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The seduction in the tension of contradictions  
within the work of Jannis Kounellis.

by

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The seduction in the tensions of contradictions within the work of

Jannis Kounellis.

Introduction.

Jannis Kounellis is an artist as multifaceted as his sculptures. He could be described as a classical idealist, a dirty-realist and/or a semi romantic. He can however be described as very flexible despite the fact that his repertoire of materials have not changed much over the course of his career. The strength of his executed work lies in the specific historic and cultural environments that the pieces have been designed to be seen in. It is the site that plays the educating role, applying meaning to the installed work. The function of the art he creates is to fulfil the role of the seducer. In turn the art highlights or emphasises the contradictions and tensions present in that given environment, most often these are derelict sites that we often categorise as eyesores. The contradictions that Kounellis accentuates epitomise various concerns, not only those that the socially aware artists witness but that the everyday public encounter also. He has the ability to reactivate the frustration often inherent in progressive society, for instance fear of destruction, change or poverty etc. His sculptural installations visually seduce us and motivate a thought process, they can draw a reaction from us as we attempt to justify their function and validity as art or social commentary.

Even entering into silent contemplation of a Kounellis sculpture is a subtle method of being able to support a mode of thought without the alien qualities that most protest- art possesses. The passive anarchy occurs vividly in those pieces that involve the installing of art into a non- gallery environment that is often on the wrong side of town in a less than savoury building. (Pl. 7) There is a



definite sense of mischief if you can visualise all the 'big- wig- Chicago- art- buffs being handed a map to the viewing in a disused warehouse, stepping in all sorts of crap on the search for art. Could some of his work be seen as a metaphor for an act of revenge on the idealists who interfere with reality, who build these wonderful temples to the future only to leave them to become dilapidated as they move on to to another tax-incentive area? In a sense this degree of social awareness constitutes a type of religion in itself.

Further exploration of this theory can be found in chapter one 'Icons and Anti-Icons?', where the treatment Kounellis gives to subject matter of a symbolic nature, to instigate his social and moral intentions, is examined. Amongst many of the pieces discussed in this chapter there is an ever present tension in the suggestion of reference to an iconographic format without the use of direct religious imagery.

The amount of content present in Kounellis's work makes him one of the most complex contemporary artist to decipher. He has altered the perception of the polarities of art genres, swinging abstraction closer to iconism, surrealism bordering on 'dirty-realism' and shock-art having formalist tendencies. His installations become experiments in expanding the cultural boundaries that artists and society in general have imposed on themselves. This constant redefinition allows for a huge a degree of freedom yet Kounellis utilises this freedom in a restricted way, focusing on a set repertoire and methodology. Chapter two, 'The Utilitarian Principles of the Non-Functional' pays attention to this methodology and how the multilayered intentions become resolved as a piece of work. One of the most prominent characteristics of Kounellis's work is the use of movement, both actual and depicted, which has the ability to

capture the attention span of the audience in order to encourage contemplation of the more weighty subject matter concealed beyond the surface. The subtle use of drama is seductive, its origins being deep rooted in the human need for entertainment, which in turn is cathartic. The resonance of movement, as discussed in chapter three 'Visible Movement, Latent Movement' becomes not only the dynamic force of the seductive tendencies in his work but also an integral quality in some of the materials he works with.

The wide spectrum of topics that Kounellis has drawn the attention of the art audience and the general public to is of great relevance. His work does not just deal with art and art production but with the basic concerns of existence. It reflects the outcome of the future as information becomes more readily available. It poses relevant questions what is the function of human existence now other than to be born, educated and die ? His work is comprised of essential information, stripped of superfluous meaning so that viewers can address the piece on their own terms and this represents a clear shift of authority, away from the artist as a god- head and theories of divine inspiration. For the viewer this direct engagement with the work of art provides a self- sufficiency, an inner dialogue that has not been instigated by a direct form of spirituality but that constitutes an independent form of spirituality relevant to our own specific environment. We have a universal need and desire to understand our present world order. Through his work, Jannis Kounellis draws attention to the contradictions and tensions inherent in our own existence and provides us with an experience that becomes a lot more than just art.



### Icons and Anti- Icons.

Greece and Italy, they are places of some cultural significance in their contribution to the ideology of Jannis Kounellis. Both countries have adopted roles in moral guidance through philosophy. Cathartic tragedies, Roman Catholic doctrine, structures for society and art methodology are all reflections of this. Kounellis has absorbed this through his background, his reasoning lies in these classical traditions of moral guidance.

*" Man has divided his life into three paths, the spiritual or religious, the factory and that of art. What do these paths signify? They signify perfection and man moves along them; he moves himself as a perfected principle towards his final conception, i.e towards the absolute; they are three paths along which man moves towards God "*

(Malevich, 1969, p.216 )

God signifies ultimate perfection. The position of the artist in the twentieth century has, on numerous occasions, been identified as the pinnacle of perfection which is deftly epitomised in the Classics. The crux of this situation is the adaption of this classical world order into a modern day context.

For Kounellis perfection alone is not enough. Art theorist Nickolai Kulbin said in 1910, *"In mans nature there are irregularities (nepravil'nosti) . . and so complete harmony will not suit him."* (Cummings, 1980, p.28 )

In the present fragmented state of western society, with various challenges to social unity, there does not exist a single, dominant moral code. Is this the core of Kounellis's observation on present day culture? Does it reflect a search to harmonise body and soul within an increasingly industrial progression? He speaks of a situation where *"body and behaviour are no longer disunited."* (Moure, 1990, p. 203 ). Looking at his piece *Untitled (Cat. no. 25)*, of twelve live horses, their physical presence and their physical behaviour are an integral part of the work: admire the streamlined

construction, strength and energy, think of the equine among the ruins of the battlefield ending its fate immortalised in art.(Pl. 1) These horses become classical icons, stoical images of all that is noble perfection, icons of the Mediterranean aesthetic. But whilst we can see their perfection frozen in classical art, we cannot, see their patient consent to restrained movement, hear their breathing and snorting and smell their body odour, acrid urine and shit. Kounellis provides this and thereby disrupts the illusion that we are often presented with in art - idealisation. The execution of this piece marked the beginning of a different stage his the working practice. It was a different method of conceiving vision by means of a dialectical tension. It was the climax that heralded the use of paradox within an art environment, leaving behind a five year cycle of canvases that were entitled 'Figures and letters ' (1959-63). These pieces featured this desire for the duality of dialect through the use of complex compositional centrality. The introduction of natural elements, like the horses, penetrated the language of common things and by belonging to the sphere of everyday existence they could possess a certain degree of reality, truth and contrast. This reassessment of reality is reminiscent of the work of Carravagio and perhaps it is an attempt to lead art back to its own faith in itself, beyond polished surface and monetary value.

