

Athina Ioannou. The Intensification of Presence.

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We are in the middle of a crisis, in the midst of summer, in the heat and humidity of the city, inside the exhibition that runs through the basement of the Museum of Islamic Art in the area of Kerameikos, Athens. An odd exhibition for Athens, a city that knows chaotic abstraction but does not know an abstraction that is organized, systematic, in a way that it becomes almost organic because, at first glance, it doesn't look to be organic, being so light that it is barely discernable. Transparency never creates a sense of organicity, but when you get close and observe the canvas, literally soaked in liquid, transparency as comes from this immersion, appears almost as if the opposite of perspiration. When something soaks but absorbs the liquid to the extent where solid is indistinguishable from liquid, it reaches a midpoint, a situation where it is neither one nor the other. At this point, it can be said that the steeped canvas appears through the transparency due to the addition of light. Consequently, organicity becomes even more intense since there appears the light that allows you to see. In the end, it all seems as if only of light.

In the basements of the museum, there is added another important element: humidity, the smell of earth, the heat, making abstraction seem even more intense. On the one hand there is the chaotic organicity that surrounds us, that of deterioration, which in this case transforms into the power of survival of a thing, of a thing that exists at the limits of the possible, and on the other, the work itself, the transparency beyond this limit. This is to say, that there is a chaotic reality, as is that of the city in which we circulate, with the sun beating down, the cars, noise, sweat and everything that makes organicity appear as an endeavour in the chaos. At the same time, we see an order opposite us, a different kind of organicity that just about underlines the minimal. The artwork overrides the surrounding organicity through a reading of the rhythm, colour, the indigenous. The colour looks gorgeous in the day, in the light, and even more so through the transparency. It comes to meet our eye.

Here we are faced with an ancient division in the history of painting, in front of two mutually incompatible parts: that of light and that of colour. Colour is a thin surface, perfectly flat, a coating, a decoration (as we are taught by modern formalism in painting from Matisse onwards). Whereas, the light is something diffuse, which we move about in, where things are in constant motion (as from Bonnard and the variations of post-impressionism onwards). The light is not decorative, even though we say that one decorates a church. In this case we are talking more about a decor that is not necessarily decorative, of a concept that does not end at the motif. For example, when we look at the stained glass of a Gothic church we don't see any motif. The motif disappears. One could say that the motif is the arrangement that allows you to see the image past the surface; it is the rosette, geometry, the forms, that allow one to see beyond the pieces of glass, or the tesserae in the mosaics; because the light penetrates and destroys the geometry, giving it reflectivity and motion. Thus, the fixed lines are shifted, rather in the same way as what happens here, in the exhibition of Athina Ioannou. If one sees it from afar or somewhat distractedly, one sees a work that has to do with the form, like that of Matisse, and which processes the flat surface of the colour which remains unaffected. One sees it as an instant, as a "snapshot", thinking that the light does not shift or if it does shift, its shifting is not relevant to the work for which one could say that it is simply an indication of the space. But if he who reads this indication carefully, becomes aware that it has to do with the fine arts, then we have to do initially with a viewer who must see with the eyes the *per se* theme of the work, of the world, of viewing. And in this case, it is not so definite that this viewer needs to directly read what he sees. He may feel it intuitively or in some way perceive it through the fragmentary motion and duration.

There is definitely a retinal vision which is not necessarily bad, but which is limited to a single plane only. One begins to have the need to read what one sees so as to be able to proceed from one level to the next. You start off with one step, then a second, then another, then you arrive at one level, then at another level, because from a point onwards you must come to a decision, not just as a viewer, but as a visitor to an exhibition. Not as one who watches passively but as one who goes to meet the other person. And when you enter the space of that other person, that space is organized, lived, laid out, permits some things and some not, to some places you can go and to some not, which means that it is not enough for you to see but you must also understand; to understand where you are, something for which you need both intuition and the capacity to read, not necessarily some text, but between the lines. In the work of Athina Ioannou the lines are in front of us. Like stripes in space where one must at the same time see between them and read between them. One must see to what

