

JANNIS KOUNELLIS: LABYRINTH
WITHOUT WALLS

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Text curatorial. David Barro

But where is our ship truly headed?

Jannis Kounellis

A labyrinth, rather than a space, is a path. A labyrinthine place is a space in motion. An abyss. A place of vertigo that demands to be penetrated and is at once inside and outside, in the future and in the past. It is architecture, landscape and ruin, because a labyrinth can only be seen in fragments and is never a safe place. For Jannis Kounellis, the journey is to abandon oneself to a kind of labyrinth without walls, an odyssey of constant persistence or the obsessive reinstatement of ideas that must be distilled through new meaning. Kounellis always returns to his past because, as Deleuze pointed out, it is not so much the path where a person gets lost, but the path by which they return. That is why he summons a fragmentary time, aware that, like Ulysses, those who return are never the same, and the mystery of the labyrinth lies in the paths that always return differently. Infiltrating history, as Kounellis was wont to do, is like entering the ocean, like crossing borders so that with each return a new beginning is born.

Jannis Kounellis' work is a journey through time, an immersion in the labyrinth of life. Kounellis defined himself as both an ancient man and a modern painter. Because his vision was archaeological, like an excavation into memory that was always based on a critical re-reading of the past, interpreted through his own, radically contemporary language. In his own words, he sought "scattered history in fragments—emotional and formal". In this case, the exhibition—which brings together a selection of works created between 1993 and 2015—emerges as a wreckage of sorts, consisting of a series of elements that allude to travel, migration and maritime transport, fundamental to globalisation, although now almost obsolete. Kounellis expresses a longing for the poetic dimension of travel, lost in the industrial age, and this exhibit generally conveys that sense of physical and emotional displacement.

The main installation, which serves as the centrepiece of the entire exhibition, consists of a set of nine Venetian sails arranged in a fan shape, evoking stories of navigation, memory and history. In this work, created for the 1993 Venice Biennale, the sails, which date from the 17th century to more recent times, symbolise Venice's cultural heritage and its connection to the Mediterranean, but also Kounellis' critical nostalgia arising from the transformation of maritime trade and the absence of the individual imprint on the industry of his present. These sails are paintings that remind us of how sailing ships were adorned with markings that identified those vessels and their crews, in many cases with shapes that offered a certain protection through their religious status. It is, therefore, a kind of lament and tribute, a warning that every story is important.

The exhibition also includes another series of works with sails that the artist created years later, well into the 21st century: on the one hand, he reused old white Mallorcan cotton sails; on the other, colourful Italian sails that twist around like a Caravaggesque foreshortening. Stretched and folded over steel frames, these sails, which are shown bent and creased, marked by use, retain the memory of their previous life at sea. As is typical of Kounellis' work, through materials that are imbued with meaning, he proposes a reflection on the human imprint on objects, but also on painting and its possibilities, since his pictorial practice is based on a transgressive conception of art and his definition of painting as a "logical affair".

This is all evident in another of his most representative series, "Albatros" (2001), which consists of a set of works composed of broken sections of a wooden boat that are suspended in front of steel plates hanging askew, evoking the wear and tear and the memory of objects. These works, also featured in the exhibit, are accompanied by a huge hull fragment of the same boat, which draws viewers' attention through its vertical forcefulness. Once again, implicit in the artist's journey is a drama that must be deciphered. Kounellis is never a neutral artist. Neither are his materials nor those of his supports. Weight, like the weight of history, is what each material conceals. Size, too, relates to what it means to be human. To take just one example, the steel plates of his "Albatross" series, measuring 200 × 180 cm, are the size of a double bed, thus seeking the contrast between the human dimension of the bed and the hardness of a material such as steel, as opposing forces. The rigidity of the plate contrasts with the malleable fragments of the boat's wooden structure, as when a blank canvas is set against the illusionism of the pictorial, such as a crucifixion by Masaccio or a martyrdom by Tiepolo. Such a confrontation of forces is a common logic in an artist like Kounellis, who does not seek to illustrate, although he does send us clues that bring us closer to the mystery of tragedy, always reminding us of his idea that weight expresses a fair beauty.

"Jannis Kounellis. Labyrinth Without Walls" reflects on and draws inspiration from the artist's childhood in the port of Piraeus and its connection to the sea as a place of cultural exchange. In these works, Kounellis insists on consecrating the everyday, and objects become something sacred, a poetic landscape. His abstraction is rooted in the sign. Because the fragments of the *Albatros* ship here are compositional elements that serve to construct the painting, but they are also emphatic signs that possess semantic properties. Kounellis acts as a transmitter of a universe of signs and forms repeated over time that constitute the distinctive character of the history of our civilization and contribute to its knowledge and expansion. Because a fragment of a boat is surely more eloquent than the very words that attempt to describe it, and forms express the inexpressible, like a primal language. Only a profound study of these signs will allow us to understand the nature of their language, and Jannis Kounellis is a landscape artist capable of painting the remnants of a story and guessing or apprehending its space, its measure. Always with respect for compositional traditions, of which he accepted to be the custodian without forgetting his attraction to transition, to achieving another order based on repetition, persistence and knowledge.