What Kounellis's work achieves through his anti - icons is to project a multiplicity of views. It provokes questioning, comparing and a deconstruction, not necessarily an answer. Our collective experience becomes a search for meaning in our existence amidst the discontinuity of understanding the world, (spiritual, scientific, artistic or otherwise).

*"For the Greeks of the archaic period (6th century B.C) clear - cut distinctions were made between the bodies of men - sub bodies - and those of the Gods - super-bodies. The former were mortal and flawed: the latter were immutable and perfect."* (Sokolo, 1990, p.116)

In the piece *untitled* (Cat. no. 84) ,two gas butane flames dance on the tops of two shoes.( Pl. 2 ) There is something ominous in their presentation, in the absence of the human and the relic - like quality in the presence of the flame. It is the ominous feeling you get when you see a discarded shoe on the street, the feeling of confusion at being told that the red flickering lamp suspended from the church ceiling is to signify God's presence. It is a combination of wonder and fear that give idols their power.It is the close proximity



to danger or the unknown. Yet flames will extinguish and shoes will wear out. Does this icon possess the *"inexplicable duality of a God-man who, by means of His bodily sacrifice brought about the redemption of mankind"* ? (ibid, p.115)

Why has Kounellis chosen to elevate these mundane non-art materials to a status where-by we feel they have an ability to express something? Times have changed, there is no such thing as a non-art material, new forms of symbolism and iconography have replaced the old. The smut from a chimney stack, a pile of coal or a burlap sack; they are as much symbolic statements- about class, belief, belonging, industry, pollution- as a religious ceremony or public declaration. They refer specifically to icons of the a past era, where the industrial revolution was the sacrifice made in order to enhance and provide us with our present civilisation. Kounellis finds himself drawn to the ideal that revolution can bring positive change, the belief (not unlike the 1960's post-war ideology) that art could change the world. The political climate between European and American art production in the 1960's and early 70's was clearly marked by a considerable tension - formalist Europeans and Post-minimalist Americans. As the American critic Don Cameron documented:

*"Celants text of 1968, in which he uses the term 'Arte Povera' for the first time, is subtitled 'Notes for a Guerilla War, and while Celant does not refer to America by name the idea of poverty is intended as a rebuff to the money-led, propagandistic and competitive aspects of the American art market"*

(Thompson, 1996, p.33 )

The difference between the European and American art practice seemed to be an issue of personal freedom. Cloying nationalistic interests and prescriptive ideologies did not seem to be the prime concern for first generation New-York artists Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning. These tensions are clearly detectable in Kounellis's work at this time marking an important stage in his development as an artist and in his concern for the relationship between the 'natural ' and the 'artificial' - the notion that art ( an 'artificial' organised cultural gesture not unlike capitalism) can subvert nature. The interplay between art and nature is clearly illustrated in 'Daisy of fire,' made in 1967- large black metal daisy with a tube at its centre, from which a live flame issues. ( Pl. 3 ) Thirty-five years after the initial stages with 'Arte povera' have Kounellis's concerns become muted with time? Some of his pieces seem to be stuck in a



nostalgic lament for an era past, like the romantic chimney stack in *Untitled* ( *Cat. no. 56*), (Pl. 4). The ironic thing is that the rebellious nature of Kounellis's work has now managed to integrate itself quite well into our present culture. Non-decorative, raw and industrial materials have become an icon of style. In fact quite a few of Kounellis's pieces would fit nicely in the P.O.D or any other trendy nightclub! Is it not the fate of any icon to become popular in time, that is the means of its affective value.

Returning to Greece,- a comparison could be drawn between Pygmalion, King of Cyprus and Jannis Kounellis. Two points become evident; the awesome power of the artist whose own act replicates that of the divine; and the power the creation in turn holds over its master.

The final tension lies in the observation that Kounellis has adopted the role of our 'art-gallery-Aristotle,' subtly insuring our moral guidance through the impending ecological, social and cultural disasters we will no doubt create as we continue our 'progression' into the next century. Despite their prophetic claims, his pieces still hold a firm grip on reality never letting us forget their humble origins. It is for this reason that we can accept them as our own icons.



Plate no. 1 *Untitled* ( *Cat. no. 25* ), twelve live horses, 1969.





