

JANNIS KOUNELLIS Structure and Sensibility:
Interview with Willoughby Sharp (1972)

WILLOUGHBY SHARP: What artist inspired you then?

JANNIS KOUNELLIS: Obviously an artist is in love with something at every period. Most people loved Van Gogh, and I did too.

ws: And when you arrived in Italy, which new art did you become interested in?

JK: Burri.

ws: What were your first impressions of contemporary art in Rome?

JK: It was a very particular situation. It wasn't just that it was the post-war, but the post-post-war as Efei puts it. Well, in the post-post-war period, the only true artists were Burri and of course Fontana.

During the first year in Rome I did a lot of thinking. I discovered there was a contemporary sensibility, which obviously did not exist in Greece. Then in '58, '59, I began to do a certain kind of painting with letters and a little later with numbers. When you make a lot of the same work people think it's a style, but that wasn't the real purpose of the paintings, so I decided to move on.

ws: Did Cy Twombly influence this work?

JK: Well, we showed at the same gallery. But I don't know. . . . He was an indirect influence.

ws: What did you do after the paintings of '62?

JK: After that I did a painting every day of the week. Large stripes in different colors. Monday was pink.

ws: Was this symbolic?

JK: No, the colors were not symbolic. It just happened that there was a certain color that was right for each day.

ws: Did that occupy a lot of time?

JK: Oh yes, a year and a half.

ws: What do you consider your last painting?

JK: Well, the ones before the letter paintings were meant to be sung. I used to sing them all the time. In 1960, for example, I did a continuous performance, first in my studio and then at the Galleria Tartaruga in Rome, in which I stretched unsized canvases coated with Kemtone, a housepaint, over all the walls in the room, and painted letters over them which I sang. The problem in those days was to establish a new kind of painting—something after Informal Art.

ws: Was this your first performance?

JK: Yes, one of the first.

ws: How does this work relate to your present sculpture?

JK: The concerns are similar—it's a reflection on art. Now I know this calls for a longer

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explanation. In all previous painting up to the Impressionists painting was an end in itself. It had its own value, which was the result of a certain kind of history. My intention is to provoke something entirely different. I don't consider painting an end in itself. In my work, painting is not bound up with a whole idealistic culture which assigned an independent value to painting. Not that my work is a complete innovation. The Dadaists were involved with a certain discourse in which the object was not considered an end in itself. And that's what Duchamp's piss pot is about. That idealistic culture, which in Italy was epitomized by Benedetto Croce, is precisely the kind of attitude which historically has always generated Mannerism. Whereas I am demonstrating the contrary.

ws: What is the relation between the painting and the performance?

JK: In this case the painting is simply a convention, but that's very important because it establishes a dialectic between a structure and a sensibility. Without a structure you cannot set up a dialectic. The painting represents a continuing, commonly held esthetic. It's a witness to history, a link.

ws: Where's the dialectic? That's the pivotal word.

JK: What I was saying was that you need to have a painting before you can have someone who criticizes it. The painting indicates a cultural canal, a specific and well-identified canal.

ws: Does this idea carry throughout your work?

JK: Yes, but more perfected. The parrot piece is a more direct demonstration of the dialectic between the structure and the rest, in other words, the nature of the parrot, do you see? The structure represents a common mentality, and then the sensuous part, the parrot, is a criticism of the structure, right? (*Loretto screeches.*)

ws: Was the horse piece that you did at Fabio Sargentini's L'Attico Gallery in January '69 a development of this dialectic?

JK: It was natural, it was a logical consequence. The important thing is that in this case, the social structure of the art gallery and its spatial organization take the place of the metal structure in the parrot piece. What the parrot did in relation to the structure, the horses do in this one.

ws: (*misunderstanding*) What did this work have to say about the social structure of the gallery? That artists are horses?

JK: No, don't you see, it's an act of awareness. An awareness of the basic nature of a gallery, of its bourgeois origin. So I used the gallery as a bourgeois fact, as a social structure. In this case I was confronted with economic interests, and ideological interests, which are the very basis of a gallery.

ws: (*misunderstanding again*) So this was an anti-gallery expression?

