

EXHIBITIONS

Jannis Kounellis "Jannis Kounellis" at Fondazione Prada, Venice

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Fondazione Prada presents "*Jannis Kounellis*", curated by Germano Celant, the major retrospective dedicated to the artist following his death in 2017. The exhibition runs from 11 May to 24 November 2019 at the historic palazzo of Ca' Corner della Regina, Fondazione Prada's Venetian venue.

Developed in collaboration with Archivio Kounellis, the project brings together more than 60 works from 1959 to 2015, from both Italian and international art institutions and museums, including Tate Modern (London), Centre Pompidou – Musée national d'art moderne (Paris), Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum (Rotterdam), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) and Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (Turin), as well as from important private collections both in Italy and abroad. The show explores the artistic and exhibition history of Jannis Kounellis (Piraeus

1936 – Rome 2017), highlighting key moments in the evolution of his visual poetics and establishing a dialogue between his works and the eighteenth-century spaces of Ca' Corner della Regina.

The artist's early works, originally exhibited between 1960 and 1966, are presented in the spaces on the first floor of the Venetian palazzo and deal with urban language. In an early phase, these paintings reproduce actual writings and signs from the streets of Rome. Later on, the artist transferred black letters, arrows and numbers onto white canvases, paper or other surfaces, in a language deconstruction that expresses a fragmentation of the real. From 1964 onward, Kounellis addressed subjects taken from nature, from sunsets to roses— these latter represented on canvases using automatic buttons. In 1967 Kounellis' investigation turned more radical with the aim of overcoming the traditionally pictorial uniformity of his early production, embracing concrete and natural elements including soil, cacti, wool, coal, cotton, and fire.

Kounellis moved from a written and pictorial language to a physical and environmental one, where the conceptual process became interwoven with elementary materials. The elitist, aseptic and authoritative language typical of the art world is replaced by a more expressive one based on the primacy of vital elements and a terrestrial relationship with art. Thus the use of organic and inorganic entities transformed his practice into corporeal experience, conceived as a sensorial transmission and investigation. In particular, the artist explored the sound dimension through which a painting is translated into sheet music to play or dance to. Already in 1960, Kounellis began chanting his letters on canvas, and in 1970 the artist included the presence of a musician or a dancer. An investigation into the olfactory, which began in 1969 with coffee, continued through the 1980s with elements like grappa, in order to escape the illusory limits of the painting, embrace the world of the senses and join with the virtual chaos of reality.

In the installations featured in this exhibition and realized toward the end of the 1960s, the artist sets up a dialectic battle between the lightness, instability and temporal nature connected with the fragility of the organic element and the heaviness, permanence, artificiality and rigidity of industrial structures, represented by modular surfaces in gray-painted metal. This opposition operates as a metaphor for the living human condition, crushed between a desire for absolute freedom and a sense of physical and moral constriction brought about by social structures.

Kounellis participated in exhibitions and artistic events that paved the way to Arte Povera, which in turn translated into avoiding the exaltation of materials in favor of an authentic form of visual expression. An approach that recalls ancient culture, interpreted according to a contemporary spirit, in contrast with the loss of historical and social identity that took place during the postwar period. Oscillating between a classical and a radical practice, the artist would create

fundamental works that led to an energetic and cultural exchange with the viewer. He created an increasingly intense and fluid art that enveloped components at once natural and historical, corporeal and symbolic, emphasizing the alchemical fallacies.

Beginning in 1967, the year of the so-called "fire daisy," the phenomenon of combustion began to appear frequently in the artist's work: a "fire writing" that enlightens the transformative and regenerative potential of flames. Fire comes in the form of a gas torch freely hung and set at eye level for the viewer, allowing visitors a potential use, or blocking its view in favor of greater attention to interior sensations. It would later become a network of flames set out across the floor, as in the 1971 installation, to announce the desire for a total change. Over the years, with the advent of a political and artistic situation of conservative nature, this practice would take on the reductive form of a candle and paraffin lamp, ultimately transforming into a cannula, light and barely visible, running along the metal surface of the painting.

At the height of the mutation and sublime result of combustion, according to alchemical tradition, we find gold, employed by the artist in multiple ways. In the installation *Untitled (Tragedia civile)* (1975), the contrast between the gold leaf that completely covers a bare wall and the black clothing hanging on a coat hanger underlines the dramatic nature of a scene that alludes to a personal and historical crisis. It is a self-portrait of the artist, here sacrificed and therefore absent, expressing the suffering of an existential and creative condition. A division between past and present that still retains some hope of coming back together again, as the presence of the lit acetylene lamp suggests.

