

Art

# The Lingering Presence of Jannis Kounellis

Pondering the legacy of Jannis Kounellis, a titan of Arte Povera, away from the crowds of Venice.



Ara Merjian July 17, 2019

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The galleries at MART, Museo di arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Italy (all images courtesy of MART, with photos by Jacopo Salvi, unless stated otherwise)

Walking yesterday evening through the small Italian city of Rovereto at the foot of the Dolomites, I caught a faint, diminished whiff of manure, borne on the wet evening breeze along an old side street. It must have drifted down from pastures dotting the nearby hills. My thoughts turned to Jannis Kounellis, one of few post-war artists whose works — through means both subtle and brutal, and through materials both organic and synthetic — rendered the senses the barometer of contemporary aesthetics. Whether with human hair, dried beans, propane, live plants, or slabs of meat, Kounellis's installations insist upon the porosity between experience and lyricism, between mundanity and marvel. A large retrospective of his work opened a few weeks ago at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, honoring his death in 2017 at the age of 81.

But I was pleased to think of his legacy far from those maddening Biennale crowds on the lagoon. A streetside waft of cow shit sufficed, for despite their physical confinement to gallery spaces, Kounellis's works remain redolent of a world outside those walls.

I'd just been down the road at MART, The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto. A large, untitled work by Kounellis hangs on its top floor: a sprawling, flat iron panel bearing several bundles of long wooden fragments, each wrapped in a crumpled sheet of lead. Though made in 1991, the piece exemplifies the artist's work since the mid-1960s. Developed before and continuing long after Arte Povera — of which Kounellis became a prominent exponent — his body of work outlasted that shifting moniker by several decades. It did so through a practice at once consistently heterogeneous and rigorously admixed.



Jannis Kounellis, Untitled (1991) (installation view) lead, iron, and wood, 78.74 x 354.33 inches (200 x 900 cm)

Born in Greece, Kounellis studied under the Roman painter Toti Scialoja and completed proto-Pop canvases bearing ciphers and letters in the late 1950s and early '60s, before eventually bringing his practice into real time and space. A mixed-media, untitled painting from 1958 illustrates this passage from representation to a tautology of the material world: its simulacral sign for a tobacco stand is easily (and

willfully) confused with the real thing. So too did Kounellis' performances — in which he wrapped himself like a mock-shaman in his own canvases — exact aesthetic experimentation from the flattened plane of painting to the realm of the body and duration. It is no coincidence that the wooden elements in his piece at MART include various disassembled frames. The widespread tendency toward a dematerialization of aesthetics, out of which Kounellis' work emerged in the 1960s, took sustained aim at painting as both a medium and an institution.

However, he never quite managed to banish painterly sensibility from his oeuvre entirely. His previous experience as a set designer for the opera and theater imbues his three-dimensional installations with a symmetrical staging and a strong frontal orientation. These works entail substances seemingly inimical to the antiseptic spaces of the gallery's white cube: coal, coffee, wool, and rocks. For his most infamous work, he tethered twelve live horses to the walls of Rome's Galleria l'Attico — whose snorts, sweat, and shit took the readymade into new sensorial dimensions. Still, his installations retained some residually iconographic and even literary allusions (twelve apostles, Twelve Olympians, twelve lunar months, etc.). Such allusions —along with those to his childhood memories of the comestibles unloaded on the docks of his native Piraeus — point to the myriad ways in which Kounellis's work has long eschewed the ascetic strictures attendant upon the 1960s exploration of objecthood.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (12 Horses)* at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, in 2015. Photo by Allison Meier for Hyperallergic

Indeed it is a particular hybridity – a co-presence of seemingly unrelated materials – which distinguishes Kounellis’s assemblages, and sets them in unspoken opposition to American minimalism and its resonance (however unintended) with corporate design. The French conceptual artist Daniel Buren once remarked of Kounellis’ work that it suggested “Giorgio de Chirico’s painting in three dimensions.” We find in the latter’s canvases dissimilar objects staged as if they belonged together: a plaster cast and a rubber ball, a seemingly ancient bust and modern sunglasses. More apposite to de Chirico’s imagery are works by Kounellis’s fellow *poverista* Giulio Paolini, whose aridly conceptual pieces – centering upon practices of framing, perspective, and spectatorship – extend the cerebral poetry of Metaphysical painting to three and four dimensions. Kounellis, by contrast, deploys his objects’ theatricality to phenomenological ends.

Of course, several fellow *Poveristi* staged similar amalgamations of incongruent materials and sensory effects. Wrought from sticks, glass, and neon, Mario Merz’s makeshift igloos thrust a “primitive” form into urban(e) spaces: expressly awkward confluences of modern materials and an ostensibly archaic, even prehistoric, architecture. Marisa Merz likewise threaded wire mess with strands of hemp, while Michelangelo Pistoletto – in works like *Orchestra di stracci* – Quartetto (Rag orchestra) – mounted together rags, glass panels, and working tea kettles. Yet even leaving aside his twelve live horses, Kounellis insisted steadfastly upon organic elements — from fire to live foliage — and their role in artisan practices increasingly obviated in late capitalist modernity. Kounellis’s work defied the ostensibly progressive, forward-marching logic of the avant-garde, proposing instead a kind of “rear-guard” aesthetics, identified instead with anachronistic and outmoded methods as a refuge from modernity’s depredations.



Mario Merz, Chiaro Oscuro (1983) (installation view), dimensions variable, MART

To this end, his work rhymed extensively (if unwittingly) with that of Italy's most prominent (and polemical) post-war intellectuals — the poet, critic, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Discussing Italy's economic "boom" of the late 1950s and early 60s — with the country inundated by unprecedented commodities, conveniences, and appliances — Pasolini described Italy as a "laboratory nation." Its culture, he noted, witnessed ever more frequent confrontations between the archaic and the hyper-modern, between "First" and "Third" world standards of living, and between a millennial-agrarian vernacular and an increasingly international neo-capitalist technocracy. Of all Italy's artists who came of age in the 1960s, Kounellis was unique in his staging of these same confrontations without *representing* them. If the coarse burlap of one installation evokes the noble pauperism of Saint Francis, the same work's chunks of coal conjures up the necessities of industrial modernity (now, from our early twenty-first century perspective, quaint in its turn).

His unorthodox use of disparate substances evince was what Germano Celant — founder of Arte Povera, champion of Kounellis's work, and curator of the Fondazione Prada retrospective — once called the "slang of matter." Just as Pasolini responded to the inexorable disappearance of peasant culture and regional dialect by evoking a world *outside* the codes of verbal language — anchored in the body, in gesture, smells, eroticism, and other sensory realities — so too did Kounellis's installations present a "pre-grammatical" tautology of the real, which repeatedly brushes up against the lyrical. Clay amphorae and iron wire, messy skeins of wool and burlap bags of coal, and flame and smoke were deployed in

arrangements faintly redolent of human design, and yet bear an often unsettling autonomy. “Arte Povera needs no galleries; it has the world,” proclaimed the cover of Celant’s 1969 volume *Arte Povera*. It would seem today that Arte Povera has a presence *only* in galleries or museums. Yet in Kounellis’s work we find a kind of tutorial for retraining the senses outside the white cube: lessons not bound to any particular aesthetic object, but awaiting discovery in the surface of the world.

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