

Continuities and dis-continuities in the work of Jannis Kounellis

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The object of this study is to trace the continuities within Jannis Kounellis' body of work, in order to make an analogy between the artistic archive and the oeuvre. This analogy is underpinned by a continuity in the materials and themes (most notably ancient Greek and Renaissance art) in his work, which Kounellis uses to create a personal archive from which he later borrows.

Moreover, another important aspect of this study will be the definition of two important functions, establishing Kounellis' work: *the re-contextualisation by the artist* and the *re-contextualisation by the audience*. Last but not least in this essay I will closely examine Kounellis' most recent exhibition in Athens (during the time of the financial crisis in 2012) and the audience's responses, more specifically the way the Greek audience approached Kounellis' oeuvre and the artist himself. Ultimately, this will serve to show that the archive of Kounellis' work evoked familiar themes for this audience and how both the exhibition and the artist himself were appropriated in a very specific context.

Before discussing the continuities of Kounellis' work, it is worth briefly discussing the artist's background. This serves to show the extent to which his personal background has inspired him to work with certain themes, materials and also helps to contextualise both his oeuvre and its public reception.

Jannis Kounellis, an important Modern Greek artist born in Piraeus in 1936, moved to Rome 20 years later, where he is now based. Kounellis' national identity can be seen as a hybrid between two different, but at the same time similar, Mediterranean cultures: Greek and Italian. Although his origin is Greek, Kounellis was raised and moulded by the Italian spirit throughout the greater part of his life. Particularly his identity has been reflected in the themes of ancient Greek and Renaissance art that re-appear throughout his oeuvre (this will be discussed further later on).

In addition, the recurring use of particular materials can be traced back to Kounellis' influence in the creation of the Arte Povera movement. This movement opposed existing contemporary art movements, which defined art in sophisticated theoretical terms. Arte Povera comes with the suggestion of highlighting and redefining the basic qualities of simple

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objects, such as weight and dimensions, by investing them with simple and new messages. Specifically, artists of this movement usually engage with themes opposed to abstract concepts of modern art, highlighting the polysemy of simple materials such as clothes, iron, charcoal, etc. A number of art critics refer to Arte Povera as the art movement which comes out of the artist's poverty, since 'povera' in Italian translates in English as 'poor'; however, this would be an oversimplified schema to approach its mentality and central elements. 'Poor' in practice could stand for the poor use of everyday objects, which instead of formulating a philosophical question would open a discourse about life itself. For example this discourse could be evident in the use of charcoal. Charcoal conventionally is associated with mining, with the working class and is also an energy fuel; when, however, it is re-contextualized as part of an installation of the Arte Povera movement, this concept of energy fuel is redefined and expanded, in order to speak about a metaphysical notion of energy. This also challenges the concept of a cheap material and reassigns its value. Elements of everyday life are both reproduced and challenged through the use of these materials.

Examining Kounellis' work since the 1960s we get the feeling that the artist kept the fundamental elements of the Arte Povera movement, such as the use of simple materials: he saw a sacred element in the everyday object. He recreates ancient Greek and Renaissance motifs by using cheap materials (such as plaster instead of marble). In this way he elevates the value of cheap materials by juxtaposing and associating them with a tradition of highbrow art, and at the same time he deconstructs the value of these artistic prototypes (classical Greek and Renaissance art). As I will go on to argue, the artist used the fundamentals of Arte Povera to problematize, but also to create continuity through his oeuvre, by staging specific art motifs repetitively in different gallery spaces across the globe. Therefore, for Kounellis this movement remains the springboard from which he started a philosophical speculation on matters concerning life and death. He is also concerned with what he calls 'η αρχαία αρχή', which translates as the ancient point of meaning. This refers both to an ancient value (αρχή) and an ancient beginning or point of origin. Thus, beyond existential issues he is also concerned with the concept of value itself. On the other hand, the notion of origin relates both to the themes he reproduces and to Derrida's definition of the archive based on the notion 'arkhe' as I will go on to explore.

Before we consider the archive it is useful to consider the notion of continuity and how this continuity of specific themes allows the artist to create an archive. Starting from the general use of continuity in modern Western Art we open a discussion about the application of the theoretical term of continuity in the work of Jannis Kounellis. The central argument and

purpose of this section is to demonstrate the appearance of continuity in his work, and to appraise how this continuity constructs a temporal duration in the whole of his work, and finally creates a lexicon through the repeated use of particular signifiers.

