

On the anniversary of his day of birth, 23 March 1936, Galleria Fumagalli **pays homage to the work of Italian master Jannis Kounellis** with a special focus.

For the occasion, **the video of the play *Die Hamletmaschine* by Heiner Müller with the scene by Jannis Kounellis and directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos**, held at the Piccolo Teatro d'Europa in Milan on 28 December 2015, **will be streamed**.

This streaming is part of our program of special virtual events conceived to positively face the medical emergency we are experiencing.
The link to watch the video is included at the end of this focus.

JANNIS KOUNELLIS



Jannis Kounellis, Galleria Fumagalli, Bergamo, 2009. Ph. Manolis Baboussis

Jannis Kounellis was born in Piraeus in Greece in 1936 and moved to Italy in 1956 settling in Rome. His art practice led him to a continuous wandering around the world, enriching his own knowledge and experiences, until his death on 16 February 2017.

During his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where he attended the lessons of Toti Scialoja, he began in the context of the American abstract expressionism and the European informal.

In his first works he painted a hermetic and fragmentary writing made of signs and symbols. The search for the restoration and recomposition of the reality's fragmentation is a constant feature of the artist's work, using industrial and organic materials to underline the dichotomies of reality.

Jannis Kounellis took part in the exhibitions organised by the Arte Povera movement (founded by Germano Celant in 1967): his personal participation was expressed through a form of visual language that dialogued

both with classical culture and contemporary art, in contrast to the loss of historic and political identity after the Second World War.

His works are now part of well-known public and private collections worldwide, such as the Tate Modern in London, Center Pompidou in Paris, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, MoMA in New York, MOCA in San Francisco, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Castello di Rivoli. In 2019, Fondazione Prada in Venice organised the largest retrospective after his death, curated by Germano Celant. The artist also participated in important international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale (2015, 2011, 1993, 1988, 1984, 1980, 1978, 1976, 1972), Biennale of Sydney (2008), Istanbul Biennial (1993), and documenta in Kassel (1982, 1977, 1972).

FRAGMENTATION OF URBAN LANGUAGE

In the works from the late 50s-early 60s, Jannis Kounellis used words, letters, arrows and numbers that he saw on street signs in Rome, he brought them to the canvas or paper.

Feeling a dramatic urgency to take on an intellectual role, he presented a fragmentation of language in accordance with the society of ruins and broken signs he lived in, a society in emergency due to the spread of a mass culture.



Jannis Kounellis. Curated by Germano Celant, Fondazione Prada, Venice, 11 May - 24 November 2019.
Ph. Agostino Osio - Alto Piano. Courtesy Fondazione Prada

«I have the attitude of a painter. This is my identity. I couldn't abandon it even if I wanted to. In Greek the word painter is *zōgraphos*, which means someone who draws life. Greek is much more accurate. It's a matter of life experience.»

Jannis Kounellis

PHYSICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL LANGUAGE AS A VITAL EXPERIENCE

In the late 1960s, Jannis Kounellis explored a physical and environmental language by introducing zoomorphic, phytomorphic and inorganic elements (cactuses, grappa, coal, coffee, parrots, iron, horses...) into the work aimed at a **sensory stimulation, active and uncontrollable**. These elements emerge with their disruptive power and energy, because they are real, material and carnal, as an alternative to a conceptual vision of art.

With the introduction of music in the works, Jannis Kounellis showed his spiritual sphere influenced by the myth of Orpheus who attributed to singing the ability to convert the lifeless into living, so as to oppose death.



Jannis Kounellis, Theodoros Terzopoulos. Die Hamletmaschine by Heiner Müller, curated by Annamaria Maggi and Alexandra Papadopulos, 28 December 2015 at Il Piccolo Teatro d'Europa, Milan. Ph. Lucrezia Roda. Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli



Installation view of *BRUT(E)*, Monnaie de Paris, 2016. Courtesy Monnaie de Paris.
Ph. Manolis Baboussis
© Jannis Kounellis

In the works in which the artist included the music, the image is connected to the sound, overcoming the traditional distinctions between artistic languages. The physical presence of the instruments of musicians and the performers allows the author and the observer to share a sensorial experience and to explore the physical dimension of the work.

FIRE AND COMBUSTION

Since 1967 the phenomenon of combustion appeared frequently in Jannis Kounellis' work. The fire took the form of a gas torch, a candle or an oil lamp that emphasized the transformative, regenerating and reviving potential of art.

Smoke was both the remains of the "writing of fire" process and a proof of the transformation of substances over time.

The traces of soot on the canvases and walls showed a personal "return to painting", in opposition to the a-ideological and hedonistic approach of a part of the production in the 1980s. In those years the motif of the chimney also appeared, a rigid and "conservative" structure that forces the free shape of the flame.



