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JANNIS
KOUNELLIS
XXII STATIONS ON AN ODYSSEY 1969–2010

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Jannis Kounellis is considered one of the most important artists of the second half of the twentieth century. Starting at the end of the 1950s, he developed an artistic vision that crystallized itself a decade later to create a vast oeuvre whose austerity and force unite with a sense of poetry and reflection, deeply-rooted in European culture, to express a contemporary message reflecting on the reality of our world. The pioneer of Arte Povera has incessantly created a visual vocabulary of an incomparable richness that assisted him in giving expression to the complementary values of the structure and the tangible, the material and the living, light and shadow, hardness and softness, heaviness and lightness, the opaque and the transparent, sound and silence, the visible and the invisible, faith and doubt, the closed and the open, of myth and history. Although the face of man only appears rarely in his work, his presence is no less strongly felt. It is expressed by the measure, the numbers, the objects he has created, the materials he has collected, the sonorities he has produced, the spaces he has constructed, the myths he has invented, the memory he has preserved, the images he has conceived.

This book has the goal of presenting and analyzing this work through the 22 alternative stations that Kounellis has created by investing spaces used for industrial production, for the storage of goods, spaces of life and authority, of faith, of knowledge, and artistic contemplation, with the fragments of his oeuvre and his imagination in an attempt to crystallize them on each occasion in a “unique act”, a total work of art. This includes spaces invested with their architecture, history and truth, and Kounellis enters into an enriching dialogue with them. It is in order to preserve the visual and textual memory of all these spaces where the work of the artist unravels to form a continuity, but whose existence is limited by time, that we have undertaken this investigation. It would not have been possible without the valuable assistance of the many people who supported and aided me in carrying out this task.

First of all, I must express my gratitude to Jannis Kounellis, who agreed to discuss these stations with me as well as with other authors to permit a more profound understanding of his ideas, of his creative processes and his vision. He followed our work closely and never ceased encouraging us and providing us with his valuable reflections. The project would never have seen the light of day without the continuous, cordial, constructive help of Michelle Coudray, the artist’s wife, who did everything possible and gave us access to all her indispensable sources of information – especially the archives. We thank her for her determination in seeing this project reach a successful conclusion, as well as Elisabeth Campolongo, the scientific assistant who deals with the archives, for her valuable assistance throughout our work.

This book begins with an introductory essay on the ensemble of the projects and their characteristics as well as a general analysis of Kounellis’ oeuvre. The central section is devoted to the 22 individual projects. We thought it essential to quote the individual authors who were directly involved in their organization, who saw them, or who wrote about them at a later date, in the texts that describe and analyze the projects so that this variety of viewpoints, and the reflections they elicited, could better describe Kounellis’ work. The authors and their texts are listed in the notes at the end of each chapter but we would like to draw particular attention to some by thanking them for their important contributions made over the past forty years: Jean-Christophe Amman, Dan Cameron, Germano Celant, Barbara Catoir, Bruno Cora, Rudi Fuchs, Mary Jane Jacob, Thomas McEvilley, Friedhelm Mennekes, Gloria Moure, Reiner Speck, Catherine Strasser, Denys Zacharopoulos and Adachiara Zevi.

We would also like to express our sincere thanks to the three photographers who created the visual testimonials to these projects and who have followed Kounellis’ work in such a reliable manner over the past decades: Claudio Abate, Aurélio Amendola and Manolis Baboussis.

I am equally indebted to my publisher Jürgen Tesch, who showed faith in my work and encouraged me with his wise advice, and Petra Lüer for her dedicated work on the design of the book. And finally, I wish to thank my wife Esther for her priceless assistance and her understanding, without which it would not have been possible to achieve my task.

We should also point out that the third section of the book, the analytical catalogue of the works, provides a better understanding of Kounellis’ creative process and refers the reader back to the photos of the works in the respective projects, whereas the illustrations accompanying the works are explained in detail in the texts devoted to them.

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

ALTERNATIVE STATIONS ON AN ODYSSEY

The aim of this book is to make an examination of Kounellis' spatio-temporal course over the last forty years stopping off at a certain number of significant alternative stations on the way. These actually questioned and widened the methods for presenting a work of art in a gallery or museum and even forced the artist to redefine the role of the studio. This change in attitude is the result of a radical reversal in artistic practices that took place after the middle of the twentieth century, and Kounellis belongs to that generation of artists who created a new language that broke down the borders between art and reality. In order to better reflect on the realities of life, these artists felt it necessary to present their work in new contexts and enter into a dialogue with these. Kounellis himself expanded his sphere of activity and took possession of the spaces that had been placed at his disposal without however renouncing the parallel role played by the studio, the gallery and the museum. That is why it is important to examine the different spaces for presenting works of art in their dialectic relationships because, even if their roles are no longer clearly defined today, they are integral parts of the creative process of the artist and the visibility of his work.

Here, we will emphasize the oeuvre presented as a totality in the context of alternate stations, without neglecting to make a detailed analysis of each of its significant elements. Presenting a work does not merely mean making it visible, but also giving it a body, restoring its aura and extracting it from the selective filter of our memory that only preserves an immaterial inner image of it. Nothing is able to replace our immediate experience with the work in a shared space, nor the dialogue between our senses that capture the energy it emits, and the flow of sensations and reflections that we project on it in return. Looking at a work implies a reciprocal reward in the sense that it comes back to life with each new glance we give it and, at the same time, touches the very depths of our soul. Every time a work of art is displayed it is given a new context (the space as defined by its architecture, other works) and subsequently becomes united in a totality that invests it with new significance. Of course, the studio is the place where Kounellis conceives and often realizes his works, and the gallery is where he prefers to experiment. The gallery (a kind of laboratory open to the public) acts as a springboard where he can test the effect of his creation in a neutral and relatively modest space. That is where he can evaluate a work's potential, where it is often baptized, and where it frequently receives its original identity. But Kounellis sometimes manages to skip this phase, and even the one in the studio, to create his works directly in –

and for – the sites he has been invited to work with, as we will see in the chronological survey of the twenty-two alternate stations described and analyzed later in this volume. We must note straight away that more than half of the works catalogued were realized in situ, which clearly shows just how important the alternative stations were for the dynamics of the artist's creative process.

In the middle of the 1960s, Kounellis' studio functioned as the place where he both created and showed his new works. Apart from the few visitors who were eye witnesses, we only have photographs to bear witness to how this renewal of his artistic language developed.

In the *Twelve Live Horses (I)*,¹ presented at the Attico Gallery in Rome in January 1969, Kounellis worked exclusively at the location: The old garage that had been converted into a gallery served him as a studio where he could transform its space into a stable and, in this way, invest it with the status of a work of art. This memorable exhibition also introduced the perimeter as a structure of Kounellis' "cavità". In 1976, Kounellis presented his *Louisiana (II)* project at the Hotel della Lunetta in Rome and, for the first time, imbued a space of active life with a dialogue. Through these two projects, he defined a new spatial concept for his work that he would further develop in the realization of all of the "unique oeuvres" that he subsequently presented at different alternate stations. Composed of a variety of elements, each of them forms a totality; this book aims at preserving a precise, multiple memory of this oeuvre going beyond its ephemeral existence.

After the *Twelve Live Horses* in 1969, and before the station at the *Entrepôt Lainé (III)* in Bordeaux in 1985, Kounellis presented around fifty exhibitions in galleries and, after 1976, a dozen in museums. During these fifteen years, he laid the foundations for his future work: A visual vocabulary extracted from reality with a syntax he had developed and which played an important part in post-1970 contemporary art. Before analyzing this syntax, let us draw up a list (possibly incomplete) of this visual vocabulary in order to be able to fully understand its opulence and diversity. When dealing with manifestations of life, we notice the parrot, the cactus, birds, the egg, the horses, carcasses of beef, the fly, the scarab beetle, red fish, butterflies and flowers. The organic and inorganic worlds are typified by coal, cotton, wood, ground coffee, various grains, hair, iron, lead, gold, stones, fire and smoke. The longest list is made up of those objects that represent a veritable inventory of reality as formed by man: jute sacks, chains, birdcages, bottles of butane gas with their nozzles, bells, hemp ropes and metal wires, fragments of old boats, ancient plaster casts, coat racks, black coats and hats, kerosene lamps, bowls, lit candles, jugs, drawing paper, wardrobes, tables, miniature trains, boat sails, the painter's palette, sewing machines, knives, barrels, eyeglasses, shoes, musical instruments, metal bed springs, carpets, fishing nets, boat anchors, books, glass receptacles, and aquariums.

It is necessary to add elements conceived and worked by Kounellis – mainly metal structures – to this list of objects: low wheelbarrows, differently shaped containers, trays, scale pans, dividing walls, panels. The last mentioned are on a human scale and we find them throughout the work: 100 × 70 cm (sheet of Fabriano drawing paper), 200 × 90 (metal bed springs), 200 × 180 cm (double bed). They embody the conglomeration of the manifestations of the living materials and objects that are part of Kounellis' mises-en-scene. Other metal elements, such as easels, beams, pedestals, spirals, hooks, as well as cloth bundles filled with various materials, cut-to-size wooden beams, lead balls, etc. must be added to these structures. These lists give a clear indication of Kounellis' profound attachment to all manifestations of reality and his desire – and also his commitment – to make them the elements of an artistic syntax. But they would be incomplete if we did not mention the various ways Kounellis made use of each category. He cut, folded, rolled, melted, sharpened, tied, placed, piled, put together, sawed, and lit the materials. When dealing with the objects, Kounellis stacked, sewed, filled, fixed, split, lit, hung, painted, hooked, and hid them. Here as well, the lists are not complete but they give an idea of the multitude of actions that can be performed on the objects and materials of reality in order to create a syntax; that is to say, a work of art.

However, Kounellis' interest is not limited to the mere implementation of the real in his work; it also stretches to cover more expansive spheres and sometimes invisible phenomena and it is important to summarize the multitude of aspects of a dialectic interest that thinks of itself as universal and aspires to creating a unitary vision.

Kounellis is not interested in the architecture of a building but its function; not in the chronology of history but its finality; not in the space but the perimeter defining it; not in the material but in its alchemic transformation; not in the shape but the structure; not in the size but the scale; not in the light but in the shadow it creates; not in the flame but in its disappearance in the ether; not in the movement but in the dynamics of the living; not in the object but in the man who conceived it; not in the history of art but in the masterpieces that run through it. On the other hand, the artist is quite clearly interested in the symbolic and spiritual significance of all of the aspects we have just cited: architecture, history, space, material, shape, size, light, the flame, movement, the object and the history of art.

After having listed and introduced the material and spiritual elements of the oeuvre, it is time to analyze how they are put together in the exhibition spaces in general and the twenty-two alternate stations in particular.

From 1985 to 2010, Kounellis followed his alternative route with remarkable steadfastness and – considering all the stations – a perennial rhythm. During this same period, he was to present more than 100 exhibitions, which form an indispensable complement to the successive stations, in galleries and museums.

Here are some examples of the dynamics of the relationship between the various exhibition spaces. The luminous breath of the lit arrow-torches that were first shown in the space of the Christian Stein Gallery in Milan in 1985 was to give life to the arches of the *Entrepôt Lainé, Bordeaux* (III). They would alternate with panels painted red and black, and then with another covered with wooden beams. All of these elements created a polyphony of forms, materials, light and colours with the architecture of the warehouse that spread throughout the space. We must point out that we will soon find these lit arrow-torches in Chicago (IV) in a completely different context and that the first work making use of lit nozzles of gas fixed to the perimeter of a space was presented as early as in 1969 in the Iolas Gallery in Paris. On the other hand, Kounellis worked in situ at the *Stommeln Synagogue* (VI) to create a direct dialogue with the architecture of this cultic space and its tragic history. After being realized in – and for – this synagogue, the work was decontextualized and integrated into the station at the Halle Kalk in Cologne (XI) in 1997 where it took on a new significance while still maintaining its original identity. At each of these alternate stations, Kounellis created a work that he forced us to consider as an absolutely separate totality but, at the same time, as an element in a continuity guaranteed by the numerous links uniting them. Each of these is noted in the catalogue of the works at the end of this book where the places and dates of their first exhibition and presence at different stations are mentioned. Kounellis' works gained in depth and density when he

staged and recontextualized them from space to space. In the chronology of the oeuvre, its date of creation is followed by those corresponding to its presentation in various spaces. If appropriate, the work will be presented either in its original materiality or in a reconstructed, or even transformed, version. In this way, Kounellis questions the rigid, final nature of the work of art and demands that it remain at his disposal, as a permanent, conceptual, energetic reservoir for his future work. The oeuvre is in a perpetual state of evolution; its existence is, to a certain extent, cyclic. Even a work with a perfect structure is capable of giving birth to a new work that will take up certain elements and, by adding others, metamorphose the original concept. Each work is a link in the long chain forming the unity of the work. Each link has its determined position in the chronology of the oeuvre but can have a relationship with other links in the chain at the same time – a phenomenon we discover frequently throughout the chain of alternative stations. This chain lengthens from station to station and it is this continuity that establishes the strength and unity of Kounellis' oeuvre. The temporary character of each station results in a creative impulse that will give birth to the next links placing the work in a continuous dynamism.

Unless they come about through a deliberate choice made by the artist, such as was the case with the *Hotel della Lunetta* (II) and the *Cargo Ionion* (VIII), the availability of the alternative stations is the result of double development – both socio-economic and cultural. As a result of various circumstances – mainly economic, but sometimes also historical – numerous architectural bodies that had lost their original function, or even those they had subsequently been given, were often left empty and abandoned. Others, such as the National Library in Sarajevo (XVII), were partly destroyed. On the other hand, the developments in contemporary art that began in the 1970s led to the creation of numerous alternative exhibition spaces. In view of this double development, many local communities endeavoured to restore and adapt certain abandoned buildings for cultural and artistic activities; sometimes temporary, but frequently permanent. This was the case with most of the alternate stations that Kounellis was invited to work in after 1985 and it must be stressed that – in seventeen of them – he was the first artist to enter into a dialogue with these spaces and their architecture constructed between the 14th and 20th centuries. That they are located in ten countries and twenty different cities gives an idea of the diversity of the challenges Kounellis was faced with in the course of his odyssey that had its most recent stopover in the underground space in central London (XXII) but has still not reached its final destination.

