNOLI
24 July 2016

The artist: "I left my homeland in 1956, unaware it would be definitive farewell, and landed in this city after a heavy snowfall. I felt that underneath that white blanket something could be reborn."

By Antonio Gnoli

Mimmo Jodice told me that Jannis Kounellis wanted his picture taken on a boat. They needed to find the right kind of boat, because after all he was Greek and came from the sea. It was almost supposed to be a "return to Ithaca." But it started to pour. In the end, both were soaked to the skin. "I remember that story, I thought the boat was supposed to be a symbol of something that leaves without knowing if it will return. If it really lands in some harbor or some cove. In the end, my life has been a long tossing along the waves of a sea which was at times calm and others stormy."

And does this change the predisposition of an artist?

"The work of an artist requires a lot of discipline and control over one's emotional states.

What is an artist's emotional state?

"Nothing promising."

Is it dissatisfaction?

"An artist is never satisfied. That is their cross to bear."

How would you divide the world of artists?

"In those who hate change and those who yearn for it."

In which camp do you see yourself as belonging?

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"I don't like guardians of the established order. But it's not a criterion with which you can determine what is great painting."

In any case, you side with the 'revolutionaries'?

"On the background of one of my works, I wrote: "Freedom or death". "

It's the slogan of the Greek flag.

"It was the Hellenic revolution against the Ottoman empire. But in reality I was thinking about Byron when I wrote that sentence. About his love for a country which had been classical and free."

You have Greek origins.

"I was born in Piraeus, where I spent my childhood and adolescence. They weren't happy years for a child who was dreaming of toys and found bombs instead. I remember an aunt who fatefully fell in love with a 'foreigner'. One day they brought her her lover's head in a bag. She was devastated. She started to lose her mind and ended up in a mental institution."

It's like the image of a tragedy.

"It was love transformed into betrayal in the view of those who barbarously couldn't tolerate the possibility of giving oneself to a 'foreigner'. But worse was yet to come: the bloody civil war, between '45 and '48, which left over 80,000 dead. It's like the suffering we had already experienced wasn't enough; we needed to relive it amplified. We were never a happy country."

Is this why you left?

"I left unaware it was a definitive farewell. I arrived in Rome in 1956. It was the year of the heavy snowfall. I felt that underneath that white blanket something could be reborn."

You mean that your art could be born?

"I enrolled into the Accademia di Belle Arti. Mino Maccari was teaching etching, there were Franco Gentilini and Ferruccio Ferrazzi, and there was Toti Scialoja, who was especially hugely influential for me."

What are your memories of him?

"First of all, he was a man of many interests. Literary and artistic. He had travelled extensively and had lived in New York and Paris. He had exhibited widely, he had met and hung out with artists like Rothko and de Kooning, abstract expressionists. And he conveyed these experiences through his teaching. He was a man of change: thin, melancholy, sharp. He wasn't an old fashioned artist with an easel. His paintings didn't have perspectives or tonalities. They were pure action in space. I'm indebted to him. It's also thanks to him that I had my first solo show: in 1960 at Plinio de Martini's Galleria La Tartaruga. I think a lot of Roman artists owe Plinio."

What was the Rome of those years like?

"It was a city which endured insults and injuries stoically. They have tried, continue to try, but still haven't managed to kill it. Its charm encompassed creative buffoonery together with a sublime resistance to change. It was a mix which attracted the Americans who befriended the inhabitants of this ancient city."

They landed en masse: Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, George Santayana e later Rauschenberg, Warhol, De Kooning, Twombly. Rome resembled a reversed Fort Alamo.

"More than a siege it was a wooing, without casualties or wounded. In the end, the only ones who really hurt themselves were those aspiring transgressive Roman painters. It's a shame because some of them were really good."

What effect did the US have on you?

"When the first big exhibition of Jackson Pollock opened at the Galleria di Arte Moderna, curated by Palma Bucarelli, it was a revelation to me. That exhibition was incredible. It was as though Moses had suddenly ordered the parting of the waters, such was my astonishment. One thing was clear to me: Pollock had abandoned the canvas."

In what way?

"He had freed himself from the pictorial tradition of the easel. He even adopted a new, physical way of painting. It's that generation, in which I would also include Franz Kline, that was at the origin of the great cultural shifts in art."

Would you also include Pop Art?

"A shrewd joke. When I travelled to New York towards the end of 1958, I saw a huge billboard on the side of a building depicting a man smoking and holding a pack of Camels. I understood in that moment what Pop Art was:

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the urbanization of landscapes and advertising. It had nothing to do with that gesture which marked the upheaval of the '900s: *Les Femmes d'Alger* which Picasso painted in 1907."

Why do you give it such importance?

Because it revolutionized what the Impressionists had done, taking painting outside itself. Impressionism was the great forefather of Pop Art. Had Warhol been born in the '800s, and provided he had talent, he could have easily painted alongside Monet or Renoir: joyous atmospheres and gay parties. Just like advertising. All *plein air* painting, while Picasso was all about interiority. But an interiority which shifts the grammar of shapes and colors. It's a universe about to implode, just like Pollock's half a century later."

At the opposite spectrum of Pollock lies Edward Hopper. Ultimately, Hopper recomposes what was falling apart into thousands of pieces.