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extent these lines are static or sensitive to motion, does the light change and transform the painting or not, whether to linger awhile to see some more or if one has seen what there is to see and can leave. Because there are works which one can look at in a glance and that is enough, and others where one must stand there in front of them and look at them, even though there is no story to be told nor do they tell a story. Any story one might think of here has nothing to do with the work itself but with the fact that the work exists in the world, in reality. Therefore, whichever story told has to do with the museum, the surrounding area, the curatorship of the exhibition in relation to the surroundings, but not with the work itself. The work is not in this sense, figurative. It has to do with how images are born, not with their story. The show is the movement in the light and not who moves and why. It is the passage from architecture to space and from space to place, where space and man meet. So in the end, all this chaotic reality is placed at a distance. The viewer does not need to smell the earth because the artwork places him at a distance from the ancient walls, from the mould of time and the damp soil, transposing the basement and the excavation to the area of light, through which an image is born and remains as an image that you do not need to get closer to. With this work, Athina Ioannou in a wondrous way reverses the movements of the architecture and of the museum. Here, the coloured triangular shapes lead from the glazing to the ground, in motion from top to bottom, doing the exact opposite of what happens in the overall function of the work: through the light, the painting functions as an upward vision, whereas structurally via the inertness of the object in the architectural space — that is to say, if you cut off its breath— it is a downward moving object that descends to the ground.

The reversal of the whole situation, from descent to ascent, is made possible through the procedure of the work, because from it is born the form. It's the Big Show of painting which we could call painting in the classical sense. Thus, one can say that something that would begin as a descent into Hell is reversed and becomes an ascent to Heaven. Thus is motion born and this motion is pivotal to the work because descent and ascent do not stop at religious traditions, but through their physical being come to find their place within painting itself. The history of modern painting begins in an analogous manner, when, for example Monet, in wanting to paint the sky, paints the surface of the water. When he wants to show us motion that goes from the bottom up, he uses the way by which reflection works and paints a weeping willow with its leaves falling to the water. Indeed, it is these same leaves, which allow him to project the totality upwards, towards the sky. If he had painted the sky directly, it would have been as if he'd have painted the world under an umbrella. And if he had painted the tree as a trunk, he would have only painted a shadow and not the light. Similarly, Athina Ioannou, in this work, positions these coloured triangles as if they are leaves or arrowheads or signs that cause the sensation of a descent, just so as to be able to transpose the totality upwards, outside the shut-in space. And each time this has directly to do with the actuality of the specific space in which the work is located, because, in this case, the light falls from above, from the ceiling. Instead, in the work she has done in a Gothic church in France, things function in a completely different way because the light doesn't come from high above, but in from the sides and literally surrounds you.

In Gothic churches, the light, as it comes in through the windows, always cancels out the architectural form. The architecture is seen only on the exterior, in the constant folds of stone that is sculpted to such a degree that it becomes almost immaterial and the light can give it movement. On the exterior, the surface of the stone disappears into the constant motion of light, but it has no depth. The depth remains a dark mystery in the interior, into which you must enter. Even so, once you enter the church, all this dark mass, the closed world, as seen from the outside, guarded by monsters and the narratives by which the church participates in the realm of reality and nature, disappears. Monsters, demons and narratives, stone, forms and nature disappear and you find yourself suspended in the light which, from the architectural whole, keeps only the rhythm, the rhythmic alternations of light which allow the different parts of the whole to function co-ordinately and in whole. The sense of depth here is not just atmospheric but metaphysical. Of course, anyone who enters such a church following the logic by which it was envisioned and built, does not enter as we would today go into a shop, but enters bowed and looks firstly, and for some time at the ground, the flooring. That is why in these churches the floors too are laid out like mosaic compositions, such as in St. Mark's in Venice with its stupendous marbling or like labyrinths such as the famous one at the Cathedral of Chartres. One spends some time before being able to raise one's head to see the diffusion of the light. Here, one must think that it has to do with a process of syllabing before reading, composure before reflection, which does not keep us suspended only in the interior light but also as to what we think we are or are able to say. The internal and external world is opposed, confused and revised. When Monet paints the Cathedral of Rouen, he shows us the light and all the fluctuations of the sky that do not represent any Jesus but all the fluctuations of a man in the universe.