Whenever he decided on an alternative station, Kounellis visited and investigated the site several times to develop his approach and define the elements that would allow him to confront the particular spirit of the site, the mystery hidden in its spaces, the characteristics of its architectural envelope, the traces of its past and the magnitude of its potential, as well as its surroundings in the city or countryside that were part of its history and had often determined its construction and even the length of time it had been in existence. Kounellis fully realizes that all these concentric circles fit into each other, and knows that certain of them are visible and tangible, whereas others can only be guessed at or sensed. Only when he has committed all of his being to this confrontation is he able to capture the profound reality of the location and penetrate into its intimacy, to uncover what the shadows were hiding and decipher its enigmas. He is then able to install a pictorial mechanism that is capable of revealing the place and breathing new life into it to invest it with a new *raison d'être* and existential dynamics. The “*gesamt-kunstwerk*” he conceives projects all the force of its truth on the place and, at the same time, bathes it in the radiance emitted from the totality of the surrounding architectural space.

Kounellis is now ready to return to the location with Michèle Coudray – his wife and project coordinator – as well as his assistant Damiano and his team. He will bring all the materials with him to the site that are necessary to create the new works conceived especially for this space, along with those that already exist and which he has decided to integrate, and which will have to be reassembled here. Teams of expert carpenters, electricians and other craftsmen join them as necessary – as do the local crews provided by the organizers. All of these activities are followed at close quarters by one of Kounellis' permanent photographers to capture all the important moments of the creative process in photographs that

will then become the only visual memory of an ephemeral total oeuvre. In this way the photographer's eye – at once close and detached – will provide us with the visual chronicle of the event. The on-site work can last several days or even weeks and the alternative station develops into a construction site until the moment when the work is finalized with Kounellis directing these activities with the skill of a captain manoeuvring his ship into a port. As in any creative process, the general idea of what is planned to be realized leaves a certain leeway to allow the artist to change his plans and dream up new solutions as his instinct tells him right up to the moment when he decides that this “unique act” is complete and can be handed over to be viewed by the public. Kounellis considers the alternative station, first of all, as a place of creation and only secondly as an exhibition space.

To conclude this chapter, here are some reflections on Kounellis' encounters with the alternative stations. Bearing all the weight of its history and the force of its spatial presence, each new station sets Kounellis' imagination ablaze; he is continuously in search of new domains to test the truth of his work and make it radiate with new significance.

Each new station becomes a laboratory where the alchemic fusion between the materials of reality and the artist's creative energy is carried out to produce a spiritual reality that indissolubly links the soul of the place with the vision of the work.

For the artist, each new station is a womb where the work takes shape and is nourished by the fluids flowing through it. The work matures slowly in the protective shadow of this cavity up to the moment when it emerges into the light of day that will be its new living space. For Kounellis, each new station represents an elucidation of his artistic trajectory: it provides him with the oxygen that makes it possible for him to assert his presence on earth and, in one fell swoop, saves us from the suffocation threatening us in our attempts to find our way in the dusty meanderings of our faltering memory.

Each new station represents a confrontation between the potent presence of reality and Kounellis' poetic imaginative spirit whose concretization in the work leaves the artist exhausted but, simultaneously, soothed and ready to withdraw for some time to his native Ithaca to gather the new energy necessary for his encounter with the next station.

Each new station is a battlefield between the forces of the double future of the work and the space it occupies and, each and every time, Kounellis proves that his linguistic arsenal is strong enough to allow him to leave the combat in victory.

Each new station permits Kounellis to return to the sources of the real from where the oeuvre draws its materials. Returning to its roots, it achieves the vitality necessary for its self-renewal.

TYOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS OF THE ARCHITECTURE

Kounellis was confronted with an existing architectural situation at each alternative station on his journey. Constructed at a given moment in an environment determined by its functions, it had sometimes been transformed by successive generations to satisfy new needs before being abandoned when the historical, economic or social circumstances changed, and finally being rescued to serve temporarily or permanently for the presentation of art. Only in very few cases did Kounellis work in spaces whose architecture continued to fulfil the original function. These architectural entities will be described and analyzed in the chronological order of the stations on Kounellis' odyssey, but it is necessary to regroup them following a typology to permit us to understand better the size of the enterprise undertaken by the artist in these spaces and buildings that represent such a large spectrum of human activities. Kounellis has been involved in this dialogue for forty years and we intend to make a closer examination of it from the view-

point of the typology of their architecture and their functions. We have organized this typology into five categories and we will analyze their characteristics to bring out the particular aspects of the different stations.

SPACES FOR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

These architectural bodies belong to the age of industrialization and were built in the 19th and 20th centuries. They had to provide large volumes to accommodate production lines and their spaces were filled with noisy machines that produced steel, as in the Halle Kalk in Cologne (XI), or sewing machines, as in the Singer Sewing Machine Co. in Chicago (IV). This type of architecture was not only functional but also expressed the pride and feeling of importance of a new epoch – when mechanized production gained in momentum – and epitomized the realization of a social utopia. That is the reason for Reiner Speck defining the Kalk Halle as “the second Cologne Cathedral” as an allusion to its size, its structure and its enormous glass windows (the pendants of the stained-glass windows in the cathedral) but, above all, to the humanist hope it embodied. The Kalk Halle was constructed in an industrial area in 1906, was taken over by the city after its closure and then given to the Ludwig Museum as a centre for contemporary art. In Chicago, on the other hand, the Singer Sewing Machine Co. and Nutrine Candy Co. were only used once for an artistic purpose. And that was when Kounellis penetrated into these different spaces, now empty and silent. The machines had long been dismantled and taken away but the floors and walls still bore traces of their existence, making it possible to imagine the tremendous dynamism that formerly gave life to these places.

Another characteristic of these factories can be found in the large glazed window bays that made it possible for the daylight to illuminate their great volume. We not only find these bays in Cologne and Chicago but also in the *Espai Poblenu* (V) in Barcelona, an old asphalt factory that has been transformed into a space for art. At each of these stations, Kounellis used different means to emphasize the openings and draw the visitor's gaze from the interior to the exterior. For example, at the Kalk Halle he hung jute sacks full of coal from hooks or suspended metal bed frames in front of the glass windows. Contrary to this, he blocked the windows with sheets of lead in Chicago, whereas he was satisfied with simply colouring certain of their panes in Barcelona. However, Kounellis' interest in glass window bays is only one aspect of his work.

In Barcelona, he took over the perimeter of the space, hooked iron panels to the walls and hung quarters of meat from the tubes fixed there. The tragic atmosphere of this scene not only reflects the changing reality of the site and its surroundings but also the political changes that had become apparent after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In the old factory on Erie Street in Chicago, Kounellis did away with the perimeter for the first time: He discovered forty-two wooden supporting beams in an enormous space under the roof and placed circular steel railroad tracks, with a miniature train as a reminiscence of the era of the machine and industry that Chicago symbolized in America, around each one. In the industrial hall in Cologne, he surrounded the tall metallic beams that supported the roof with a steel spiral that accentuated the soaring verticality of the architecture.

In London (XXII), the underground space was originally a huge concrete construction hall used to test problems of civil engineering. Its dramatic and impressive scale offered Kounellis the opportunity to install in this empty space a ‘unique work’ specially conceived for this unusual industrial matrix corresponding to his ideas of the “cavita”, this antrum which prefigures the Labyrinth.

These large-scale industrial production spaces allowed him to install magnificent mises-en-scene reverting to certain old ideas and multiplying them in these imposing spaces. Industrial architecture is a natural environment for an oeuvre based on elements such as metallic panels, posts and metal containers, sacks full of coal, sewing machines, wooden sleepers, miniature trains and – once again – jute sacks; this time folded and stacked. These empty spaces now took in objects integrated into an artistic production and they appeared to be returning to their place of origin to give it a new lease of life by recalling its original function. In this way, Kounellis paid homage to the epoch of industrialization that had been such a great source of inspiration for his work.

SPACES FOR STORING GOODS

The storage of industrial and other goods is the stage where their distribution is organized before they are consumed by the social body. Consequently, the architecture of these spaces is conceived to provide for the storage of a large variety of different goods or, in contrast, certain specific materials. These spaces are like enormous empty wombs, ready to take in goods at any moment – but only for a limited span of time – before they leave for any number of other places. These receptive spaces act as an in-between time for goods destined to be integrated, transformed, used, consumed or eaten. The silence and immobility of the warehouse, which only changes when goods either enter or leave, are the opposite of the activity and noise that prevail in production facilities. In contrast to production sites, warehouses are often without natural light.

Most of the warehouses Kounellis worked in are at ports – or at least close to the sea – indicating that the goods arrived by ship. The *Entrepôt Lainé* (IV) in Bordeaux, for example, is a stone construction erected in 1824 with a height of 80 feet and a surface area of 21,500 square feet, and was originally called “L’Entrepôt réel des denrées coloniales” (Real Warehouse of Colonial Goods). The same applies to the *Bottini dell’Olio* (XIII) that was constructed near the port of Livorno in the 18th century and was capable of storing 24,000 cisterns of oil. We should also remember *La Salara* (IX), the salt warehouse in the port district of Bologna that provided a connection to Venice. The most significant example for the relationship between the storage of goods and maritime transport is that of the *Cargo Ionion* (VIII), moored in the port of Piraeus; it is actually a moving storage space and Kounellis chose to take over its hold and to stock it with his ‘artistic goods’ for a certain period. There also, the space was sunk into darkness and the light which illuminated this cavern only accentuated the shadows. The only warehouse with glass window bays open to the sea was the one in *Jaffa Port* (XIX): This structure from the 1920s makes it possible for us to dream of other countries lying beyond the horizon from where the goods that are in transit come before becoming part of the cycle of life. The storage space refers to the concept of the voyage as well as to the alternation between fullness and emptiness, light and darkness, movement and immobility.

Of course there were other warehouses including the one on Ontario Street in Chicago (IV) that was built around 1900 and in whose rundown walls Kounellis created his “Civil Tragedy” anew to give it a completely new significance in this context.

The architecture of warehouses is often impressive, as is the case in Bordeaux where the stone arches create a rhythm around the perimeter of the space that Kounellis left intentionally empty. He partially blocked the arches with different configurations of materials which certain ones – such as the piles of jute sacks or the wooden beams stacked vertically – sometimes appeared to integrate with the memory of the site, whereas others – the numerous iron panels with the flaming arrow-torches, for example – seemed to want to oppose the emptiness of the warehouse and introduce the tragic memories of recent history into this location. In the *Bottino dell’Olio* (XIII), Kounellis’ metal cisterns gave new life to the memory of those that had been buried for so long beneath the stone paving of the warehouse with its magnificent arches, supported by square pillars, rising up above it. To bring back memories of how this oil was once transported and stored here, he submerged fragments of old boats in the oil that filled these cisterns. When Kounellis evokes the past, it is with the aim of investing the place with a poetics for the future with the cistern as the symbol of a new structure for the presence of art at this location.

The salt storehouse *La Salara* (IX) was originally constructed as a fort in the 18th century, which shows the changes in the functions that certain buildings underwent in different epochs. It was buried a long time ago and only recently excavated. That is why the visitor first of all penetrates into the upper space with its wooden, Palladian style, roof structure. This space is well-lit and Kounellis created a rhythmic installation of wooden posts, each with a suppedaneum bearing a stone. In contrast, the lower level only receives faint light through a few windows high up on the walls. These have been bared and form arches terminating in the groin vaults and inspired Kounellis to create a vertical rhythm with iron panels fixed to the walls and to hang iron beams with stones attached to them along

them. No space better corresponds to Kounellis’ concept of “cavità” and, with its restoration, he ushered in its artistic renaissance.

Going beyond their common characteristics, each of these spaces for storing goods has its own history and particular environment that led Kounellis to enter into individual, quite specific, dialogues that were always drawn from the imaginative sources of his oeuvre and strengthened by the aura of the place. The ‘storage’ of his works in these warehouses would only be temporary and they would be reintegrated at the future stations of his global work, while still preserving the memory of their place of birth and stopovers.

SPACES OF LIFE AND AUTHORITY

In contrast to spaces used for producing and storing goods whose architecture served the work of man, spaces of life and authority are defined by architecture destined to preserve political and/or military power and provide a framework for both the public and private spheres. The châteaux-forts that subsequently developed into châteaux and palaces belonging to this category were constructed between the 14th and 18th centuries. Their architecture has a defensive character, their interior spaces lie withdrawn behind thick walls but, at the same time, they also express the pride and ambitions of their successive proprietors who were driven by their Christian faith and their thirst for conquest as well as their wish to live in comfort. *Château de Plieux* (X), that old fortress driven into its promontory in the Lomagne region between Cahors and Toulouse exhibits the austerity of Romanesque architecture in spite of the fact that it was constructed in the Gothic period. It is cut off from the outside, and only a sparse amount of light penetrates into it. Kounellis recognized the mirror of a culture whose values he wanted to revitalize in this symbol of the past. At Plieux he found numerous spaces voided of their former function and created a dialogue from structure to structure, from stone to stone, and from wooden post to wooden post, to create an artistic message in situ using the elements of his visual vocabulary.

The *Château de Chaumont* (XXI), rebuilt in the 15th century, was initially a fortress with Gothic architecture that was later subjected to Italian influences without relinquishing its origins. Owned by the Amboise family for five centuries, it was acquired by the Prince de Broglie in the 19th century and – as was the case with most buildings of this type – classified as a historic monument. Overhanging the river, the château and its large estate have now become the object of renovations and works to restore its decoration. Crossing certain of these spaces that are still empty, Kounellis created a course linking the basements with various octagonal rooms in the towers and finally leading to the former private apartments. He arrived in Chaumont with his bells, his wooden beams and several other elements where his dramatic, austere mise-en-scene evoked the profound truth of these spaces dedicated to the defence of this site, to the pleasures and dramas of life, to the faith, and the demonstration of power.

The defensive tower of the *Torrione Passari* (XV) in Molfetta, constructed in 1515 on the seaside as the rear section of the castle, was conceived as a stone cylinder without any lateral opening. The only light penetrating into this interior space came from the top of the tower. Kounellis also bore in mind that this tower had later served as a water cistern. Kounellis staged a scene with twelve offering plates full of water with red fish swimming in them placed on top of jute sacks packed with local stones – all of this resting on twelve chairs placed along the walls – in the antechamber to the tower.