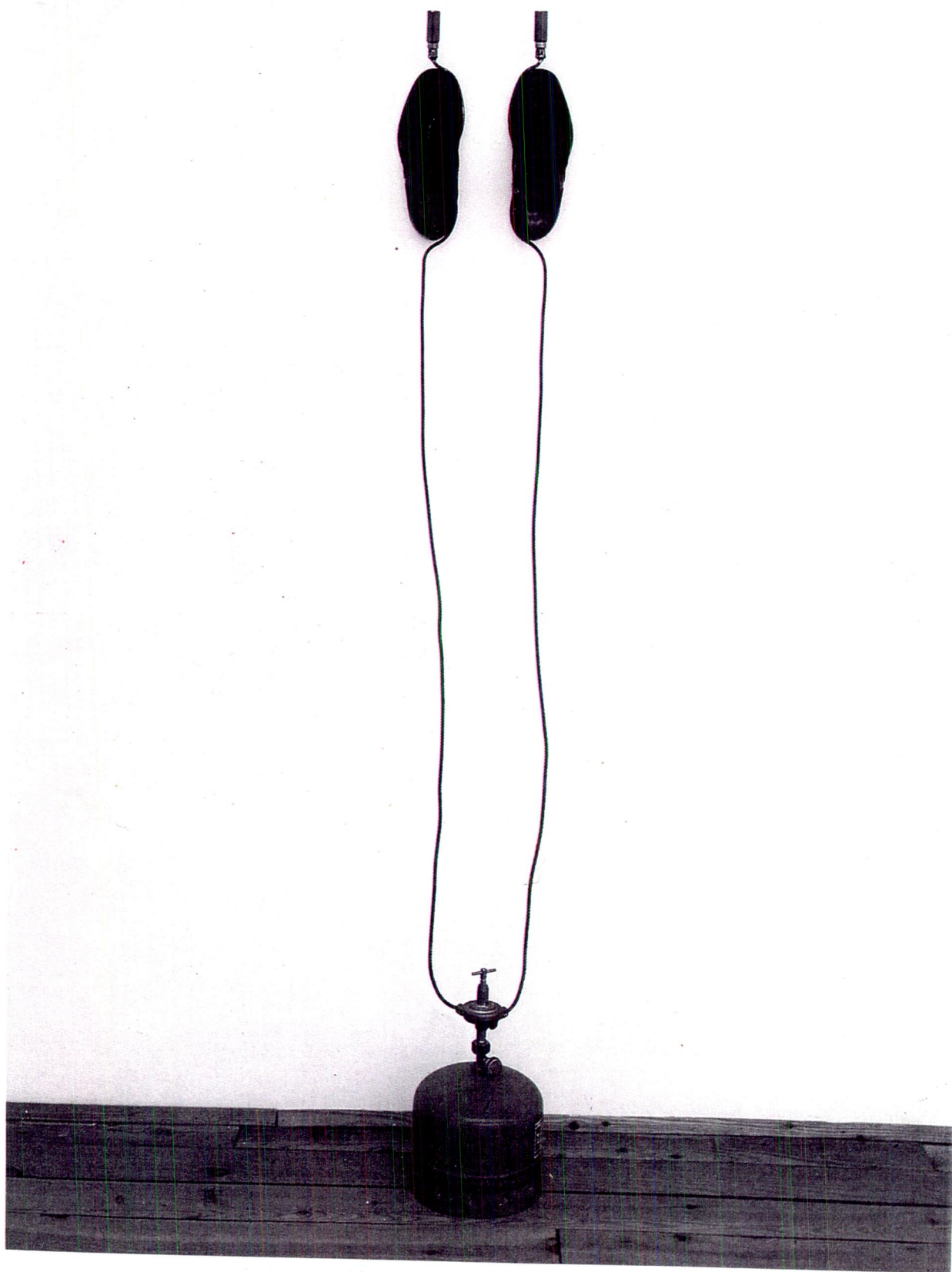


Plate no. 2 *Untitled* (Cat.no. 84) , shoes and burning flames, 1985.





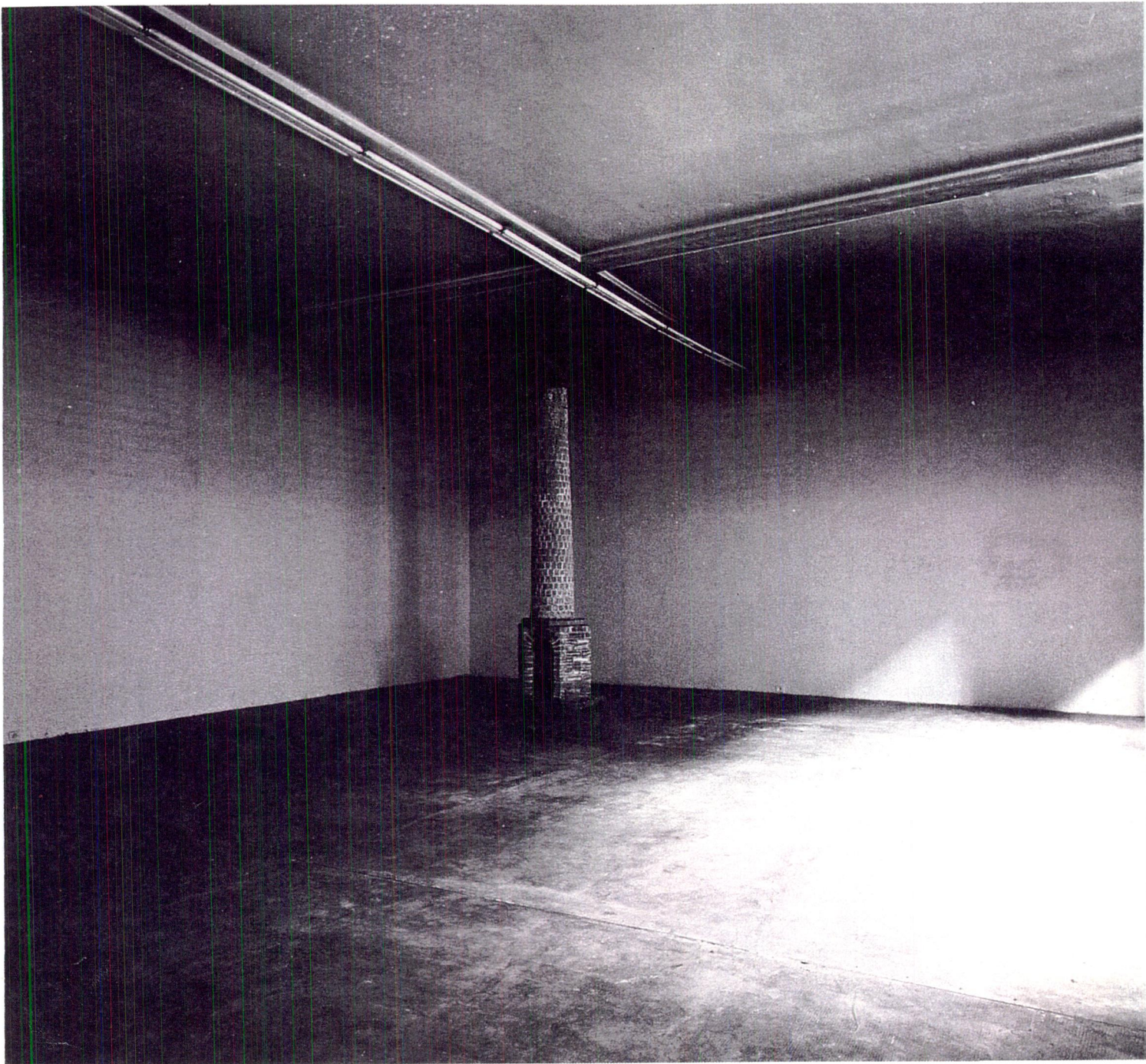


Plate no. 4 *Untitled* (cat.no. 56 ), brick chimney, black smoke stains on the wall and the ceiling, 1976.







