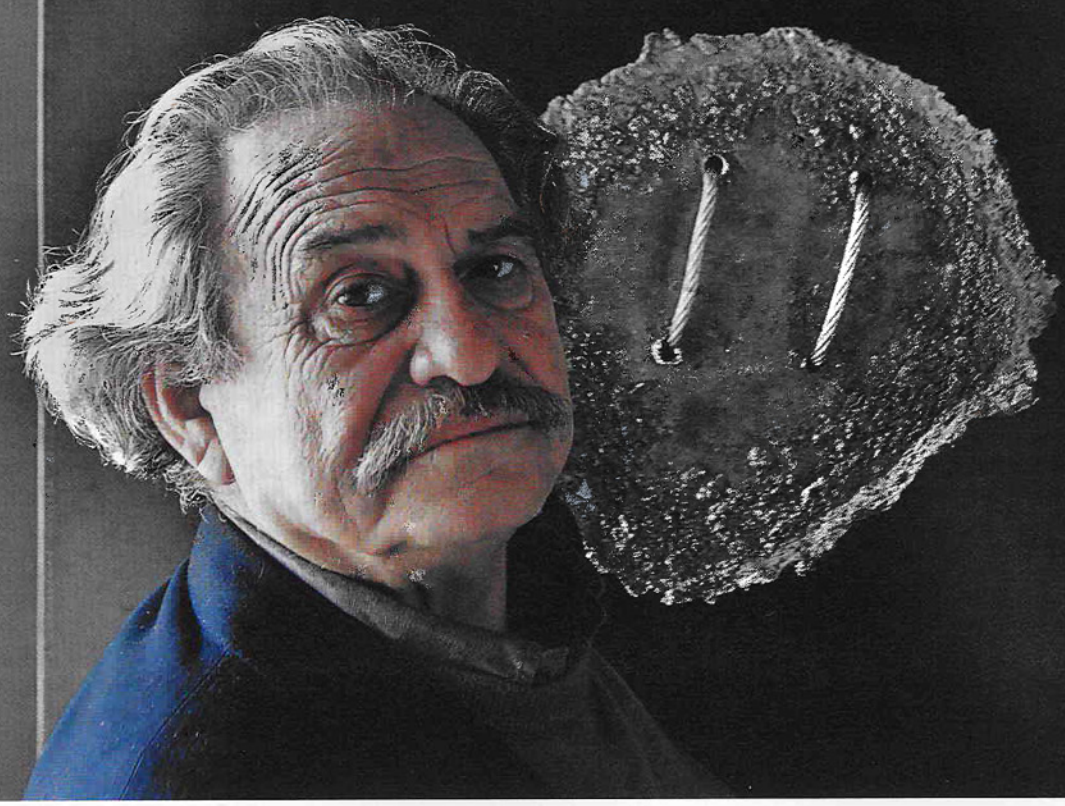
Art Auction: 'Jannis Kounellis', by Kenneth Baker, January 2009

ART+AUCTION

Jannis Kounellis

APPEALING TO ALL THE SENSES, THE THEATRICAL WORK OF THIS ARTE POVERA LEGEND COMBINES THE NATURAL WITH THE MANUFACTURED, THE HISTORICAL WITH THE PRESENT, THE EPHEMERAL WITH THE DURABLE. BY KENNETH BAKER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONI MENEGUZZO

JUST INSIDE THE ENTRANCE to the major survey of his work last winter at the Neue Nationalgalerie, in Berlin, Jannis Kounellis positioned one of his signature untitled installations: a dozen timeworn bentwood chairs facing one another in a large circle. After I visited the Berlin show, that enigmatic ring of chairs lingered in my mind. While walking around the city, I stumbled on something that seemed to make sense of it. The old Checkpoint Charlie, once the site of fraught passages between East and West Berlin, is now a tourist attraction, with a display of historic photographs. Among these is an image of the 1945 Potsdam Conference, at which the victorious Allies redrew the geopolitical map of Europe, showing the heavily clothed principals seated around a circular table.