Inside the tower, he hung a gigantic fishing net full of old shoes as a metaphor for the human presence this space needed to once again be invested with life. The dialogue culminated in an artistic vision in search of the spiritual reality this architecture still reflected.

The Palazzo Fabroni (VII) in Pistoia was constructed in the 18th century in the centre of the old town facing the Roman parish church of Saint Andrew. The architecture of life and authority opened itself to the urban fabric surrounding it and Kounellis seized this opportunity to enter into a visual and sonic dialogue with this environment; the bells he hung near the windows echoed those of the parish church. It was at the Palazzo Fabroni that the bell became part of Kounellis’ inventory of reality and displays the importance of the genius loci as a source of inspiration for his oeuvre.

Each typology has some borderline cases. The first of these was the two rooms in the Hotel della Lunetta (II) in Rome that was the temporary home to men and women passing through which, consequently, Kounellis attempted to rescue from their anonymity. This was the first time that he had intervened in a space of active life.

The other case was that on the Isola Renata where Renato Borromeo had erected a palace in 1600 to improve the defence of Lago Maggiore. The island was later renamed Isola Madre and became famous for its exotic gardens. Its glasshouses made it possible for Kounellis to continue his dialogue with the living and nature that had begun forty years earlier. The station of *Santa Fe* (XVIII) provided the unique opportunity to be able to take part in the transformation of a work, originally conceived for a neutral space and now recreated in a space of life conceived for a power sensitive to the beauties of nature. The elements of life, such as the parrot, the cactus and butterflies, as well as the metal structures surrounding them, entered into a dialogue with the luxuriant vegetal environment. This station opened new perspectives on the integration of the living in Kounellis' oeuvre that had begun in 1969 with the *Twelve Live Horses* (I) and which revolutionized contemporary art at the time.

SPACES OF WORSHIP

Religious architecture is based on a symbolic stone structure erected in a space where the various materialized symbols fulfil a function that is not only spiritual but also organizes the space to permit the performance of religious rites. Religious architecture defines a protected sacred space separated from the profane outside world. In the case of a church, the architecture strives upwards from where the light illuminates the space in which the faithful gather and pray to express their belief in spiritual communion with their community. When speaking of the materialized symbols of this architecture, Kounellis stated that: "the construction of the cathedral is the construction of a visible language."²

Let us make a closer inspection of the four places of worship that Kounellis entered into a profound dialogue with and describe just how different his approach to each of them was. The *Church of San Agustin* (XII) was constructed in Mexico City in 1692 in the Roman Baroque style. The revolution set up the National Library in the building in 1867 and the 1985 earthquake damaged the architecture that then had to be renovated to preserve its substance. Kounellis penetrated into this cultic space in 1999, took a keen interest in the stages of its history, and maintained "that a church always remains a church" because its identity is determined by the religious essence of its architecture and not by the function it has to perform at any given moment. He started his dialogue with this space by placing a metal Via Crucis, alternating with cubic constructions made of the volcanic rocks of the region mounted on wheeled carts, in the central nave. In this way, he united the tradition of the Passion and Mexican culture, the house of God and the house of man, in the same course. The enormous photo of a Mexican Cross destroyed by the earthquake inspired him, first of all, to create a cross whose horizontal iron beam stretched between the two walls of the church and then another wooden cross where the vertical wooden beam has a suppedaneum with a sack of flour pierced by a knife placed in it as a visual metaphor for the Crucifixion. In the same spirit, Kounellis installed other works in the gallery and various other chapels whilst giving new contents to the empty shelves of the National Library.

In this way, Kounellis' works dialogued with the symbols, signs and rites of the cultic places of San Agustin more than 140 years after it had ceased functioning as a church.

The history of the Church of Saint Peter in Cologne has its beginnings in the 6th century when a chapel was erected on the ruins of an ancient Roman bath. It was expanded and transformed from church to church, passing through the Carolingian, Romanesque, Gothic and late-Gothic periods. Destroyed during the Second World War, it was initially reconstructed fragmentarily and then renovated to take on its present shape before being reopened in 2000. Kounellis penetrated into this space, which continues to serve as a church but also as the Kunst-Station Sankt Peter (XIV), in 2001. There he found a *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (1638–1640) by Peter Paul Rubens and an altar designed by Eduardo Chillida that was installed when the church was reopened.

The cross he conceived and placed on the floor of the long central nave of the church was formed out of 31 metal barrels filled with approximately 20,000 pairs of used eyeglasses whose lenses captured the light coming in through the transparent glass windows. In the gallery, two Stations of the Cross completed the vision of this symbol that Kounellis had developed, whereas, in the courtyard, he stacked eight bells without their clappers in a cylindrical cavity that had been dug in the ground. Their fate appears to be tragic and in contrast with the bells hanging in the Romanesque tower that still continues to summon the faithful. Kounellis used this enigmatic work to pose questions concerning the relationship between a historic continuity and the incapacity of today's world to rediscover a long-lost unity.

In 2003, Kounellis arrived at the *Armenian monastery* (XVI) on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni in the Venetian Lagoon. Constructed at the beginning of the 18th century as a home for Mechitarist monks who were seeking refuge in Venice, they wanted to create a synthesis between their Armenian identity and the civilizations of Byzantium and the Mediterranean. To achieve this goal, they assembled a monumental library with its countless incunabula and miniatures together with objects from ancient Egypt.

Kounellis approached the complexity of this location with the desire to create a harmonious dialogue in this monastery where the monks continue to live and pursue their spiritual quest. First of all, he selected the arches along the ambulatorium surrounding the interior garden of the monastery and placed receptacles of various shapes made of glass from the neighbouring island of Murano – whose glassblowers are so famous for preserving old traditions – on trays hanging between the arches. The rhythm of these suspended groups of glass objects echoed that of the arches and the rays of light captured by the glass, or blocked by the columns and arches, projected a play of shadows onto the promenade evoking the unity between the physicality of the objects and the light of the spirit. Here we have a perfect symbiosis between the architecture of the site and Kounellis' oeuvre.

In the library, Kounellis positioned dried scarab beetles on clouds of cotton on top of metal pedestals as an evocation both of life and the symbolic significance of the scarab that he had discovered on the cloth wrapped around an Egyptian mummy. And finally, he drew attention to the human presence through the well-known elements of his repertoire – the black coat and the kerosene lamps.

By inscribing his action on the heart of these spaces of the faith, heirs to a glorious past, Kounellis confronted them with a contemporary artistic vision.

The last cultic space is also the most recent and actually the first one Kounellis personally singled out for a dialogue. The neo-Romanesque architecture of the *Stommel Synagogue* (VI) was constructed in 1882. Abandoned as a result of the political events of 1937, it was renovated and reopened in 1991 with an artistic project by Kounellis. This humble construction has become the symbol of a society seeking to overcome the traumatization caused by Nazi barbarianism in Germany. Kounellis approached this location that those who had built it had been forced to abandon as a place of worship and raised three wooded beams, each with a stone at the top, to symbolically support the ceiling of the synagogue. These three beams formed a triangle resembling the Star of David on the floor. This work, which was realized at the location, was accompanied by a parallel text explaining the thoughts this space had inspired in him and completed with an image of red fish swimming in a bowl full of water with the blade of a knife plunged into it; this is the double metaphor for a cultic space offering the faithful safety and the dangers from outside threatening them. Going beyond their history and specific architecture, all of the cultic spaces are characterized by a typology destined to the spiritual needs of the communities to perform rites handed down from time immemorial. Even if their continuity had been interrupted by various tragic events, these spaces maintained their original identity and Kounellis forces us to look at them with the power of an art searching for truth in its confrontation with the reality of the world.

SPACES OF SCHOLARSHIP AND ARTISTIC CONTEMPLATION

The places where knowledge and great literature is stored are called libraries and those that collect works of art are known as museums; both have certain char-

acteristics in common, even if their architecture responds to different functions. Books as well as works of art need compact storage spaces, libraries or store-rooms from where one takes the first to be studied in a reading room and the second to be hung on the walls of an exhibition room. Both are destined to attract an interested audience. Spaces of scholarship and artistic contemplation are reservoirs where the objects of knowledge and human creativity are collected and are the guardians of their materialized memory.

The most spectacular space of scholarship that Kounellis tackled was the Vijećnica, the National Library of Sarajevo (XVII), that was partially destroyed in the siege of the town during the war (1991–1995). Kounellis selected the hexagonal atrium, with its magnificent, recently reconstructed, columns and Moorish arches, to be the space of his intervention and created works for the twelve doors of the ambulatorium surrounding the hexagon and leading towards the interior. He blocked the perimeter with a series of twelve images, constructed with the objects and materials from his visual vocabulary (books, stones, metal bars, jute sacks, sewing machines) that forcefully evoked the need to return life and the spirit to this place of scholarship, where the books had fallen prey to the flames. Here, he was not concerned with giving this site a new function but in helping it, metaphorically, to once again become a library by recalling the humanist vision that had given birth to it. Here we should bear in mind that Kounellis' first "blockage" of an empty door took place in 1969 in San Benedetto del Tronto and that the number "twelve" forming a circle – regardless of whether this was with sacks of coal or chairs – is one of the standard structures in his oeuvre. Together, the Vijećnica and Kounellis' work will preserve the memory of this brief encounter and close dialogue that came about at the very moment when this place triumphed over the drama of its destruction and once again found hope for a future for the library that still had to gather a new memory – the old one had gone up in smoke.

We have already dealt with *San Agustin Church* (XII) in the typology of cultic spaces. After its desantification, it became the National Library of Mexico before being used to store the manuscripts and incunabula of the Mexican culture until an earthquake finally robbed this space of any function at all. In his work, Kounellis also considered the most recent functions and filled the empty shelves of the library with the elements of his vocabulary of the real, especially those of the living (birds, cacti) to give an indication of the possibility of a return to life.

The other place of the faith already mentioned is the *Armenian monastery* (XVI) and we return there because it possesses a large library and Kounellis placed scarabs, each resting on a cloud of cotton, on pedestals in that space; then he hung his coat in a corner of the library and illuminated the old manuscripts with fourteen kerosene lamps, as if to help them escape from their torpor by confronting them with a contemporary artistic message. The monastery is a place where religious faith and scholarship go hand in hand and complement each other even if each has its own domain. This is also a place of life for the Mechitarist monks and our typology of spaces helps us better understand the nature of the challenge facing Kounellis' work that changed according to the specific functions of the spaces taken over by the artist.

When dealing with museums that welcome artistic contemplation, Kounellis' activities normally took place within the framework of exhibitions where his works were confronted with the location without entering into a potent dialogue with its architecture and history. It is true that Kounellis was certainly sensitive to the specific atmosphere of museums whose architecture was originally often conceived for other functions – such as the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, the Madre in Naples, an old palace, or the Reina Sofia, that old hospital in Madrid – when he displayed his works in these spaces that had obviously been renovated but still bore witness to their former roles. However, in the typology of the spaces of artistic contemplation that we are interested in here, mention must first of all be made to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago because it was part – along with four alternative stations – of a unique project that spread across the city *A retrospective in five locations* (IV). The works exhibited in the museum echoed those dialoguing with the four other stations and, in this way, encouraged the visitors to follow a course and memorize it to fully understand the unity of this total work of art. The most significant dialogue was the one that took place between Kounellis and the architecture of Mies van der Rohe at the *Neue Nationalgalerie* (XX) in Berlin that had been inaugurated in 1968. Kounellis placed his labyrinth in the

centre of Mies' transparent volume and then extended his action around the square perimeter of the building. We were taking part in a dialogue of opposites; Mies' structures extend to infinity, whereas Kounellis' was closed in a finite universe. Mies worked with the statics of the square, Kounellis with the dynamics of the diagonal. Mies welcomed light, Kounellis looked for the shadow. But, there were also many similarities including the clarity of the gesture and the visible structures. We notice the equilibrium that was established between two opposing forces representing the tensions in twentieth-century art.

To complete our reflection on the spaces of artistic contemplation, we must refer to the project at the *Château de Chaumont* (XXI). Kounellis suggested interpreting the place from the opposite direction to the tour offered to the visitors of this museum in situ that evoked the history of the château over its architecture, decorative arts and painting. In his own way, Kounellis questioned the stones and discovered the truth of the place in a course where the imaginative powers of art reanimated the memory of these spaces.

To summarize, the diversified typology of the architecture of the buildings and their functions allowed Kounellis to renew and enrich his work in each of the successive stations that caught his interest and where he made a, more or less, long stopover. In this way, each station became the receptacle of a totality and from then on a part of the memory of the oeuvre.

THE TOTAL WORK OF ART (GESAMTKUNSTWERK)

Certain aspects of Kounellis' spatial strategy remind one of Schwitters' "Merzbau" whose very title "Cathedral of Erotic Misery" evokes "the necessity of constructing a cathedral" advocated by Kounellis as a metaphoric model for recognizing the unity of the oeuvre. For Schwitters, the "Merzbau" was the concretization of the idea of the "Gesamtkunstwerk" – or total work of art – and was an expression of the utopian ambition of "transforming the entire world into one tremendous work of art in a still unforeseeable future."³ In another passage, Schwitters also called for "in principle, the equality of all materials [...] I demand that all materials, from double-rail welding machines to the three-quarter size violin, be incorporated"⁴ and then stated that "Merz is consequence. Merz means creating relationships, preferably, between everything on earth."⁵ That is certainly a statement Kounellis could identify with without any hesitation. Schwitters' utopian gesture, repeated on two occasions, did not stand up to the test of time and, apart from his writings, we only have photographic documents and a reconstruction as visual witnesses to his "Merzbauten" (1920–1936), whose radical nature remains one of the most important moments in modernism. Kounellis' gestures are firmly anchored in the topography of contemporary art and their existence is intentionally restricted in time to better guarantee the need for their renewal. That is why these total works of art only exist in our memory and through the visual and written documents that we are able to present in this volume. Contrary to Schwitters, most of the works/fragments Kounellis installed at each successive alternative station on his route have an autonomous, permanent existence. Kounellis is one of the rare contemporary artists to have had the ambition of taking a step similar to that of Schwitters and, even if his futurist vision of "transforming the entire world into one tremendous work of art" has still not been realized, Kounellis has nevertheless undertaken a long odyssey and stopped off at countless stations along the way that he has invested with the constitutive components of his visual language. This is composed of all the elements of reality, from durable materials to perishable goods, from the flame to the smoke, from the world of animals to that of plants, from fluids to music, from light to shadow, from objects shaped by man to built structures, from cotton to lead, from jute sacks to the sail. All these have formed the most extensive undertaking to create a "Gesamtkunstwerk" of the past fifty years.