When the exhibition of Athina Ioannou takes place at the Museum of Islamic Art, it has not to do with Islam since the space could very well be a Jewish museum. It has, however, to do with the actuality of the place and with the totality of a civilization and not of only one culture. It is not confined

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to the selectiveness of an urban culture, but comes to confront a much broader set of codes that make up a civilization. At the same time as the exhibition of Athina Ioannou in Athens, Yiannis Kounellis presents a work at the Stathatos Megaron (Museum of Cycladic Art), that goes against the idea of the 'seemly' culture as imparted by a historical mansion: the beautiful rich urban house, its decor and especially the picture of a material and moral comfort, together with the certainty of a bourgeois class that feels that the world is its oyster. In a manner analogous to that of the Gothic church, Yiannis Kounellis presents us with all the demons, monsters and narratives in the foreground so as to lead us progressively to the other side, to that place where, if one finds the time and strength to focus, one can find one's own centre of gravity. One finds the gravity of things and of oneself, in a way that, when from the razors' edge one lifts his head, he finds himself not in the sky, of course, but in history. The viewer then becomes a citizen and finds his place as a completed historical person in the world. Thus, in the work of Athina Ioannou, as in that of Kounellis, if a metaphysical aspect is present, it is no longer that of a religious world. The place of religion belongs to culture. If one wants to see the metaphysical itself in religion, then one should consider civilization in such a way so as to think philosophically about humankind's active place in the world. And this is a place that is not on offer by anyone. You must assume it yourself. That's the meaning of historical consciousness.

It is important for one to emphasise that if our history is revealed to us through its contradictions, the awareness of these contradictions does not necessarily constitute a collective system and record. For example, when some years ago they asked Yiannis Kounellis if he remains politically to the "left", he replied "yes", but not because he had read Marx's Capital, but because of that child who stole a loaf of bread because it was starving and the police and society persecute it for the rest of its life. The refusal of society and its institutions to recognize that someone can be starving simultaneously generates a sense of solidarity or compassion, and the awareness of injustice, revealing a sense of justice that is different from its abstract legal meaning. Justice in this case, is expressed as an urgent sense of the man who does not want to die, be hurt, be hungry, and to be able not only to survive but to live. It is very important for one to consider this distinction when discussing churches, states, regimes, philosophical systems that are deduced. It is no coincidence that the same Victor Hugo who wrote the story of the child in Les Misérables that Kounellis is referring to, and through the manhunt reveals all the underground dealings, both actual and conceivable, of the modern metropolis, also writes the Hunchback of Notre Dame. In this work of his, written in the course of the 1830 revolution, the meaning of the church is transposed from the centre of town and its monument - the great Gothic metropolis and its edifice - into every home and individual consciousness wherein the book enters. From the moment that the book exists, there is no longer a need for Muhammad to go to the mountain, since the mountain can enter the life of all common folk. Ever since Gutenberg onwards, the bible is in every home and everyone can read it, appropriate it and convert it into personal conscience. By abolishing papal infallibility, Luther also allows everyone to know what is true. Hugo claims the right for man to be able, through his conscience, to stand equal in the face of the world and the universe. This means for him to be a citizen of the world, to inhabit the world. The "stone hook of the world" as Victor Hugo calls the history of architecture and its pinnacle, the Gothic churches, is abolished by Gutenberg's paper book through which starts the whole of the Renaissance.

The book of the Renaissance is not only of text but also of image, illustration and imagination, motion and freedom. Thus, and having spoken of reading earlier, Poussin when in writing from Italy about his paintings which he sends to France insists on the need "for one to read both the history and the painting." And of course, history is primarily the story depicted in the painting, the story which the artist has painted, but is also the history of the art of painting itself. That is to say, one sees simultaneously what the artist has painted and how he has painted it; because history is not the same everywhere as are not the conditions of life and the consciousness of it. You must see and look at the painting. In those days, someone in Paris did not paint like someone in Rome. This has to do neither with the same light, nor the same colours, nor the same techniques, nor the same concept, nor the same picture. Thus should he understand the language of painting, because painting is a language. It may be that the root of this language is very old and perhaps common to all histories of painting, but languages change from place to place, from period to period. The history of painting is not only the history of oil painting. There are forty kinds of histories of painting and forty types of painting taking part in the history of painting and art. That which we call art, is not only in relation to the fact of how one paints. By the same token, if Victor Hugo said, "Notre Dame" is a stone book it doesn't mean that the cathedral is a book but that it has the complexity of a book. It contains chapters, paragraphs, a table of contents, a bibliography. Of particular complexity is exactly that which was called "a painting" in 1600, being the same as that which we have since then called a painting and no longer an image, which means that it is a multiple and multilevel listing and recording of things. It is the compilation of a thing that re-enacts and contains the sum of the elements that constitute it.

