

NEWS

WALKER ART CENTER PRESENTS THE FIRST U.S.-BASED RETROSPECTIVE OF THE INFLUENTIAL ARTE POVERA ARTIST JANNIS KOUNELLIS IN OVER 35 YEARS

***Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts* to Feature Iconic and Never-Before-Seen Works**

On View October 14, 2022 – February 26, 2023



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1996.
Photo: Photo: Mario Gastinger
Courtesy: The Estate of Jannis Kounellis

MINNEAPOLIS, JULY 7, 2022—On October 14, the Walker Art Center will open the first U.S.-based retrospective in 35 years on the work of influential Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017), whose wide-ranging interdisciplinary practice examined critical questions about culture, nature, and humanity. Titled *Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts*, the exhibition will feature 50 works from across every major stage of Kounellis’s career, including works that will be shown publicly for the first time. While Kounellis’s work has been presented extensively in Europe, especially in his adopted country of Italy, the artist has remained lesser-known in the U.S. The forthcoming retrospective introduces new audiences to Kounellis’s practice, which remains deeply relevant to contemporary art dialogues, and offers new scholarship that enriches global understanding of his innovative vision and approach. *Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts* will remain on view at the Walker through February 26, 2023.

The exhibition, co-organized with Museo Jumex in Mexico City, is curated by Vincenzo de Bellis, the Walker’s curator and associate director of programs, Visual Arts, who worked actively with the Estate of Jannis Kounellis and Archivio Kounellis to assemble an exhibition rich in both iconic and rarely exhibited works, making it one of the most comprehensive showings of the artist’s work to-date. The exhibition was further supported by William Hernández Luege, curatorial assistant at the Walker. It is accompanied by a major publication, produced by the Walker’s acclaimed design studio and featuring never-before-seen archival materials and essays by an international cadre of scholars. Following its presentation at the Walker, *Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts* will travel to Museo Jumex in Mexico City, where it is being curated by Kit Hammonds, the museum’s chief curator.

Although Kounellis’s practice embraced found objects, sculpture, installation, and performance, he always referred to his works as paintings, viewing the



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1974. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photo: Courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. ©2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

incorporation of different media and approaches as a means of transcending painting's boundaries and joining it more actively with life. Rather than unfolding chronologically, *Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts* is organized in six thematic sections that explore the artist's material and conceptual innovations and evolutions.

"Jannis Kounellis is a giant of art of the 20th century. He has influenced many emerging artists in his more than sixty-year career. His first show in the U.S. was in 1972, and I cannot think of a better moment than on the 50th anniversary of that presentation to finally give him the exposure in this country that he so richly deserves," said de Bellis. "Kounellis is also traveled all his life, from one country to another, to fulfill his dream of being an artist. His works speak to memory, history, and migration—things which are very important and resonant today."

Kounellis was born in Greece, but spent the majority of his life in Italy, having moved to Rome in 1956 to attend the Accademia di Belle Arti. His earliest works, which he began exhibiting in the late 1950s, featured letters, numbers, and symbols that referenced advertisements, newspaper articles, and street signage. These large-scale canvases and works on paper reflected Kounellis's innate interest in merging the experience of painting with the experience of life. By 1966, this driving vision led Kounellis to incorporate found objects such as burlap sacks, coffee, earth, fire, and gold, into his canvases, further liberating painting from its traditional confines. This gave way to Kounellis's work with live animals, and in 1969, he presented one of his most iconic living installations at the Galleria l'Attico in Rome. It featured 12 horses positioned within the gallery environment. The work leveraged the energy of the living beings, transforming the gallery context and making visitors an active part of the experience. Kounellis's ongoing revelatory engagement with humble materials, nature, and the confluences of art and life made him a central figure in the Italian Arte Povera movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1993 (*sails*), 1993. Courtesy Christine König Galerie, Vienna. Image Courtesy of Estate of Jannis Kounellis. Photo by Claudio Abate.

From the 1980s onward, Kounellis continued to build his vocabulary of materials, introducing smoke, shelving units, trolleys, blockaded openings, mounds of coffee grounds, and coal, as well as other indicators of commerce, transportation, and economics. He also continued to experiment with and embrace elements of performance that brought the viewer into active connection with his work and the ideas of memory, history, language, and nature that were central to his oeuvre for over five decades. His profound career-long examination of the relationships between nature, culture, and humanity makes his work incredibly resonant in contemporary art dialogues and influential to generations of artists.

Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts will feature works that capture the range of the artist's work through six thematically-organized galleries. The first space will explore the theme of language and include works from the *Alphabet* series—large canvases that incorporate letters, signage, inscriptions, and typography from the streets of Rome. These works break down artistic language in a way that parallels the fragmentation of real language. The second gallery will capture ideas of journey. Boat fragments, trains, and beds are just some of the

elements that Kounellis leveraged to examine this subject. The third section is focused on the theme of fragment: in these works, classical statues, pieces of wood, books, glasses or stones are accumulated—piled on top of or adjacent to each other, occupying hollow spaces, and giving rise to a unitary form composed of previously separate parts. These installations operate as collage in two and three dimensions. The exhibition continues with a room dedicated to the artist's relationship with nature, featuring works that explore the Kounellis's full integration of multiple organic elements such as fire, coffee, sulfur, and coal, as well as everyday objects like iron bars, burlap sacks, wool, stones, and other items. Through the lens of musicality, the following section presents hybrid works that combine painting and sculpture with performance and dramaturgy. To complete the presentation, the the last section shows the circularity of Kounellis' work, presenting two major works which bring together all the elements explored and referenced in the prior sections.

"The Arte Povera movement played a critical role in redefining artistic practice, with central figures like Jannis Kounellis breaking down boundaries and establishing new vocabularies through their experimentations with performance, installation, and found materials. These actions shaped contemporary art as we understand it and continue to influence the work of artists today," said Mary Ceruti, the Walker's Executive Director. "From its founding, the Walker has been committed to presenting daring, transdisciplinary work and championing radical and visionary artists. This includes a long history of presenting and collecting the work of Arte Povera artists, and so it is deeply fitting that the first major U.S. show of Kounellis's work in decades be organized and presented at the Walker. We are very much looking forward to engaging audiences with his poetic and compelling career, through the exhibition and catalogue."

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts is accompanied by a major publication, the first comprehensive assessment of the artist's work to be assembled by a U.S. museum. The richly illustrated volume, which contains many never-published archival materials such as personal photographs and unpublished artists texts, is produced by the Walker's award-winning design studio. The catalogue features essays by exhibition curator Vincenzo de Bellis; Ara H. Merjian, professor of Italian Studies at New York University; Claire Gilman, chief curator at the Drawing Center, New York; and Kit Hammonds, chief curator at Museo Jumex, Mexico City; as well as a selection of the artist's writings, selected by Archivio Kounellis president Michelle Coudray and edited by Walker curatorial assistant William Hernández Luege.

ABOUT THE WALKER ART CENTER

Known for presenting today's most compelling artists from close to home and around the world, the Walker Art Center features a broad array of contemporary visual arts, music, dance, theater, and moving image works. Ranging from concerts and films to exhibitions and workshops, Walker programs bring us together to examine the questions that shape and inspire us as individuals, cultures, and communities. The adjacent Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, one of the first urban sculpture parks of its kind in the United States, holds at its center the beloved Twin Cities landmark *Spoonbridge and Cherry* by Claes Oldenburg

and Coosje van Bruggen as well as some 60 sculptures on the 19-acre Walker campus. Visit walkerart.org for more information on upcoming events and programs.

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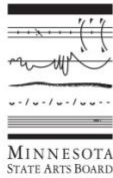
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