

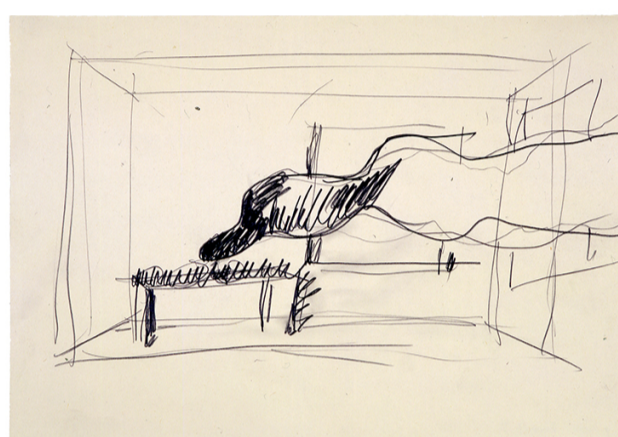
May 2024

Jannis Kounellis: La stanza vede

Jannis Kounellis first showed a comprehensive selection of his drawings in 1990 at the Gemeentemuseum The Hague in an exhibition entitled «La stanza vede». In the poetic title, the space itself turns into an actor and conjures up a vision: it is a paradoxical image for the active role Kounellis intended for these sheets. The 150 drawings that were exhibited at that time are now in three collections, and thus it was possible to bring them together once more for an exhibition at the Museo del Novecento in Florence and subsequently at the Museo degli Eremitani in Padova. All the works are reproduced in the catalogue, accompanied by an essay. Although the drawings meant a lot to Kounellis, prior to this exhibition he had always avoided providing an inside view of this aspect of his work. This reticence was not just because he preferred to present his large spatial pieces in his shows, but was in keeping with his basic defiant stance, a hallmark of his work.



Space plays a central role in Kounellis' drawings; it is Masaccio's stage rendered using central perspective and serving as a backdrop for the appearance of erratic things that become enigmatic signs. This space is sketched in with just a few lines to indicate the rear wall, floor, ceiling and side walls. Sometimes there are doors or windows, which lead to nowhere, inserted in these walls. The objects which impinge on each other in the space make the fragmentation, the loss of centrality, tangible that Kounellis saw as the tragedy of modernity and adopted as his theme.



The reference to Masaccio brings art history into play. Kounellis' practice is rooted in a particular Italian tradition, which found powerful expression at the start of the twentieth century in Giorgio de Chirico's «Pittura metafisica». There are also echoes of such diverse artists as Delacroix, Redon, Ensor, Klimt and Munch. The essential precondition of the originality of Kounellis' work is the close link to history. For Kounellis, drawing was an activity he could pursue when travelling from place to place far away from his studio, enabling him to record the fantasies that haunted him obsessively. It is possible to ascertain from the drawings how he tried out his visual ideas for exhibitions, works and larger ensembles. Some of the drawings are rudimentary sketches capturing an idea in a few strokes, while others are more thoroughly formulated. The drawn line is emphatic and vibrantly tense, culminating in vehement hatching, which may fill and darken the space.



Some items keep appearing in the drawings as leitmotifs, such as the kerosene lamp with its characteristic glass cylinder. The lamp acts as the bearer of illumination, a metaphor of the Enlightenment bringing light into the darkness. The chimney is just as present and significant, along with smoke becoming billowing hair. Shadows appear on the walls and transform into figures, while the hatching dissolves into lines that spread across the walls, becoming entangled and fanning out again. The inner logic of drawing allows Kounellis to pile up casts of antique heads to produce a new figure, such as he once stated in a conversation: «For many years, metamorphosis has been my real theme.»



The drawings function at a different level to the sculptural pieces, incorporating fantasies and dreams; they pave the way to his large, space-commanding pictures and they represent their fluid counterpart as they withdraw from material reality. In answer to a question about the particular nature of his drawing, Kounellis replied: «In drawing I have always accounted for things that were consistently dreamed. The work itself is something quite different.»

The exhibition in Florence closes on June 9, 2024; the exhibition in Padova runs from August until the end of November.

A supplement to Newsletter 28: «An Ode to Robert Moskowitz» (<https://brooklynrail.org/events/2024/05/13/ode-to-robert-moskowitz/>)

Dieter Schwarz