Jannis Kounellis. Curated by Germano Celant, Fondazione Prada, Venice, 11 May - 24 November 2019.

«Even when it is not an artist who makes it [the fire] it is an artistic act. The fire has a unique and crazy power, it is vertical and goes straight to the sky, almost a spiritual element. However, it is made by man, it makes man feel strong and healthy.»

Jannis Kounellis

INSTABILITY AND BALANCE

In the works created since the late 1960s, **Jannis Kounellis activated a dialectical conflict between the instability-fragility of natural elements and the permanence-rigidity of industrial structures.** This opposition operates as a metaphor for the condition of living beings, squeezed between the aspiration for freedom and the physical and moral restrictions due to social constructions.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2005. Iron scales, Murano glass, 250x600 cm.
Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli



Visioni. 20 artisti a Sant'Agostino. Ex Chiesa di Sant'Agostino, Bergamo, 2005.
Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

Jannis Kounellis often combined clothes (like black coats) with metal sheets, real canvases that became sculptures: they are the portrait of the human being, sacrificed and absent, which expresses a painful existential and creative condition, a split between past and present that still hopes to come together.

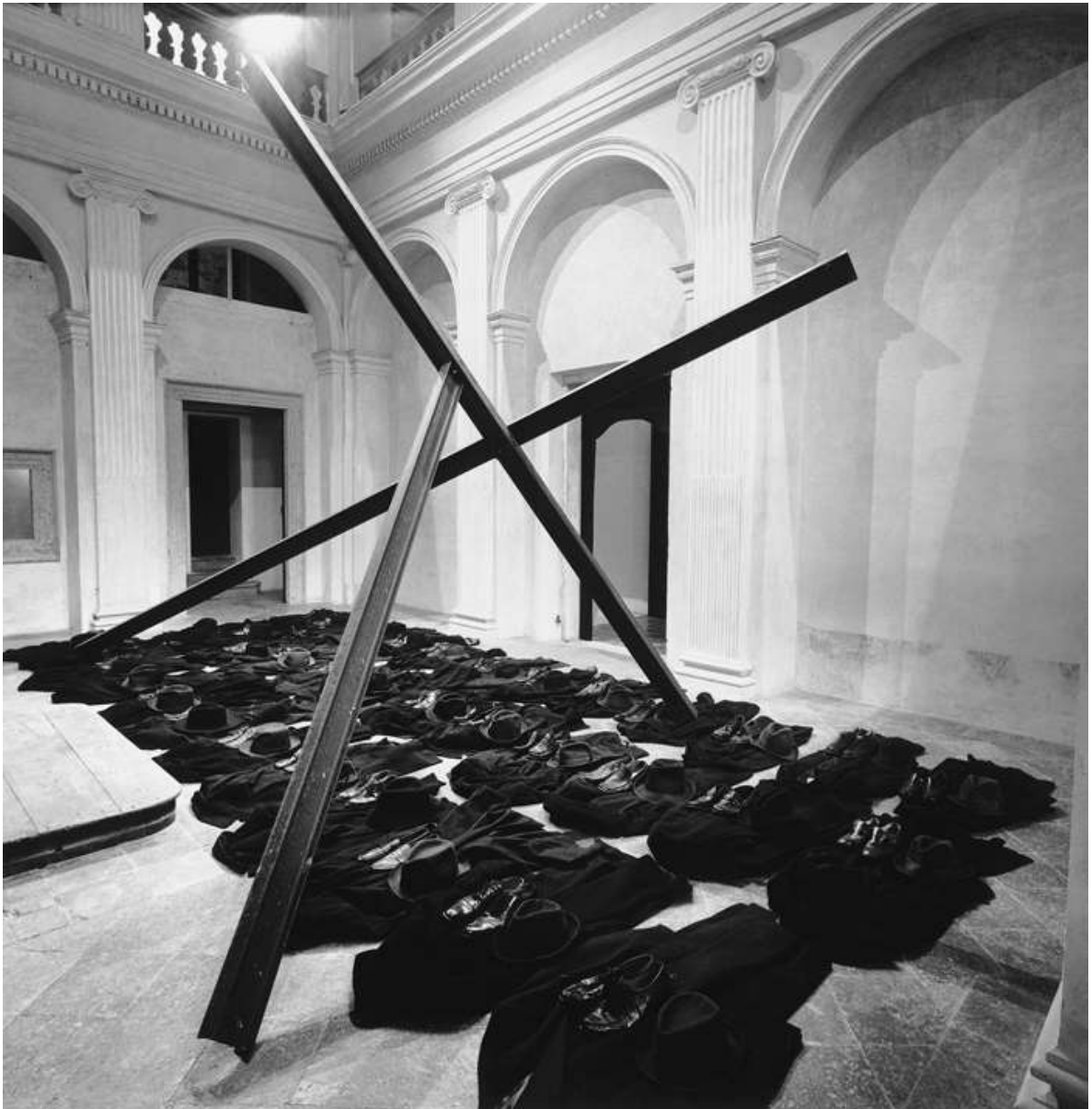


Installation views of *Jannis Kounellis*, Galleria Fumagalli, Bergamo, 2009.
Ph. Ezio Manciuca. Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ARCHITECTURE