Continuity in its general use has been seen by art critics until this time as a theoretical term, which generally stands for consistency in the use of certain features and characteristics by a creator. According to Clement Greenberg¹:

‘Styles (if not movements) do seem for the most part to follow one another in a logical and orderly way. Hindsight sees that best, but it doesn’t take hindsight alone to see it. Continuity imposes itself inexorably [...] It’s a continuity that has overridden all the innovation of the avant-garde, and still does so. There have been no breaks or discontinuities in the course of avant-garde art, as there were none in Western art before it. The continuity of sensibility -in this case the continuity of Western sensibility- has been to that if nothing else. That continuity happens to be the most inexorable one of all. You can no more escape from it as you cannot escape from yourself [...] The continuity and long-term orderliness of the course of art so far embolden me to say that certain probabilities do seem to govern the immediate future of the best art.’

Although Clement Greenberg talks specifically about the Avant-garde, I argue that the successors of modern Western art follow the long tradition of classical forms, which is deeply rooted in Western sensibility as Greenberg argues, and Kounellis’ example falls under this category as well. If in Kounellis’ work continuity can be seen in the maintenance of the same motifs, it could be also traced in his attempt to promote particular philosophical concepts. More specifically, we can trace his endeavour to maintain the same themes and sustain a concrete symbolisation throughout different exhibitions.²

The artist in several of his interviews states how his work has been the extension of the Renaissance tradition, promoting the values and concepts of this tradition³. To a further extent the artist is concerned with the continuity of Western art as the historical development of Renaissance from classical Greek art; this becomes obvious when he states that:

‘Έχει να κάνει και με την κίνηση. Στα πάντα, το πιο σημαντικό πράγμα είναι η κίνηση. Βλέπεις, στον Κούρο γεννιέται ο Λαοκόων. Υπάρχει μια ελάχιστη απόσταση ανάμεσά τους, καθόλου μεγάλη. Ο Κούρος εννοούνταν ως Λαοκόων. Ο Λαοκόων ξέρει ότι ανήκει σε αυτή την οικογένεια - ότι ξεπήδησε, κατάγεται από τον Κούρο’⁴

Kounellis applies this idea to his personal work by rearranging a repertoire of certain objects differently in each gallery space, in order to provide continuity between his old and new installations. Maintaining the same motifs and characteristics in the whole of his oeuvre, the artist presents his new installations as the development of the old ones, all being

¹ Greenberg 1999, 38.

² See for example Kounellis’ exhibition in the Studio d’Arte Contemporanea in Rome 1975 and his most recent exhibition in the Cycladic Museum of Athens in 2012, which I shall discuss later in this study.

³ See for example Sans, 2012; Stiles and Selz, 1996; Kounellis, <http://www.tovima.gr/culture/article/?aid=485271> www.tovima.gr

⁴ Kounellis, <http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/2407>.

connected by a chain of a continuous meaning. The movement mentioned by Kounellis is actually the development of one idea into another. This development of ideas (rather than introducing new ones) creates a continuity of themes.

As Marc Scheps, the director of the Tel-Aviv museum of Modern Art argues, this continuity aimed at by the artist is important, as in the end it adds strength to the whole of his oeuvre:

The oeuvre is in a perpetual state of evolution; its existence is, to a certain extent, cyclic. Even a work with a perfect structure is capable of giving birth to a new work that will take up certain elements and, by adding others, metamorphose the original concept. Each work is a link in the long chain forming the unity of the work. Each link has its determined position in the chronology of the oeuvre but can have a relationship with other links in the chain at the same time [...] it is this continuity that establishes the strength and unity of Kounellis' oeuvre.⁵

Kounellis is very much interested in connecting the whole of his oeuvre with a starting point founded in Western civilization antiquity, particularly in the tradition of Renaissance art with close reference to the history of Western culture. The ambition of the artist as has been argued by several art critics⁶ is to connect his work with its past as well, but at the same time to make a statement about the present time through this continuity; specifically the artist mentions that:

'I use references to history, so as to create sensitivity for the present.'⁷

By this re-examination of the same concepts and by providing the same symbolisation - and in this study I shall call it a *re-contextualisation by the artist*- the oeuvre gains internal and external continuity. But most importantly, it also elongates its life span, as it works as a lexicon, which has been crafted over the years with various sequences in the course of time, with an established intellectual content in the minds of its audiences.

