

**Frieze** : 'Jannis Kounellis', by Despina Zefkili, May 30th, 2012

# Jannis Kounellis

MUSEUM OF CYCLADIC ART , ATHENS, GREECE



A piece of black cloth covers the chandelier in one of the first rooms in the neoclassical Stathatos Mansion, which houses the Museum of Cycladic Art's temporary exhibitions. In the adjoining rooms burlap sacks full of coal are assembled into three circles, in the middle of the first is a pile of cheap prescription glasses; in the second, a marble plate; in the third, broken casts of statues and newspapers. Only the titles of the newspapers – which refer to a range of subjects, from political reality to the weather – indicate that this is a new project. Both in terms of material and form, Jannis Kounellis's new site-

specific works reference the Arte Povera of the 1960s, a movement in which Kounellis's contribution was central. 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, since, as he puts it, 'at this particular moment it would be impossible to have just an exhibition of art in Greece'.



For his new exhibition, like in most of his works from the '60s and onwards, Kounellis, who is Greek, uses different elements, such as burlap, coal or iron, in complex combinations. It is no coincidence that most of his works are untitled, although the different manifestations of human struggle seem to link them. Old shoes and hats placed in rows in one of the museum's display cases behind black curtains; black coats hanging from slaughterhouses' hooks and a butcher's knife are some of the visually impressive elements in the show.



Back in the '60s the use of materials not traditionally used for art by Arte Povera artists established a new iconography full of political and ideological connotations that critiqued the *miracolo italiano* (the Italian miracle), the emerging consumer society of highly industrialized, post-fascist Italy. However, in today's Greece the use of these aged materials lends the work a lyrical patina; its symbolism has become conventional and now

references art history rather than contemporary politics. Kounellis's 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. All the coats are black and almost identical, as are the old-fashioned shoes and hats; all seem carefully chosen to fit a specific image and aesthetic, yet no average Greek worker or migrant nowadays wears such an outfit. Perhaps, paradoxically, an exhibition of older works by Kounellis might be more relevant to today's situation, or perhaps, after all, this is 'just an exhibition of art in Greece.'

**Despina Zefkili**