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Jannis Kounellis: Berlin 1974

A first essay which I wrote in 2020 dealt with the early letter pictures by Jannis Kounellis, while the one now being published is concerned with his participation in the festival “ADA 2 Aktionen der Avantgarde” that took place in Berlin in September 1974. A cycle of Kounellis' preparatory studies for this project came to light at Galerie Folker Skulima in Berlin; these are now on show at Larkin Erdmann in Zürich.



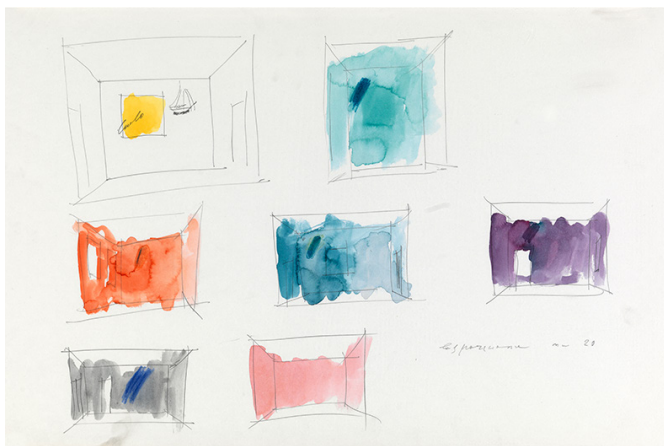
From very early on, Kounellis was convinced that his path as an artist would lead him north. In November 1971, he made Skulima's acquaintance at the private view of the Beuys exhibition at Lucio Amelio's Modern Art Agency in Naples. Only a month later, on 17 December 1971, his own exhibition opened at Skulima's gallery, his first solo show outside Italy. At first, his proposed exhibit was a dead horse wrapped in blankets, but in the end, he showed a painting primed in brown with sheet music, which provided a backdrop for a cellist who repeatedly played a passage from Johann Sebastian Bach's “St John Passion”. According to most publications, this work is supposed to have been presented for the first time at Amelio's in Naples, but actually that exhibition took place a couple of days later. Kounellis often included pieces of music in his works at the time, but he continued to see himself as a painter, and his view of music was a painterly one: musical motifs were components of spatial pictures, on a par with colours, objects and figures.



For “ADA 2”, Kounellis planned to have a singer perform in front of a painting, a nude, on the stage of a Berlin cabaret. She was expected to constantly intone the “Bilbao Song” by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. This was intended as a subtle commentary on German Modernism, which Kounellis located somewhere between Kurt Schwitters' everyday subject matter and Brecht's exuberant imagination; he regarded his own Mediterranean kind of art on the other hand as a dynamic gesture to transcend this opposition. Unfortunately, the cabaret performance never happened as envisaged, because the singer cancelled at the last minute. Her place was taken by the pianist Frederic Rzewski, who for “ADA 2” played bars from Giuseppe Verdi's opera “Nabucco”; this work was not really intended for Berlin, as Kounellis had shown it a couple of years previously in Rome. The time Kounellis spent in Berlin, where he engaged a model for the express purpose of painting the picture for the stage, inspired him to do numerous drawings, in which he sketched fanciful reveries inspired by phantasies of the 1920s Berlin. In fact, Kounellis only began to draw during this work phase, in order to visualize his manifold ideas for spatial pictures; these project studies, which have rarely been exhibited, were from then on done on his journeys to exhibitions all over the world. The Berlin drawings culminated in a magnificent series of watercolours, which became known as *Hommage à Lotte Lenya* – a title that was not chosen by the artist, however.



A few days after his unsuccessful contribution to “ADA 2”, Kounellis' second exhibition at Galerie Skulima opened in October 1974. In yellow-painted exhibition spaces, a petroleum lamp was hung next to a yellow monochrome painting. The windows were wide open, in spite of the freezing cold weather, while the only illumination came from the streetlamps casting their yellowish light into the gallery. The exhibition was a poetic gesture – the yellow linked inner space to the world outdoors, and history to the present day, thus engendering an intense atmospheric image. This was only the prelude to further exhibitions, in Turin and Rome, for which Kounellis also had the spaces painted in colour. His appearances in the North had encouraged him to pick up on the expressive colour schemes of the European painters he admired – Van Gogh, Ensor, Munch, Nolde. The use of music and colour was far more than a formal matter, however, but an expression of Kounellis' will to assert his artistic freedom and override the new boundaries that had been drawn in the 1970s.



The catalogue of the exhibition with a comprehensive text will be published at the end of March.