

Chiara Parisi, "Jannis Kounellis Atto Unico," *L'Officiel Art*, May, 2019

# L'OFFICIEL ART

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N°29

## Jannis Kounellis Atto Unico

by Chiara Parisi

In a text for a show in 1987, Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017) wrote: "I want to see the return of poetry through any means: through exercise, observation, solitude, speech, image, and rebellion." Associated with Arte Povera since the 1960s, the Greek-Italian artist created a remarkable oeuvre composed of paintings, sculptures, environments and performances. Prompted by the first major retrospective at Fondazione Prada in Venice following the artist's death in 2017, curated by Germano Celant, Chiara Parisi offers an insightful portrait of Kounellis' practice, mainly focusing on his performative and music-inspired works.

"JANNIS KOUNELLIS,"  
FONDAZIONE PRADA,  
CA' CORNER DELLA REGINA,  
VENICE, MAY 11 -  
NOVEMBER 24.

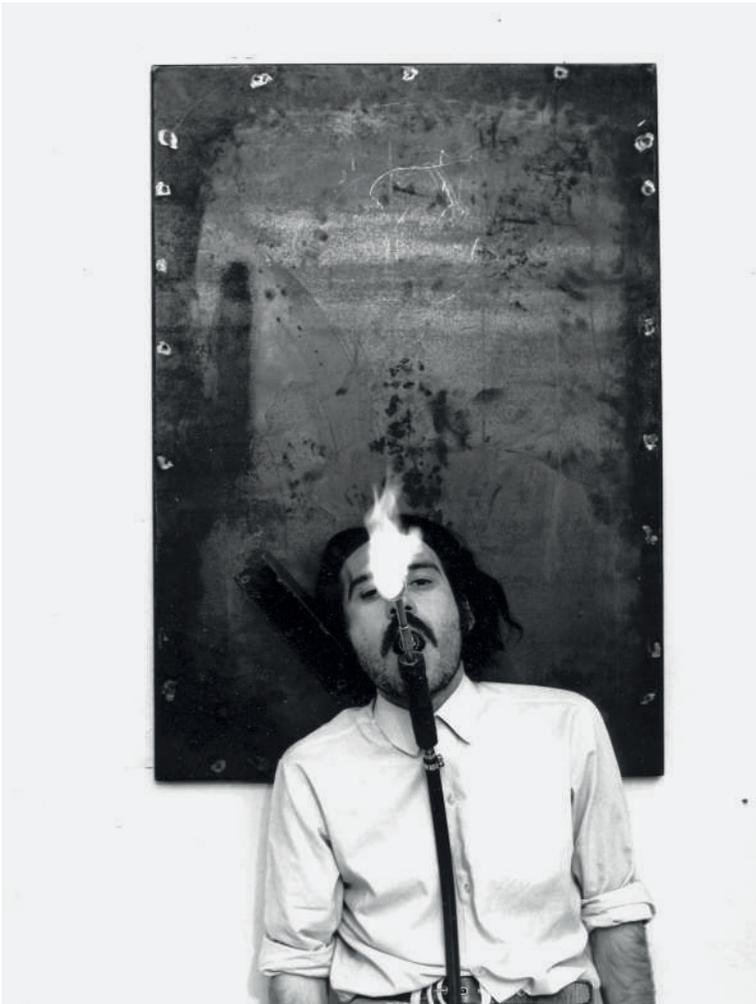
Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1987;  
flower-shaped iron structure, propane gas torch.  
Photo: Giorgio Colombo, Milano.

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Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1973; the artist with a propane gas torch in his mouth in front of an iron panel, performance, Modern Art Agency, Naples. Photo: Claudio Abate.

There are artists who have inseparably associated their poetics with the material they have invented for their works. A living material, capable of leaping from the walls, ambulating, burning, shining, occupying and making space. Jannis Kounellis was an artist with a remarkable capacity to bring together primordial elements together, staging them not in a metaphorical display, but in a physical, concrete sense.