"They're not exactly contemporaries. Hopper arrives from the '800s. He realizes you can no longer make joyful paintings. He understands that the '900s are a century of solitude and this sensation stays with him throughout his life. But he remains an easel painter. He still has to paint enduring reality. He's an artist without heroism. While Pollock places himself at the chasm of 'epicness'.

They look to the US with two opposite approaches. Yet both manage to capture a fundamental aspect of it.

"Hopper reminds me of Glenn Miller, with his music for movies. While Pollock reminds me of jazz. He makes me think of Billie Holiday. Both gave us this great notion of mental freedom."

Does this tribute to artists of change not excessively reduce the influence of those who opposed it?

"I'm not talking about the quality of someone's art. [Jacques-Louis] David is a great artist. But he is, in some ways, an artist of power. He doesn't indicate any path to follow. He shuts us with signposts. This doesn't mean that the *Death of Marat* isn't an incredible painting. But there's nothing epic about it, just celebration."

How would one explain the refusal of the easel?

"It's a form of painting which no longer has power or credibility. Cezanne, Picasso, Pollock, Rodchenko, De Chirico all took away its legitimacy. What remains in painting is the drama of space, where I can deposit sacks of coal, light candles, install horses.

Your horses were a very astute idea?

"Astute? I would rather say they were an idea of freedom. It tethers horses to a wall, in the perimeter of the space of the Roman Galleria L'Attico. It was 1969. Twelve horses installed in a space as though in a stable. The last reproduction took place last year in New York."

What was the reaction?

"The same as the first time: curiosity, excitement, participation. The question is who has the upper hand between culture and nature. Between provocation and inertia? There's a need for both in the understanding of the artist as a witness to what is happening, rather than as a protagonist."

Are you alluding to the importance of the artist?

"I would talk about a gaze which is at the margins of an endeavor. A theatrical gaze."

Isn't art as theatre a limitation?

"Why? All great artists have something of the theatrical. It's one of the reasons which led me to work in theatre. Especially in Germany. I remember that in 1991 I made the stage designs for Heiner Müller's *Mauser*, at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. That work aspired to transcribe The History of the Cross by Piero [della Francesca] in his sequence of frescoes painted in Arezzo."

What is your relationship with the ancient?

"It's the relationship between history and the traces the artists know to search for and, at times, finds, like a water diviner. The artist dialogues with all art, but then he has his favorites."

Who are yours?

"Masaccio and Caravaggio. They make me understand what the weight of art is."

The weight?

"Yes, as opposed to the virtual. The virtual is the novelty which doesn't lead to any novelty. Weight polarizes space. It's a quality. It's an indication of a desire to discover something concrete."

You were alluding to the frescoes of the Cross by Piero della Francesca. What does the weight of the cross suggest to you?

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"It obsesses and accompanies me. I once made a double and oblique steel sheet representing a cross. And once, when Francesco Clemente came to my studio, he stepped underneath it and lifted it onto his shoulders."

What did he see?

"He saw something which both amused and disturbed me. I like the falling cross without Christ, even if it's obvious I'm referring to him. But the problem isn't the representation of the cross, but the presentation."

I don't understand.

"Representation implies a desire, a project, an orchestration. Mine is an involuntary theatre. All the might of the weight is in the work, not in the artist."

Is this how you work?

"This is how I work. For my sacks of coal the primary concern is not the material but its weight."

But the weight implies the material.

"I don't ignore it, but if it were to limit it, then 'my' sack of coal could easily fuel a heater."

And instead?

"Instead the work is there – in an abandoned factory, inside a museum or a gallery – living its full theatrical potential."

They define you as an expression of Arte Povera.

"I identify as such. Poor but not minimalist."

Why poor?

"It's a term Germano Celant coined, inspired by Grotowski's concept of poor theatre. Poverty is the weight of drama. This is why I'm dark. I love shadows that verge towards darkness. It's a different feeling from what a painting of flat colors can offer. Mondrian is flat. Goya is shadow. Both are important, but in different ways."

A shadow forewarns about death. How does an artist live it?

"An artist works until the end. Being an artist means you don't retire, you don't take holidays, you don't have Sundays. There are no breaks. All your life is enclosed in the gesture of painting. It's not work but an illumination and death, even death with its supreme irrefutability, belongs to you."

Do you ever go back to your roots, for example to Greece?

"Roots are in the head, not in the feet or the ground. I owned a house on an island, but I didn't go back in 25 years. Now perhaps it's different. Every once in a while I think about the past as an old Ulysses without his Ithaca."

What do you miss about the past?

"Nothing and what is this past? What we loved or hated? What made us better or worse? The seized opportunities or the lost ones? The yes's of our life? The no's? What is this selective memory which leaves out an abundance of things we're not even aware of? Would you define all of that as the past? The only thing that interests me is man in the present-day."

Your beliefs are put to the test these days.

"There's no doubt but deterioration is not the fault of man but of the powers of the economy. Economy has nothing to do with its origin anymore, when it was *Oikos* or home. We've been evicted by economy, by its laws, its algorithms."

What's your relationship with money?

"I'm not against money. But it's not the main point of being an artist. Art is like poetry which needs to defend its autonomy."

That's what they say.

"It's true, but what else should I answer? This old and whittled Rome which knows no cult of dependence and submission, but just that of patience."