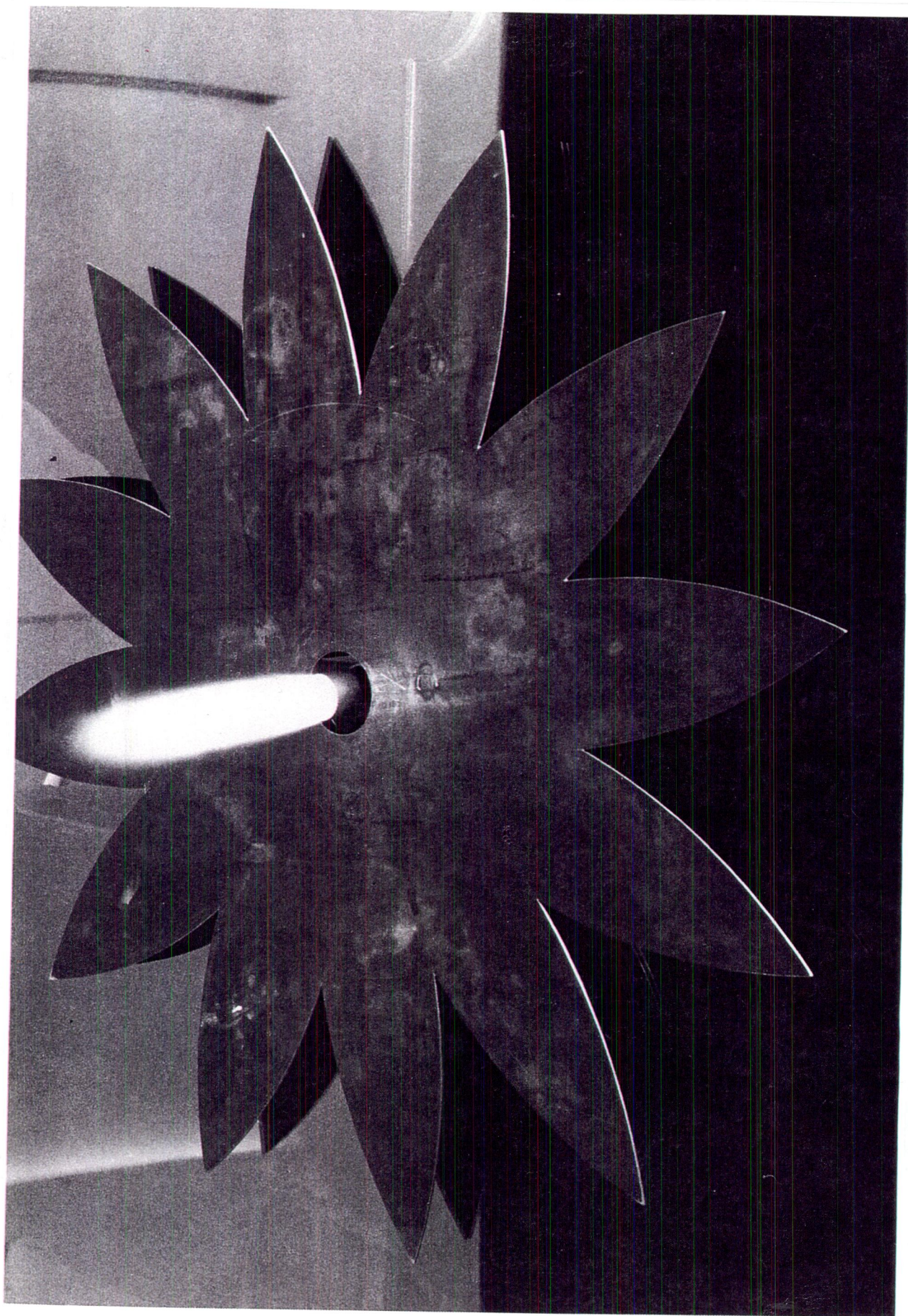


Plate no. 3 *Untitled* (Cat. no. 3 ), iron structure in the form of a flower with a burning propane gas flame, 1967.



### The Utilitarian Principles of the Non-Functional.

What is the non-functional? Who categorises it and deems it non-functional? It has been said that waste material is useless, since the middle ages modern civilisation has pre-occupied itself with matters of hygiene. We have made provision for the disposal of our own human waste and our material waste to be removed from sight and well concealed so as not to offend. Now it has become quite a topical ecological issue to recognise the utilitarian principles of recycling. Although recycling as a world wide concern has only come to the fore recently it has been employed in art making since the first cubist collages and Duchamps readymades were executed. Kounellis employs different methods to invigorate these non-functional materials into art with utilitarian principles, by creating audience dependency, by using methods derived from alchemic intervention and by emphasising tensions present in conflicting environments and materials.

Kounellis work possesses a dependency on its audience to give his pieces the type of existence they must have in order to become art. Despite our acceptance of the mundane qualities his materials possess, they still strike us first. Sheet steel, scrap wood, soot, they become art materials only with reluctance on our part. He has succeeded in seducing us to ask the questions he desires us to ask. The work relies on our ability to solve it.

Kounellis takes an old steel bed , a propane gas torch , some rodents, a few lumps of solid fuel and a cage-what occurs during the process of recycling to convert these base materials into art. Kounellis sees these base materials not as waste but as individual objects, that when combined within a given environment command

an exemplary state of existence. This process of transmutation from base materials into precious ones hails from the medieval tradition of alchemy.