THE SPACE, THE COURSE, THE LOCATION AND THE WORK

The space Kounellis moves in is the European cultural space with its countless stratifications. His journey does not have a fixed timetable: it takes place fitfully and seems to be chaotic and incoherent, a little bit like a seismic movement that spreads out from its base to reach one or more places and then returns to its departure point. This irregular, rhythmic course unfurls in time-space over a territory principally covering the north-south axis of Europe with occasional jaunts along the east-west axis of the planet. It is the Ariadne's thread that will make it possible for Kounellis to find his way out of the labyrinth after having arrived at the centre of the work and the perpetuum mobile of a work that is played like a violin passage. To make the work visible, this course, like one of Pollock's drippings, needs the vehemence of a multiple spatial trajectory to create a significant totality, it needs the intensity of layers of dazzling lines placed on top of each other. Kounellis' space is the background on which his work unfolds, the personalized map of the stations he is going to stop at. These are the fixed poles that give the oeuvre its stability and visibility. If space is imperceptible, formless and infinite, the location, on the other hand, has a precise structure, occupies a defined space and is anchored in a real geographic situation. The site has a coherent interior, but it is also like a star in cosmic space and these two ways of perceiving it define each other reciprocally to form a dialectic alliance. The interior space of a site Kounellis works on is the bearer of energy just like the space of the cosmos, and it shines like the light of a star. This radiation provides the energy for the following stations and, together, they all form the Milky Way of the oeuvre. Each station is made up of multiple fragments, has its own characteristics, its own unique radiance, but only achieves its full significance by occupying an absolutely distinctive place in the cosmic ensemble of the oeuvre. Each station saw the light of day under unique spatio-temporal circumstances, but it is linked to all the others by a common origin, and the collective memory of the oeuvre invests the ensemble of these stations with that profound sense of unity we discover on each occasion.

Kounellis is the dramatist of his own work. What he "installs" in a given place has been created, chosen and positioned on the stage of his action by the artist himself. Although – similar to a painting – a permanent version of the individual work exists, the installation at one of the alternate stations is temporary. It is this "atto unico" that Kounellis conjured up with the title of his exhibition in Milan in 2006. Each individual work is a totality created at a specific moment for a defined or undefined space but, at the same time, it is a fragment that, when united with others, forms a spatio-temporal provisional arrangement that will ultimately only remain a fragmented memory for those who have experienced it personally and a reality documented by the image and text for the others. The alternative stations have a destiny similar to that of the artist and are part of his peregrinations: As soon as one of them completed its temporal cycle, the next is already under way. This uninterrupted march towards the next station is a part of Kounellis' creative process; he is much less interested in mounting a new exhibition than by a new occasion to create. The exaltedness of the vision creating a structure founded on the truth of the work and the dialogue with history and morals is followed by its return to fragmentation, the tragedy of its disappearance and the silence that succeeds the storm of the spirit. This is the moment for Kounellis to return to his native Ithaca, to recover his strength, to immerse himself in a reverie, to meditate, to allow his imagination to dream and then finally to set off once again on the next stage of his voyage, to the next stopover, with the aim of reaching the centre of his work that always appears to be continuously receding into the distance like a line on the horizon, but which can in fact be found in the depths of his being.

When Kounellis encounters a place built by the hand of man, two historic situations are confronted: That of the place and that of the work; the space is the feminine element that welcomes the masculine element represented by the work into its interior space. Kounellis conjures up an active modern vision within a spatial structure characterized by its past, by the traces of its transformations over the years and the inevitable marks of time. Armed with his imaginative powers and the materials that form his oeuvre, he begins to investigate the spirit of the location, to attempt to uncover the historic and spiritual strength that emanate from it and extract their quintessence. Kounellis' oeuvre is a redeeming weapon that, by unveiling the place, reveals it to itself: by giving it back a function, by

breathing new life into it, it is able to hear its messages that had become silent in oblivion, to see the realities its weary eyes could no longer make out, and perceive the substance of a past that was no longer felt. Kounellis identifies himself with the deep roots of the location and he has the tools required to penetrate into the mysteries of the past – the accumulated wealth of his work itself – and the energy necessary to create a new artistic syntax. By taking over a space imbued with history, he only has to follow the dialogue inscribed inside the interior of his own work that, in this way, becomes richer at each stopover. This encounter, no matter how brief it might be, represents a unique moment in the space-time continuum of the location and the oeuvre. Its echo will resound at the next station and all of them are linked to form a chain of events as an integrating part of the creative process. Kounellis' oeuvre breathes through the places he has temporarily taken over; nourished by them, his imagination flows over them and this union becomes firmly inscribed on the common memory of the place and the work.

TIME AND ITS ABSENCE

The historic time of a work is the period when it assumes its form and becomes a visible, tangible reality. But, since this process of creative genesis takes place within a spatio-temporal dynamic, as soon as the work has assumed its definitive form, the work becomes frozen in a timeless immobility and rises to its 'eternal' existence that so many spirits believe to be able to recognize in the work of art. However, this also has a present time, that of the eye and spirit of the viewer who, by establishing a dialogue with the frozen body of the work, give it back a temporality, albeit fragile and without any guarantee of a future. In fact, the viewer takes part in a double dialogue; on the one hand with the historical time of the work and, on the other, with the present born of his own subjectivity. These two times – although they are both contradictory – superpose and nourish each other reciprocally. The viewer knows that this revival of the work is only temporary: the work's real life rests in its future or – to put it differently – in the hope that those looking at it in the future will throw light on it and invest it with a new existential vitality.

Kounellis permanently experiences this dialectic of the work positioned between the memory of its creation and its existential future and, at an early stage of his trajectory, decided to create a dynamic that makes it possible to unite the different times of the work. The fundamental idea lies in the fact that each work, no matter how complete and definitive it might be in itself, is nothing but a fragment in the totality of Kounellis' oeuvre; it is only one moment in its continuity. Consequently, each time he incorporates an ensemble of works in his "living pictures" they are reborn and given new significance. They will become a part of a much larger whole that itself is only a fragment of a total work in progress. This "living picture" incorporates the series of the "historic times" of the works it is composed of. The artist 'recreates' them by shedding new light on them and integrating them into the present time. This means that Kounellis' works have experienced many cyclical "resurrections" without their substance being greatly changed. Kounellis has reversed the priorities of artistic tradition that had seeing an autonomous entity whose beauty had been frozen for eternity in an individual artwork as its goal. He is only interested in the historical time of a work to the extent that he is able to give it a present and a future. In fact, eternity is in danger of dying at any moment without a flame capable of bringing it back to life.

The time of a work lies outside of it, accompanying its journey like a verbal process. The work itself is timeless; it is frozen in the absoluteness of its being, in its permanence. Kounellis does not name his works – they quite simply exist – and their present (or rather, our present in front of them) does not differentiate between their past and future. However, the person looking at the work has known a transitory existence, therefore limited, and – like the creator – casts a temporal gaze on the work that has already been given a position outside of time. During the creative process, the artist and the work share a common temporal reality. But as soon as the process has been completed, the work escapes from its creator's temporal reality, from the intimacy and the moment of creative exhilaration that had united them, and becomes part of this timelessness that is its profound reality, its "being" without a future. Nobody ever described the fascination of the absence of time in a work of art better than Maurice Blanchot:

“The time of the absence of time is without a present, without presence. This ‘without a present’ however does not refer back to a past. Earlier had the dignity, the active force of the now; the memory of this active force can still be felt, that which frees me of what would otherwise remind me, frees me by giving me the means to call on it freely, to have it at my disposal as I wish at present. The memory is the freedom of the past. But that which is without a present can no longer accept the present of a memory.”⁶

It is precisely the absence of time in the work that makes it possible for Kounellis “to call on it freely, to have it at my disposal as I wish at present”. The dating of Kounellis’ works is not a measure of time; it is the symbol of an awareness that unites all the other symbols of a work in full flower. Each space taken over by Kounellis represents a new attempt to define his oeuvre, look for its unity and find its centre. All of the works presented are brought back to the present of the artist and freed of the temporal memories connected with them. Kounellis’ total oeuvre is timeless in the sense that its fundamental character has been defined from the very beginning by his ‘quintal of coal’ and since then it has only become enriched through the elements that have deepened and broadened its message. This absence of time is the very foundation of the unity of the oeuvre, the guarantee of its topicality at all time – present and future. It is definitely of its age that it helped shape but, above all, it also pertains to future considerations that will make them their present. The photographs of the works, taken in the successive contexts where they had been positioned, make their spatio-temporal progress visible and bear witness to their successive significances generated by the diversity of the temporal expression placed on them. It is this multiplicity of considerations and significances that Kounellis hopes to provoke in the viewer, and his role consists of offering new possibilities to interpret the oeuvre through a differentiated contextualization. What Kounellis suggests to us is looking from the interior towards the interior; it is the revelation of a process that unflinchingly recreates the work, clarifies it, modifies it, reinvents it, thinks about it again; it transcends its absence of time and its immobility. He wants to give the work its time, to rediscover the intimacy of the creative moment, without in any way modifying this memory of the “completion” of the work that has escaped from his influence. That is the reason why, when looking at a work by Kounellis, we have the double impression of a déjà-vu and something new, of the same and something different. Each time we see one of the works contextualized in a new environment, it opens itself a little more, unveils another of its secrets for us, and we wait for the artist to offer us a new vision of this old work that will enrich ours.

FEELING THE VISIBLE, QUESTIONING THE INVISIBLE

Merleau-Ponty’s posthumous work “Le Visible et l’Invisible” was left unfinished at the time of his death in 1961. A few years later, in 1966, Kounellis embarked on his experience of the real that he is still pursuing. Speaking of the role of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty wrote: “It wants to give expression to the things themselves from the depths of their silence.”⁷ Kounellis has the same aim and we wish to observe it based on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis and the artist’s creative process. The visible world is not just in front of us; it surrounds us making us a part of it. We observe it and, by doing so, its image becomes engraved in the depths of our body; it is written on our memory and our experience. However, while reality and our own body belong to the physical nature of the world, the image that penetrates us is immaterial; it is like a reflection in a mirror, the image of a reality remaining in the space of the world. However, could the reality captured by our inner mirror be visible without it? Of course, it would be there, but invisible to us; that is to say – inexistent. This would be true if we only used our eyes to see what is real. But we experience reality with all our senses and feel its physicality and profundity through that of our own substance. We experience the world totally – we see it, feel it, smell it, even hear it; we investigate it with all that ties it to us, all of which makes us it. When we see our own image in a mirror, we know that it is only a surface that hides all the invisibility of our earthly and spiritual reality. In the same way, we know that all the depth of an invisibility that escapes us can be found behind the reflected image of the real. Therefore, even if we grasp this real with all the fibres of our body, even if its image enters into us and becomes imprinted on us, the real as such remains distant, elusive, hidden by the substance

of our own being. It is necessary to develop other tools than those of our corporeal subjectivity to attempt to transfer our sensorial understanding into an interpretation capable of delving into the totality of the invisible realities of the world. This spiritual work must develop out of the innermost regions of our being, from the depths of our invisible nature that reflects the invisible of the world. But if we allow ourselves to be guided by the image of the real it will ultimately take us to the threshold of the invisible, on the condition that we renounce its deceiving surface and consider it a key that makes it possible to penetrate into the mysteries of the invisible.

Kounellis feels the invisible and internalizes it; he measures the length and width of the space to determine its depth; he observes the light that crosses it and the shadow that deepens it; his hand brushes against the walls surrounding it. Kounellis is present in the bosom of this space that, in turn, is present in the depths of his own body. From now on, a double image will exist: on the one hand, that of the materials and objects that radiate the image of their “being” and, on the other, that of the artist projecting the reflection of his inner world onto the elements of the real. Reality only exists if it is seen and understood by the artist and the inner vision can only arise if it is informed by images of the real. In this way, Kounellis becomes part of the reality of the world and by discovering this, he discovers himself. His dialectic of the double view – this simultaneous, parallel exchange of glances watching themselves being observed – takes place in the very soul of the complex fabric of the reality of the world. But these intersecting glances do not have making an inventory of the real or finding their bearings in a cartographic space as their only goal. The artist understands that this glance can only see the visible world and will neither penetrate into the depths of the objects nor the infinitude of space. Kounellis has renounced the idea of providing us with an illusory image of the world and when he mobilizes his materials and objects it is to reach a truth located beyond the visible. He also knows that the objects he touches with the palms of his hands are only fragments of a reality that will help him unveil the invisible, the limitless, unknown sphere of the universe, with its hidden, mysterious face. The visible and invisible are both parts of the totality of the world and close links bind them together. Kounellis understands that his image of the world will only be complete when the invisible, clarified and unveiled, creates a unity with the visible.

Kounellis has developed a new language with its own vocabulary and syntax in order to discover regions unviolated by this invisibility that seems to be at the end of the world but could possibly be within arm’s reach. A scientific person would certainly look for a universal formula, but the artist takes part in a long quest knowing that the great truths only gradually come to light and that, actually, the only important thing is to be on the right track. At each alternative station on his voyage he widened the frontiers of the visible and questioned the invisible for us to enrich our vision and our understanding of the world.

THE LABYRINTH: MYTH AND LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE

The labyrinth is a mental structure with a great number of meanings. It can be understood as a symmetrical geometric figure, as a principle of order leading from a circumference to a centre, as a fatality, as an image of the flow of time, as a finite universe, as losing oneself, as a guide of initiation, as a place of retreat for solitary meditation, as a protecting shell, as a cavern, as a progression, as a place of confusion, as the hope of a vision, as the proposition of refound unity, as enlightenment, as a sacred space, as a prison, as a return trip, as an exercise for the memory, as a platform for taking off towards the infinite, as a womb waiting to give birth, as an eternal sarcophagus. The labyrinth is a universal myth, a microcosm of human fate, a metaphor for our relationship to the world, an existential space, a utopia in permanent evolution.