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It is overpowering, the phrase wherein Nietzsche declares that "we do not communicate with thoughts, but with movements and mime signs which we subsequently read on the key of thought." As the notes in music, so too are these signs read on a key and they are not even thoughts or words, but sounds, gestures, movements. A thought can mean nothing outside of the language that articulates it and words mean nothing if you do not read them in the language in which they acquire meaning. That which applies to music or philosophy also applies to painting. These languages do not evolve linearly, but via their contradictions and contrasts. One who studies the history of civilization, from the classic style will pass into its opposite which is the romantic. An artist however, passes through a conception of things that may be termed as classic style, though not to the next conception, but instead to a daily preoccupation and reality with that which constitutes his fixation. Charles Rosen, in his remarkable book *The Classic Style*, writes that the most difficult thing is not for one to devise a style (i.e. to formulate a code), but to be able to continue to keep it active. Accordingly, the effort needed by Beethoven, for example, to maintain the minimum of classicalness in his work, is ceaseless. Through that, perhaps romanticism may come through, because romanticism takes this effort into account and makes it heroic but this occurs in absentia of Beethoven. If Beethoven continues to this day to be such an acclaimed musician, it is because this superhuman effort he makes is of no concern to him at all, or rather, it is never perceived as something that concerns his work. He never follows set themes and even his loss of hearing, despite the theories surrounding it and the commentary, is not part of his work but solely of his life. You cannot understand Beethoven in the terms of Van Gogh who cuts off his ear, who commits suicide, who completes the existentialism of a person.

But even if we know Beethoven's biography, his work stands beyond it. Beethoven does not write music, he constructs it. He tears down to build. He eliminates anything that is expected, denies any common ground. And that is where a huge turn is made, because this construction is neither painting nor sculpture. The form is neither in marble as is Michelangelo's, nor in a conceptual world of images as in the case of Poussin, but as it was at the time of Cezanne and Rodin, music is a composition of small pieces of a broken world that one must reconstruct. Even though the final picture that we receive is in sum, Rodin, for example, never made a body in whole, but by taking the hand of one, the arm of another, many different parts and different moments, he composes them into a whole person, who resembles a person, but whose problem is not for it to look like a specific person. What concerns the artist is for the work to stand in lieu of the person, of humankind. Not even to give shape to humanity but to undertake its conscience. To assume the responsibility of the form, which means to assume man's ability to be contradictory, to be other than himself, to understand that what is before him, to not be afraid of that which is not seen, to be able to take the measure of shadow and of darkness, and be able to give it back to us, not through some lighting but from within the light. The lighting would have been something that would be ideologically very intense. We light things up in the theatre; the central stage is lit up, as is the audience. Perhaps a whole society can be able to think of the Enlightenment when we all take part, each one with their light, so that we can be reciprocally lit up. But if one on his own should want to light up the city, then he probably becomes the director of the Olympic Games. That is certainly a profession, something like a super electrician, but it has nothing to do with art and perhaps not even civilization. There where falls a ray of light, if one can take a first step, then perhaps a second until he finds the shadow in front of him and persists until he once again finds a ray of light that allows him to take a few steps more, then he understands as much the daily process by which Beethoven was able to construct that which we call music through the elimination and fragmentation, as does Nietzsche in his philosophy or Kounellis in his painting, and observes in the basements of the Museum of Islamic Art, the way in which Athina Ioannou registers her work within the fragmented spaces, bringing the singular consciousness of time and the combinative consciousness of place into the light.

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