*"The emblematic alchemic operation is the transmutation of base metals into gold, which is conceived as the perfect state toward which they tend in the supreme order of things."*

(Baker, 1987 p.101 )

It highlights an acceptance of the banal as containing the qualities of both the mundane and the exalted. Andre Breton describes this presence as the *"discovery of the everyday marvellous ."* ( Breton, 1970, p.177) Kounellis can distil this essence of the real from the commonplace through welcome intervention by the marvellous. The real is the essence of existence, life and death, the nature of materials and the transience of the human condition. The marvellous occurs in the acts of energy that he uses to convey existence: the burning fuel tablets and frantically active rats. These elements are strongly reminiscent of the occult which includes witchcraft, fire and ritual, a type of pagan act that elevates the non-functional into a state of utilitarian acceptability. Kinetic or active qualities present in some of his pieces have a strain of alchemic interference running in them. This could be recognised in the *"Tableaux vivants"* (Weldman, 1992 p.288) of the mid to late 1960's featuring live plants, animals and human beings, right up to more recent work situated in an abandoned power station. The works involved the introduction of activity into inanimate spaces. In the case of both environments, the gallery and the power station, he introduced dynamism as a metaphor for return of life. In the disused power station made functional once again, he united two parts of the building by reactivating the railway track between them. It transported a platform bearing sacks of coal from one space to another. This project focused not on utilising the factory for its original purpose but as a reincarnation of its former self as an art installation. It becomes a collective work of reconstruction. Originally a space born from tragedy, tragedy is then overcome through the intervention of the installation, healing the wounds of its disuse by not hiding them.



Alchemic traits can be found in his constant choice of materials. Repetitive use of fuels, burlap, animal and metal substances takes on the format of the alchemists ingredients, each with their own specific properties and when combined create different reactions. Some of these materials typify the process of alchemic transmutability-having duality of presence or the ability to change. For example, wax and lead can be altered into solid or liquid forms. The nature of our approach to a Kounellis sculpture demands a degree of alchemic process- translation of symbols in order to equate some meaning in the work.

*"The alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious, but also directly to matter in which he could hope to induce transformation through the power of the imagination."*

(Jung, 1963, p.222)

This observation also reinforces the function of audience dependency which was discussed earlier in this chapter. The use of alchemic process highlights an on going contradiction, between that of our modern civilisation and the spiritual dimensions of another state of awareness.

*"...a search for new spiritual values that issue from a radical transformation of consciousness, a consciousness that was iconoclastic in character and that responded to the contradictions of the modern era."*

(Sokolowski, 1990, p.116 )

In many ways Kounellis's sculptures seem to desire an inner dialogue with their audience and hence invoke a new type of spiritualism via the medium of modern elements (coal, steel etc.)



It is evident that he has remained faithful to his vocabulary of non-art materials. Among them are natural substances:wax, gold, lead, rock, wood, coal, fire, wool, and smoke traces. Most of these For example, wax and lead can be altered into a solid or liquid forms. the nature of our approach to a Kounellis sculpture demands a degree of alchemic process - translation of symbols in order to equate some meaning in the work.

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It is evident that Kounellis has remained faithful to his vocabulary of non-art materials. Among them are natural substances : wax , gold , lead , burlap , rock , wood , coal , fire ,wool and smoke traces. Most of these materials can also be associated with construction and commerce. The ambiguity of the natural and the man-made emphasises his fondness of contradiction.

The art also becomes something of a homage to itself, its predecessors and its peers : for instance wax can be associated with Beuys, the black painted square with Malevich ,canvas and burlap with Fontana and Burri and wool with Manzoni. Kounellis has used materials in various states. In the late 60's he showed a preference for materials in an uncomposed, raw state ; ravelled heaps of wool, a sack filled with coffee, unorganised piles of burlap etc.



In the 70's, he dealt with a rather contrary method of working, involving man made props such as reproduction classical busts, articles of clothing, toy trains and musical instruments. The movement from the uncomposed to the more refined creates a greater complexity in Kounellis's sculpture. Use of steel (first appearing in the late 60's) has become his foundation. Building beams, panels and shelves dwell with or contain the art work. Ignoring the industrial reference, steel has become the mediator amidst tensions between sculpture and painting. Large rectangular panels of steel contain gas flames that mark the surface as they burn. Further evidence of this is visible in other wall mounted constructions that can range in size from a stage set to a small icon. Most of the materials are recognisable as individual objects but by subjecting us to see them in a certain way, placed in a particular site, what can it mean by accepting these constructions as art ? By deeming them valid one could take numerous readings from his metaphors; are his pieces in general commenting on historical materialism, ecological issues or is it being anti-establishment? There are so many possible non-verbal symbols that, when juxtaposed with others present in the work the final outcome is a mass of questions pertaining to having some utilitarian principle that we are required to find. This seems to be one of the biggest challenges that Kounellis gives to our treatment of sculpture and to the traditional view of meaningful sculptural issues. Kounellis communicates masterfully with humble materials, he mocks our automatic acceptance of ancient and modern culture, he advocates revolutionary thought, action and anarchic aesthetics and he protests againsts the established order of society, art and politics.

In 1987 he created a piece on the first floor of an abandoned warehouse in Chicago (Pl. 5). It embodies some of the aforementioned traits. A thirty foot wall was gilded in goldleaf. Nearby nailed to some double doors was a slat of coat hooks (reminiscent of Duchamp ), a felt coat and hat (reminiscent of Beuys ) and hundreds of folded burlap sacks pressed beneath a H structure made from I beams. The contrast of gold and industrial materials in the factory context bring to mind various tensions and contradictions, oppositions of labour and capital, history and utopia and of wages and profit. It is possible to realise where the work begins but due to the physical elements being so integral it is hard to see where the work ends. It is surprising (and a slight mockery!) that the distinction between what was art and what was not art was made at all considering the aesthetically rich, dirty, realist environment. The gilding of the wall equates with the gilding of frames and how a gilded frame communicates pride of possession and the worth of an artwork.