In Kounellis' work smoke, naturally connected with fire, functions both as a residual of a pictorial process involving an energetic transit, and as proof of the transformation of substances and the passage of time. The traces of soot on stones, canvases and walls that characterize some of his works from 1979 and 1980 indicate a personal "return to painting," in opposition to the anti-ideological and hedonistic approach employed in a large part of the painting production in the 1980s. During those same years the artist develops the industrial chimney motif, in other words the exact opposite of the primitive force of flame that is in fact imprisoned in the brick structure. While fire symbolizes the possibility of a revolutionary intervention on reality, soot and smoke released from the industrial chimney represent dissolution and the end of every potential political and social act through art.

The two works from 1980 and 2006, composed of musical instruments connected to gas cylinders and wrought iron bells, are ideally connected to two works dated 1971. In the first case, several flutists play a fragment of a composition by Mozart, while in the second an oil painting portrays the notes of another sacred composition by Bach, this time played live by a violoncellist. With these two operations, Kounellis renews the sacred dimension of music connected to the myth of Orpheus, which attributes the ability to convert inert objects into living things to music, thus placing it in opposition to death. These works substitute or connect the image with sound, overcoming the traditional distinctions between artistic languages. The repetition of musical fragments and the physical presence of musicians allow the artist to explore once again the corporeal dimension of the work, as well as the sharing of a conceptual and sensorial experience between the author and the viewer.

Throughout his artistic research Kounellis develops a tragic and personal relationship with culture and history, avoiding a refined and reverential attitude. He would eventually represent the past with an incomplete collection of fragments, as in the work from 1974, made up of portions of plaster casts of classical statues laid out on a table and accompanied by a lit paraffin lamp.

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Meanwhile, in other works the Greco-Roman heritage is explored through the mask, as in the 1973 installation made up of a wooden frame on which plaster casts of faces are placed at regular intervals. This wooden support evokes a blank canvas that evokes a theatrical space in which the mask, according to Greek tradition, establishes the role and identity of the character, defining its origins and destiny.

The door, displayed in this exhibition in three different declinations dating from 1972 to 2004, is another symbol of the artist's intolerance for the dynamics of his present. The passageways between rooms are closed up with stones, iron reinforcing bars and lead sheets revealing the historical interiority of the building and making several spaces inaccessible in order to emphasize their unknown, metaphysical and surreal dimension. Over the years Kounellis would present the door motif in various versions, sometimes accompanied by bells and plaster casts of classical statues, the stratified memory of a visual and sensorial legacy at once profound and impenetrable.

The exhibition narrative is completed with large-scale installations realized by Kounellis from the end of the 1980s. These ensembles, which multiplied the modularity of historical works in order to inhabit the space, envelop shelves or metal constructions containing objects of various origins: from plaster casts to stones, from coats to glasses and mechanical gears. The large interventions hosted in the central rooms of the two main floors of Ca' Corner della Regina are included in this context. On the first level visitors will find three large-size works from 1994, 2011 and 2013 respectively. The most recent is made up of two train tracks that support six iron structures that echo his "cotton" piece (1967), each of which contains 200 kg (441 lbs) of various different materials within. The large room of the second floor hosts an intervention from 1993-2008 made up of different colored closets and forms hanging from the ceiling. Conceived for the first time for the spaces of Palazzo Belmonte Riso in Palermo, the work challenges the laws of gravity and, through the series of casually opened doors, seems to imitate the impossible perspectives of baroque painting.

In terms of external interventions, already as early as 1967 Kounellis dealt with the motifs of gravity and equilibrium in his works, taking advantage of the formal and imaginative possibilities of the act of hanging an object. However, it wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that he developed a deeper dialogue with architectural and urban spaces. Both of these aspects would result in the monumental 1992's installation presented in the internal courtyard of the Venetian palazzo. Originally conceived for the external façade of a building in Barcelona, it is composed of seven metal plates that support sacks filled with coffee beans.

The retrospective is completed on the ground floor by documents ^{3/4}including films, exhibition catalogues, invitations, posters and archival photographs^{3/4} that trace Kounellis' exhibition history, and by a focus on his theater projects. The exhibition is accompanied by a volume that includes an essay by Germano Celant and an extensive illustrated chronology, documenting and exploring Jannis Kounellis' artistic career and biography. Designed by 2x4 (New York), the book is published by Fondazione Prada.