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Jannis Kounellis's Arte Povera turned coal, steel and fire into fine art

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis shows how the artist reshaped our worldview by drawing attention to the natural and everyday

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Several overlapping arches of iron span a doorway, bowed down by eight shelves of perfectly heaped sulphur. It seems improbable that this soft, meringue-like substance can have heft, much less charge a battery or explode when ignited. Nearby, a pool of coal smoulders, barricaded by jute bags stuffed with more coal. Precarity and gravitas, in equal measure. Both works appear halfway through *Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts*, a major retrospective of the Greek pioneer of Arte Povera at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, demonstrating how Kounellis, who died in 2017, believed in raw material and exploiting its formal and emotional possibilities.

Arte Povera, literally “poor art”, was coined by the Italian critic and curator Germano Celant in 1967, referring not to artists’ poverty but their use of organic and degraded material to revolt against tradition and value. Exhibiting primarily in Italy, Kounellis, who grew up in Greece and left for Rome aged 20, and fellow young artists including Alighiero Boetti, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz and Michelangelo Pistoletto emphasised an art not of metaphors but of the auras of rural and industrial material, believing a close relationship with it was key to our understanding of history, nature and mythology.

Over the next five decades, Kounellis created an immediate art, employing burlap, steel, wool, fire, music and live animals in stark propositions questioning how we remember (or forget) and how we endure our monotonous days. Curated by Vincenzo de Bellis with William Hernández Luege at the Walker, *Six Acts* organises works across six thematic galleries — Language, Journey, Fragments, Natural Elements, Musicality and Reprise — which summon his life-long guiding principles.



'Untitled (sails)' (1993) by Jannis Kounellis © Eric Mueller

The first thing we see are five giant, painted enamel letters on paper from 1996, each screwed to a steel plate and hanging by a meat hook from the ceiling. They look like tread marks. Together they spell “NOTTE” (night), the furiousness of the gesture at odds with the pirouetting balance of the thick metal — both unease and tranquility are possibilities as evening draws in. This painting is joined by earlier queries into language such as *Untitled* (1960) and “(untitled) z/3” (1961). In the former, the letter “J” looks more like a hook, repeated until it fades away; in the latter, the terse arrows and bright primary colours suggest transformation, as in a chemical reaction. Kounellis made these *Alfabeti* (alphabet paintings) by lifting from signs and advertisements across Rome. Each *Alfabeto* appears to be more about the sign than what is signified: you understand the power of the letters even before you comprehend them.

As unrest swelled around the world in 1968, from anti-Vietnam-war and black liberation protests in the US to student uprisings in Paris, Kounellis wanted to bring art closer to reality and sought a greater economy of means to do it. *Untitled* (1968) is a white canvas draped with four burlap sacks. Three are grouped, followed by a stark white space before the fourth. It is both painting and sculpture: the sacks have encrusted and unravelled; they prevent the painting from hanging flush, tipping it beyond the picture plane into our world.

Burlap also evokes shipping and industry, and Kounellis was always, in life and in art, connected to the sea. The son of a naval engineer, he grew up in the port of Piraeus. *“Untitled (Albatros)”* (2001) is an assemblage of four rowing boat fragments, suspended from steel plates with more meat hooks, the hull pulled apart, its structural stakes whittled by weather. The sea is a means to a destination, but its vastness means there are no guarantees.

Peripateticism and the desire to treat identity as a journey, as Kounellis did, is not without its pangs. Around a column, a toy train (*Untitled*, 1977) pulls two cars, one piled with toy coal, the other empty. The carriages circle endlessly, nearing the track’s edge but never toppling.



Untitled (1968) © Kevin Todora

The deficiency of a practice so invested in the near-mystical potential of material, however, is that sometimes detritus is just that: discarded for a reason. Two untitled works from 1983 present wooden slats stacked vertically and horizontally. They strive for poetry but remain as unremarkable piles of building scraps.

There is a similar effect around Kounellis's works gathering cast plaster fragments of classical statuary, begun in the 1970s. Untitled (1974) is an antique table scattered with cartoonish snippets of a hand on a hilt, a foot, half a face and a bust with lifeless, marshmallowy arms. To top it off, a snuffed oil lamp sits nearby. Taking something so pure and romantic as classical statuary — though we now know it was polychromatic — and emphasising its fragmentation, or defacing it in anguish, signals loss, albeit grand and overwrought.

Few of his audacious live actions are included in *Six Acts*, perhaps out of safety or practicality. Missing slightly is the danger, or at least deterioration and chance, as in a room stained with smoke emanating from a brick smokestack (Untitled, 1976) or a stable of 12 tethered horses in an open gallery (Untitled, 1969).

The one live action in *Six Acts* is Untitled (1972), an installation recently rediscovered in the Sonnabend Gallery archives. Two metal booths sit near the exhibition's end, activated only during the opening by an Apollo-masked performer and a flautist playing Mozart. Perhaps some of Kounellis's work is characterised by its ephemerality: you had to be there. So can you really reconstitute his radical acts? Kounellis turned tension and serendipity into personal dramas, all about the first impression. In a way, knowing the danger via documentation first, or showing up on time for a live action to start, is imperfect.

Still, Kounellis was a champion of material potential. His work has urged generations of artists to use fewer metaphors in pursuit of a distillation of feeling — these are artworks that intensify our appreciation of the natural world and our imprint on it.

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