*"The gold of Medieval art stresses the fact that the figure must be viewed at its highest splendour."*

(Bakargiev, 1987,p.59 )

It was a well timed installation coinciding with an exhibition of frames (some of them bound to be gilded!) dating from the 1300's to 1900 at the Art Institution of Chicago. By gilding the wall of a site in urban decay Kounellis approaches the issue of the frames in true realist and revolutionary fashion. To accept his installation as valid art you have to embrace the derelict site. The gold seduces. To distance the cloying radiance of the intense colour is to be able to see the gold as a metaphor for the way we see the world. Our inherited historical value systems are subject to re-evaluation.

The physical world should not be seen purely for its value but for its potential to be loved and valued despite any flaws it may possess. This therefore acknowledges that contradictions can even exist within the confines of historical materialism.

Realism versus surrealism

Sacred versus profane

Pure versus impure

Blessed versus damned

Abstract versus concrete

Birth versus decay

Possible versus impossible

Soft matter versus acidic matter

corporal versus conceptual

The list of emerging contradictions within Kounellis work is endless and their purpose is resonant. Whether defined as pluralism or duality their presence serves to cut, corrode, open and fragment, to decompose imposed cultural regimes. The activity in these tensions incite us to ask many questions about the future of our society.





Plate no. 5 *Civil Tragedy* (Cat. no. 55), two doors and a wall of bricks covered with gold sheeting; hat and overcoat on the hanger of one of the doors, 1969.







Visible movement, latent movement.

The use of movement in Kounellis's sculpture is a correspondence with life. Movement, when incorporated into work seems to have the ability to seduce the audience. It is an embodiment of what (we as) an audience want from life, to express change and have the ability to understand it. In turn that is what we want from art, to understand its expression of change. Movement communicates a correlation between an event and an expression. It symbolises development and change, though it must be stated that with all forms of progression there is a growth and a decline of awareness and experience. This is the contradiction that Kounellis finds most seductive. It allows him freedom, in his expression of the movement and change in life, in his desire to experiment with the means and object of his expression in art and his study of and feeling for reality.

Visible or actual movement, in the dynamic sense, is present in those pieces that actually move (Pl.s 6 & 2). They can change with the movement of the spectator and they have an actual time duration or limited time factor. In the piece *Untitled*, (cat. no. 29), made in 1969, there are two spring mattresses, one with metal plates supporting burning tablets of solid fuel, the other with rats in a cage. (Pl. 6). Here Kounellis uses two kinetic elements, fire and animals. There is a silence, a pervading sense of danger on a human scale in the atmosphere of this work because of the familiar domestic nature of the subject matter.

The confined , yet frantic movement of the rats plays against the exposed flickering flames. The tension is subtly depicted in the contrast - the aggression of the confined rats versus the aggressive exposure of the slow burning naked flame. This is unlike latent or depicted movement , that had existed once and is now expended or that is very slight (Pl. 6 ) This affects us with sensations that only suggest motion. In July 1983 ,in an installation entitled "*Untitled ( Cat. no. 7 )*" (Pl. 7 ) three components are visible , a steel container packed with fleece , a large rectangular steel container with four drills , each one filled with gravel and cacti plants and on the wall a live parrot on a steel perch. The box with fleece could be preventing the movement of the fleece like a restrainer or is it a receptical for the transportation of the fleece? The cacti are live, slowly growing despite their artificial environment , the steel casing. The parrot (it isn't clear whether or not it has the ability to talk!) stays on its perch ,like an irrelevant sentry, separated from its natural environment as are all the organic elements in this installation. Even if the parrot decided to stray from its perch it wouldn't get far in the white room. There is a weighty sense of confinement despite the introduction of life into this otherwise dead space. The movement seems concealed , nearly obliterated and completely futile making a mockery of movement itself as an art technique. In the stationery piece chimney stack (Cat. no 56 ) the strong absence of movement suggests the extinction of a social class that evolved before the technological era.( Pl. 4 )The chimney becomes a funerary icon. The black smoke stains suggest the extinction of a landscape, creating shadows and clouds. The absence of the fire that created the smoke indicates an action past and taking on board a more historical viewpoint the chimney stack could be read as a monumental icon to the millions of Jews that



were subjected to genocide under Hitler's Third Reich. Kounellis blackens the chimney as an icon with the use of smoke. Its trace movement becomes the negative presence that enhances the absence. In this piece Kounellis refers to his use of black smoke in relation to a scream, "*the first phase of a negative, radically anti-dialectical expression which is consequently capable of attesting to a condition.*" (Moure, 1990, p.22)

The revival of tragedy, through the use of absence and presence in the form of Kounellis's sculpture can be seen as a liberation of tragedy which extends to his language as a means of communication and towards a greater freedom of conception of the space.

Movement or lack of it, is relevant not only in his sculptures but also in the environment's in which he chooses to place them and sometimes in the audiences that come to view them. In probably one of his most successful installations, the Eire street installation in Chicago, dozens of miniature toy trains chugged around tracks which encircled columns until one eventually flew off! (Pl. 8)

The engines are named after a litany of fabled rail lines; Santa Fe, Pennsylvania, Topeka, Achison, Reading and New Haven, becoming an elegy to America's epic period of expansionist dreams. To the people in Chicago, however it represented the bygone era of the 'golden age'. But any optimism is undermined by the trains' repetitive circular motion. Visible and concealed movement in the sculptural context of Kounellis's work becomes the motion of making, the composition and the constructing process.

Movement (in an art context) has evolved, beginning its existence perhaps on a cave wall where a depiction of an animal flees its hunter, progressing to the academies where paintings were executed with complex interpretations of movement in compositions

and leaving us finally , at the end of the twentieth century with a continuing futurist fascination for speed and dynamism. It is true to say that movement (physically and in an art context,) is responsible for its own discoveries and progression. In our own progression as a modern civilisation we have forced movement into becoming a complex symbolic construct for the passing of time and in our industrial haste we have chosen to forget its organic origins. This could be the reasoning behind Kounellis repetitive patterns (rhythms in movement itself ) in material usage. By remaining constant to a combination of hard and soft materials (inorganic and organic) Kounellis creates a tension (a dynamic kinetic in itself) underlining the dialectic nature of the work. The tensions of contradictions between past and present , sense and nonsense , soft and hard , create an intellectual kinetic motion of thought , being and situation.