As we have seen the fundamental ambition of the artist has been to create a continuous path throughout his work, also connected to the art history of Western tradition. However, as we shall see next there might be various interpretations and responses to Kounellis' work. The representations of the same characteristics, which stand as the signifiers, in other words the *re-contextualisation by the artist* of these signifiers, work towards this ambition and towards

⁵ Scheps 2010, 7.

⁶ 'Οι αναφορές του στην αρχαιότητα, (εκμαγεία, πιθάρια, αρχαία κεφάλια) πασχίζουν να συνδέσουν την πρωταρχική εικόνα μ' ένα σύγχρονο αρχέτυπο. «Ο καλλιτέχνης -λέει ο Κουνέλλης- τρέφεται μ' αρχαία όνειρα». 'The artist [Kounellis says] is nourished with ancient dreams' in Kounellis, <http://theartnoise.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/jannis-kounellis.html>

⁷ Kounellis, <http://worldcity.wordpress.com/category/legends/jannis-kounellis>

the creation of a personal language and as the modern art historian Stefan Beyst calls it ‘*an iconic idioticon*’⁸. In what follows in this study, extending this idea of a personal language, which is built upon signifiers tailored by the artist, an archive of artworks is also initiated by this language. Therefore, Kounellis by reconstructing his works and at the same time by perpetuating the same patterns, creates a body of work kept as a background open to the artist to return to and re-contextualise, and to the audience to return to as a point of reference in order to evaluate the artist’s work as a whole.

If we assume that continuity is established by Kounellis’ perpetuating use of themes, motifs, mannerisms, symbols and by the act of *re-contextualisation by the artist*, we can also assume that this same continuity sets the basis of an artistic language. These elements could be imagined as gathered either in a physical space i.e. the artist’s studio or in a non-physical space, i.e. the psyche of the creator. This physical or non-physical space can be translated in this study as a personal archive from which the artist borrows. At this point we should consider the notion of the archive and then juxtapose it to the definition of the artistic oeuvre. Marlene Manoff, a researcher at the MIT University, suggests that we should approach archives as the link between the past and the future as the element that creates

‘The archive affirms the past, present, and future; it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future. [Archive is a] place where documents and other materials of public or historical interest are preserved. [...]’ One is the conflation of libraries, museums, and archives; and the other is the inflation of the term “archive,” which has become a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts’⁹.

According to Manoff’s ideas, the archive could be seen as the element that enables continuity between different historical moments. As she argues in the second part of this quotation, the archive also has become a broad theoretical concept, which enables its application in a wider perspective. Starting from this idea I am going to demonstrate how the first premise of Manoff’s argument about the archive can be applied to the work of Jannis Kounellis and in which ways it relates to the artist’s ambition to create a visual language. In other words the purpose of this section is to make an analogy between the oeuvre and the archive as a broader theoretical concept.

Kounellis’ ambition to construct a language with a continuous relationship to the past and a promise of an insight to the future is already obvious in his conversation with Beuys, where both artists argue about:

⁸ “Idioticon” comes from ‘ιδιωτικός’ in Greek, which translates as personal/individual. Therefore what Beyst means is a personal language, which is also iconic because its constituents will be images rather than words; it is going to be a visual language. See Beyst, <http://d-sites.net/english/kounellis.htm>.

⁹ Manoff 2004, 11.

‘the construction of a Cathedral: the construction of a visible language’¹⁰
a visual communication that is held in common by both artist and public.¹¹ For this intention of Kounellis, repetition becomes a central technique that enables continuity throughout the oeuvre. In order to construct this language Kounellis establishes certain characteristics as visible signifiers. Moreover he maintains the same elements in order to introduce to the audience the basic elements of his artistic language.