The labyrinth is never closed; a passage makes it possible to enter and leave it. This passage is the geometric place of a beginning or an end; in a manner of speaking, it is a course that leads to the other extremity, to the centre of the labyrinth, and then back to the start. Reaching the centre of the labyrinth means that the goal has been achieved and the only way out is to take the reverse course back to the point of departure – the passage making it possible to leave it. The dialectic of the periphery and centre is inscribed in the spatio-temporal curve of the labyrinth, in the unravelling and rewinding of a course: It is like an Ariadne's thread; the memory is developed during the progress to the centre and it deconstructs itself on the way back to the exit of the labyrinth. No matter whether their geometry is perfect or asymmetric, all labyrinths are a metaphor for this "return journey" of life that starts at birth (the moment of entering the labyrinth) and ends with death (the moment one leaves it). A person entering the labyrinth without an Ariadne's thread – that means, without the memory necessary to construct the being – will never find the path permitting him to leave. Without his Ariadne's thread, even Daedalus, the architect of the labyrinth, remained imprisoned in his own construction that he no longer had in his memory. He was only able to escape with the help of the wings of wax he had made for himself and his son Icarus. His technical ingeniousness made it possible for him to fly and escape from human constraints. But, due to his incapability to control the work of his hands and the memory of his secret structure, this upwards flight ultimately led to the death of his son Icarus and his own wandering to the end of days.

The memory is a linguistic tool and the artist's work consists of creating his own language through the memory accumulated at each station along his labyrinthine course. Daedalus carried out the construction of the labyrinth but was unable to memorize its own unforeseeable course. Theseus, on the other hand, was successful because he was armed and prepared to take on the task awaiting him in the labyrinth. Daedalus had created the structure governing our life and Theseus had experienced the initiatory experience of the battle; returning in victory, he was able to follow the guiding thread of his memory. Daedalus had created a structure, but Theseus had experienced its inner dynamics. Daedalus and Theseus represent the two faces of artistic creation and these two heroes braved their destiny alone: One as the inventor and builder of an unparalleled universe, the other as the fearless adventurer throwing himself into the depths of the unknown. One created an architecture of secret traces full of beauty; the other plunged head-first into an existential drama. It is not sufficient to merely create the structure of a new language; it is equally important to carry out an incessant battle to give it an expressive vitality. Each great artist bears the double nature of Daedalus and Theseus in him: that of the creator of a stable structure and that of the wrestler relentlessly seeking truth.

The interior space of the labyrinth is closed on itself like a mussel; it unravels like a spiral plunging into the obscurity of a measureless time. But, unlike the mussel, the labyrinth also has a horizontal structure that opens upwards and, in this way, reminds one of a deep trench from where one sees the sky but not the horizon; a trench with many branches, without any orientation points, where only the firmament guides one's steps and makes it possible to orientate oneself. But this opening to the skies, towards freedom, can also become a trap because escaping upwards is not without danger, as shown in the myth of the fall of Icarus. The other danger is that, just like Daedalus, we could remain imprisoned in the trench/labyrinth. In the mythological tale, Daedalus was only capable of locking up the Minotaur but Theseus was the one who got what he was after, leaving victorious after his battle with the monster and thwarting the snares of the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne's thread: A metaphor for anamnesis, a return to the source overcoming the weakness of memory. The victor was then able to announce to King Minos and his people that, now that the monster no longer existed, they were free.

To enter into the labyrinth implies isolating oneself from the socialized world, choosing a voluntary retreat, immersing oneself in an alternative universe. Everyone builds his own imaginary labyrinth at a given moment, because everyone is looking for his own path, his own truth, knowing that the struggle with himself takes place in the darkness of the mazes of life and gives a premonition that the decisive moment will come when he discovers and confronts his inner 'Minotaur'.

The labyrinth is a linguistic and spatio-temporal structure that defines an area controlled by an entrance that is also an exit. To experience the labyrinth means penetrating into the contradictory structure of this area: on the one hand, all the paths lead towards the centre but, on the other, they are all conceived to slow down this discovery. This paradoxical structure is a metaphor for our existential journey, this slow progress full of uncertainties and erring ways, towards a centre that is both longed for and feared. This solitary, nostalgic search for a central space symbolizing the centre of the world is a constant factor in the myth of the labyrinth. It signifies a return to the origins, to that Garden of Eden we have been expelled from, to that space that is beyond time, to that original unity that has been shattered. Finding this centre means rediscovering a unitary vision of the world. Stressing the difficulty of this undertaking, Kounellis speaks of those "who do not have the courage to reach the centre and capture the sacred animal that has lived there since the time of the cavemen, that marks the centre and provides a profound sense to the sacrificial celebrations, to once again discover radiant freedom".⁸

Just as Daedalus was the prisoner of the architectural structure he had built, the artist is restricted by the linguistic structures he has defined. If he decides to remain faithful to them, he will fulfil his labyrinthine existence until the very last. But if he decides to betray them, to leave his horizontal course and attempt to flee vertically, he will suffer the fate of Icarus because, for the artist, freedom without any linguistic structure is an illusion that inevitably leads to nothingness.

For Kounellis, the idea of the labyrinth consists of initially defining a perimeter to delimit a territory of art, making it possible to search for the unity of the oeuvre. The artist's eyes are turned towards the interior and his spatio-temporal journey, starting on the perimeter, winds the various stations of the work around a centre that remains mysterious and distant. Kounellis' labyrinth is not a geometrical form but, much more, a mental structure, a symbol for the cycle of life. A winding path uniting the entrance/exit with the exit/entrance, it also reveals the divine, the living and art and makes it possible to escape from the chaos of an infinity lacking a centre. Like a compass that always points north no matter which direction is chosen, the labyrinth is an indispensable instrument for those looking for orientation and finding the light hidden in the depths of their own shadows. In the labyrinth, we are like an embryo in the maternal womb: tied to it, nourished by it and passing through all the phases that lead to the world of the living. At the end of its cycle, the embryo will renounce comfort as well as its dependence on the womb/labyrinth, will seek to make its way towards the light, and will be born to become involved in another labyrinth – that of the world. The labyrinth's exit therefore marks the end of an initiation, but the labyrinth itself will endure – a timeless structure already waiting for its next initiate.

Kounellis transforms each place he takes over into an idea of a labyrinth; he conceives it as a space cut off from the outside, folded back on itself, and his intention is to take measure of the perimeter to be able to then look for its centre. This is not necessarily its geometrical centre but much more the place where the existential drama of the work unfolds. When Kounellis constructs a labyrinth of iron and coal, it is in the interior of a built site: He erects a second shell to protect this space from the boundless chaos outside; and it is in the interior of this hard core that he regroups the existential cells of his oeuvre. The genealogical line of the works he reunites there, whose dates and places of birth are spread over time and space, only accentuates the deep bonds uniting them with each other. Even though they are all labelled "untitled", each one of them, regardless of how perfect they are, is part of the totality of Kounellis' work in the interior of which the full extent of their significance can reveal itself. Each presentation of the oeuvre calls for a spatio-temporal development that only permits a unitary vision. Kounellis has chosen to construct the labyrinth to make such a course visible and define its layout and limits. Kounellis' wanderings in the interior of the labyrinth of his oeuvre and his pictorial language are an inner, organic necessity for him: Each station of his work is a fragment of a totality that will not be completed until he reaches the ultimate centre of the work – its profound unity. The earthly image of a mythical imagination, the labyrinth constructed by Kounellis, is the stage on which the everyday battle between his artistic creation and its progression, hesitation, hopes, nightmares, and certainties takes place. But the

labyrinth is also the site of the definitive victory over the monster that is inside man, the place where the artist conquers his freedom to offer it to mankind.

In the 1960s, the concept of “sculpture” assumed a new significance. Sculpture moved back to a definite location; it became site-specific: an architecture often set down in a landscape with an auto-referential function. Almost all of the artists who created their mazes after 1968 left the exhibition walls behind them and chose sites in the open air where they installed abstract, geometrical symbols – frequently harking back to ancient universal signs. The artists who conceived these “nomadic sculptures” (Rosalind Krauss) for the interior or exterior had the desire to create spatial structures making it possible to experience a journey, full of the unexpected, offering a completely new type of environment.

Kounellis’ development took place simultaneously to that of Morris, Smithson and quite a few others, but was completely different. His point of departure was painting – that is the traditional concept that he questioned – not only by doing away with the pictorial illusion for the benefit of materials selected from the real world, but also by using this reality to create his “living pictures” that he projected in a space defined by its perimeter. While American and European artists were installing their actions in places chosen intentionally for their neutrality or amorphous infinity, Kounellis was permanently on the lookout for locations that reflected a historic dimension inscribed in a defined structure. When he started to conceive a labyrinth, it was to be inserted into an existing architectural entity; in a way, it was to provide a stage on which a drama recalling a forgotten past, that he projected into a future that had still not been conceived, could be performed. Kounellis’ labyrinth is not an abstract symbol planted in a “no man’s land” but a spatial structure within which the artist develops and makes visible the stages of the progression of his oeuvre. Kounellis’ labyrinth is not a spatial sculpture but a “container”, just like the hold of the *Cargo Ionion* (VIII) or even the metal structure of the *Cotoniera*. Kounellis’ labyrinth does not comply with an aesthetic code but with a necessity. His entire oeuvre is based on the dialectic of the structure and the sensitive, and that is why the labyrinth only makes sense to him if it contains and is completed by the sensitive, namely the works of art that reflect the living, nature, human energy, the flame of hope, the expectation for a bell’s sound, the willingness to fight, and the search for a vision. Kounellis’ labyrinth is the moral and visible structure of the work: its external profile is that of a blind fortress positioned firmly in its environment, withdrawn in itself; its interior holds a treasure trove full of vitality, the concrete memories of a vision accumulated at each station of his odyssey and united in the labyrinth as a premonition of a coming future. At the beginning of the 21st century, moving from one labyrinth to the next, Kounellis is trying to transfer the weight from the fragments of his work to its totality, from its temporal moments to its continuity, from its spatial distribution to its concentration. In this way, the labyrinth develops into an image of a utopia, a constructed metaphor of the work as a process, a symbol of a dynamics leading to the centre of the oeuvre. The labyrinth is a forest where each tree is a fragment, a living entity. The more there are of these entities, the greater the forest’s importance. And, in this dialectic of the fragment and totality on which Kounellis’ entire oeuvre is founded, the labyrinth gives a structure to the totality where it can unfurl and set free its profound unity.

1 The successive stations are itemized by Roman numerals from I to XXII and written in italics.

2 *Ein Gespräch*, Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Anselm Kiefer, Enzo Cucchi, Parkett/Cantz, 1986, p. 167.

3 Cited by Harald Szeeman in: *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Verlag Sauerländer, 1983, p. 321

4 Kurt Schwitters, *Die Merzbühne*, 1919, GW 5, DuMont Schauberg, 1973–1981, p. 187

5 Kurt Schwitters, *Merz*, 1924, GW 5, DuMont Schauberg, 1973–1981, p. 340

6 Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire*, Gallimard, 1968, p. 22

7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, Gallimard, 1964, p. 18

8 Jannis Kounellis, “La grandiose invention de l’angle” in: *L’Humanité de l’Homme*, Editions Cercle d’Art, Paris, 2001, pp. 142–145 (English: *Echoes in the Darkness*, Trolley, London 2002)

The photograph captions show the number in the analytical catalogue of the works reproduced, and proceed from left to right. The list of the solo exhibitions that took place following the preceding station is given at the beginning of each of the XXII stations. The notes on the texts devoted to each of the XXII stations can be found at the end of each chapter.

XXIII
STATIONS
1969–2010

ROME 1969

12 LIVE HORSES

L'Attico Gallery

14 January 1969

Director: Fabio Sargentini
 Photography: Claudio Abate
 Catalogue (Italian) | Text: Alberto Boatto

Architecture: Old garage
 First utilization of the location for artistic purposes



With the passing of time, this presentation of twelve horses in a space dedicated to art has lost none of its powerful impact. This is because Kounellis' action questioned the modalities of the relationship between the work of art and the socio-economic structures of its dissemination. The event took place in the Attico Gallery in Rome in January 1969 (cat. 12) at a time when a new generation of Europeans was refusing to accept the social and political order that had developed after the Second World War and was developing its own visions of how to renew the historical and cultural perspectives. In this climate of simultaneous refusal and hope, Kounellis and his companions in the "Arte Povera" movement were attempting to expand the dialogue between art and life. The subject had already been on the agenda for some time, but they added a political dimension, as well as the conscious will to review their cultural heritage in a contemporary context. In order to be able to understand the complete extent of Kounellis' actions, Jean-Christophe Ammann reminds us of an account the artist gave: "His comment that a statement made by André Breton in 'Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution', that something must be impossible to the same extent as the Tartars were never able to water their horses at the fountains of Versailles was one of the triggers for the 'Cavalli,' is particularly informative."¹ Kounellis' main intention with this action was to redefine the role of the art gallery as an instrument for mediating the work and he changed its function temporarily into that of a stable. "By turning his dealer into a stable boy, he avoided the trap of all those artists who criticize the system they are engaged in. With him, this economically and politically complex position achieved a foolproof coherence. However, the understanding of the work could not be restricted to this first approach because, here, the archaic horse – the most ancient bearer of history – represents culture more than rustic simplicity."² The living horses located in the space of the gallery replace their traditional pictorial representation. For the artist, the horse is, above all, a manifestation of the living; but he is obviously aware of its pictorial presentation in occidental art and the qualities attributed to it – in particular those placing it so close to man. In this way, Kounellis continues with a tradition that he also questions with his radically provocative proposition.