In the constant search for relationships between objects and materials from opposite worlds, Jannis Kounellis also faced the architectural space and its history. **The artist aimed at dialoguing with the past, with its similarities and differences from the present, aware that the historic time often repeats itself.**

For example, the series of coats lying on the floor of the Ex Oratory of San Lupo in Bergamo (2009), a project promoted by Galleria Fumagalli during the artist's solo exhibition at the gallery, evoked the human presence within the sacred environment and emphasised the original function of the place: a cemetery. An impressive iron cross occupied the interior space of the building, with an inclination that referred to the illustrations of the Via Crucis in the 17th-century and counter-reformist iconography. The artist created a deep relationship with the space that hosted him, on one hand through the evident scenic and theatrical power of San Lupo, on the other due to its religious nature.



Installation view of *Jannis Kounellis*, Ex Oratory of San Lupo, Bergamo, 2009.
Ph. Manolis Baboussis. Courtesy Museo Adriano Bernareggi and Galleria Fumagalli

THE THEATRE

The theatre and its scenographic construction had been fundamental components of Jannis Kounellis' artistic research since the 1960s. He made his debut, with his scenes, at the Teatro Stabile in Turin along with director Carlo Quartucci in the show *I testimoni* by T. Rózewicz (1968/1969) for which he created a scene with bags of coal.

The passion for theatre, drama (as he liked to call it) continued over the years bringing on Italian and European stages a language that was not made of brushstrokes, but of real things: bags of coal, fire, wool, jute bags, plants, animals, attributing to the artistic matter its truth and the power of unveiling with poetic, literary and metaphorical references.

A real dramaturgy to be understood in terms of scenic writing, capable of transforming space into a «theatrical and humanistic cavity», as the artist said, because «the human being is the true point of view of the theatre, its centrality which unlike painting has a development and a great immediacy.»



Jannis Kounellis, Theodoros Terzopoulos. Die Hamletmaschine by Heiner Müller, curated by Annamaria Maggi and Alexandra Papadopulos, 28 December 2015 at Il Piccolo Teatro d'Europa, Milan. Ph. Lucrezia Roda.
Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

In 2015, the Piccolo Teatro d'Europa, in collaboration with Galleria Fumagalli, presented the project *Die Hamletmaschine*, curated by Annamaria Maggi and Alexandra Papadopulos, with a scene (and stalls area) created by Jannis Kounellis and a performance taken from *Die Hamletmaschine* written by Heiner Müller in 1977, directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos.

The play was performed by actress Sophia Hill, the live electronic music by Panagiotis Velianitis and the male voice realised by the director.

Die Hamletmaschine (Hamlet's machine) is a postmodern drama loosely inspired by William Shakespeare's Hamlet and characterised by the friction between the poetic word and the story. The protagonist's monologue is a ranting soliloquy in which are laid bare, on one hand, the abandon of any utopian impulse and, secondly, the paradoxes of the modern intellectual, torn between the inability to change the state of things and the will to turn into a machine at the service of the power. In creating the scene Jannis Kounellis thought of a Hamlet "with his back turned towards the ruins of Europe" for a play that is both personal and social, against corruption and power.

In the early months of 2016 Galleria Fumagalli presented the video of the performance in its Milan venue with part of the scene created by Jannis Kounellis for the Piccolo Teatro d'Europa.



**The video of the performance
Die Hamletmaschine by Heiner Müller
with the scene by Jannis Kounellis and directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos
is on view at this [LINK](#) typing the password:
Hamlet2020**

The video of the performance was shot by Luca Casartelli and Vito G. Signorile, edited by Paolo Comuzzi

To discover more on the artist's work, visit Galleria Fumagalli's [website](#).

Texts partially drawn from the press release of the retrospective *Jannis Kounellis* held at Fondazione Prada, Venice (11 May - 24 November 2019); from the article *Jannis Kounellis* by Lorenzo Benedetti published on flashart.it on 20 July 2015; from the conversation with the artist *Everything needs to be centred on humanity* by Martin Gayford published on apollo-magazine.com on 17 February 2017; from the interview *Se l'artista accende il fuoco della rinascita* by Michela Casavola published on exhibart.com on 17 September 2014.
