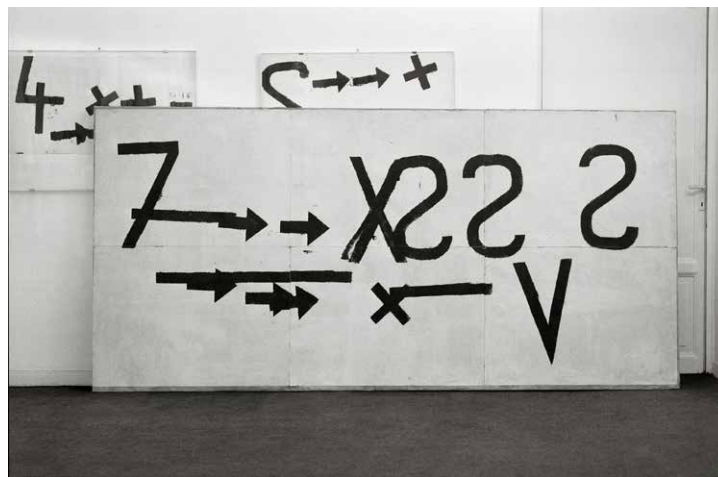


December 2020

Jannis Kounellis

In 1960 Jannis Kounellis entered the public arena for the first time with an exhibition at Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome. This was a major appearance for the young artist, who was still studying at the Accademia di Belle Arti. There were four pictures in the show, displaying groups of black letters and numbers on a white ground. These letter paintings were not the work of a beginner; they were formulated with a decisiveness that one would expect only of a mature artist. The exhibition was a landmark in Italian art as well as for Kounellis himself, who was well aware that it heralded the end of his youth.



It is rarely the case in recent art history that an artist's oeuvre is so clearly defined from the outset. Among Kounellis' contemporaries Giulio Paolini comes to mind and his very first work *Disegno geometrico* from 1960, which staked out his future path. Then there was Luciano Fabro, who in his debut exhibition in 1964 circumscribed his practice with a group of unusual 'didactic' works. Looking back even further, Giorgio de Chirico comes into focus and the metaphysical pictures he painted prior to the First World War, which seemed to have emerged into the world almost out of the blue and immediately elicited a huge impact on account of their provocative rejection of symbolic conventions.



The interest aroused by Kounellis' letter pictures has never waned since their first appearance, and their presence remains nearly overwhelming. Perhaps this impact entailed some misconceptions, given that these works are not really paintings. Kounellis bent over backwards to break with conventional painting and to nullify the values that were upheld in the post-war period. He proceeded deliberately in an un-artistic manner, using templates instead of painting directly; he used household emulsion and gloss paints instead of oils and substituted incorporeal signs for the "matière" that Burri and Fautrier lauded as the content matter of an artwork. In some cases Kounellis' approach resembles that of Cy Twombly, who had also exhibited at La Tartaruga at a somewhat earlier date and was working towards divesting abstract expressionist painting of its gestural coherence. Indeed it is noticeable how strongly the young Kounellis responded to new American art, i.e. to Pollock, Kline, Johns and Rauschenberg. This overt rivalry persisted and preoccupied him even in his later work. What distinguished Kounellis from the American artists, however, was his determination to translate painterly expression into the impersonal spectacle of the sign, into a hermetic script. The signs can no longer be combined, but remain fragments. Henceforth this insight was to define the aesthetics of Kounellis' practice.



An exhibition at Larkin Erdmann in Zurich afforded the opportunity to take a closer look at Kounellis' early work. For the catalogue, which was published at the end of the show, I wrote an article that examined the creation of the letter pictures and their significance for Kounellis' oeuvre — this could be the first chapter of a comprehensive treatment of the artist and his work. The catalogue is now available from the gallery (www.larkinerdmann.com).

Some further suggestions:

A conversation with Gianfranco Schiavano about Michael Venezia (in German): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiLsPNyH0So>