Rudi Fuchs draws an impressive panorama of the affinity between man and the horse – above all the predominant place this animal has occupied in the history of the visual arts from ancient Greece up to modern times. "The horse is the ally of man in war, when travelling and in agriculture. A symbol of strength and energy, of proud beauty and, therefore, the dream of every artist. In the history of art, its aesthetics occupy a place second only to that of the image of man. Thus, the gallery not only shows horses from a Roman stable but also the nervous warhorses of the Parthenon and the famous bronze horses that now crown the colonnade of Saint Mark's in Venice. The celebrated *quadriga* that Augustus brought to Rome from Alexandria, and Constantine to Byzantium, where they adorned the great

hippodrome before being stolen by the Venetians in 1204 in the terrible siege of the city during the Fourth Crusade, tells the dark story of the Mediterranean. They are also the horses of Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca and the famous horses rearing up on the monument to the Milanese *condottiero* Trivulzio that Leonard never realized, although he studied the movements of horses in all their details and wrote a fragmentary treatise on this. Let us also recall Géricault's mad horses and the noble ones of Delacroix, as well as those Picasso showed suffering and dying. They are the same horses that, in Alexander Blok's verses, the Scythians see grazing between the ruins after the final battle. They gallop through history before arriving in Rome in the gallery where we can see them. In each and every moment, the art and allegory of their painful history."³ By drawing attention to the visual tradition, Rudi Fuchs aims at transcending an interpretation linked exclusively to the discovery of a new artistic space where the elements of the visual vocabulary created by Kounellis in the preceding years could articulate themselves. In turn, Catherine Strasser decided to make a profound investigation of two paintings in which the horse plays a predominant role – two paintings Kounellis was certainly aware of – and she creates a relationship between them and his "unique action" in the Attico Gallery. "The horse occupies a fundamental place in Greco-Roman mythology and, very early, it provided an abundant, varied iconography. Starting in the Renaissance, this was elaborated on in occidental culture when it was taken up by artists who illustrated, interpreted and enriched these magnificent narratives with the signs of their time. Kounellis is aware of the amazing Hall of the Horses painted by Giulio Romano and his team in 1525 in the Palazzo Te at Mantua (ill. 9). The walls there are completely covered to the top and have life-size portraits of horses on several levels. [...] The parallels between the scale and – exceptional – consecration in a palatial hall of horses finds a certain echo in the 1969 exhibition. More directly, because Caravaggio's Cerasi Chapel in the Santa Maria del Popolo Church in Rome, and here the Conversion of Saint Paul in particular – one of the most prominent of Kounellis' references – shed light on the work in the Attico Gallery. Caravaggio chose to show the moment when the Roman legionnaire Paul of Tarsus, sitting astride his horse on the way to Damascus, is brutally thrown off of his mount by the revelation of the Christian God. The violence of this physical and spiritual shock is translated into a sophisticatedly organized composition. [...] The painting can only be seen close up. Much like the relationship between the dimensions of the gallery and the size of the horses demands this proximity from the spectator."⁴ Catherine Strasser notes: "The major theme of the horse is associated with the legend of two heroes, Ulysses and Hercules, who respectively embody cunning and determination in the first case and strength and courage in the second. [...] the figure of Hercules provides another key to Kounellis' exhibition,"⁵ in particular, his role in the fable about the Augean stables that "clearly illustrates the manner in which Kounellis

appropriated it and knew how to stage, in the terms of his time, a symbolic account that, just like the Trojan horse, became commonplace.”⁶ It is interesting to look at the interview given by Kounellis more than thirty-five years after the event at the Attico Gallery where he discusses the traditional origin of the oeuvre. “Above all, it was never my intention to create a scandal by making ‘The Horses’. In fact, it is much more than that, there is a traditional aspect, not in the sense of wanting to restrict myself to the rules, but because there is a relationship to tradition, even if it is accompanied by the desire to do away with it. The living horses are placed in a space, a space where they evoke the Epiphany. They are located in this space; they are attached around this space and define its concrete perimeter. The space manifests itself through their presence. The horses create the perimetric sense of the space by opposition. It is not a question of treating the horse as a form, as a symbol, as an imaginary or literary figure. Most importantly, this all serves to create a manifestation of space. And that in an evident manner, there can be no doubt about that. The work has a traditional origin – in short, it does not betray tradition; on the contrary, it respects and makes use of it, although trying to leave it.”⁷

This apparent contradiction between respect for tradition and the determination to leave it behind – that is to say, renew it – can often be observed in Kounellis’ oeuvre, in particular in the multiplication of objects or of identical measurements arranged in the space that end up creating a number. They might be metal panels of identical measurement, sacks of coal with the same size or, in the present case, the 12 horses.

Twelve is a number one finds more than once in Kounellis’ work. Catherine Strasser recalls the traditional significations of the number and shows how they enrich the work and invest it with unsuspected dimensions. “The number 12 is the result of the multiplication of the prime numbers 3 and 4, being the activation of two mathematical symbols from a particularly vast signifying field. However, this activation, which remains the most abstract of the presentation, provides it with part of its anthropological dimension. Since ancient times, 3 has represented harmony and perfection in many cultures: the divine structure often assumes a triadic or Trinitarian form. The number 4 signifies equilibrium and stability, the square symbolizing the earth is associated with the woman sharing her fertility, while the triangle forms a masculine symbol. In the exhibition, the number 12 – the live horses – therefore potentiates the masculine by the feminine, harmony by equilibrium, as well as the four cardinal points by the three dimensions of space, the four elements by the ternary structure of the universe. For all these reasons, the number 12 has been special since the most distant times: It is the number of the sons of Jacob and, therefore the tribes of Israel, the months of the year, the signs of the zodiac...It also faithfully echoes the twelve labours of Hercules.”⁸

The cultural dimensions of the work allow us to better understand the radicalism of Kounellis’ gesture that marks out the principles of a new spatial language. In doing this, he found the principle of the duality of the living and the inert, of the structure and sensitivity, of culture and nature, that was to become part of the syntax of his oeuvre from then on. The iron panel replaced the canvas of the painting, that is to say its structure, but it still lacked the depth of the pictorial space. In the present action, the expanse of the gallery itself, and all the elements that define it, had a structural function while the horses represented all the sensitivity of the living world. The space of the gallery was absorbed and integrated into the work of art; it became indissolubly united with it. Kounellis seized the gallery space to initiate a return of art towards the real and living. What could have been more powerful than the twelve horses tethered along the perimeter of the gallery to reunite art and life?

Kounellis defined the limits of what he calls a theatrical cavity, marking his taking possession of the space, and this spatial strategy was to become a constant aspect of his oeuvre. We will find it once again in the same year in the Iolas Gallery in Paris with the “Fires” (ill. 36). The twelve horses are a living image and their integration into a spatial structure created a totality that led to Kounellis’ assertion: “I am capable of rediscovering and reinterpreting the world.” The reality of the world had taken over the illusionist space of the painting and it is in the stratum of his space that the artist integrates inert and living fragments to create an image of unity. The nature of the relationship between the work and the viewer

is no longer the same because Kounellis projects the observer into its centre, causing him to become an active protagonist in the theatrical action dreamed up and staged by the artist.

Germano Celant described it from his point of view: “Therefore, with their force of procreation, the *12 Live Horses* embody the totality of an artist who believes in creative fertility; this time, a traditionally arid ground (the gallery, the architecture) has been sown. The blending of animality and the space, the architectural and the theatrical (one sees the interior of L’Attico Gallery through an opening) makes the viewer the witness of a Dionysian *mise en scène*.” And Celant continues his analysis on the observer’s perception of the work: “As in all other galleries worldwide, one was quite simply forced to watch passively. However, now the perception increased to vast proportions by calling in feelings and the senses ranging from fear to the sense of smell. [...] The relationship between Kounellis and the viewer is not passive; in a manner of speaking, it is aggressive. The artist intends to interpellate all the senses; his aim is for all the observers to become aware. Kounellis is looking for the sensual fluid that must continue to flow between art and reality, that must not be interrupted, that makes itself felt in an uninterrupted exchange of energy, through a sensitive tension that has endured to our time.”⁹ In his review written after the genesis of the *12 Live Horses*, a critic displayed particular lucidity when describing the importance of the work for Kounellis’ future oeuvre and its place in the art of today. “He is about to set out on a liberating odyssey, but the voyage still has no destination. However, this journey will lead to an ever greater exploration that, even though it would be possible after every experience, does not rule out the desire to return, to revise and restore. After the show in L’Attico, as with the Burri’s sacks or Pollock’s drippings, one can proclaim: If they are horses, they are Kounellis.”¹⁰ This exhibition of *12 Live Horses* is exemplary for the art of the twentieth century and paved the way to all of Kounellis’ other alternative stations.

The importance of the *12 Live Horses*, and the influence this work had on contemporary art, led to Kounellis presenting several reprises. First of all, in 1976 at the XXXVII. Biennale in Venice within the frame of the “Ambiente Arte: dal Futurismo alla Body Art” Exhibition (p. 22), then in the Whitechapel Gallery’s London show “A Brief History of Performance: Part One” in 2002, followed by the inauguration of the MADRE, the new Donna Regina Museum of Contemporary Art in Naples in 2006 (p. 23) and finally at the “40th International Fair for Modern and Contemporary Art” in Cologne in 2006 as a homage to Jannis Kounellis (p. 23). As the organizer of this last presentation, I was in the position of being able to realize that the radicalism of this work had lost none of its actuality and that it forcefully expressed a challenge to the established order of the art market but, at the same time, the triumph of a new vision of art developed by Kounellis and the artists of l’Arte Povera in the 1960s. With this work, contemporary art once again inhaled the real odours of life even if they did come from the stables. Duchamp paved the way in 1917 with his “Fountain”, the ready-made of a urinal, although the man who was soon to sign his works “Rose Sélavy” preferred the smell of “La Belle haleine, Eau de Voilette” (1921).

Overlooking the odours, the essential aspect for Kounellis resided in the creation of a space in the interior of which he was able to develop a pictorial vision uniting art and life.

¹ Jean-Christophe Ammann, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1977

² Catherine Strasser, “L’art travaille autant qu’il se travaille,” in: *Du travail de l’art*, Ed. Regard, 2006, pp. 201–219

³ Rudi Fuchs, “Terzo racconto,” in: *Kounellis, Casa centrale degli artisti*, Mosca, Leonardo de Luca Editori, 1991, p. 189

⁴ Catherine Strasser, op. cit., pp. 201–219

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Jannis Kounellis, “Entretien avec Giovanni Lista,” *Ligeia, Dossiers sur l’art*, 2006, p. 12

⁸ Catherine Strasser, op. cit., pp. 201–219

⁹ Germano Celant, “Jannis Kounellis, Senza titolo (Dodici Cavalli Vivi), Rome 1969,” in: *L’art de L’exposition. Une documentation sur trente expositions exemplaires du XXe siècle*. Editions du Regard, 1998. Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch (eds.)

¹⁰ Claudio Cintoli, *Se sono cavalli sono Kounellis*, Cartabianca, 15 May 1969







Untitled (12 live horses), 1969/76, Venice Biennale [cat. 12]

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Untitled (12 live horses), 1969/2006, Naples [cat. 12]

Untitled (12 live horses), 1969/2006, Cologne [cat. 12]



ROME 1976

LOUISIANA

**Hotel della Lunetta, Piazza del Paradiso 68, Rome
January 1976**

L'Attico Gallery, Rome
Director: Fabio Sargentini
Photography: Claudio Abate

First and sole utilization of the location for artistic purposes



In 1976, Kounellis chose a room in the Hotel della Lunetta in Rome in order to pursue his reflection on the space of art. This hotel room was reduced to its essentials: A double bed covered with a simple spread, a standard wardrobe, two chairs placed side-by-side, a lit pear-shaped lamp on the ceiling, hexagonal tiling, similar to that in his studio, and completely naked walls with the exception of the wallpaper with its decorative motif. The facing wall was cut in two at head height by a horizontal slit kept open in the centre by a ping-pong ball inserted by Kounellis. That was the only intervention made by the artist in this run-of-the-mill location (cat. 30).

Let us reconsider the essential aspects of the statement made by the prominent art historian Giuliano Briganti who, in his own words, discovered Kounellis quite late on that day when he went to see his work in that hotel room. "I can still remember how I felt standing in front of his untitled 'installation' in the Albergo Lunetta, one of his works of that year. I remember it because it was an important day for me. The poetic manifestation of that work which, to my eyes, was expressing ancient formal values in a totally new language gave me the clear sensation of being 'inside' the most exciting process in contemporary art. I say 'inside' because I believe that only a work of art which truly expresses the contemporary can evoke in the eyes of the viewer something similar to the creative spirit. That is to say, something that is more or different from the mere emotional and intellectual recognition of the value of the work and the pure contemplation of its quality [...] It was the untitled 'installation' of the Albergo Lunetta therefore which enabled me to take this step: a horizontal cut that practically divided the wall of a dreary hotel room which I had reached after wandering through a maze of stairways and corridors. A precise pure incision cutting so deeply into the structure of the wall that it was a wonder it remained standing: the edges formed two very fine lines that joined together at one extremity and ended up on the faded pink wallpaper in one sharp pencil mark while in the center they widened just enough to hold a fragile ping-pong ball [...]. It seemed to me that the tortuous route leading to that room was symbolic and the dreariness of the surroundings concealing it, mythical, and I thought of the story of the Labyrinth and others about hidden treasure: a treasure that could be hidden in the most banal of places, like Poe's purloined letter."¹

