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Top Picks

Inside a Labyrinth, an Artist's Obsessions

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Berlin Art

The ground floor of Berlin's New National Gallery, Mies van der Rohe's late masterpiece, is one of Europe's most dramatic places to exhibit art. With its soaring glass walls and black marble floors and columns, the space is both minimalist and monumental.

No one in recent memory has used the space with such wit and ingenuity as the Greek-Italian sculptor and installation artist, Jannis Kounellis. In a remarkable show that simply bears his name, Mr. Kounellis has constructed a labyrinth of steel walls, 2.35 meters high, that snakes its way through Mies' vast open room, creating a strangely intimate gallery within a gallery in which Mr. Kounellis exhibits a select group of some 30 installations from five decades of his career. The labyrinth walls are decorated with piles of coal -- a favorite material of Mr. Kounellis's -- and the labyrinth itself becomes a kind of horizontal coalmine, in which we unearth, or just come across, the full range of the artist's obsessions.

Mr. Kounellis, born in Piraeus, Greece, in 1936, was closely associated with the Arte Povera movement in Italy in the 1960s and '70s, which stood in playful, but purposeful opposition to other trends in the art world. In contrast to American minimalist and conceptual artists, who used starkly reduced elements to construct pure works of art, free of any larger political, social, or historical concerns, Arte Povera artists saw themselves as aggressively political and social figures -- as terrorist clowns.

Often drawn to what could be called ephemeral materials -- one of the best-known Arte Povera figures, Piero Manzoni, notoriously canned and sold his own excrement in the early 1960s -- the movement's artists were as humorous as the minimalists were solemn, as idiosyncratic as the American conceptualists were dogmatic. Now being rediscovered by a range of collectors and younger artists, Arte Povera has emerged as one of the major artistic movements of postwar Europe. Mr. Kounellis -- who lives and works in Rome -- is the lone Arte Povera figure still hard at work.

His new Berlin show highlights the achievements of the movement. Visitors entering the ground floor -- also referred to as "the upper hall," to distinguish it from the main exhibition galleries in the basement -- are greeted by a recent piece: a large ensemble of antique sewing machines, plank tables, jute sacks, and stray bits of coal. Like Joseph Beuys -- who had a similar ability to assemble and transform rough everyday objects -- Mr. Kounellis seems to wave a magic wand over everything he touches. The 2003 installation (untitled, like all his work) has a kind of hilarious, but haunted quality -- where are the people who run these machines? -- and is perfect preparation for what is to come. Inside the labyrinth itself, we come across installations consisting of sacks of beans, or of old bed frames, or of suspended levels of ground coffee -- relics, it seems, of some lost civilization.

There are also works outside the labyrinth -- most unforgettably, a large work from 1985 covering a section of the space's eastern glass wall. Made of steel panels, into which Mr. Kounellis has driven bits of lead and apparent fragments of plaster sculpture, the piece obsessively but elegantly refers to the poles of European history as Mr. Kounellis sees it: antiquity and industrialism.