Kounellis resides primarily in Rome but also maintains this studio in Umbria. Opposite: The artist with an untitled work from 2008. Born in Greece, he has lived in Italy since age 19.

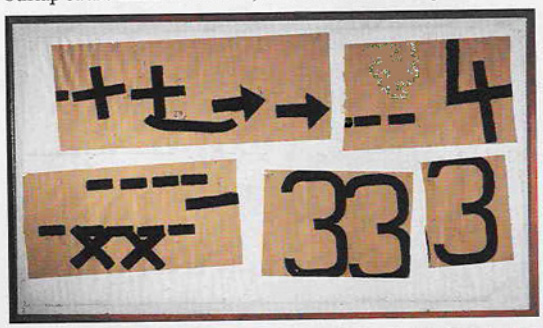
Did Kounellis know of this photograph before the Neue Nationalgalerie exhibition? When I meet him in his Rome studio not long afterward, I know that he will never answer unequivocally. Such questions matter little to him. What he wants is for his work to spark viewers' emotional awareness of their times.

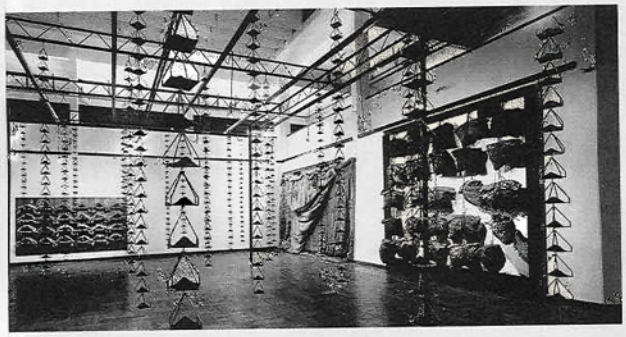
I ring the bell at his inconspicuous house, not far from the Vatican, and his partner of many years, Michelle Coudray, calls from a window above for me to take the stairs to the third floor. There, entering through a kitchen that gives immediately onto an office, I meet Kounellis, who greets me in Italian with a welcoming handshake. The apartment—far from new yet ageless in feel—is filled with eclectic furnishings probably acquired over many years. We sit at a massive dining table beneath windows with a view of nearly leafless trees outside. Kounellis lights a cigarette (the first of many), settling into the sober, but not humorless, demeanor that seems typical of him. Tousled and making no effort to disguise his age, 72, he comes across as a man continually preoccupied but not easily distracted.

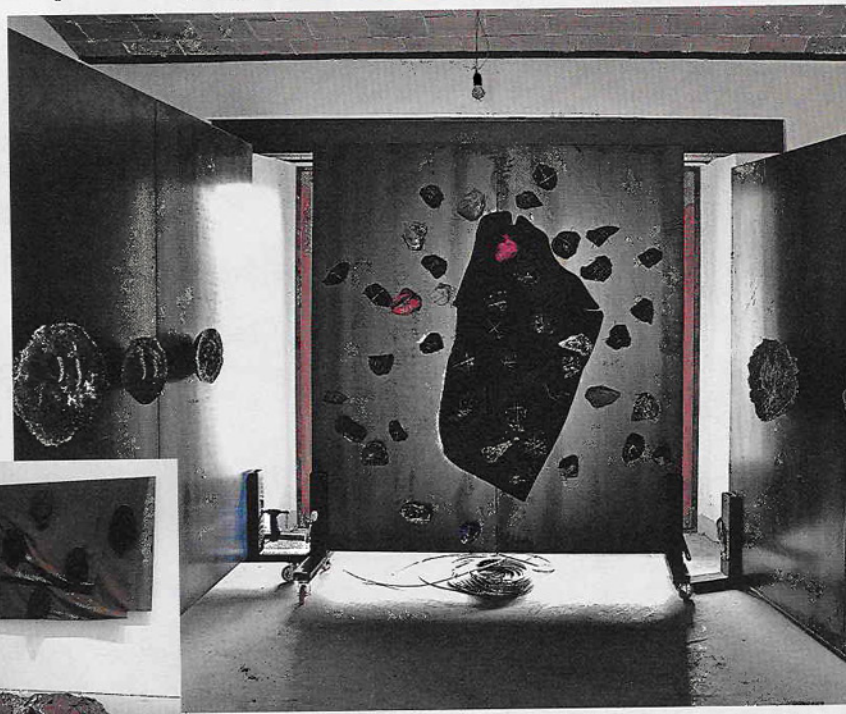
Born in Piraeus, Greece, in 1936, Kounellis moved to Rome at age 19 to escape the civil war in his country and stayed. Fluent in Greek and Italian but not English, he relies on Coudray, who speaks a French-accented Italian, to translate. Does he consider himself an Italian artist? "I always have. A Greek-born person, but an Italian artist."

He studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and in 1960, while still a student, had his first solo exhibition, at Galleria della Tartaruga, consisting of a group of paintings stenciled enigmatically with letters, numbers and arrows. These early "alphabet" paintings are now regarded as precursors of Arte Povera, or "poor art," the designation coined in 1967 by the Italian critic Germano Celant to denote the ambitious work of Kounellis and his contemporaries Giovanni Anselmo, Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio. To overcome the preciousness and gravity of the European tradition, these artists employed ostensibly nonart stuff in often anti-art gestures that self-consciously referenced the cultural past. They favored undefined installation pieces as ways of rejecting Italian art's long service to church and state. Like Anselmo and Merz, Kounellis has employed natural with industrial materials, and he still relies on the sharp contrasts between the two. For decades he has returned repeatedly to such substances as steel, coal and scavenged wood, as well as to stone, wool, burlap and coffee (the scent of which permeates some of his installations) and sacks of grain. He has also famously incorporated live animals—birds, horses and fish—into his art.

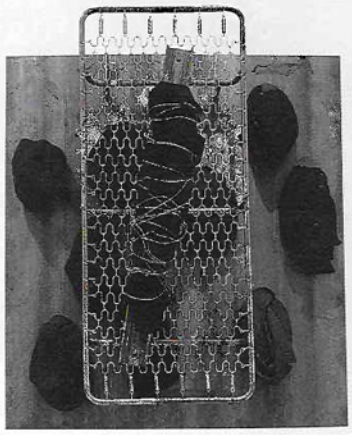
Kounellis nearly always chooses mediums for their physically powerful but highly ambiguous associations. For example, although viewers may not immediately read the inert stacks of burlap sacks filled with corn, coffee beans and legumes as »







Clockwise from top: *Untitled*, 1960–61; a view of the artist's Umbria studio, with mixed-media works from 2008; two untitled sculptural pieces from 2006, on view at the Cheim & Read gallery, in New York; and a multipart installation involving hanging metal plates and piles of ground coffee, at Montevideo's Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, in 2001.



markers of the passage between production and consumption in a vast system of human survival, that is what Kounellis intends them to be. The seeming lack of context for these goods gradually awakens a sense of how seldom we think about the economic and industrial forces that form our habits as consumers.

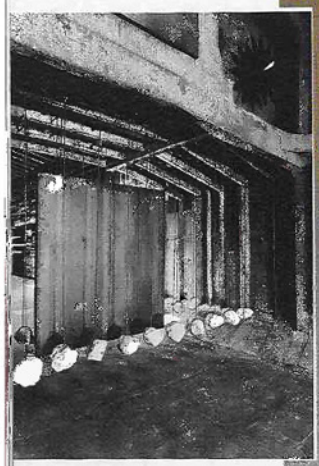
Whereas American postminimalists or conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Barry Le Va or the young Richard Serra might array materials to sharpen spatial awareness, Kounellis creates configurations that refer outward—to other art, to social patterns and to the mind. "Kosuth is a friend of mine, but he says that a chair is a chair, and this is something I cannot accept," Kounellis says, speaking of a frequently reproduced work by Kosuth that displays a real chair alongside a photograph of it and a printed dictionary definition of *chair*. Kounellis considers such metaphorically bereft uses of things "too pragmatic."

