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Jannis Kounellis

SONNABEND GALLERY

Jannis Kounellis confronts nature and the man-made. He makes this confrontation literal, incorporating both objects and performances. He confronts the kind of paradoxical fusion of real and manufactured that Magritte was particularly masterful at depicting. Kounellis' Papagallo of 1969, the earliest work in the show, consists of a vertically oriented iron rectangle. The work outlines his esthetic position perfectly. It is an abstract "object"—gray, hard, and Minimal—to which the artist has bound a "natural" phenomenon—a richly colorful, cawing, bit of life. Each impinges on the other's reality. The structure represents a modernist norm which is put into perspective as somewhat cold and artificial by the gorgeous coloration of nature represented by the bird. The bird, in turn, and the mess it makes, seems artificial in the light of its formalistic gallery setting. It is a juxtaposition, calling both realities into question, which he exploits to full advantage in all his work. Each of the small pieces in the show contrasted natural material—hair, coffee, a burning candle—with the metallic certainty of sculptural forms. Every work was executed with tidy precision, a sparseness which allowed a few elements to carry the message eloquently, and in exquisitely sharp focus, like illusionistic Surrealist art. In Conceptual terms and even in certain visual effects it relates as well to the assemblages of Rauschenberg and Johns.

Da Inventare Sul Posto of 1971 is a large pink painting in oil on canvas, loosely brushed and incompletely covered with paint. On it in black are painted a few bars of musical notation. When the piece is being performed a violinist, formally dressed, sits to the left of the painting and a dark-haired ballerina dances forward of the work until the violinist has completed his fragment of Mozart, then returns, walking, to stand toward the right of the painting. It is a tableau vivant expressing "Degas-ness," representing in a literal way all the elements that a painter like Degas could only depict. This kind of dual emphasis on contemporary modes of art-making and the content of past art runs through all of Kounellis' work.

The piece was performed in tandem with Flauto, 1972, at the opposite end of the gallery, which consisted of a flutist dressed in black playing a fragment from Mozart. He was seated within an open-fronted black metal closet. A third work, Maschera, 1972, was located between these two pieces. In it the artist stood within a closet identical with the other one except for being halfcurtained in green. His face was hidden behind an antique Roman white plaster mask of a deity, symbolizing the artist's persona, his connections with art throughout the ages. A strong strain of Greek theatrical tradition filtered through the screen of De Chirico pervades all Kounellis' imagery.

The Greek patrimony of Kounellis is especially crucial to the other large work in this exhibition, Woman, Blanket, Iron Base and Acetylene Torch of 1969 in spite of its additional references to Joseph Beuys and to Piero Manzoni. Hints of ancient ritual magic, of death shrouds, of poverty and the stark contrasts of Greek light put it into a very disturbing emotional framework. A woman, carefully wrapped each day by the artist in a dull gray blanket except for one bare foot which remains exposed, lies on her side upon a rectangle of iron. The nozzle of an acetylene torch is taped to her bare foot. It is attached to a tank of gas in the corner, and burns blue, red,

and yellow, while giving off a hissing roar of sound when it has been lit by the artist. It functions with the other performed pieces to remind the viewer of the inevitability of death like a memento mori in a Baroque painting. Kounellis' disinterest in physical concerns, like whether the woman mightn't burn herself to death with the torch should she fall asleep and move her foot, or how she breathes under there, or is she hot, are in direct opposition to the work of some of his contemporaries, like Vito Acconci, for whom these practical considerations form a major part of the statement. Kounellis uses life to make art in a coldly literal way, almost as if it were a piece of marble to be carved into a Greek sculpture. The positioning here is anti-Happening and pro-Conceptual Theatre.

—April Kingsley