The desire of Kounellis to create an artistic visual language is based on what he calls ‘η αρχαία αρχή’¹² in several of his talks, and could be paralleled to the definition of *archive fever* by Derrida, when he clarifies that *archive fever* is:

‘to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire [...] an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement’¹³

Specifically in one of his interviews¹⁴ the artist declares that he is merely interested in the starting points or the origins rather than the aesthetic forms of a completed art piece. In addition he maintains that he regards his work as the continuity of an *αρχαία αρχή* (which can be translated as the ancient *arkhe*), which sets the course of the artistic language. The artist, by creating a body of works and through this a body of signifiers, uses what Derrida calls the power of consignation to formulate a body of signs, or in other words an artistic language with certain features all well connected to each other. Kounellis deliberates the importance of a principle in art as the starting point of an entity, in order to create unity to the whole. According to Derrida the archive principle refers also to this archaic starting point of an entity, which is in other words the *arkhe*:

[The archive] indeed refers as one would correctly believe, to the *arkhe* in the physical, historical, or ontological sense, which is to say to the originary, the first, the principal, the primitive in short to the commencement.¹⁵

Kounellis has established characteristic motifs as the principles, *the arkhes* of his oeuvre. The artist then repetitively represents those materials, which he borrows from cultural institutions such as museums or churches, isolates them from their original context, and in this way also isolates the signifier from its original signification. The result of this effort is finally the formulation of a new language, a re-contextualisation of signifiers into his own archive.

¹⁰ Bann 2003, 191.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 63.

¹² What Kounellis was trying to approach was the concept of an archaic starting point, see for example his argument in his interview in *ελculture* in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfW-8Tmm9lM&list=WLpxgeXP-mUksgGzxQ7d9nyBE9TXi97EgH>

¹³ Derrida 1998, 91.

¹⁴ Kounellis, <http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/29965>.

¹⁵ Derrida and Prenowitz 1995, 9.

In addition to the unity of Kounellis' oeuvre as an archive, his choice not to assign titles in his artworks makes them look more continuous. According to Kounellis the title of the work should remain open to time and interpretation. The artist does not want to situate his works in a particular cultural context or in a particular period of time; as he points out: 'Δεν βάζω ονόματα γιατί δεν θέλω να ανήκουν'¹⁶. Yet all of these works are connected to each other thematically and are made by the principle characteristics of Kounellis' artistic archive. Scheps connects the fact that all of Kounellis' art works are untitled, with the idea of unity in the whole of Kounellis' oeuvre, when he argues that:

Even though they are all labelled "untitled", each one of them, regardless of how perfect they are, is part of the totality of Kounellis' work in the interior of which the full extent of their significance can reveal itself. Each presentation of the oeuvre calls for a spatio-temporal development that only permits a unitary vision [...] each station of his work is a fragment of a totality that will not be completed until he reaches the ultimate centre of the work – its profound unity.¹⁷

In this attempt to approach Kounellis' work through the theoretical concept of the archive, it becomes apparent that Kounellis' work affirms the past, the present and his future creations by establishing a basis of certain personal characteristics. This is important in order first to understand Kounellis' artistic language and next to examine how his oeuvre is in some cases critically examined in isolation from its unity. This fact is illustrated in the case of his most recent exhibition in the Cycladic Museum of Athens, which we shall consider next.

Kounellis returned to Greece in 2012, after eight years of absence, exhibiting a series of works in the Cycladic Museum of Athens, in the gallery of Megaro Stathatou in particular. In this section I shall present his exhibition in detail, as in the next section I will analyse the audience's responses, which are important to examine in order to understand the act of *re-contextualisation by the audience*. At this point it is important to bear in mind that all of the works exhibited in the Cycladic Museum are connected with the past; borrowing the principle characteristics of Kounellis' artistic archive, this time they were transformed in a new way in order to open a discourse about the present.

Kounellis' exhibition was organised in-between two different levels of the Stathatou Mansion between four different rooms in the ground floor and four rooms in the first floor.

¹⁶ 'I do not put titles since I do not wish my works to belong': Σακαλής, Φ.
<http://www.elculture.gr/elcblog/article/kounellis-247819>

¹⁷ Scheps 2010, 14.

Entering the mansion from the main entrance of the Cycladic Museum the viewer stood in a round room under an installation of a massive filled black cloth, hanging from the ceiling¹⁸.