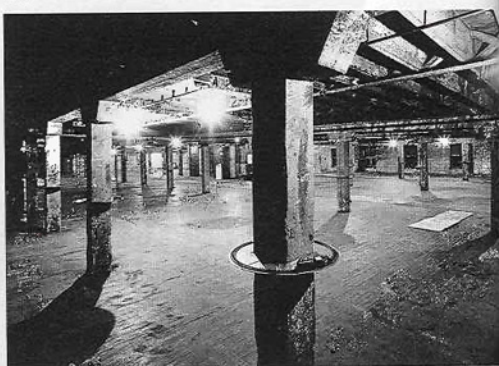
Why has his work, whose poetic sensibility appeals to European audiences, not been embraced by Americans? "The answer must be because of indifference to subtlety, complexity and depth," says the New York dealer John Cheim, who has shown Kounellis's work since 2005. "Europeans usually get there first—witness Warhol and Twombly—so I expect Americans will catch up." The artist has exerted influence, Cheim adds. "If one looks closely, there would be no Damien Hirst without Kounellis's horses and parrots."

At the time of my visit, the artist's dungeonlike Rome studio is nearly empty, containing little besides a table, some tools and a few high-intensity lamps on tripods. But that hardly matters. Since the late summer of last year, he has been living in Umbria, preparing mixed-media pieces—burlap and paint on metal panels, lumps of coal affixed to sheets of heavy paper—that are on view at Galerie Lelong's Zurich branch through the end of February (this May, Cheim & Read will present new works).

Whether it is present or not, he says, "I am always thinking about the work, always." How does the process begin for him? "By chance," Kounellis says flatly. "I never make a drawing." The majority of the ingredients of his large-scale pieces, which he reconfigures to accommodate disparate venues, reside in storage most of the time anyway. He considers viewers' interactions with his art in the exhibition space essential to its fulfillment. Everything done in the studio has the character of a rehearsal, a resemblance enhanced by the mezzanine that wraps around his workspace, making it feel like a hall between productions.

Standing there, I think of Kounellis's repeated references in interviews to the gallery space as "an empty theatrical cavity." The remark is not pejorative since, as he tells me, "dramaturgy is something very deep in Italian culture," and he thinks of his own work in terms of it. In the late 1980s, he collaborated on the staging of several theater events in Europe, and some of his well-known works from the early 1970s involve dancers and musicians. »





Clockwise from above: An iron panel with hanging stones was one of several pieces exhibited in the hull of a cargo ship in the port of Piraeus, in 1994; *Untitled*, 2006; a large-scale piece (trains running on miniature tracks fitted around columns), presented as part of the artist's 1986 retrospective, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and various untitled works completed in Umbria.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHEIM & READ; CLAUDIO ABATE. COURTESY JANNIS KOUNELLIS. TOM MNEOUZZO. MANOLIS BAROUSSIS. COURTESY JANNIS KOUNELLIS

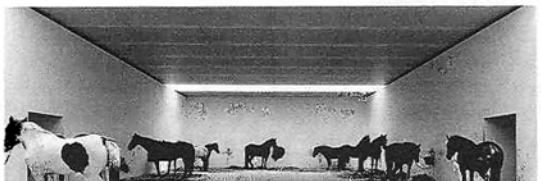
For an untitled piece performed in a gallery in Naples in 1971, a cellist played a passage of Bach in front of a canvas by Kounellis. In a 1969 work, a woman wrapped in a wool blanket and supported on a steel base had a lighted blow torch attached to her foot; the potential for disaster created enormous tension for the model as well as the spectators. One of Kounellis's most provocative and famous creations was staged that same year at the Galleria L'Attico, in Rome, which he turned into a stable for a dozen live horses, a feat he replicated at the 37th Venice Biennale, in 1976.

