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Monumental art has this heroic, macho thing that I'm attracted to, but which I couldn't possibly do myself' - Phyllida Barlow

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ON VIEW

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For decades, two things have been consistent in Jannis Kounellis's dazzlingly diverse installations: a relationship to painting, and the desire to articulate universality



experimentation at the core of their practice. More than a doctrine, Arte Povera was an attitude, one that chimes today with the understated work of numerous young European artists, including Lara Favaretto, Vanessa Billy and George Henry Longly. Since then, Kounellis has shown his work in countless museums but also in churches, castles and warehouses, each time directly responding to his immediate surroundings. "A space is polarised", he explains. "The artist has to divine its polarisation."

Consistently, in parallel with this site-specific outlook, Kounellis has brought textures and their symbolic associations into confrontation, opposing the organic with the industrial, the barbarous with the domestic. (His early works, for example, involved steel, fire, coal, wool, beans, plants, and animals; the lexicon has progressively evolved to incorporate meat, furniture, knives, toy trains and clothes.) Yet, as Kounellis says, "making art is cyclical", and he continuously reuses his repertoire of shapes and materials, producing pieces difficult to identify as "of a given period". This approach has granted his work a rare sense of timelessness. In 2007, for example, the artist turned the ground floor of the Mies van der Rohe-designed Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin into a daunting metal labyrinth. While undermining the basic principles of modernist architecture and its focus on open, light-flooded spaces, Kounellis also staged an encounter with his own artistic development: works from the past five decades hung in every nook and cranny.

Here, an untitled work from 1969 – consisting of a steel panel bearing the inscription 'Libertà o Morte' and the scrawled names of the French revolutionaries Marat and Robespierre completed by a small shelf and lit candle – felt

words COLINE MILLIARD

FROM THE DOZEN LIVE HORSES he 'installed' in the Galleria L'Attico in 1969, to the constellations of vintage chairs crowding a hangar in the port of Jaffa in 2007, most shows punctuating the half-century-long career of Jannis Kounellis have turned around a single potent image. "An exhibition is a unique act", says the Greek-born Italian artist when I meet him in his apartment in Rome. "It's a statement, a categorical idea."

During the late 1960s, Kounellis was associated with Arte Povera, the radical Italian art movement that reacted to the country's instability following the decline of the postwar 'economic miracle'. The artists involved – including, among others, Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pino Pascali and Pier Paolo Calzolari – put open-ended

fittingly like the personal motto of an artist who has always resisted compromises (including, perhaps, the compromise of a signature style). Meanwhile, the burlap bags of grain (*Untitled*, 1969), presented at the Kunsthalle Bern in the first European survey of conceptual art, *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), were in Berlin slouched against a partition. Conceived as a collection of vital textures, they looked, in this tunnel-like corridor, like an abandoned stock of wartime food provisions, compulsively gathered against some historical or fantasised conflict. Large bells, lying on wooden planks, paid a silent tribute to an entangled wool corpse loosely knitted on stretchers. *Untitled* (1998), with its large gunnysacks hanging off wooden stretchers, could just as well be from the late 1960s, and yet

it feels less like a repetition than a reassertion of the importance of unadulterated materials. Its flatness and verticality also underscore a crucial aspect of Kounellis's work, one that insistently ties his diverse and context-specific art together: his relationship to painting.

For Kounellis professes to see himself as a painter, albeit one who, during the 1960s, had to break free from the diktat of the canvas. It was a concern he shared not only with the Italian avant-garde, but also, across the border, with the French movement Supports/Surfaces. "Painting is not a technique", he says, "but a linguistic intuition". From the start, Kounellis's installations were conceived as paintings bursting out into the third dimension, becoming tableaux, compositions in real space: at their extreme, these compositions might even be movable, changeable, as in his 1969 horses installation. It corralled into the gallery the messy reality of the horses' existence: their smell, their shit, as well as their palpable tension, locked up in a white cube as they were for weeks on end.

The link between painting, language and space can also be traced back to the artist's *Alfabeti* paintings, made during the early 1960s. These large canvases are inscribed with obscure combinations of letters and numbers: "It was hermetic poetry, like Ungaretti", says Kounellis,

referring to Italy's best-known modernist poet. "These paintings showed a will to sing, it was writing that one could sing. I even performed them once. It was also very much about space", he adds, "as these canvases had the dimensions of the walls in my house". If the artist left the *Alfabeti* after three years for fear of their becoming a style, they nonetheless formed a template that he was to work with throughout his career. Most of Kounellis's pieces take the size of his walls, of a double bed, of a door. In steel, wood or cloth, these standard measurements, repeated again and again, and designed and optimised to reflect the proportions of a body, place the human dimension at the heart of his production.

Kounellis's existential sensibility shows affinities with the work of Yves Klein and Christian Boltanski, his involvement with materials echoes the practices of Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer; but it's with his historical predecessors that the artist has developed the most fruitful dialogues. In 1989 he hung quarters of beef on steel panels in the former warehouse Espai Pobleu in Barcelona. It was a matter-of-fact display of meat, invoking in its trail still-life painting – and the work of Rembrandt, Soutine and Bacon. As brutal as it was, the work felt like a logical next step in a process centuries in the making: like Kounellis's display of horses, it advertises a shift from *representation* to *presentation*. The piece shortcuts art history while pointing to humanity's core concerns: the need to be fed and the ubiquity of death. Over the decades, this sense of universality has allowed Kounellis's work to be at once immediately identifiable and site-specific – a rare balance which, fittingly given his dialogue with his own predecessors, has also made him a reference point for many leading artists of subsequent generations: Paul McCarthy, for example, who acknowledges Kounellis as an influence. Perhaps most important, however, Kounellis's wide-open approach has permitted him to continue operating with flexibility and undimmed potency, travelling light and speaking to all languages. "I'm able to go with empty hands to any country in the world and make a work in a very short time", says Kounellis. "That's the miracle." Next performance: London. ■

Quarters of beef hung on steel panels invoke still-life painting, shortcutting art history while pointing to humanity's core concerns: the need to be fed and the ubiquity of death



Work by Jannis Kounellis is on view at Ambika P3, London, until 30 May

this page: *Untitled*, 1989 (installation view, Espai Pobleu, Barcelona). Photo: M. Piersanti. Courtesy Sprovieri, London

facing page: *Untitled*, 1969 (installation view, Galleria L'Attico, Rome). Photo: Claudio Abate. Courtesy Sprovieri, London