

Artcritical : 'Jannis Kounellis : Hard Materials, Transcendent Light',
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Jannis Kounellis: Hard Materials, Transcendent Light

Jannis Kounellis: Stations on an Odyssey, 1969-2010 by Marc Scheps



Jannis Kounellis, Untitled / 12 Live Horses, Rome, 1969

In the early 1960s, American Minimalism set the stage for a discourse that involved a divergent attitude toward sculpture. Often referred to as “primary forms,” artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin embraced the abstract pragmatic notion that materials constituted a structure contained by its own language. They sought a more or less uniform placement of modular units, such as cubes, cut pieces of felt, angular shapes, or readymade florescent light fixtures. By the end of the decade, these artists came to see an opposition between their empirical aesthetics and the more psychological and political content appropriated within the context of installation, performance, and body art.

When the Greek-born Jannis Kounellis entered the scene in 1967 as a seminal artist at the outset of the Arte Povera movement in Genoa, his tendency was to reject what he saw as a superficial split between aesthetics and politics. Instead of separating the two, Kounellis believed they could function on equal terms in relation to one another. While considered radical at that time, especially in *12 Live Horses*, shown at L'Attico Gallery in 1969, the symbolic art/life/political position of Kounellis has gradually been accepted over the years through a remarkable series of large-scale installations, primarily shown in Europe. The importance of the current large-scale tome, titled *Jannis Kounellis: Stations on an Odyssey, 1969-2010*, authored by curator and art historian, Mark Scheps, recounts the artist's work in twenty-two installations by a sculptor who implicitly offers a holistic alternative to the dualistic pragmatism of Minimalism. In shifting his observations away from the empirical parameters of Minimalism, Professor Scheps acknowledges the work of Kounellis as an Odyssey, which, in this case, is comparable to the complex mental structures conceived by Daedalus in the labyrinth as "a universal myth, a microcosm of human fate, a metaphor for our relationship to the world, an existential space, a utopia in permanent evolution."

For Kounellis art cannot be separated from either life or politics. Therefore, when he works with materials such as steel, wool, gas-jets, stones, hemp, wooden beans, bells, words, and live animals, such as horses and parrots, in relation to politically loaded architectural sites, he closes the breach between the literalism of Minimal art and a heightened allegorical context derived from history. His acute stylistic syntax transcends the kind of singular object by which sculpture was identified in past centuries, and shockingly imposes on the viewer a confrontation of hard materials that ironically reveals the poetry of light. There is nothing pretentious or superficial in these installations. They are meant to be what they are. When you see steel I-beams riveted over window shutters, a photograph of the artist biting a steel plate with a lit candle against his nose and forehead, piles of stones or fabric piled within a threshold as a blockage, or carcasses of beef hung against steel plates heated with gas lights, there is poetry, to be sure. But in contrast to the kind of poetry read on a page, these brutal, confrontational installations suggest something more violent, something malevolent that impedes the motion of the body from movement,

from evolution, or from making any kind of political progress towards a possible future where the quality of life takes precedence over the perennial insistence of political oppression and mindless power.

It is clear in works, such as *Exhibition of Winter Landscapes* in Pistoria (1993-94) or the *Stommeln Synagogue* in Pullheim (1991-92), that Kounellis's installation are not merely a formal exercise but an exacerbation in which the aesthetic posture combines with the force of a political resistance against the human weaknesses evident within a historical moment. Instead of positive change, there is a sullen discrepancy positioned against human beings struggling for a livelihood and freedom with the course of their everyday lives. A more recent example would include the *Church of San Augustin* in Mexico City (1999-2000) in which stones and draped coverings combine with steel crosses on the diagonal in a modular format. Against the Minimal aesthetic comes into play as the political resistance makes itself evident that persecution is counter to humanity and to future progress in the real sense of moving ahead to establish a more compatible world.

Finally, this book – accompanied by Scheps's insightful narrative, and its exemplary design where, in fact, the presentation of the book appears all in black and white as if it were an extension of an textually embodied installation – reveals Kounellis as not simply an artist working within the “expanded field” of Rosalind Krauss, but as a compelling humanitarian artist who feels the disjunction of time as the consequence of misguided incentives toward power and the inescapable seduction of power, which fully encapsulates the human condition, even after the launching of postmodernism. In many ways, this is the correction that Kounellis offers to the practice of art– not as a sparse conceptual diatribe, but as a tactile, material means to intuitively establish a counter regime, an apotheosis of a kind that goes against the diurnal routines of existence that in many ways blind us from the larger realities that constitutes the endless tragedies found in history and the architecture that harkens the evidence of these histories. This is the project of Kounellis, a European project, to be sure, given that Americans have only recently confronted terror without fully understanding its consequences or its aftermath.