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## Jannis Kounellis

*SEPT 2019*

*By Toby Kamps*



Installation view: Jannis Kounellis, Fondazione Prada, Venice, 2019. Courtesy Fondazione Prada.  
Photo: Agostino Osio - Alto Piano.

**Jannis Kounellis**

## **Fondazione Prada**

*Jannis Kounellis*

May 11 – November 24, 2019

Venice

Jannis Kounellis is a magician of metonymy. His paintings, installations, and sculptural works use fragments to suggest larger, more complex wholes. In his hands, snippets of text, open flames, gold leaf, shattered casts of classical sculpture, and all manner of raw and manufactured materials become signs and signals pointing to ineffable histories and ideas. The evergreen subject of his innately theatrical work is the grand saga of European civilization—from antiquity to modernity, with all its cultural and political revolutions.

Born in 1936 in Piraeus, Greece, to a family of seafarers, Kounellis himself embodied some of the storied passages alluded to in his work. At 20, he left his homeland to study art in Rome, thereafter making Italy his home. This journey, paralleling that of Odysseus, is memorialized in an untitled work from 1972 consisting of one of the artist's trademark fedoras crowned by a golden laurel wreath that hangs casually on a gallery door hinge. Throughout his life, Kounellis traveled to all corners of the Western world, feeling his way into the cultures he encountered in his art and poetic writing.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1980. Flute, violin, drum, trumpet, cornet, cello, mandolin, gas tank, flames. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. Photo: Agostino Osio - Alto Piano.

It is fitting that *Jannis Kounellis*, the first survey of the artist's work since his death in 2017, should be staged in the Fondazione Prada's Ca' Corner della Regina space in Venice, that crossroads of Europe. This 18th century baroque palazzo on the Grand Canal was built by the family of another pan-Mediterranean figure, Catherina Cornero, the 15th century queen consort of Cyprus. And it is only appropriate that its curator is Germano Celant, Prada's Artistic and Scientific Superintendent and Italy's most renowned exhibition maker. Celant was a close friend of the artist and was in the late 1960s the first to name and theorize the *Arte povera* movement in which Kounellis was a leading light.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2011. Coats, hats, shoes. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. Photo: Agostino Osio - Alto Piano.

Exploring the exhibition is a delight. The 64 works, including several incorporating live music, elegantly inhabit the palazzo's airy, timeworn rooms, which amplify the redolence of history in them. Kounellis staged his work in a wide variety of institutional and historic spaces, but this is surely his most opulent. The only drawback is that the installation's just-so perfection and its staff of well-attired guards undercut the melancholy at the heart of much of the artist's work.

The exhibition begins with Kounellis's early text and sign paintings from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Taking words, fonts, and glyphs from street signs and placing them on white backgrounds, these spare images, like all of his subsequent work, are Proustian: they call to mind the timeless din of the marketplace as well as the limitations of language to depict the

fractious dynamism of the postwar polis. They also are reminders that the artist always considered himself first and foremost a painter. His works in three dimensions follow the frontal, all-at-once compositional logic of paintings.





Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (Tragedia civile)*, 1975. Goldleaf-coated wall, coat rack, coat, hat, lamp. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. Photo: Agostino Osio - Alto Piano.

In fact, it was American Abstract Expressionism and Pop that propelled Kounellis to venture into three-dimensional media. His transatlantic counterparts, including the Minimalist sculptors, he felt were too driven by the rationalism defining the world's dominant culture. Another, freer American intellectual force inspired Kounellis and *Arte povera*. The theories of philosopher and psychologist John Dewey, which emphasized a direct, subjective experience of the world, along with an emphasis on the value of the individual grounded Kounellis. "I don't see the Parthenon anymore," he said in 2015, "but I remain within a logic whose center lies in humanism."

The sculptural tableaux in the exhibition are remarkable in their directness and succinctness. Unlike the installations of Joseph Beuys, which used similar materials, including lead sheets and insulating textiles, there is no fustiness in Kounellis's work. Beuys was steeped in the murk of German Romanticism and its cathartic transformations. Kounellis conjures the pellucidity of attic skies as he clears the way for his materials to reveal their chastening truths.

Like the poems of another Greek exile, Constantine Cavafy, Kounellis's works are spare and direct with no fancifying inflections of materials or handling. They also employ the allusive devices of poetry. In an untitled work from 1992, sacks of fragrant coffee beans hang on scale like trays in a lightwell, suggesting port cities and ancient trade routes. In another untitled sculpture from 1988, hundreds of glasses of grappa arranged on the floor support an irregular lead form, a possible reference to the political violence of Italy's "Years of Lead" beginning in the late 1960s. And in yet another untitled assemblage from 1982, cheap gas torches strapped to musical instruments become hardware-store eternal flames for all practitioners of the arts.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1984. Iron shelves, soot. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. Photo: Agostino Osio - Alto Piano.

*Untitled* (2011) a large-scale floor work consisting of rows of folded wool overcoats topped with fedoras and leather shoes highlights the oftentimes delirious multivalence of Kounellis's work. It calls to mind the artist himself who wore similar garments but also a continent's countless migrations, modern life's faceless bureaucracies, and the systematized theft and murder of the Holocaust. At the same time there is something Chaplinesque and everyman-ish about it. Another work in the show, *Tragedia civile*, [Civil Tragedy] (1975) a bent-wood coat rack bearing a black hat and coat standing in front of a wall covered in squares of gold leaf hints at the inevitable disparities between a culture's aspirations and the lives lived within it. Critic Thomas McEvelly also cites this work as a crux in Kounellis's career, one showcasing both his reverence for Malevich and the Russian artist's sincere belief in the power of pure abstraction and love of Duchamp's playful assertion that the entire world is a fair subject for art.

Jannis Kounellis is certainly a key predecessor for a group of nomad-artists who range widely and deploy commonplace objects and actions in attempts to build bridges from objective facts to subjective truths. These include David Hammons, Mona Hatoum, Robert Gober, Doris Salcedo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Danh Vo. Among these peers, however, Kounellis stands out as the most oracular. Through him, the cargoes of the Occidental world reveal its dreams and destinies.

## Contributor

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