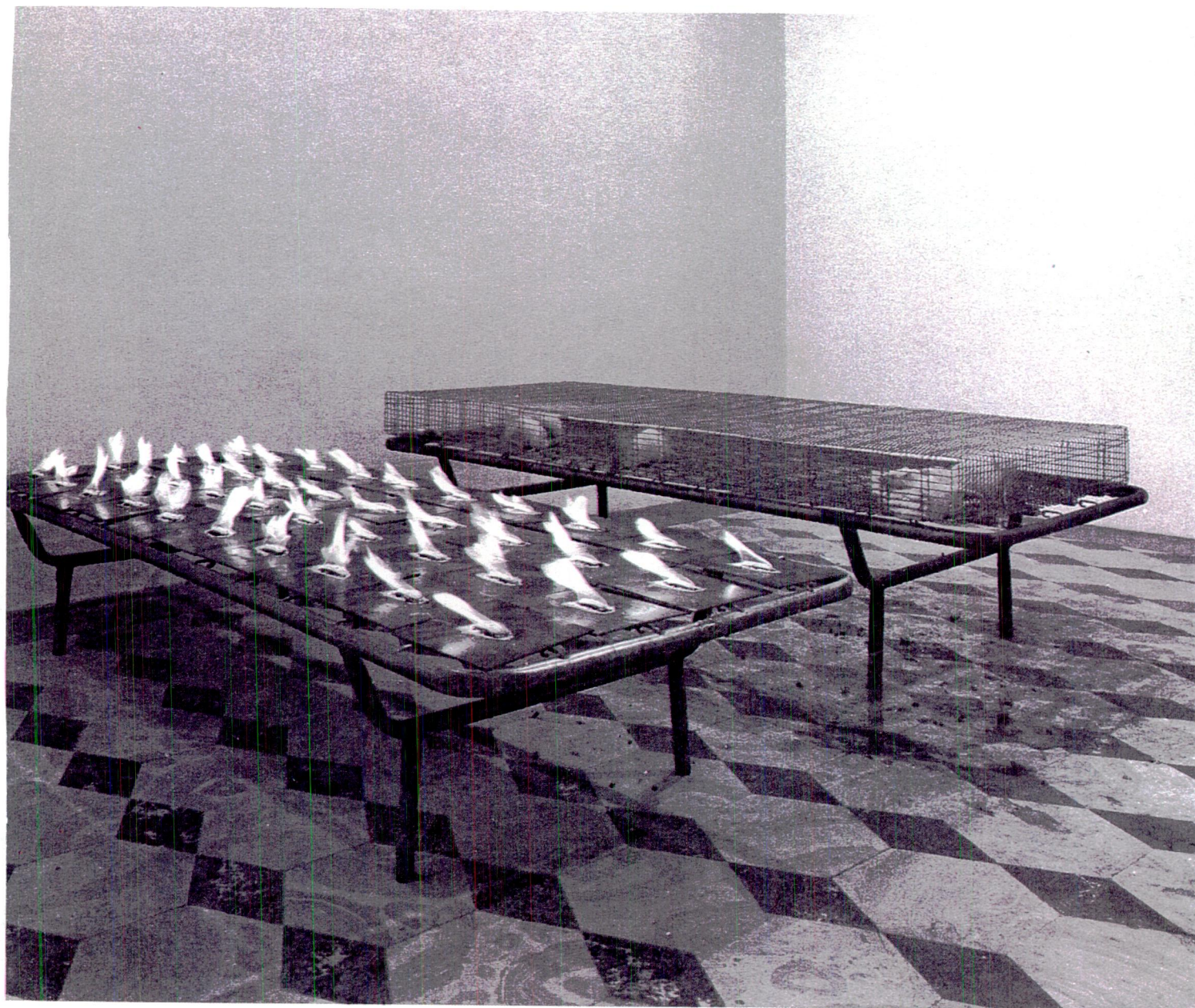


Plate no. 6 *Untitled* (Cat. no. 29 ), two spring mattresses, one with metal plates supporting burning tablets of solid fuel, the other with rats in a cage, 1969.