Maurizio Calvesi depicted the atmosphere of this district of Rome that was so familiar to Kounellis and placed the Hotel della Lunetta, situated close to the L'Attico Gallery that had organized this event and, in 1967, had already presented the exhibition "Kounellis. Il Giardino. I Giuochi", a veritable artistic manifesto by the 31-year-old artist who had just set off on a new path – into its urban context. "For a time, he fretted with the idea of renting a hotel a few yards from the Galleria dell'Attico for an 'exhibition' – the Hotel della Lunetta (rebaptised Louisiana) in a marvellous corner of Rome that these days is getting a murky reputation from the

curse of pickpockets and murder but which gives off sweetness and the irregularity of the weather from every stone and every cavity or womb warmth of existence. And how much of this good, lousy anfractuosity, this crustiness which it seems ought to smell bad and then instead smells of frying and moon among the terraces and hidden roofs in the internal clefts nestling as it were in the dominating shadow of the dome of S. Andrea della Valle, how much of this non-squalid squalor is found – only more secret and quasi-suffocated – with tragic and regular intermittency inside the perimeter of this little hotel. Mafai would have painted it; Burri would have gone off with underwear and quilts for a composition, introducing a splash of blood into it. Kounellis first felt it as a setting emptied of life that he could fill and orchestrate with the presence of heaven knows what pictures and inhabit with an alien public that would desecrate those unbaptised back stairways with a hum of inauguration, only monotonously experienced by the invisible comings and goings of anonymity. Then he must have realised that its character was that very emptiness and that the problem was to establish a relationship with it – to do it himself first of all, and then get (in his wake but in tiny groups) a public involved in the terrible intimacy of that relationship. It was thus a question of paring down the gesture and eliminating any redundancy of colour or exclamation, to focus the relationship itself so as to underline a single point – a matter of precision."² Calvesi maintains that the hotel had been renamed "Louisiana"; in fact, Kounellis gave this name to his intervention to invest it with a metamorphic dimension and Maurizio Fagiolo believes having discovered the hidden key to this work in its borrowed name: "Everyone began to look for symbols, emblems and allegories. Vainly poring over the work, expecting it like Moses to speak up, few people noticed the plate on the door of the room. The label said 'Louisiana', and referred to a little hotel in the Rue Jacob in Paris. It was the only possible clue to understanding this work. Once again, Kounellis refused to exhibit anything in a gallery. This time he exhibited just the hotel. With all the infinite dreariness of people who have recently gone out, chairs neat and tidy, cushions plumped up, a semblance of sweeping the floor. ... A little gesture that beyond all tittle-tattle means so many things. First of all, mistrust of the packaging context even of a museum, then the freedom reclaimed for the artist (the ultimate individualist) to do what he wants, and lastly a renunciation of art as merchandise."³

We must bear in mind that Kounellis lived in the Hotel della Lunetta when he arrived in Rome from his native Greece and that, at the time, the Hotel Louisiane in Paris was a meeting place for artists and intellectuals. Its very name is suggestive of a change of scenery and symbolises migration with all its uncertainties, its make-do aspects and the resulting loss of identity; but also with its hopes and new discoveries. Kounellis returned to this site of his arrival and made a minimal intervention into this room; he did not even touch the one next door which was also part of his presentation, being content with leaving the

doors of the two rooms wide open. Did this opening symbolize the occasion of an unintentional encounter, of coming into contact, a first step out of isolation? Bruno Cora, who witnessed the project, evaluated the importance of Kounellis' limited, isolated intervention and understood that the artist had set off on an odyssey-like voyage and the first stopover had already been made under the same auspices in 1969 with the "12 Live Horses". "It would seem an eccentric space, this last one selected by the artist to 'write' about a descent upon social places, places of memory, places of literature and life. A hotel in the heart of the secular district, very close to the Campo de' Fiori, a refuge at all times, an uncertain oasis for transitory presences, ephemeral councils, escape from the throbbing din of the city and back-alleys, from the tumultuous worries of living, the sancta sanctorum of privacy at a fixed price. ... You arrive in room 35 as if for a secret appointment. In the dim light of an ordinary lamp, on the wall opposite the bed, of threatening size in the little room, already cramped between a chest of drawers, washbasin and a dark cupboard, a sign is discovered, heavy with silence like a legal exhibit, an incisive mordant mark of intent and clear mystery. Over the whole breadth of the wall, several yards long and above the height of a man of medium stature, engraved on the wallpaper, on the wall, dug out like two slender lips, a cleft opens and remains open beneath the apparent pressure of a ping-pong ball in celluloid, which seems to absorb the weight of the whole wall in the cavity. A fragile and frivolous springer for all the walls and all the rooms, a point of suspension for the whole hotel and its humanised organism. In the elementariness of working implements, everything is brought together that surrounds it in these environments and outside them. It is a calamity intended to act as a catalyst. It is a symbol of a biographical epic, a mythical voyage never interrupted. Elsewhere it is called Hotel Louisiane, paradigm, nomenclature – images of a particular event, a "vigil" that noted a perception and discovered a form of mental behaviour or revealed an ethical risk. A fragrance is reconstructed here in images, an abstract mood, a rage and an enchantment is revealed in signs."⁴

John Thompson, in turn, made a pertinent analysis of the structure of the installation and its impact on the visitors: "The work functioned according to a severe, almost canonic, structural parallax; and this was further emphasized by the way in which the mirrors all the time played back the viewer's changing relationship to the objects in the room. The purpose of this process of "doubling" seemed to be that of making the "self" conscious of the "self" in the act of looking..."⁵ This is a hotel room without any particular character, without any style except mediocrity, without any history, a place one goes into and out of without leaving a trace, a place without a memory that one forgets as soon as one leaves it; in this way, it is similar to countless other hotel rooms. It is an anonymous place, a ready-made or rather a "ready to lie down in", a simple sleeping machine for the traveler passing through. It is a transitory place for a horizontal stopover, a place that breathes sadness, and the only way out for the person who spends the night here is to dream of imaginary spaces. Kounellis presents the in-between-time of the room, the absence of any human presence to which it is doomed. The artist penetrated into this everyday space but emptied it of its functionality in order to purge it of its insignificance, its dreariness, its passivity, without negating its almost prison-like reality. The slit in the wall is like an open wound; it reveals the fragility of something that is suddenly nothing more than a fine membrane covering another reality. The slit demonstrates the illusion of security that the blind wall appears to guarantee. Here, Kounellis questions the wall as the surface of a visual illusion and, in doing so, raises the issue of the relationship between painting and spatial reality. Whether intended or not, the reference to Fontana quickly comes to mind, not only because of the influence he had on Kounellis and the other artists of his generation but also because the "Tagli" he started to create in 1958 radically questioned the notion of the (physical and intellectual) space behind the canvas (ill. 28). Fontana's spatial concept rejected any form of pictorial illusionism; however, his aggressive action did not have the aim of destroying the canvas itself but, much more, a certain idea of painting. Kounellis transferred this iconoclastic gesture into real space, in a social and human context, with all the consequences resulting from this. At the time when Fontana was working on his spatial concepts, Jasper Johns was in the process of painting his flags, his numbers, his targets and various other objects and in 1957 would create his "Drawing with 2 Balls" and, the following year, Study for a "Painting with a

Ball". The two drawings show vertical slits held open by small balls and, in 1960, John finished his "Painting with Two Balls" (ill. 27), this time with a horizontal slit across the entire width of the canvas with two small balls, side by side, holding it apart. The painting itself is an extremely colourful "all-over" abstraction with the surface unsettled by the tension between the open slit and black background. All told, Johns remained within the framework of painting, even if he incorporated real fragments whereas Kounellis toppled into the real world while staying a visionary painter. Kounellis temporarily appropriated the hotel room to leave his traces on it, to give it a place in history and a memory. He broke the wall to upset the conventional order of this room as well as to take it out of the solitude it was in and make it a place of exchange and a change. The room is now no longer anonymous; the artist's signature has left traces of his stay and his dreams. This all the more so because the hotel is called the "Lunetta" – the little moon. Speaking of his painting some years earlier, Kounellis explained that: "[...] there is a moon every week, and you, you paint that moon that never stops growing [...] I came to the moons, because, anyway, you have to wake up every day..."⁶ Maybe the little ping-pong ball is a metaphor for the lunetta that throws light on sleep and illuminates the dreams of the artist in the process of thinking about what he will create differently this time. Could the slit be the trajectory of the *lunetta* that never stops growing and accompanies the artist on his path? Could the *lunetta* be a metaphor for the artist in general who, as he progresses, reveals more of his riches, then, having completed a cycle, starts over again "because, anyway, you have to wake up every day..."? Doesn't the artist open the slit in the wall to discover the realities he never stops dreaming about on the other side?

¹ Giuliano Briganti, *Kounellis* in: Jannis Kounellis Edizioni, Galleria dell'Oca, 2007, pp. 103–104

² Maurizio Calvesi, "Fitta un Albergo per presentare un solco in un muro e una panina," *Corriere della Sera*, 1 février 1976

³ Maurizio Fagiolo, "Attenti l'opera è quella crepa..." *Il messaggero*, 4 février 1976

⁴ Bruno Cora, "Hotel Louisiane," *Data*, mars-avril 1976, p. 22–23

⁵ Jon Thompson, "Deadly prescription," *Artscribe* 88, September 1991

⁶ Jannis Kounellis, "Odyssée Lagunaire," *Écrits et entretiens, 1966–1989*, Daniel Lelong Éditeur, Paris, 1990, p. 67





III BORDEAUX 1985

ENTREPÔT LAINÉ Works from 1983 to 1985
c.a.p.c., Musée d'Art Contemporain
10 May – 8 September 1985

Director: Jean-Louis Froment
Photography: Claudio Abate
Catalogue (French/English) | Texts: Jean-Louis Froment, Rudi Fuchs | Design: Daniel Perrier

Architecture and Functions: Port warehouse built in 1824 as the "l'Entrepôt réel des denrées coloniales". Utilised as a cultural centre since 1979, after enlargement program (3500 m²) reopened in 1984 as c.a.p.c. Museum of Contemporary Art.

Solo exhibitions in public spaces since LOUISIANA (II):

- 1977 Kunstmuseum, Lucerne (cat.) | Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam (cat.)
- 1978 Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (cat.)
- 1979 Pinacoteca Provinciale, Bari (cat.) | Folkwang Museum, Essen (cat.)
- 1980 Arc/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris (cat.)
- 1981 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven | Travelled to: Obra Social, Caja de Pensiones, Madrid, 1982 | Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1982 | Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, 1982 (cat.)
- 1983 Musei Comunali, Rimini (cat.) | 1984 Haus Esters Museum, Krefeld (cat.)

Following the *12 Live Horses* and *Louisiana*, as well as numerous exhibitions in galleries and museums after 1960, Kounellis was invited to present a personal exhibition in the foundations of the Entrepôt Lainé – a space, dating from 1824, that impresses with its dimensions and stone architecture – in Bordeaux in 1985. The artist knew of the location from his participation in the "Arte Povera Antiform" exhibition in 1982 and "Legends" – the c.a.p.c.'s inaugural exhibition – in 1984. From the mid-1960s, Kounellis had developed a visual language that permitted him to project a vision of the future for an art in search of a new centrality in the space of his work and a given location; he was now ready for a project of this scope. Jean-Louis Froment, Director of the c.a.p.c., immediately detected the unique potential of this encounter between the artist and this particular location: "Jannis Kounellis has perhaps sought within the history of the very place offered to him for the creation of his exhibition (the word has moreover never seemed at once so inappropriate and yet so perfectly apposite, as only a question can be) points of reference, situations and a whole language of coincidences with his own artistic impulses – to the point of endowing this place with an original fictionality which disturbs and undermines its real nature. The Entrepôt Lainé seems at once so close to, and yet so remote from, the image that we have of it. It will be said: during the weeks of preparation of the project, Jannis Kounellis has perhaps placed himself in jeopardy, seeking to extract from his memory and from his whole human trajectory, a form – or the invention of a form – which would have some resemblance to an exhibition. But I am well aware how far we are from finding the word to describe this form."¹

Rudi Fuchs describes his impressions at the location and analyses the manner in which the artist visualized his interpretation of the space, with the help of the elements and materials that formed his artistic language, to create an extremely poetic spatial rhythm. "The proper reading of Kounellis exhibitions at the splendid Entrepôt Lainé, doing justice to the sharpness of the artist's mind, must be a political and artistic one. Art is not a system of chance. The intervention of the artist in a given space is a calculated act, relative to the artist's own reading of the space. The artist is the individual who is able, in moments of incredible enlightenment, to escape from so-called historical inevitability; he cuts into it, he confronts history and changes it by indicating a different reading of what is past and present. The Bordeaux exhibition is a wide movement following the arches of the Entrepôt Lainé, in which Kounellis inscribes his interpretation of the space, using the material elements that in the course of time slipped into his language: hissing gas-flames, pieces of old wood smelling of tar, little heaps of coffee on metal scales, sacks, traces of smoke and, also, a panel of glowing red (in memory of the morality and simplicity of Georges de La Tour's discreet, almost Calvinistic style). The hall is high, spacious and, because of the surrounding arches, rather regular. Between the different works are various intervals. This gives the row of



cat. 49, detail

works a quiet rhythm (or cadence) as in a slow line of poetry. My impression is one of a hymn being chanted. The works are called into presence, transforming the dim, desolate, abandoned space of the Entrepôt into a place of risk and high adventure – like it used to be when it received the exotic, precious goods brought in by the sailing ships. Thus the works, in a way extracted from the space (from its atmosphere and its history and coming forward from the dark arches into the dim light, like personae) show also the space itself. Art-works and space evolve from each other like day and night or silence and sound. The exhibition, then, impresses not only as a group of individual pieces but even more as exhibition. In my view the exhibition presents a moral point about exhibition-making – one I have hardly ever seen articulated with such brilliant precision."²