JK: It was meant to accentuate the artist's physiognomy vis-à-vis the system. It's not the situation itself, but the artist's position within the system, the position of someone who has to make money. Because the artist has to assume responsibility for his work. Whereas an artist born at the end of the 19th century operated in a different context.

ws: (*still trying to understand*) Where is the social comment?

JK: It's liberating, isn't it? It's a liberation from a certain kind of art history. It's an act of awareness, and there's your social comment right there.

ws: But the use of animals in a gallery implies that there was a shift from the gallery as a place to show paintings to the gallery as something else. I'm trying to find out what the shift was. You say that the horse-gallery space interaction served as a liberation from tradition, past art. But how do you conceive of the gallery space? Is it like a theater?

jk: Now listen. I believe that the gallery is a convention. One gallery may suit one kind of work better than another. But basically the gallery space is conventional.

ws: You mean you couldn't have done it at Lucio Amelio's Modern Art Agency in Naples.

jk: That's true, it wasn't possible. But space aside, it was impossible because the total situation in Naples is quite different.

ws: In what way did the space suggest the work?

jk: That's not the point—it's a matter of approach. I look at the place and then I present a certain work. I try to find a place that suits the work.

ws: You exhibited your *Coal* piece at Galleria La Bertesca, Genoa, in 1966, which superficially resembles certain coal works which Smithson did a little later. How were your concerns different from Smithson's?

jk: Well, I think these things by Smithson are derived from many sources, even a certain type of Japanese art and the whole Zen mentality which leads him to make the mountain from the outside—no, it's a very different problem.

ws: What were your specific concerns in that work?

jk: It's still the same basic idea as in the parrot piece, only that there the structure was not so felicitous, it's structured more according to a particular design. But there is still a dramatic relationship between structure and sensibility.

ws: What I'm really trying to get at is the development of your work.

jk: Well, you know, any work that one does springs from a particular historical context. Therefore there is no progression of work independent of the events which make it change. So in order to give an account of the development of a work, one has to talk not just about the work itself, but also about the significant encounters one has had, human events, and the others, the social and historical ones, which are vaster, more far-reaching. In fact, you must continually sustain a certain kind of mature vision. So it's impossible to explain the work as an end product, for if you do, you extricate it from the historical mesh. (*Loretto caws.*) Now how does America come into it? It's quite obvious that it does. In America there is also a structural process, but "structuralism" in America ends up by being an apology.

ws: Why?

jk: Because it is completely in keeping with the system. There is a history behind European structuralism, which flourished during the Russian Revolution. It was based on a new revolutionary order, for which in fact it was an apology. It was sympathetic to this system and made propaganda for it. Whereas I see the American structure as Byzantine—Byzantine in the sense of being an apology. I was talking to you about my work, and you asked, "Why the soil and the cactuses?" Precisely in order to put the structure in a contradiction. Well, in order to provide a criticism of the structure, to allow the artist sufficient freedom to comment on everything that happens. And creativity is this—it freezes this aware-

ness. On the one hand, art and history run parallel and are not independent of each other contrary to what was believed by the idealist tradition. Now I want to instigate a critical dialogue, which begins with a political consideration—political in the sense of art politics. Why doesn't the American artist show his earlier work? Because he's surrounded by a consumer society, which would never forgive him for aging. I don't have this problem, you understand. I can show all my work, while the American is conditioned by another reality. Take the medieval painter: he was essentially a public man. But what really made the medieval painter was the person who commissioned the work. He supplied the esthetic, the dominant values, and also in a sense the iconography, and a certain kind of subject matter. Whereas today a person who commissions work is a consumer—but let's not say that, it's an ugly word.

ws: Has the course of your work been primarily logical or emotional?

