

**The Observer** : 'Jannis Kounellis', by Laura Cumming, April 25th, 2010

## Jannis Kounellis

**Ambika P3, London** The patriarch of arte povera breathes new life into the 1960s art movement with his Kafkaesque installations



'An industrial-scale elegy' ... one of Jannis Kounellis's installations at Ambika P3.  
Photograph: Richard Saker

Jannis Kounellis, at 74, remains the patriarch of an Italian art movement that has long since slipped away, though brevity was always a part of its nature. The radical gestures of [arte povera](#) – flame throwing, horse wrangling, missile straddling – were as short-lived as the humble materials the artists used, such as ice, bread, newsprint, flowers and lettuce that wilted even as you watched. This was a 60s art, it seemed, that would never grow old or repeat itself.

Yet Kounellis has achieved both. Born in Greece in 1936, he moved to Rome aged 20 and has lived and worked there ever since. Repetition has gradually become his modus operandi. Not the exact reproduction of one work, however, but, rather, the conception of each separate piece as a kind of chorus, reiterated over and again, to the larger elegy of his work.

Burlap sacks, beans and lentils, empty bottles, stones and coal: if you saw the gallery recently devoted to Kounellis at Tate Modern you will be familiar with most of his stock, the inventory of dry goods from which he makes his dark and plangent works. There are variations – coffee, piano music, very occasionally paint (he started out as a painter) – but Kounellis is faithful to his repertoire of uningratiating materials. Each time you see one of his grain sacks or dry-stone walls, you are reminded of all that went before: plain things, universal, ancient and yet unarguably modern.

In Ambika P3, the vast underground bunker beneath the University of Westminster, Kounellis has found the ideal gallery. Acres of bare concrete rising up to cathedral height, the former engineering hall is both desolate and inspiring. The artist has filled this space with one colossal installation and many smaller works that feel like further meditations on the theme.

The central work is overwhelmingly dramatic: immense steel walls diverging through the concrete gallery, each supported by a steel table and each forming a substrate for the most haunting configurations of glass bottles, meat hooks, tensile cords and black overcoats pinioned like dead or dying bodies. What first strikes is the sense of a whole gallery of martyrdoms combined – compressed – into a single work.

But as you walk down one avenue, a particular panel may suddenly take on the glow of a stained-glass window as the light catches the green and sepia of the empty bottles. Or the funereal clothes may be arranged in a manner more reminiscent of flags or revolutionary banners. The silver meat hooks are by turns bleakly functional or rococo in their curlicues. Everything you look at feels unfixed, no matter how solemn and still – a stream of proliferating associations.

And like avenues, these walls are directional – down one side, up the

other, into a tight convergence in the middle. It feels like a vast cross; in fact, as the viewer eventually discovers, it takes the form of a letter K. An outsize signature, presumably it is also an allusion to Kafka's character who can never penetrate the bureaucracy of the castle, still less its walls. That allusion shouldn't be overstated, though, since Kounellis has created his own mysterious edifice, its fortifications topped with heaps of coal.

You become a wanderer, trying to get to the heart of it all – and what's going on in your mind is translated in the most physical terms. Hooks, coats, bodies, bottles: traces of humanity, of labour and pain, of the solitary worker in the industrial machine. It feels like a game of word association played out in objects and images, or knowledge encrypted, waiting to be revealed if one only had the key. The experience is powerfully affecting and theatrical. Kounellis has designed sets for Heiner Müller and the Berliner Ensemble. The wrangled horses were his, tethered live in a Roman gallery. And the smaller works dispersed among the pillared halls have the presence of characters escaping the main performance to speak for themselves.

A descent from the cross, in which the overcoat is dangling upside down, person and winding sheet all in one; a jacket wrapped around itself, huddled, confused and lashed by steel wires whose hard glint is reflected over and again in the clear glass of the bottles; frozen air in a cold-hearted world.

The effect stops short of bathos every time because the decisions are so well judged. Just the smallest adjustment – barely perceptible – in an arrangement of bottles introduces a threat of danger, just as the angle of a garment can make it seem more or less human or abstract.

And in the end, despite the accumulation of so many objects – hung, strung, stockpiled, stacked – the sense is of looking at paintings by other means. Portrait, still life, history painting, battle scene: the installation is like an art gallery made abstract.

"My focus is to present, not to represent," Kounellis has said. No matter how complex or unfathomable the works may seem, their elements remain irreducibly simple. A dozen black overcoats hanging on hooks exceed the obvious anthropomorphism – garments as people – to evoke

some distant age of dignified men going to their deaths. An old black sewing machine dangling from a wire and you might sense the hot dusty village and the soldiers hammering at the cottage door.

Clearly, each viewer will have their own associations, but there are fundamental overtones here of our European past. Kounellis has found a way of rearranging his repertoire of objects differently in each location to maximise the emotional impact. Here, he has made an industrial-scale elegy that speaks to the site as a deserted construction hall. Imagine what this Greek poet might produce for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.