Reflecting on the presentation of the work of art in the neutral spaces of the museum and gallery, and on its subsequent development, Rudi Fuchs analyzed the space/work relationship it was necessary for the artist to create to guarantee the validity of the ensemble: "A number of artists, among them Kounellis, have recognized that the subtlety of an art-work not only depends upon its internal structure but also on the structural, evocative relationship it sets up with its space. For a space is not only a formal set of dimensions but also and always an echo and a history and it is the reality in which you inscribe the work and thus its dialectical component."³ Rudi Fuchs detected another characteristic in Kounellis' present work: fragility. "Kounellis entered into the Entrepôt Lainé in a most subtle way. He did not squarely occupy the space with his imagery, for that would have destroyed his ability to argue. Fragility is the very structure of this work, the structure of its mise en scène. It is fragile like the speaking of James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*; therefore it is really subversive, absolutely denying the desires of the majority, evading taking form, "maquisard", hovering like the poet's voice."⁴ In his own way, Bruno Cora described the process through which Kounellis transformed the warehouse into a cavity where the alteration of pillars and the works created a sense of rhythm that invested the ensemble with all of its significance and produced a feeling of continuity around the perimeter. "In Bordeaux at the Entrepôt Lainé, Kounellis placed between the pillars and the vast architectural passageways of that ancient storehouse of pain and hope the greatest sequence of images ever produced by his linguistically subversive repertory. By virtually closing off all the openings, the painter darkened the great Piranesian cavity, creating the pneumatics of an inner vision. By marking the spatial plane at the base of the first pillars with long iron beams in a continuous line, the artist surrounds the viewer and tightens the whole of the environment around him – creating in a sense, a real horizon and a cascade of pictorial hues, a highly loaded feeling of relationships placing the space within the coordinates of the historical quality of color and the archaic bent of the raw materials. The image thus took hold one after another within an almost perfect circle of vision."⁵ Continuing, Cora describes the

alternation of the works with towering lit torches and those with iron panels painted red and black respectively. This alternation of flames and colours brings back a vision of painting that is at the origin of Kounellis' work. "First, the sequence of the Milan fires on iron sheets (cat. 49), followed immediately by the enormous section between two pillars, which has been painted red (cat. 50). An opaque, passionate red, revealing color as a kind of luminosity verging from the real toward abstraction, much in the same way as it does in the representation of the women in Masaccio's "Crucifixion." A red rather like a silent chromatic intermission, a thought reverberating from De La Tour, but with enormous expansive intensity, side by side and in counterpoint to the choral surging of gaslight flames. Again the rhythm of the iron sheet with the fires of Milan. Then, the diagonal bucking of the linear compositions following the ghost – restless still and never quite vanished – of the supremacy of painting [...] And again, the rhythm of the iron sheet with the fires of Milan. One, two, three of them, and a fourth one, with the fires against a black background. Then a cut this time obtained by painting the enormous section between two pillars an opaque uniform black (cat. 51); a field of absorption with shadowy Caravaggio-like moods where the all-pervasive color inhabits the space. But it is also a veiled, dramatic black vibrant with an atmosphere reminiscent of Malevich. The iron sheet which, with the fires, closes off that long statement of pictorial sonority, adjoins two further means of spatial occlusion obtained through a dense sequence of vertical wooden elements"⁶ (cat. 46). Another silent, almost evanescent, manifestation of the flames can be found in a harsh-white painted panel with twenty-four shelves with traces of smoke (cat. 52). Kounellis had conceived a similar work the year before and Daniel Dobbels described it in the following manner: "The intervals, distinct, belonging to different periods, temper and temporalize the home (a wall) of what went up in smoke without being completely effaced or lost. A body, a physical force, holds it there, supporting beyond all perception an absence possibly without end but not without tangible, abstract measures."⁷ The panel shows the very last traces of the material; fragile, delicate signs produced by its combustion, signs placed breath-like by the invisible brush of the flames, signs of a magical vivacity transformed into spiritual signs as if by alchemy. There is an elusive movement in the smoke, something indefinite (neither solid, nor liquid) a certitude, a lack of body, an absence of form, a transparent opacity, a receptiveness, an adhesive faculty, something unpredictable, a lightness, a disorientation, a lack of will, a sense of invisibility, a swaying, and a meditation that so fascinated Kounellis. Smoke is a paradoxical material that is always in movement, it is allied to the air it flows through before vanishing into nothingness, it is the child of heat and dies in immaterial coldness. Smoke: that is the death of the fire having devoured the matter, it is the final act in an existential tragedy, but the black traces it leaves in passing on all who come close to it bear the memories of its origins.

Before tackling the spatial dynamism of the flaming torches, let us analyze the diagonal formed by the planks of wood piled on top of each other that Kounellis trace in the space of an arch and which opens the view towards the semi-darkness, (cat. 39), in contrast to all the other arches that are filled with orthogonal panels turned toward the empty centre of this immense area. Here, Kounellis takes a stance in opposition to the tradition of painting and the rectilinear limits of its surfaces through the diagonal, with all its vitality, its movement, its power, its expressivity and its spatial autonomy. For him, the diagonal is a utopia, just as it was for the Italian Futurists, the Russian Suprematists and the Dutch De Stijl movement, a utopia simultaneously artistic, political and humanist. We are dealing with an ascending, dynamic prospective utopia the visibility of which is nothing but a sign of the immaterial, spiritual forces of human creativity. This sign was now inscribed on the space of the Entrepôt Lainé and delivered its message.

In the semi-darkness behind this diagonal, one discovers one of the earliest works by Kounellis making use of a flame fed from a nozzle attached to a bottle of propane gas. It dates from 1967 and serves here as a prelude to this multiplication of fire that fills the empty space of the warehouse (cat. 8). But here, the hissing flame comes out of the centre of a steel flower formed of twelve petals arranged in a circle to become "a generic form like Malevich's black square or Mondrian's paintings in the form of a rhombus."⁸

Nike Bätzner stated that: "Here, the flower is an image fractured by technology. Nature can no longer be perceived in the sense of a well-balanced unity.

It now appears to be defending itself against coming into the clutches of mankind. The threatening flame keeps the viewer at a distance by threatening him, at head-height, as an aggressive opponent [...] in the centre, the precise, sharp-edged silhouette cut out of the iron confronts the permanent change that interrupts the unity of the surface. Form and formlessness, determined materiality and vital energy, rigidity and flexibility, cold and heat all meet each other."⁹ Bätzner then quotes Kounellis' recollection of his sensations: "...I feel the height where the fire is, I measure the width from one end to the other, I feel the coldness of the material, I rediscover the sense of a scathing picture that I had lost."¹⁰

In the course of the creative process, Kounellis discovered that flames can be aggressive, but also a source of warmth; they can throw light on, but also transform matter. The flame can also serve to punish and purify; it expresses suffering, symbolises the hell, as well as the inner flame of the creative spirit. The flame is a burning breath propelled through space that, unless it reaches its goal, disappears in the ether without leaving a trace; but this flame also fades as soon as the source of energy feeding it peters out. It is the visible part of this energy, it is shapeless, volatile, a coloured, luminous undulation charged with menace but also hope. The flame is an ephemeral state of life, with birth and death forming its simultaneous existential duality. It is the flame that the artist has to master, channel, direct and ultimately transform into a visible, spiritual force that takes over the visual space of his creation – a process that leads from the ephemera of the imagination to a reality firmly anchored in life. Let us leave it up to several witnesses to recount what they saw, felt and heard when they penetrated into the hermetic space of the Entrepôt, and their reflections on the feelings this unique experience aroused in them. "Kounellis playing with flames appears to be like Prometheus stealing the flame from the gods or Apollo bringing the spirit to man: elusive and inexorable. In the depths of the dark crypt of the Entrepôt Lainé in Bordeaux, the artist impresses with an amazing spectacle where the purifying fire whispers to us that art is light. One hears it even before entering into the dark den of the belly of this boat. One hears the raucous, continuous song as disturbing as a foghorn. Going around an arch, the gaze sweeping over the space, one notices almost nothing except these small bluish flames running here and there like will-o-the-wisps. Then, when the eyes become accustomed to the darkness, one discovers the bricked arcades with vertical railroad track sleepers (cat. 46), with sacks of cocoa that, from a distance, look like large stones or potatoes, stacked up or folded and stratified (cat. 47). And all the time, the gnawing sound of the fire from the forge [...]. This fire, volatile but controllable, represents both freedom and human suffering. As the painter he is, Kounellis has used this to create silvery panels where the blue flowers from the gas nozzles race about, living, zebra-striped frescoes of filamentous stars in the sky and/or the flames of hell."¹¹

Here is another eye-witness account oriented on the origin of the fire, gas, and the fear of a leak, as well as a feeling of emptiness: "First of all, there is the noise. Between the muffled hissing of a kettle and the compressed drone of an airplane ready for take off. Regular, monotonous, it can already be heard in the entrance to the hall. And then, there is the smell. The unique smell. The smell of gas. A smell that is not really biting, nor exactly acid, a really rank smell. And then, it was necessary to penetrate into what used to be called the 'Entrepôt réel des denrées coloniales', that is where this vision is. A strange vision because at first, nothing was registered on its boundaries or, at least, nothing stuck out. As if on a screen, one saw high walls marching by, brownish panels, false exits opened and the real exits blocked, and – above all – the void – the immensity of the void – between the majestic pillars of the nave. It was rare for an art exhibition to expose its own paucity, its own barrenness, to such an extent. However, the smell and the noise were not misleading. The gas, in effect, was in the process of bursting out of the long, fine copper pipes lined up on the rectangular metal panels. The gas erupted in such a way that it was necessary to rapidly replace the blue bottle that cooled it every two hours. And, without explication, the shadow of fear, a devious, sickening fear, wormed its way in, insinuated itself, took hold. Fear of what? Of a leak. One is always afraid of leaking gas. However, this time, it wasn't the gas that one dreaded escaping. It was the fear of the escape itself, as well the loss of meaning (the empty space) and that of the body (the desert). To try to reassure oneself, one goes, one comes, one moves closer

to the flames and then away as if one was in a museum trying to find the right distance for admiring a painting: *accommodation*, an obligatory exercise when visiting an exhibition. And it is true that the fire piped onto the monochrome panels could easily be interpreted as pictures forming a group or series with each one, taken individually, suggesting an original composition and special syntax.”¹² Hervé Gauville could not help but think, in this cavity closed on itself, on the tragic, terrible history of the recent past and – without explicitly referring to it – posed these questions that, simultaneously, provide the answers: “What was the former name of this place that one enters ignorant of what one will find inside, this place where all the exits have been so carefully blocked, this place barely lit by a murky light that only allows you to see where you are treading, this place where an unpleasant smell floats in the air and where the gas, inexorably, infests the atmosphere? This horrifying place where one starts to fear that one will not be able to get out of it? This room where one quite simply risks being asphyxiated, gassed?”¹³

Jean Eimer is more explicit and, just like Kounellis, understands how to examine history and pose questions on the very presence of his work that called on the viewer to take a critical stance. “Jannis Kounellis has put a great deal of his soul into the large space of the Entrepôt Lainé. He installed his art there with ease. But still with its extremely high demands. Something that leads to quite strange sensations on the part of the visitors. The ear is reached first of all. Even before penetrating the naves, one perceives the heady music of the surf, of a waterfall, a torrent, of the impatient hiss of airplanes taking off or the obstinate heave of the sea-wind in our woods. But they are only jets of gas. The nose takes over. The warehouse has been transformed into a gas chamber. Lacq, between rotten eggs and our little suicides. Auschwitz, the barbarous tragedy. Then the eye gradually discovers the work pushed back around the periphery of the vast empty space. There are panels of bluish-brown iron, positioned at eye-level, wedged against the stone, with torches shooting up in front of them, brushed by the wind from a fictive trajectory. The Grecian blue flames are placed at the end of copper pipes stretched like the feet of wading birds on their migratory exodus in the azure of a steely sky [...]. This installation, which turns its back on prettiness in order to come close to the essential, interrogates history with a frightening economy of means. How have our societies managed since the birth of man? Kounellis, this classicist, asks these questions through the four elements recreated as he pleases in an office celebrating work. Without the slightest intention of giving a reply, he leaves the visitor behind with his scepticism after he has performed the miracle of bringing the ship away from the dock onto the sea. Sail on! Sail on! But to which shores?”¹⁴

In Bordeaux, Kounellis invested a warehouse with a new significance by temporarily entrusting it with a tragic message that, at the same time, is also an act of artistic renaissance. This is how Denys Zacharopoulos described the organic

integration of the architecture into the totality of the work: “... the architectural space was organically integrated into the show as the container of all the work’s possibilities; by the same token, the structure lost both its ability to function as a theatrical, illusion-creating setting and its objective role as the pragmatic site, a producer of reality. The architectural space was no more real or illusionistic than a canvas or a frame; it became simply another grammatical unit in a larger language.”¹⁵

At the Entrepôt Lainé, Kounellis created his first major spatial fresco, inseparable from the space and structure in which it took shape.

1 Jean-Louis Froment, “Red,” in: cat. *Jannis Kounellis, Œuvres de 1983 à 1985*, c.a.p.c., Musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux, Entrepôt Lainé, 1985

2 Rudi Fuchs, “Jannis Kounellis, from Bordeaux.....,” op.cit.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Bruno Cora, *Jannis Kounellis: Burning is the image in the hour of the eclipse*, Parkett 6, 1985, p. 41 (translation from Italian: John Herrin)

6 Ibid.

7 Daniel Dobbels, “L’Angle nu,” in: cat. *Jannis Kounellis*, Hôtel des Arts, Toulon 2005, p. 20

8 Rudi Fuchs, “Vocation,” in: *Kounellis*, Editions Cercle d’art, 1991

9 Nike Bätzner, *Arte Povera*, Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 2000, pp. 176–177

10 Kounellis, cat. *Raum, Zeit, Stille*, Cologne 1985, p. 173

11 Elisabeth Vedrenne, “Les Feux d’Apollon,” *Beaux-Arts*, July-August 1985

12 Hervé Gauville, “Dans les Chambres à gaz de Jannis Kounellis,” *Libération*, 17 June 1985

13 Ibid.

14 Jean Eimer, “Autodafé et chambre à gaz,” *Sud Ouest*, 20 June 1985

15 Denys Zacharopoulos, “Jannis Kounellis,” *Artforum*, November 1985

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Untitled, 1985 [cat. 48]

Untitled, 1985 [cat. 52]

Untitled, 1985 [cat. 49, detail]

Untitled, 1985 [cat. 50]

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Untitled, 1985 [cat. 47]

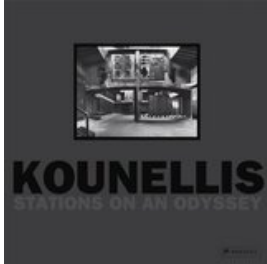
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Untitled, 1983 [cat. 39]

Untitled (Margherita di Fuoco), 1967 [cat. 8]



Entrepôt Lainé, general view



Marc Scheps

Jannis Kounellis

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Der Star der europäischen Avantgarde in einer spektakulären Werkschau

Jannis Kounellis hat die europäische Kunst in den 60er Jahren ebenso nachhaltig verändert wie Joseph Beuys oder Mario Merz. Bereits mit zwanzig entwickelte der in Rom lebende Künstler ein Werk, das sich von jeder tradierten Kunstform emanzierte. Er begann mit codeartigen Bildern aus Zahlen und ging dann zur Nutzung gänzlich kunstferner Materialien wie Kohle, Glas, Kaffee etc. über — Weltruhm erlangte er schließlich durch gigantische, oft hochprovokative Installationen. Dieser prächtige Band zeigt Kounellis genialen Blick auf das künstlerische Potential des vermeintlich Alltäglichen.