jk: Both. I think my greatest aspiration—to be paradoxical—is to become a needle to sew everything up, but first to push my way in there, and sew all this history up again. I don't want to delve into the past for archeological pleasure—though it could have been that—but because the past has a reality which conditions us deep down. Then if you bring it slowly to the surface, it's full of possibilities. As far as Italy is concerned, that past is the sole reality. But it's not only true of Italy. Even for Duchamp the past was a reality, because Duchamp without the medieval phases of his thinking—the epic poems about knights—wouldn't really have been Duchamp. Duchamp came along and uncovered certain elements from the past. So it isn't a matter of pure invention. But it happened in a certain historical context, in a country like France which has had a revolution, so it wasn't quite by chance. Now in Italy the historical conditions are very different. Here the Risorgimento outburst was blocked. Here the basic reality is the cultural reality—all the rest is reformist. First of all Catholicism. With the Middle Ages there was a cultural break, which came with the transition from *Christus Patens* to *Christus in Gloria*. Without this change there wouldn't have been either the Risorgimento or the Enlightenment. And these are all precise facts, they are all interpretive historic links. And then there emerged this Catholic mentality which made it possible in Venetian painting for a Madonna to be a whore holding a child by the hand—which I personally find magnificent—especially compared to Protestantism and orthodoxy. For myself, as an artist, I must give an accounting of this history. Perhaps you'll say, why should anyone care about this thing which interests you? Because it is an act of awareness, and an act of awareness concerns *everyone*. For it is not only Italy's drama, it's a drama which involves the entire Western world.

ws: Yes, but what about America?

jk: In America the cultural process is interpreted very differently, because the state has a different structure. America was born in revolution.

ws: So what you were saying before is that all your works are basically about the same thing.

jk: Yes, the basic thinking is the same. Besides the works we've already mentioned there's a series which derives from the same inspiration. The *Charcoal*, the *Fire*, the structure with the cacti are all related in that they are everyday, common things. While all these works

deal with the same problem, it's not that rational. Very often the connection is impossible to grasp. All these works have something in common—the relation between structure and sensibility. But in others like the *Dancer* or the *Violinist*, there isn't the same relationship. They say something about a certain kind of history and a certain kind of pleasure. In the final analysis, art is about that too, isn't it? And that's why I cannot accept conceptual art, because there is a historical contradiction in it. Conceptual art developed at a historic moment and represents that moment, in keeping with a particular mentality, and for me it is a reactionary art. Because of my historical circumstances and condition I cannot accept this art—to me it represents a retrograde, Victorian attitude. Conceptual art is another kind of artistic style. And a style blocks any attempt at revolutionary thinking and activity. It has a base of new, formal invention but in terms of content it stifles all the new things that are happening in art at the same time. I don't know if I'm making myself clear, but if I were to accept this business of conceptual art I would have no reason to exist.

MARIO MERZ Untitled Statements (1979, 1982, 1984)

Arte povera (they say) has raised commercial materials of manufacturing and technology to the level of representing an artistic idea: it has destroyed or simply obscured a certain number of artistic surfaces to give back to the support the value of destiny in a broad sense. For example, it has eliminated the canvas as a surface in order to confer value on the most elementary as well as the most complex surfaces: the stasis of the floor, the stasis of the field, or the vertical stasis of the wall of bricks, stone, or cement. *Arte povera* clings to rafters and it clings to trees.

These alternative surface-destinies have liberated art from fixed programs, not to create new iconographies, but to free the art as a sounding apparatus among diverse and opposite realities rather than to enclose it or to include it in traditional supports, thereby bringing art back to iconography or the relations among iconographies. One cannot speak of relationships among Expressionism, Goya, pre-Raphaelite iconographies, or those of the Fauves, etc., etc.

This sense of newness does not protect art, it doesn't make it fan out; but it enables it to occasionally be a sounding instrument between realities, objects, and languages destined for other values, other readings. For example, Conceptual Art is a sounding instrument between printed words, luminous writings, and letters scrawled in a hasty nervous instinctive calligraphy.

Objects or natures remote from being art or artistic surfaces find a rapport in the new art. A parallelepiped of iron pipes can become a frame for pulling a flying-jib; a pile of sticks adds the intrinsic and irremediable opacity of a natural product because it unites art with the irremediable luminousness of electric power. A canvas and an image sprayed rapidly, within ten minutes of non-painterly artisan work, reveals the possibility of using this si-

* Mario Merz, untitled statements (1979, 1982, 1984), in Germano Celant, *The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S. 1* (New York: P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Umberto Allemandi, 1985), 229, 234, 237.