

Jannis Kounellis: A Taxonomy of Tired Things



A response to the late Greek artist's survey at Fondazione Prada, Venice

H BY HARRY THORNE IN **VENICE 2019** | 07 JUN 19



All that remained were 48 hats. 48 hats and 48 coats. 48 hats and 48 coats and 48 pairs of shoes. They lay, folded, in six lines of eight, the discarded wear of 48 absent men or the uniform of a single man, repeated some 48 times.

They were, or he was, never seen again (if they or he were ever seen at all). But they were everywhere, still. And he was everywhere, still, in his petulant refusal to be seen. Absence enhances presence, always.

In a central foyer, an encyclopaedia was assembled. Wool, stones, burlap, sewing machines: all manner of mundane objects and industrial matter were separated from one another, separated from the world, and distributed into a procession of cavernous troughs of wrought iron. A taxonomy of tired things.

The artist is a human being who liberates things and teaches others to liberate things and doesn't liberate the thing that has already been liberated, because that would be absurd.¹



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2011, coats, hats, shoes. Courtesy: Fondazione Prada

Always, such objects were liberated by these men, this man. Always, they were catalogued with a deftness and love, as if the vacant effects of a departed friend. 16 cupboards were hauled into a vaulting chamber, their struts lashed with steel wires and their hefty frames raised to the ceiling. At times, doors fell ajar; at others, they remained locked, ashamed of their emptiness.

The 48 men, or the man with 48 hats, had a penchant for lifting such humdrum objects from their homes and bestowing unto them a new life. A plait of hair, against metal. A burning candle, against metal. A single egg lain lengthways on an iron shelf. And now: its shell is too brittle, too ovular, too fine. And now: its presence too important, somehow, given what it ordinarily is.

My materials do not blend in, they demand a space of their own and, at the same time, create an overall space that tends to bring the pretence into question, to provoke it and reveal its restrictions.²

Who were these men, who was this man, capable of elevating such forms? Who could take these mundane objects and objectify them once more, allowing them to exist on their own terms – and be judged as such? Who could ensure that everything and anything had the potential to be seen, regardless of its aesthetic or perceived use-value? Who could take a single brick wall, layer it with gold leaf, and make it shimmer?

The 48 men, the one man with 48 pairs of shoes, had more hats than could be assembled. On coatracks and errant corners and the backs of doors they hung like a stamp or signature, that unremarkable reminder that what we see is not of our own devising. In an otherwise vacant corridor hung a single hat bound with golden leaves: a crown, a wreath, a votive. A skin, shed.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1972, grey felt hat with golden laurel wreath. Courtesy: Fondazione Prada

And there was shedding, everywhere – an emptying out of life, everywhere. For the presence of these men, or the man with 48 coats, remained warm, as if the building were evacuated not seconds before. And the many rooms of blue propane cylinders, they too remained warm, their orange tips heating empty corners and contradictions alike. Fire as: punishment as well as protection; rebirth as well as ruin; purification and that which will likely char.

*Fire for me is the same as the parrot. It's a living thing, turned outward in an aggressive way. [...] They are alive, real, but above all they are signs of an image constructed on a support and when all is said and done for me they are both painting.*³

These forms were neither complete nor composed – could never be complete nor composed – could never be anything but in the process of. Eternally disrupted by the hot ambition of their flames, they refused stasis, refused to ever be one fixed thing. They championed a politics of incompleteness and aliveness that, while familiar to us as beings very much alive, remains a beautiful thing. The most beautiful, perhaps, this commitment to impermanence. Or the most poetic. Or simply, quite harrowing.

And when all is said and done, all that remained were hats, coats and shoes. Hats, coats, shoes and that which was arranged by whomever placed them on the ground. Placed, or forgotten:

*Wherever I left my raincoat last night is where I also left my house keys, and my memory of this slowly slips away.*⁴

And, in a sense, where you leave your house keys is where you leave your home. And where you leave your home is where you continue to reside. Part of you is encased within that object, pushing out against its edges from the inside. And just as that object lingers, somewhere but nowhere to be found, so too do you linger, or the slipped memory of you, like a legion of 48 men, or a man with a single uniform repeated some 48 times.

'Jannis Kounellis' is on view at Fondazione Prada, Venice, until 24 November 2019.

Main image: Jannis Kounellis, Untitled (Tragedia civile), 1975, gold leaf-coated wall, coat rack, coat, hat, lamp. Courtesy: Fondazione Prada

1 Jannis Kounellis, in Cala Lonzi, 'Un villaggio pieno di rose. Un'intervista a Kounellis,' in *Catalogo 3* (June 10, 1966), reprinted in Celant (ed.), *Jannis Kounellis*, cit., p.50.

2 Jannis Kounellis, in Marisa Volpi, 'Tecniche/Materiale', in *Marcatré*, nos. 37-40 (May 1968)



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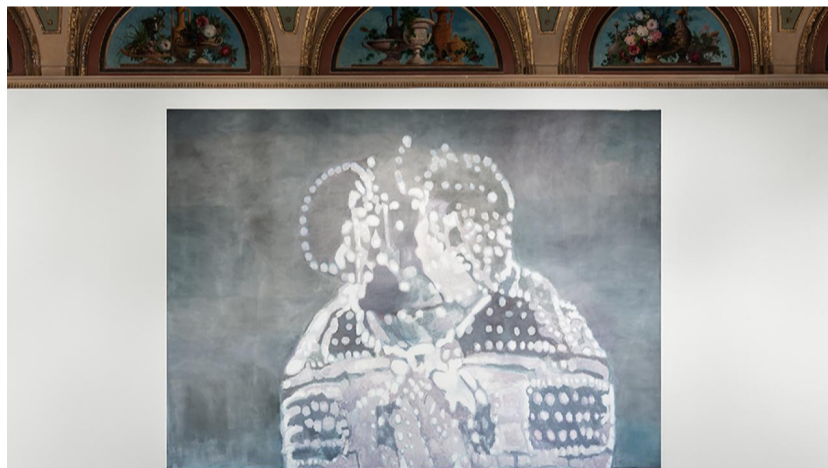
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