Kounellis' works therefore bear the scent of origin, of mythological time, of the setting for life experience or inheritance. Identity guarantees a future that is impossible without roots. The artist himself described this by saying that there is no such thing as isolated tradition. But it is important to emphasise that we are talking about tradition and not enlightenment, because it is not a question of exalting the past, but of examining and understanding the signs of that tradition in order to organise it and embrace it like visionary eyes. Distance reinforces the mystery, the power of the unspoken, like a kind of tenebrism in the manner of Caravaggio or dark expressionism, like Goya. The fragments of the *Albatros* could also be a kind of half-drowned dog. All meanings are possible when a bit of light is shed on what has remained in shadow, when the fragments of memory are brought together after a shipwreck. It is a question of opening up "to rediscover what may no longer exist tomorrow". Because Kounellis does not embark on a journey into the unknown; he himself has asserted that "journey" means "going to another place", and on this journey of initiation he always seeks something familiar, even if this serendipitous

undertaking arises from something minuscule, which in his case always stems from his profound knowledge of history.

It is in this sense of journey that we can best understand his attraction to the labyrinth, a concept that goes far beyond the drawings by Kounellis featured in this exhibition. One need only think of the display he set up at the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Arnone in 2007, where he exhibited five original canvases by Mattia Preti, curated by Bruno Corà, in which his intention to keep the past alive in a kind of critical reinterpretation is evident. But above all, the labyrinth he constructed from 160 steel panels measuring 2.35 meters in height at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin that same year comes to mind. A labyrinth that is a place within a place, a labyrinth inside a glass container that demands a performativeness and a certain theatricality of the viewer. Kounellis has always moved outside the frame without ceasing to be a painter. As in life, it is necessary to leave in order to return, so as not to lose one's bearings. For all these reasons, he insists, time and again, on rediscovering the meanings of each drama and each space. Silence, as the mystery of history, allows him to speak and write between the lines, to operate from the vantage point of the unsettling. That is why he often included musical instruments or huge silent bells, like a poem where the spoken word only resonates in the image. For Kounellis, the inexpressible is, ultimately, the condition of art.

In this exhibit, the scent of labyrinth also leads us to the mythical labyrinth of Crete, which Daedalus built and in which Minos confined his son, the Minotaur. Later, it would be Daedalus himself who would be imprisoned there, with his son Icarus, for whom he would build wings using wax. With these wings, they would manage to escape over the Mediterranean. It is well known that Icarus flew so close to the sun that the rays melted the wax on his wings and he fell into the sea. Of course, the story is more complex, but we are interested in this relationship with the sea as a way out of the labyrinth. After the city of Athens lost a war against Minos, the king of Crete, he decreed that every year seven youths and seven maidens should be sent to be devoured by the Minotaur, who was trapped in the labyrinth, from which it was impossible to escape. The Athenian prince Theseus volunteered as one of the seven young men, intending to kill the Minotaur. His father, the Athenian king Aegeus, decreed that if he came out of the labyrinth alive, he should hoist white sails. Theseus killed the Minotaur and, following Ariadne's thread, managed to escape from the labyrinth, although on his way back to Athens, he forgot to hoist the white sails, leaving the black sails exposed. Upon spotting the ship, Aegeus, believing him dead, threw himself into the sea and drowned. Hence the name of the well-known Aegean Sea, the birthplace of Jannis Kounellis, who always compared himself to Odysseus in his status as an emigrant and his interest in travelling to discover what other people are like, to see other places.

Of course, this artistic relationship with myth is not exclusive to Kounellis. Daedalus and Icarus are the subject of a famous painting by Frederic Leighton, a landscape by Brueghel the Elder, several prints by Henri Matisse, a mural by Picasso, an oil painting by Anselm Kiefer, but also a unique hanging sculpture by the arte povera artist Giulio Paolini and a documented performance by Chris Burden. Icarus leapt into the void of history, as Yves Klein would later evoke, and it should come as no surprise that Kounellis continues a long tradition of artistic inspiration in classical mythology, something that can be extrapolated to cinema or even to the music of current bands such as Arcade Fire. Because this theatricality, which has its basis in history, is also the pillar of his performative nature, of his attraction to the decentralisation of Pollock's painting—an influence evident in some of his labyrinths—as well as to performance art and body art, and to the nature of arte povera. His attraction to a freedom of expression capable of combining what resonates, or the material and the spiritual based on his attachment to the Orient is also evident. And what resonates is a crack in perception. That is why Kounellis does not seek completeness and embraces the metaphorical. That is why it is not difficult to think of Malevich when we pause to consider the black steel frames that support the remains of the *Albatros*, although Kounellis does not formalise this series in a rigid manner because what he seeks is to activate the pictorial space, as in his large installation of Venetian sails.