There were no closed doors between the gallery spaces and as the viewers walked cyclically to examine this installation, they also had the chance to evaluate it in parallel to the second room of the exhibition, which was standing as a background in the visual field of the spectator. Entering the second room of the exhibition space, which was the central hall of the mansion, the spectator recognized another principal material of Kounellis: sacks filled with charcoal arranged in a circle on the floor. The centre of this circle was filled with Greek soil. On top of the sacks the artist had situated a rectangular piece of used marble.¹⁹ The central hall on the ground floor stands in the centre of a triangle between three more, in close thematic connection with them as well.

The third space of this exhibition was situated northeast of the central hall and contained two more installations by Kounellis. On the right stood an installation of a massive canvas filled with black coats sewn together²⁰ and in the centre of this space another installation of sacks filled with charcoal formed a circle; this time, however, in the centre of the circle there were fragments of ancient statues and scraps from contemporary newspapers.²¹ In the last space of the ground floor, in the southwest of the central hall, there were three different installations arranged in a triadic relation between themselves. In the centre of this room there were again sacks filled with charcoal arranged in circular formation, this time surrounding a pile of spectacles.²² Opposite the burlaps a black rusty metal board was hanging, on top of which there were fragments of plaster replicas of ancient heads fixed with wire.²³ At the other end of this triangle, an immense black metal cross with a small gas lamp attached to one of its ends was hanging upside down from a white background board.²⁴ Kounellis -as he revealed in one of his interviews- found the materials for these particular installations in junkyards and flea markets in the centre of Athens. All of these elements, charcoal, burlaps, metal, fragments, black coats, knives etc. are the principle and signature daily materials used by the artist in most of his installations, which also provided for an aspect of the sense of continuity that we have seen in the second section of this study.

On the second floor of this exhibition Kounellis arranged his installation in a labyrinth manner. As the spectators walked up the wooden stairs of the mansion, they would stand

¹⁸ Appendix, pic. 1.

¹⁹ *ibid.* pic. 2.

²⁰ Appendix, pic. 3.

²¹ *ibid.* pic. 4.

²² *ibid.* pic. 5.

²³ *ibid.* pic. 6.

²⁴ *ibid.* pic. 7.

directly opposite a hanging kitchen knife before a white background.²⁵ Walking through to the room on the left, an installation of a board made up by green glass bottles tied together with a white cloth and a black coat stood in the first room.²⁶ Following the gallery space of the second floor clockwise, the spectator would enter three other spaces containing three separate installations; a chair that stood alone, bearing a massive rock²⁷, an installation of old shoes and hats behind a black curtain²⁸ and finally, in the last space of the exhibition, black coats hanging up in a line.²⁹

The detailed description of Kounellis' exhibition in the Stathatou Mansion was at this stage important in order to illustrate a particular mannerism in Kounellis' installations as, in the next section; I shall discuss how the viewers and the critics responded to particular works of this exhibition.

‘αυτό που τον απασχολεί μέσα απ' αυτή την έκθεση είναι «το γλωσσικό πρόβλημα», όπως σημείωσε ο ίδιος. Τι εννοούσε; «Τον τρόπο που θα "διαβαστεί" το έργο του από τον επισκέπτη της έκθεσης»³⁰

As I have argued in the third section of this study and as it is indicated in this quotation by Katerina Lymporopoulou, Kounellis' works have an open relationship with their spectators, as the artist aimed at a communication with his viewers through his works. Although Kounellis acknowledges his works are about self-expression, he wants his works to involve communication with his audience and his main goal is to open his works for interpretation rather than impose a message. Yet this attempt sometimes leads to a certain appropriation of the artwork, or even of the artist himself by the critics and by the audience as well. Starting from this idea it would be very interesting to see how this applies in the case of his exhibition in Athens, how his work triggers a variety of responses from the audience and the critics, which finally leads to the act of *re-contextualisation by the audience*.

It seems clear to me that both the Greek audience and the art critics have certain expectations when they approach the work of a compatriot artist, which come from their cultural background and environment. These particular expectations construct a first level of reception or, as Wolfgang Iser³¹ would argue, the horizon of expectation, which depends on the cultural background of each of these spectators. Kounellis aims to let the audience

²⁵ *ibid*, pic. 8.

²⁶ *ibid*, pic. 9.

²⁷ *ibid*, pic. 10.