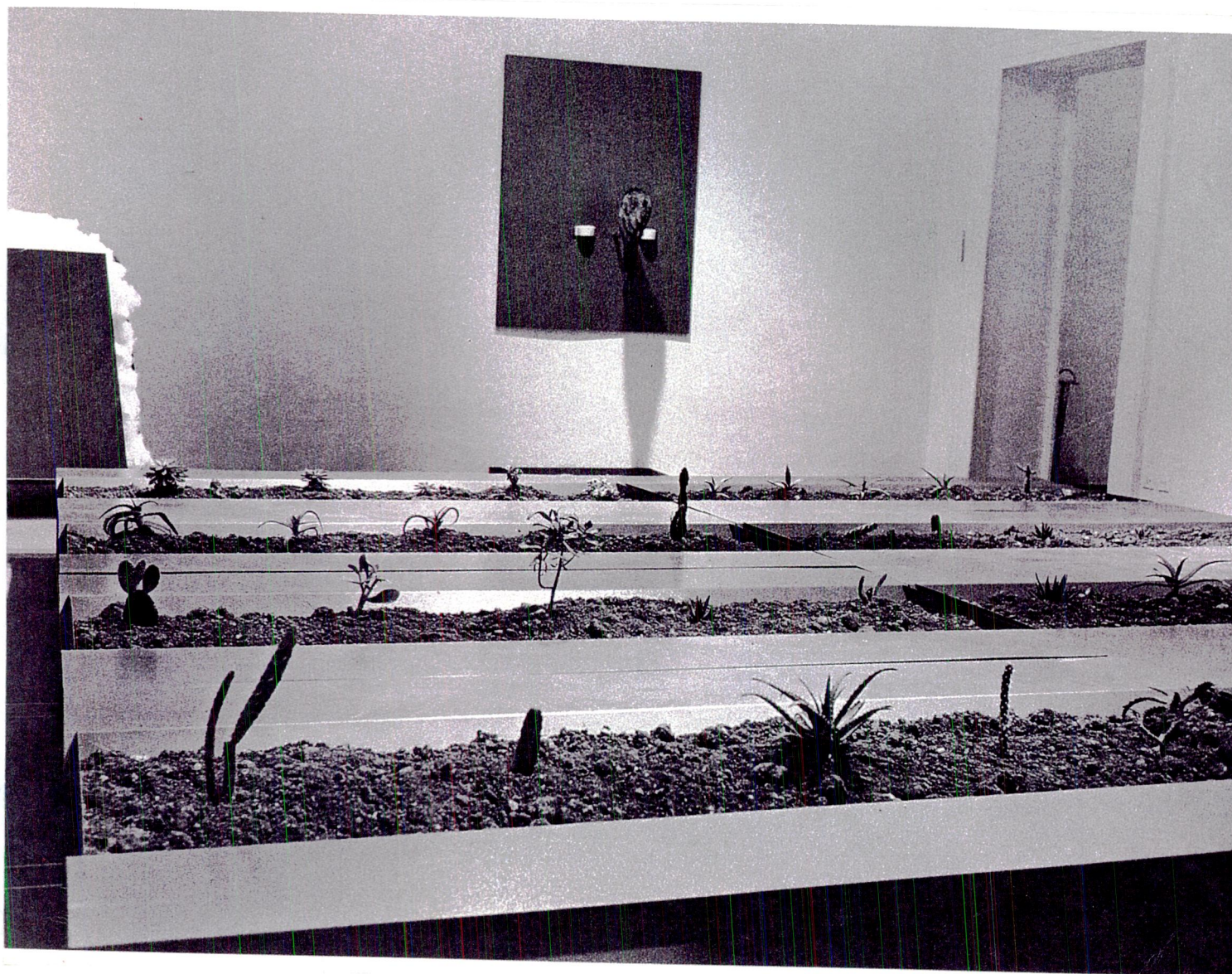


Plate no. 7, *Untitled* (Cat.no 7 ),work consisting of three elements :varnished iron structure containing cotton;four varnished iron receptacles containing earth and cacti; varnished iron panel with perch occupied by live parrot, 1667.









Plate no. 8 *Untitled* (Cat. no.58 ) ,miniture electric train on a circle of iron fixed to a column (detail), 1977.







### Conclusion.

Jannis Kounellis continually breaks with his earlier existence and embraces each environment differently soaking in its characteristics and creating a piece of work suited to that context. He alternates his subjects in order not to be identified with only one. Recurring materials are pushed to their capacity as he rearranges their former coordinates of representation. His strong commitment, ideologically and politically to reality creates this continuum of altered perspective which in turn assists the dialectic process. If a definition of the content of the reality present in Kounellis's work was required, it could be found in an examination of his use of multiple tensions and contradictions. Reality is a hard state to isolate due to wide cultural differences of this modern global community. Reality cannot be equated on a global scale. Kounellis depictions of reality are applicable only in a European and American context, this is evident due to his preference for exhibiting in the Western world. His concerns with reality are derived from his radical exploration for a modern day classicism in those remnants of industrial relics that progressive society has provided. It cannot be seen as an attempt to seek Utopia but rather an effort to draw attention to the moral responsibility we have to bring to the fate of our future existence, be that cultural, environmental or otherwise. These sculptures are burdened with a weighty function, to make the audience aware of their "utilitarian principle". Kounellis can compel an audience to generate their own thoughts on his subject matter and the environment it inhabits, in relation to or in comparison to their own existence and specific habitual environment.

It is a task that most prefer to turn a blind eye to! Pressing issues like poverty, death, pollution, spirituality, materialism, art politics etc. are not easy topics to subtly introduce into the gallery without creating an atmosphere of despair. Kounellis using site-specific methodology and recognisable materials seduces us into looking closer at the nature of the tensions and contradictions of the aforementioned realities (poverty, materialism etc. ). It is a dialectical situation which possesses a certain degree of idealism but solutions or inner laws are not dictated to us, a continuous flow of objective and subjective ideas offer a multiplicity of views. His use of tensions and contradictions create a curiosity for the audience just like a street brawl always pulls spectators. Conflict is one of the most human of traits and is quickly recognisable. Horses confined in a gallery space, a large black metal daisy that jets a flame from its centre, gold leaf covered walls in a dilapidated part of town are all seductive situations when examined from a visual and theoretical point of view. The seduction is extended into conflicting use of materials, hard and soft surfaces, natural and artificial composites, solid and liquid consistencies which all texturally intrigue the eye. Perception is the first step in initiating a thought process. Representationally, Kounellis's materials could be still identified with non-art materials which further enhances the paradox between art and reality. Seductive use of movement, kinetic elements in stationery environments and vice-versa become physical examples of tensions and contradictions. Use of dramatic movement has a mystical and alchemic quality, a primordial attraction that suggests a presence independent of man, like fire, a natural element that can cause destruction unless understood, harnessed and controlled. It is as if Kounellis, by using these natural elements



wants to indicate the close relationship we can have with our environment, like being able to realise that the contrasting qualities like those present in fire, has both the ability to comfort and destroy, are an integral part of reality. This mode of thought could be defined as a spiritual one because we are challenged to consider its relevance to life. Whether or not it seems like a natural or artificial method of thinking for the present state of society, it does offer seductive possibilities; sentiment, nostalgia and a brave optimism. Kounellis's use of tensions and contradictions are not purely reserved for aggravating our social and moral conscience's, they are provocative pieces of sculpture but even if all subject matter was to be ignored they would still be visually interesting pieces. Kounellis allows us freedom of choice as an audience, we are under no obligation to take the piece further than face value but certain materials always act as signifiers. To see live horses in gallery becomes more than replicating an act of visual entertainment ! Kounellis has said that" *The passage through contradictions and across landscapes leads to the awareness of limit.*" and that "*however revolutionary it may be, my project is the only one possible with which I can rediscover the integrity of an image of our culture.*" ( Moure, 1990, pp. 230 + 225. ) The sculptures and installations of Jannis Kounellis are a creative response to the crux of society's condition as the second millennium approaches. The end of one era heralds a new future with numerous possibilities and uncertainties and perhaps he is allowing us seductive insight into the format of those complex tensions and contradictions that no doubt will occur with the future synthesis of our different cultures.

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