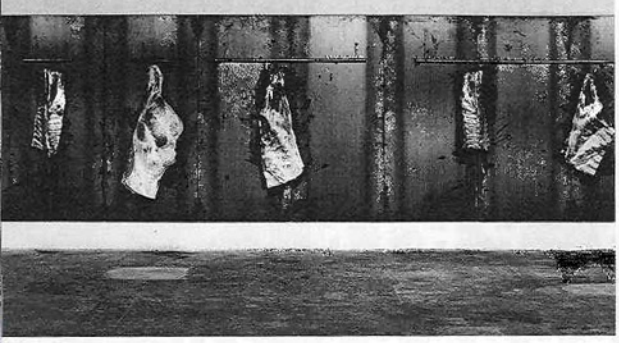
Kounellis's use of animals and human performers represents the extreme of his effort to bring pictorial forms into real space. "Coming out from the canvas as we did in the 1960s," he recalls, "the purpose was to develop more possibilities of being dialectical," by which he means encouraging the viewer to see multiple meanings or viewpoints in the work. He relates this desire for open-endedness to the divisions that fissured war-torn Europe. After the war, common interests and sheer curiosity opened channels between groups that had seemed mutually exclusive. He mentions certain international exhibitions, particularly the curator Harald Szeemann's groundbreaking "When Attitude Becomes Form" at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, as formative events where artists from Europe and the U.S. could meet and see each other's work. "For my generation, it was necessary to cross borders, to discuss things," Kounellis says. "This gives you the opportunity to refuse any kind of dogmatism. You have suffered, you know what it is about. You want to understand."

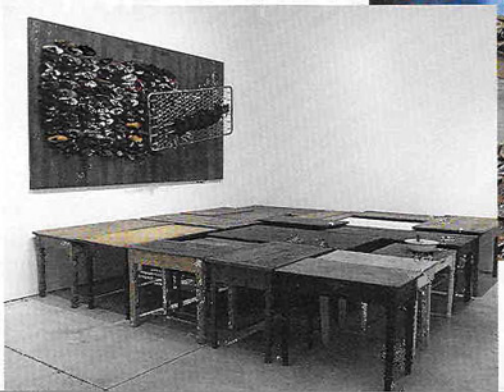
Kounellis's art still has the power to surprise, as his 2006–07 exhibition at Cheim & Read reminded me. The melancholy sculptural assemblages of everyday objects such as shoes, coats, old wooden tables and metal bed frames emitted ghostly traces of human existence. There was a sign of life, but even that was fleeting: On the edge of a table was a shallow bowl of water with a cleaver resting in it. Viewers turning away from the bowl might catch a flicker of orange as a goldfish darted beneath the blade.

Asked about his use of living beings in his pieces, Kounellis replies, "Originally I wanted to make a critique of the finished object. I consider nothing a finished object." And nothing exemplifies this contingent quality better than a living organism. Even his inert pieces are active, calling out to all the senses: A lit kerosene lantern gives off heat; open sacks of grain and raw wool provide texture; piles of ground coffee emit a heady fragrance. I ask whether Kounellis would acknowledge that his work could be an allegory of the senses—a recurrent theme in the European painting tradition. With a characteristic mixture of obliqueness and directness he answers, "I have often used smell, an element missing in paintings that became something represented in painting. But for me, the smell of coffee, *this* is painting, because it's a reality, but it's also an idea of traveling, an idea of adventure." ⊞

+WEB EXCLUSIVE For unpublished images of Kounellis's studio and more about his work, visit artandauction.com.







Clockwise from right: A 2005 re-creation of Kounellis's famous 1969 installation involving 12 live horses at the Museo Madre in Naples; Kounellis in his studio, with untitled works; a view of the artist's 2006 show at Cheim & Read; and *Untitled*, 1989, with quarters of beef hanging against an iron slab, at the Espai Poblenou, Barcelona.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MANOLIS BAROUSSIS, COURTESY JANNIS KOUNELLIS; TONI MENEGUZZO; CHRIS BURNSIDE, COURTESY CHEIM & READ; CLAUDIO ABATE. COURTESY JANNIS KOUNELLIS