²⁸ Appendix, pic. 11.

²⁹ *ibid*, pic. 12.

³⁰ This translates as: ‘what interests him in this exhibition is the "language problem", as he noted. What did he mean? How the visitors will read the works of the exhibition?’:

Λυμπεροπούλου, <http://www.tovima.gr/culture/article/?aid=451856>

³¹ Iser 2003.

reconstruct and broaden this horizon by arriving at a particular meaning to the spectator when looking at his art work.

However, most of the pieces exhibited in the Cycladic Museum were received as a comment on the current crisis and on the Greek tradition, without much reference to their relationship to Kounellis' work as a whole or to their universal meaning. However one may argue that the ability of this work to be taken as a contemporary comment in any situation (thus also in Modern Greece) is a characteristic of works with universal meaning.

Despina Zefkili, a Greek art critic writing on the on-line art magazine *Frieze* reflected upon Kounellis exhibition in the Cycladic Museum, and criticized his, in her opinion, poor and conventional attempt to express his anguish about the current socio-economical situation of Greece:

'In an attempt to respond to the economic and social crisis that the country is currently going through, for the works in this show he used materials he found in local Athenian markets and junkyards [...] Kounellis' attempt to enliven the spirit of a now historicized vocabulary through the filter of the current Greek crisis seems forced [...] The well-publicized fact that he found his materials in a flea market in Greece does not suffice to update their impact. The monumentality of the work makes the raw material seem both de-sensitized and too sophisticated, which results in a conventional response to the state of contemporary Greece'³²

Was it Kounellis' desire to respond to the current state of Greece or was it just the art critics' desire to expect from an artist of Greek origin to participate and sympathize with the precarious state of his country? The fact that the artist had obtained his materials from flea markets in previous occasions indicates that it is the audience's expectation that leads to this interpretation in this specific exhibition. It is this expectation that would finally lead to the appropriation of Kounellis and his repatriation as I will go on to argue.

There was also quite a vibrant response to two particular installations of his exhibition in the Cycladic museum from the audience; one could say that these two installations share the same principal characteristics of Kounellis' artistic language. Both situated on the ground floor, the one with the circle formulated by burlaps, which contained fragmented ancient heads and newspapers and the other installation with the fixed fragmented heads on the metal black board; both of these are untitled, like the exhibition on the whole. One of the viewers automatically connected these installations with Greek attitudes towards their culture, when she stated that:

'It was heartbreaking [...] All these broken heads this is our ancient culture. Instead of appreciating it, we throw it away, break it into pieces and get to know it in fragments.'³³

³² Zekili, <https://www.frieze.com/shows/review/jannis-kounellis1/>.

³³ Pournara, http://www.ekathimerini.com/4Dcgi/4dcgi/w_articles_wsite4_1_22/05/2012_443356

Although this is a very interesting response from the audience, if we examine Kounellis' oeuvre on the whole, then we realise that the fragmented ancient motifs existed already as a central theme in several of his installations as it is already argued in this study. For example this is evident in the performance *Untitled '73*³⁴, in which the artist is seated beside a table wearing and holding an ancient Greek or Renaissance plaster mask. On the table are lying plaster cast fragments and a stuffed crow is sitting next to them to keep them company. A flutist seated beside the table as well plays a fragment from a composition by Mozart. We should also consider Stephen Bann's arguments on fragments in Kounellis' oeuvre:

'the cast is always fragmentary but as a result often appears to have the character of a freshly discovered archaeological object, recently retrieved from ruin'³⁵

It seems evident, then, that fragments for Kounellis are reflecting mostly their archaeological aspect, namely they are elements that indicate an archaic point of origin which connects to the idea of the artist for the *αρχαία αρχή* of origin as well. Fragments in this way could also stand as the objects of memory that set a narrative of the past from the present time, connecting the present with the future as well as the past with the present.

Another way of engaging these fragmented heads by the audience, also supported by the critics, was to categorise them as the heads of our predecessors or even to a greater extent to our fragmented tradition, an attitude close to the previous quotation.