Reports at the time of the exhibition set up by Kounellis in 1967 at L'Attico, the historic gallery in Rome, observed: "Today Kounellis has made the grand rejection: he has abandoned painting and passed directly to nature, to a nature not represented but unabashedly concrete [...]. This return to zero, this total rejection, this concrete neo-metaphysics takes us back, in a world of 'objects,' to the intact 'things' of the genesis." These words help us to understand the leap made by the artist, his ability to make nature burst into the designated places of art, with animals and vegetation, their odors, the delicate or imposing presence: images capable of generating sensations of great force and simplicity at the same time, the same ones I felt as I listened to him talk while smoking on a balcony overlooking the Seine, during the days of the installation of his solo show at Monnaie de Paris in 2016. Kounellis was a man of ancient, sophisticated graciousness. He would often grip your arm as he spoke, but the words issuing from his mouth were nearly whispers. Utter slowly, authoritative, like a poem set to music. And it is a fact that music, poetry and dance reappear in many of his works. Factors apparently less vigorous than the horses, parrots, candles, coal, flames, the succulents with which he made so many of his projects, but no less vital and explosive.

Already in 1970, in the spaces of Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, the loud, obsessive echoes were heard of the aria *Va' pensiero* from *Nabucco*, the famous opera by Giuseppe Verdi considered the "soundtrack" of the Italian Risorgimento. Those were the days of "Vitalità del negativo," curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, a crucial exhibition for that period, so much so that it was covered by the American magazine *October* in a special issue on some of its memorable installations. For the occasion, Kounellis had called on the pianist Frederic Rzewski to play the piece in an empty room; a pure, essential presence of music in an exhibition dominated by a multitude of visual images and input, as if the artist had decided to shift creation onto another ground, working by subtraction and activating other sensory stimuli.

The same work was later presented by Kounellis inside "Atto Unico," the project created for Fondazione Pomodoro in 2006 in Milan. The music spread in the over 3500 square meters of space in the former industrial complex that housed the Foundation, flooding over the other works on view: I remember the smell of the sides of beef that were part of the work *Untitled* (1968), strong and acid, in contrast with the energetic but soothing sound of the music. This conveys one of the most incredible aspects of Kounellis's poetics: the possibility for his works to always manifest themselves in different forms, to reveal themselves and take on meaning based on the place and the moment in which they were enacted. Like organisms possessing an unpredictable, disorienting vitality.

*Da inventare sul posto* (To Invent on the Spot) is a paradigmatic work in this sense. Starting with the title, this work presented in 1972 for the first time in Rome, again at L'Attico, and also shown

that same year at the iteration of Documenta curated by Harald Szeemann, constitutes a manifesto of the artist's habit of working in the dimension of the "here and now" with the living material supplied by the steps of a dancer and the music of a violinist, against the backdrop of a large pink canvas with a painted score. *Da inventare sul posto* is perhaps Kounellis's most clearly performative work, and the one most susceptible to being repeated each time in different forms, reacting to the influence of the space and the improvised movements of the dancer, whose contribution was deployed in this work for the first time, almost as if to attenuate the density of many of the pieces produced to date, but also adding the physical presence of the dancer to the notes of the solitary musician from *Nabucco*. The work was shown in various contexts and moments: directly "from the hands" of Kounellis, in the debuts in Rome and Kassel, and in Paris, in 2016 at Monnaie de Paris, in what was the last "replica" of this extraordinary work of art. I remember Kounellis as he explained to the dancers and musicians how to make the painting come alive, with the ballerina on her toes, in an improvised movement that lasted a few seconds, to the notes of the Tarantella – from the *Pulcinella* by Stravinsky – played by the musician. Movements and fragments repeated for hours during the course of the exhibition. "When I was in Greece, as soon as I finished a painting I put it into music and sang it"; it seems as if the artist wanted to literally transpose this autobiographical fragment into a work, charging it with time and architecture, by way of movement, sound, color, but also making it ephemeral, in the moment and – perhaps for this reason – even more epic. *Da inventare sul posto* unleashes all its force in the tension that is created between improvisation and planning, movement and stillness, allowing the vitality of the present (the choreography of the dancer) to act on the solemnity of the story (Kounellis always used scores by authors of the past like Bach, Stravinsky, Verdi), making the body in motion activate the immobility of the canvas.