For Kounellis, travelling is not just physical movement but also a life journey that shapes our identity through the changing contexts, places, cultures and experiences we encounter. He was always fascinated by far-off places, enthralled by exploring new horizons, a condition of late 20th-century globalisation. Displacement is a contemporary circumstance, and maritime transport is key to understanding the birth of globalisation. And it is in this sense that we should understand the labyrinth, which, from a philosophical point of view, symbolises the initiatory path to wisdom, a gateway to the intellectual challenge of embracing uncertainty and discovering that around every corner lies a new beginning with no definitive answer, inviting us to continue exploring. Kounellis does not want the viewer to stop at the familiar, at the first answer; which is why he calls on depth and his works delve into history. The labyrinth is always an inner voyage, a plunge into the event, the search for the lost centre. The labyrinth is the echo of history, and it should come as no surprise to note the depth and forcefulness of his labyrinth drawings, even the most concise and simple ones.

In “Jannis Kounellis: Labyrinth without Walls”, the fragment is the presence of the past, a kind of broken writing or a sign of what can no longer be absolute. The fragment is a quote lying somewhere between thinking and feeling. His labyrinths are a world without a map, a disorder that might well remind us of a painting by Delacroix, but the fragments of the *Albatross* also seem to cling to the support of the painting in the same way that Ophelia clings to the tree in the painting by the French master. Because Jannis Kounellis’ stories are never finished stories; they always emerge and float, like his materials. That is why in his writings, Kounellis wonders whether it is true that Joyce could not have written anything other than *Ulysses*. After all, if we think of the sea in the history of painting, it has also gone from being a pictorial background to the protagonist of works with the recurring theme of shipwreck, cultivated by many of the artists whom Jannis Kounellis admired. Consider Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, but also Francisco de Goya’s oil painting *A Shipwreck*, small in size but large in weight, which the Aragonese artist painted on tin when he lived by the sea in Cadiz. With his “Albatross” series, Kounellis tells us the story of a shipwreck, with its pieces of wood, like the one painted by Carlos de Haes in the late 19th century, now belonging to the Museo del Prado. Carlos de Haes was not interested in the details of the tragedy, but, like Kounellis, in the skeleton of the ship, the strength of the vessel stranded like yet another rock. The shadows of an image.

Yet the most curious thing about Kounellis is his unprecedented ability to verticalise the remains of a shipwreck. Perhaps because his work always defends something in danger of foundering. When visiting this exhibit, it is not difficult to think of the epic nature of maritime transport, the social problems of ports, the pain or the adventure involved, themes that also pre-occupied Kounellis in his writings. These are works produced with few elements, always using materials from the world that function as windows or doors, allowing us to intuit and frame landscapes that only visionaries can explore. Each material is an idea, and the labyrinth is thus a time capsule, a double effort by the artist to refloat the most subterranean world of matter.

It is in this sense that we must also contextualise the work *Untitled* (2007), which consists of an enormous canvas covered in shells draped over wooden beams in the shape of a cross. As on other occasions, Kounellis combines the natural with the built world and the ephemeral and fragile with the austere solidity of the wooden beams, which contain the tension. A cross that, beyond its facet as a symbol of cultures and religions, represents the union of forces and evokes a solemn sensation, transforming the space into a kind of altar fusing the natural and the architectural. Time, memory, the journey, the remainder, “inheriting” once again, which, as Derrida points out, is nothing more than recollecting memory, with the performativity that this expression implies. Because ruin is experience itself, an open memory—fragmented, but limitless.

For Kounellis, fragmentation is ultimately a political act, evidence of material ruin and social destruction. Art here is a kind of reconstruction through resonance. The suspended time of a past that requires constant effort to reveal its hidden dimensions. This is where the weight of matter gains its importance, as the weight of that fragmented history. Everything is suspended,

with the theatricality of Giambattista Tiepolo's artwork. The fragments are like words that seek to form language and transcend it. Because fragments are the symbol of an impossible journey into the unknown, a voyage into the labyrinth. Kounellis could well subscribe to Samuel Beckett's maxim that "the only chance of renovation is to open one's eyes and see the mess". Because, as we see in many of his labyrinths, he opens the door to disorder with the same liberating energy as Pollock's action painting. Although in Kounellis' work, painting is not a liquid script that leaves marks; here the marks are those of life, those of its fragments, its objects, its history. Hence, in this exhibition, we also encounter much of the visual vocabulary that has accompanied him for decades: iron plates, wood, lead, candles. It is about returning whenever possible. "My mother is Ithaca, my youth is Ithaca, my journey is Ithaca, my death is Ithaca," the artist was to say. Materials that allude to the human condition and leave us with an overwhelming sensation that we could describe with an oxymoron: a deafening silence in a labyrinth without walls.

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