Specifically, the art historian and theoretician Pantelis Tsavalos, as he approached these installations at the Cycladic Museum in an exhibition tour, pointed out while identifying them as ancient Greek replicas that:

'We need to buy those ancient Greek replicas in order to embody our Hellenic identity deeply rooted in antiquity, in order to embody these ancient values of antiquity. Since this distant past provides prestige in our social statuses'³⁶

Similar to these views is the one maintained by the critics that Kounellis did follow the principle of Renaissance art tradition in order to highlight the ancient Greek spirit through that tradition:

'Είχε το όραμα να δει τη συνέχεια της ελληνικής σκέψης μέσω της Αναγέννησης. Γι' αυτό θεωρώ ότι ο Κουνέλλης είναι η πεμπτουσία του Έλληνα, η βάση της έννοιας του Ευρωπαίου που είχε το όραμα να δει τη συνέχεια του ελληνικού πολιτισμού.'³⁷

Kounellis definitely saw a connection between Renaissance and ancient Greek tradition but through his work he approached this connection in order to speak about comprehensive qualities, without a specific preference as to which of these two traditions he would finally

³⁴ Appendix, pic. 13.

³⁵ Bann 2003.

³⁶ Tsavalos, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sNDhY4Jo8A>

³⁷ Καπουζάκης, <http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/3141>

use as a springboard. As we have seen, Kounellis, on the contrary, considers Renaissance art and ancient Western tradition as a starting point for his work, without separating the ancient Greek tradition from the particular western civilization traditions; instead he argues for their close connection.

As we have already seen, the artist is interested in producing and sustaining continuity through his work rather than producing certain pieces of work isolated and particularly referring to contemporary issues; instead he is interested in placing universal issues and commenting on deeper philosophical subjects.

What we must consider is that the artist definitely had in mind that his work would be reviewed in the contemporary context. On the other hand was it actually his aim to make a response to the Greek crisis? This remains unclear. The answer might be that he always wants to be contemporary. He wants his works to be open to any present, any audience and this goes back to the problem of the avant-garde, which is the loss of ephemerality: The quality of the ephemeral was no longer present in most of his avant-garde works, since repetition in a different context not only added to their meaning but also made them last through time. Or was it present after all? Because ephemerality could also lie in the audience responses and no reading would be the same as the other. Maybe it is the ephemerality of the reception and of the audience as well as of the 'present' that makes Kounellis work 'avant-garde', and this is achieved because he uses a recurring theme cultivating into a personal archive.

In contrast to international critics and audiences, who treat Kounellis as an international artist, the Greek audience and the Greek critics tried to appropriate him almost entirely based on his national identity and motifs, and categorize him as an exclusively Greek artist, who returned to Greece only to speak about the present situation in that specific context.

In my opinion Kounellis on the one hand wants to be *re-contextualised by the audience*, i.e. open to a dialogue with the present, and on the other hand he wants to address universal and not specific issues (such as the Greek crisis). It is my claim that it would be a risky decision to separate specific pieces of art from the whole oeuvre of an artist, since in this way the spectator will not have the chance to grasp the continuity between art works and thus would not be finally able to understand the artistic language and evaluate the oeuvre on the whole. In this way, not only the oeuvre loses its depth but also the spectators lose their ability for a valid evaluation.

In conclusion, from what we have seen there are certain elements establishing Kounellis' work. Firstly, the artist creates continuity between different pieces of art works. Using this strategy Kounellis creates a body consisting of specific motifs and characteristic

elements, and this body can be translated into an archive to which he goes back and borrows for his future projects. At the same time, he re-contextualises his own archive: setting up new exhibitions in new exhibition spaces with other/ new materials or with the same materials and this act establishes the re-contextualisation by the artist, introduced in this study.

Most importantly, from what has been argued, Kounellis combines motifs referring to Renaissance art and at the same time to his Greek background, by reusing certain objects to speak about the present. In the same manner he used the notion of the ancient *arkhe* to find the original starting point and create a chain of memory and emotions with it. Kounellis maintains a universal and not a particular symbolisation, but at the same time he opens his work to interpretation. From examining the reception of the artist's latest exhibition in Athens, we have seen how his work, as it has a universal meaning, can be taken as contemporary in this occasion as well. Furthermore, it has been argued how by separating Kounellis' works from their continuity and artistic archive during the *re-contextualisation by the audience*, there is the possibility that the spectator will lose the original depth of the oeuvre as a whole, and the artist and his work will be accordingly appropriated.

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