It is no coincidence that Kounellis admired Jackson Pollock, and the ritual, performative character of the American artist's approach to the canvas on an operative plane. Though he loved theater – in particular the production of the German dramatist Heiner Müller, due to a shared sense of enigmatic tragedy – Kounellis never considered his own works "theatrical." His installations stop short of set design; his actions have an anti-spectacular gravity. The generations of artists after Kounellis seem to have absorbed this attitude, to some extent; and in several performances by artists in the recent spotlight, we can sense the familiarity with certain actions of the Greek-Italian artist.

There can be no doubt that the musical component, seen as expression of a contingency and a tension connected with the moment, was an indispensable factor for Kounellis, crossing all his output, also in more recent works like *Untitled* (2013), created for the Salone Vanvitelliano of the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome. In the marvelous spaces of this venerable library, the artist imagined a concert for bass violin and two cellos, playing an "Adagio" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: in the meantime, piled on the desks in the hall, an army of burlap bags filled with bread engaged in a silent conversation with the books inside the space. Bread and books: two equal elements for Kounellis, both fundamental necessities, in which the artist wanted to grasp the similarities: not just from a conceptual standpoint as "foods" of civilization, but also in formal

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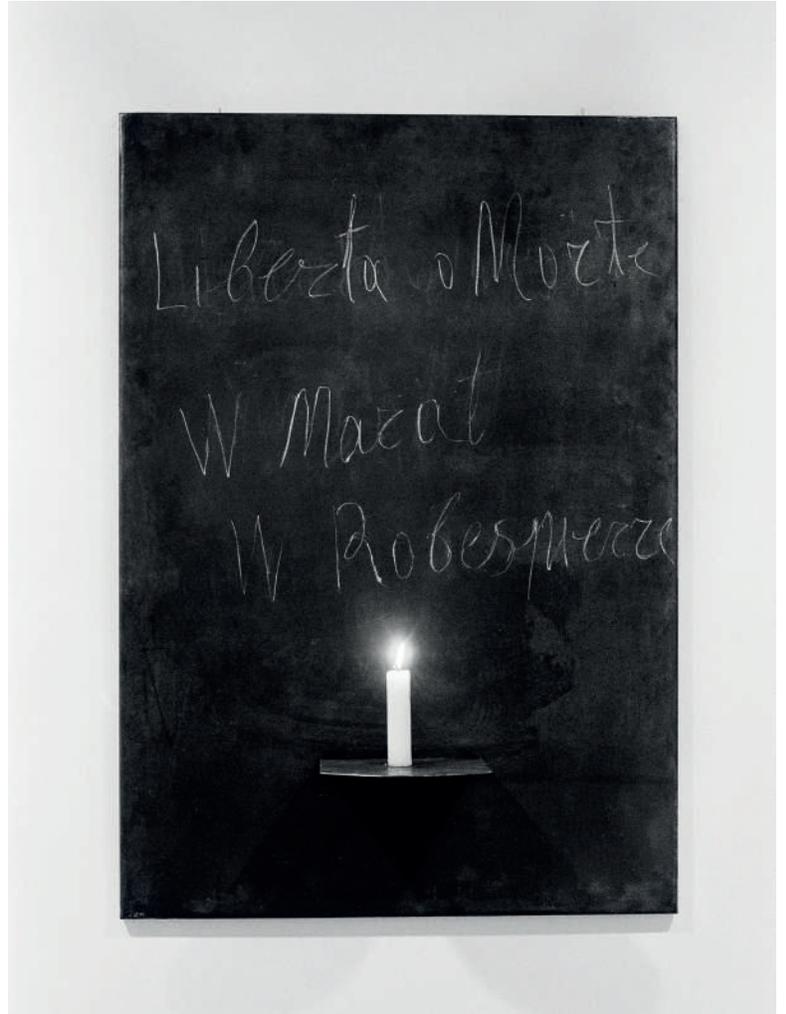
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Above: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2005; table, chair, hair in black fabric.  
Courtesy: Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome. © The Estate of Jannis Kounellis. Right page:  
Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969; chalk on iron panel, candle; 100 x 70 cm. Photo: Claudio Abate.

