

la libertá o morte

freedom or death

By Jannis Kounellis

HEART Herning Museum of Contemporary Art opens its doors for the first time to present a retrospective exhibition of the works of the Italian artist Jannis Kounellis (B. 1936). This is the first major presentation of Kounellis's works in Scandinavia, and the artist will create a number of new works for the exhibition.

HEART owns the world's largest collection of works by the Italian artist Piero Manzoni. In his early works from the 1950s and 1960s Kounellis may well have been the one young artist whose sensibilities and choice of materials came closest to those of Manzoni.



FOTO: STEEN GYLINDAL ©



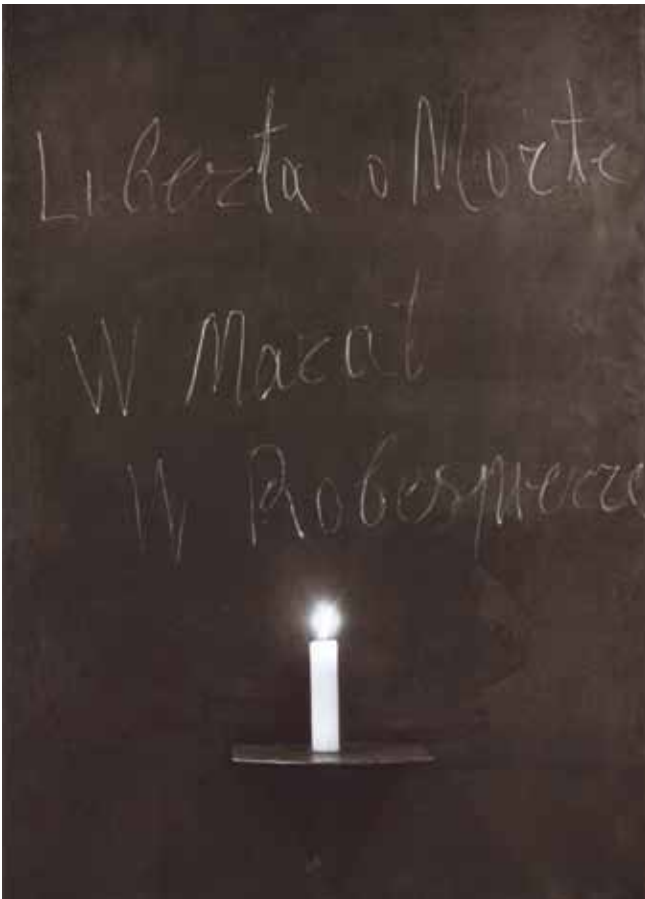
Untitled, 1993. Old seals and ropes. Variable dimensions

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The HEART exhibition of Jannis Kounellis' work derives its title from a piece created in 1969. Strictly speaking, the title of the object is not even *La Libertà o Morte*. Like most of Kounellis' work the piece in question has no title, but the statement or exclamation is the very essence of the work. *Untitled, 1969* consists of a sheet of iron with dimensions similar to those of classical paintings. The sheet is hung on the wall like a painting. In the iron surface, the words "Libertà o Morte W Marat W Robespierre" are inscribed. Underneath the inscription is a small iron shelf bearing a lit candle; one of those short, slender tapers lit in front of images of saints in Catholic churches.



With its text, *Untitled 1969* refers to the French Revolution and to two of the strongest champions of the Revolution. Marat and Robespierre both fell victim to their own fanaticism, but during their brief careers they also laid down the foundations of the ideals of freedom inherent within Western European democracy.

In this sense Kounellis' work tells us that freedom is the most important thing in our lives, but also that the ideals of freedom and our civil rights were born out of a bloody, selfcontradictory chaos. Both points are worth remembering.

Up until 1965 Kounellis was a painter, but like many other young Italian artists of the time he abandoned painting. Since he left behind the art of painting he has retained the designation "painter", but in fact he works with reality on a 1:1 scale, re-establishing the poetic and historical dimensions in the simple and the everyday.

Resistance is a keyword within Kounellis' art. Resistance against the art institution, against commercialisation, against the collective loss of memory and historical awareness; but his art also represents a struggle for the poetry and imagination encompassed within history and everyday life.

Untitled, 1969
Iron panel, iron shelf, candle, chalk
100 x 70 cm.

la libertad o muerte

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Arte Povera

In 1967 the exhibition “Arte Povera e im Spazio” opened in Genoa. The works at the exhibition were created by six artists: Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, and Emilio Prini. Later that same year the curator behind the exhibition, the 27-year old art historian Germano Celant, wrote the manifesto *Arte Povera: Notes For a Guerilla War*. The concept of “Arte Povera” had been born. Whenever the designation has been used since then, it is very rarely translated. In English the expression would be “Poor art”, but in addition to the various associations of the word “poor”, the term “povera” can also mean “deceased”, so the true multiplicity of meaning is only retained in the original Italian.

The expression “Arte Povera” referred to the materials employed by the artists: Fire, iron, wood, fruit, corn, coal, basic foodstuffs, and original elements with strong historical

and social references. Artists and critics spoke of the “open” work; a work, which had neither beginning nor end; which opened up towards the spectator and the world. A work of art that crossed the boundary between life and art.

Arte Povera marked a break with the art of painting, particularly with the expressive tradition. Thus, it also marked a revolt against Western European art, which was dominated by painting, and against a culture defined by the faculty of sight. The artists of Arte Povera moved out into the space of which their works were part, incorporating the other senses and human beings themselves in the creation and perception of the work of art. In this sense Arte Povera prefigured installation art.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Danish Arts Council Committee for International Visual Art.