

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Elisabetta Povoledo, "The Spirituality of Jannis Kounellis," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2016

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ART & DESIGN

### The spirituality of Jannis Kounellis

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO OCT. 28, 2016



Jannis Kounellis "Dodecafonía" is on view at the deconsecrated church of Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, which the gallerist Gavin Brown converted into an exhibition space last year. Credit Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome & Jannis Kounellis, photo Manolis Baboussi

ROME — Sitting on a wonky chair inside the dim, deconsecrated church of Sant'Andrea de Scaphis in Rome's Trastevere neighborhood last month, the artist Jannis Kounellis pondered eight of his newest works and agreed that they were the product of an extremist.

"Si!" he said with conviction, and perhaps a hint of amusement that at 80 years old, he still tries to express the same idiosyncratic spirit as his first works six decades ago.

Certainly, the pieces — which were created for the solo exhibition "Dodecafonía," on view in the church until Nov. 30 — feature many elements familiar to Mr. Kounellis's art, like burlap, rope, wood and steel. The Greek-born, naturalized Italian artist has also been positioning mounds of coal in his installations since the 1960s, when he bypassed painting and began using common materials to become one of the leading figures in the Arte Povera movement. Seasoned furniture — chairs, tables or the clothes closets used here — have also been recurrent props.

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But in the context of the former church, where they are hung like compact altarpieces defining makeshift chapels, the artworks had an intrinsic spirituality, supported by Mr. Kounellis's musings on the human condition and mortality.

Lately there has been a resurgence of interest in the work of Mr. Kounellis, who had a solo show at the Centro Arti Visive Pescheria in Pesaro that closed this month, and had major exhibitions this year at the Monnaie de Paris, the Galería Hilario Galguera in Mexico City and the White Cube in London.

The artist has become an "important point of reference for younger generations of artists who are revisiting the art of the 60s and 70s," said Ludovico Pratesi, an art critic and the curator of the show in Pesaro. He added that those artists are searching for value, to counterbalance "the difficult moment we are living" in.



The pieces feature many elements familiar to Mr. Kounellis's art, like burlap, rope, wood and steel. Credit Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome & Jannis Kounellis, photo Manolis Baboussi

"Kounellis is always dramatic, epic," he said. And while the artist has an identifiable vocabulary, "he has been able to reinterpret it in novel ways."

During an interview last month at the church, which the gallerist Gavin Brown converted into an exhibition space last year, Mr. Kounellis touched on an array of topics: from politics, to the recent earthquake in central Italy (which did not affect his country home in Umbria) to Italy's dearth of middle class arts patrons, to creativity: "It's being struck by lightning, like falling in love, you don't understand why, but it happens."

Each artwork in Sant'Andrea de Scaphis consists of a well-worn closet, encased inside a steel frame that is the exact size of a double bed — "a farmer's bed," the artist said — with part of the closet exposed.

"The closet is natural, it's the closest thing to man, because of what it conserves inside, various motifs tied to life," he explained. Indeed, in each closet the artist has placed a coat wrapped in wire, a memento of a lived life. "You can't see it," he acknowledged, "but I know it's there."

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Mr. Brown wrote in a press release that Mr. Kounellis “sees the realities and frustrations of contemporary society while, simultaneously, drawing upon primitive, fundamental, human values and the human objects that embody and contain and measure those values.”

Within the rough, unfinished interior of the church — a ninth-century parish deconsecrated in the 16th century when it was given to a guild and later used as a shop — Mr. Kounellis’s humanist message is all the more forceful. “It is what it is, you are here in the continuum with all the other souls that have passed through this place,” Mr. Brown said.



At 80 years old, Jannis Kounellis still tries to express the same idiosyncratic spirit as his first works six decades ago. Credit Michelle Coudray

That sense of being in continuum with history is one reason why Mr. Kounellis came to Rome, from his native Piraeus, Greece, in 1956, to study at the Academy of Fine Arts. “It was what I wanted, I considered it a necessary bridge to the rest of the world,” he said, describing the city as a crossroads of history, culture and religion.

He recalled a febrile artistic scene that attracted the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Franz Kline, to name a few American artists. Though Mr. Kounellis briefly moved to New York City in 1958 with a thought to remaining, he quickly returned to the Italian capital. “I wanted to understand more of the Europe that had passed through the war,” he said.

Rome proved to be fertile ground for Mr. Kounellis. He held his first solo exhibition, “The Alphabet of Kounellis,” in 1960 at the Galleria La Tartaruga, and nine years later the Galleria L’Attico here was the set for one of his best known works, “Untitled (12 Horses),” which featured a dozen horses fastened by ropes to the walls of a garage. That piece was reprised last year in Mr. Brown’s New York exhibition space.

Though his art is mostly defined by sculpture, installation and performance, Mr. Kounellis still considers himself a painter and refers to his works as paintings, even as his art has sought to break down and transcend the medium’s boundaries.

“Everything I do is painting, even if I don’t touch a brush,” he said. “I tell my truth as a painter.”

He added that his truth has always aimed to establish a dialogue with the observer. And in some cases, it would seem, with the divine. Asked whether he believed in God, he said: “All artists believe in God, for one motive: God is the reason of synthesis.”

“I don’t think he would have made the same show anywhere else,” Mr. Brown said of the exhibition space in the church. “Does that mean the church is dominating? No. I think that means that the artist is flowing with life.”