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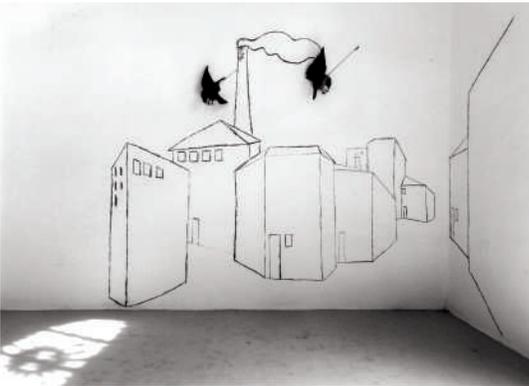
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Above: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1979; charcoal drawing on the wall with two staffed crows with arrows; installation view, Musei Comunali, Rimini, 1983. Photo: Claudio Abate.  
 Right page, above: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969; solid fuel tablets on floor. Courtesy: Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome. © The Estate of Jannis Kounellis. Below: Jannis Kounellis at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1972. Photo: Claudio Abate.



terms, with the yellowed color of the books seen in an unexpected yet obvious chromatic correspondence to the crust of the bread. An incredibly intense wordless dialogue placed upon the music of Mozart, which without compromising the austerity of the installation made it vital and even more powerful. Notes, books and bread thus formed a triangle in perfect balance between sacred and profane, in the context of Europe's oldest public library, which for over four hundred years has sheltered precious volumes and, perhaps, the essential codes with which to decipher the secret affinities between books and this nutritional staple.

A few years ago, in the summer of 2016, Kounellis visited the inmates of the Opera prison, just outside Milan. He went to the instrument-making workshop, where he met Erjügen and Nicola; following that encounter, the two inmates made a violin, which was delivered to Kounellis, perhaps because in his youth the artist had played that instrument. The freedom of music and the duress of prison: the impressions from that visit inspired Kounellis to make one of his last works, also containing apparently irreconcilable elements. The artist decided to modify the violin he had received as a gift, replacing the strings with barbed wire and enclosing the instrument in an iron case, hard, restrictive, a metaphor of incarceration. This work sublimates the ethical force of Kounellis's vision, and probably also his relationship with music: in a useless, silent instrument, there is the extreme point of arrival of a tragic dimen-

sion that is also full of dignity. A work that once again – in keeping with the statements of the artist – seems to be the direct emanation of the reply offered by Kounellis to a question about the location of art today: "It is anywhere a surface can be found on which to narrate, engaging with it, the greatness of man." After Kounellis's death, the violin was displayed at the Opera prison, accompanied by a concert by the composer Carlo Crivelli, and in the future the work should also be shown in other penitentiaries around the world.

Jannis Kounellis thought of the musicians he loved as painters. This is why music was a constant throughout his life. Even more: it was an indispensable presence, capable of filling his works with energy and vital force. Essential and necessary, like the books and bread juxtaposed in the installation at Biblioteca Angelica.

Chiara Parisi is curator at large at Académie de France à Rome – Villa Medici.

1 - L. Trucchi, "Kounellis all'Altica," in *Momento Sera*, Rome, 15 December 1967.

2 - J. Kounellis, *La selvaggina*, L'Espresso, Paris, 1996, p. 33.



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Jannis Kouvelis, *Untitled*, 1971  
performance with cellist playing a passage  
from J.S. Bach's *Passion According St. John*  
in front of a painting (on his cello)  
featuring the musical notes, Modern Art Agency,  
Naples. Photo: Claudio Abate.