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Parte del circuito
MASILugano

Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore

20 September 2026 – 17 January 2027
Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

PRESS RELEASE

Lugano, 18 September 2026

Curated by Vincenzo de Bellis
In collaboration with Archivio Kounellis, Rome

The Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati presents "Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore". Curated by Vincenzo de Bellis, it is the first exhibition to explore the work of Jannis Kounellis (Piraeus, 1936 - Rome, 2017) by specifically and systematically interpreting it in terms of painting practice. This approach forges an alternative critical perspective that is broader and more radical than the conventional view of the artist as one of the leading figures of Arte Povera, or as a master of installations and poet of matter, as he was often hailed.

The show's starting point and guiding theme is a simple phrase the artist often repeated: "I am a painter," a statement that has less to do with technique or medium, and more with his approach to reality. "The Greek term ζωγράφος (*zōgráphos*) — painter, literally "writer of life" — guided the entire curatorial project. Kounellis only painted on canvas in the conventional sense for a few years of his artistic career, but throughout his life he painted with iron, coal, fire, jute sacks and the aroma of coffee. He painted with space, silence, and the heritage of a Mediterranean civilization he felt was under threat. Yet to date, no exhibition has used painting as a lens through which to explore his work," explained the curator Vincenzo de Bellis.

The show in the Collezione Olgiati venue brings together more than 35 works by Jannis Kounellis dating from the late 1950s to 2014, including some previously unseen or rarely exhibited pieces, such as *Untitled (Homage to Van Gogh)* of 1991 and the Black Rose on paper with a silver spray-painted background of 1966, here on show for the first time. The exhibition does not proceed chronologically but rather is constructed around various themes – *Painting as language; Painting as matter and weight; Painting as memory and silence; Painting as scene and icon* – which, like communicating forcefields, are traversed by echoes and conversations between works which date from different periods but draw on profoundly similar ideas. The show also reveals the artist's highly relational view of painting, nurtured by visual conversations with some of the greats of art history, from Van Gogh to Malevič, Mondrian, James Ensor and Hans Arp. Kounellis clearly staked his claim in this tradition, and though he continually transformed it, he never sought to turn his back on it. The themed sections span the whole of the artist's career, highlighting how his various obsessions are not limited to, or enclosed in a single stylistic period, but continue to resonate throughout his oeuvre, forever challenging the viewer.

Io sono un pittore, the exhibition layout

The exhibition at the Collezione Olgiati opens with the section dedicated to *Painting as language*, featuring works in which letters, numbers, signs and flowers serve as the components of a visual lexicon. Here, for Kounellis, paintings become a linguistic field: not images to contemplate, but statements to read. This section opens with a creation that is both a tribute and a provocation: a large black square painted directly on the wall, flanked by panels of 1958 enamelled with shop signage (*Tobacco Shop*) and numbers (*Untitled*, 1958 / 2012). Thus Malevich's *Black Square*, the defining work of suprematism, meets the streets of Rome, and life takes over the "zero point of painting", a confrontation that for Kounellis would never find resolution.

If painting is language, even a rose can become an ideogram, the writing of nature in the art system, as can be seen in his famous series of Roses. The exhibition at the Collezione Olgiati showcases four works from this series, including the monumental Red Rose (1966-1967) and the very rare the Black Rose on paper with a silver spray-painted background (1966), exhibited for the very first time.

In the works in the section entitled *Painting as matter and weight*, Kounellis paints by deploying the weight of the elements he chooses, from iron to coal, wool and smoke. The world is not represented, but enters the work, exerting its starkly concrete presence. The 2005 *Untitled*, for example, shows a field of cacti surrounded by rolls of lead: a dialogue between organic and metallic, slow growth and fixed boundary. In other pieces, canvas itself is the painter's material: in the large work of 1969, jute sacks and huge loops of white wool mark out the surface like a polyptych, while in that of 1967, four sacks physically take over the white surface - the heft of real life straddling and invading the artwork.

On his white and monochrome canvases, Kounellis' painting is reduced to a trace, an echo; it connects with the European tradition in order to challenge it. The section *Painting as Memory and Silence* extends down a twelve-metre corridor, along which one of the most powerful symbols of the show unfolds: the work *Untitled (Homage to Van Gogh)*. Created in 1991 and only previously exhibited a handful of times, it is a sequence of iron sheets each measuring the same as one of Vincent van Gogh's paintings. Some of them have apertures through which light filters faintly, appearing to come from within, as with Byzantine icons. Nothing of Van Gogh's works is present on the surface of the metal, except the structure and proportions he chose for them. Yellow – Van Gogh's yellow, but also the gold of Byzantine icons – is the colour theme of this entire section. It is alternated with sheet metal in the monochrome *Untitled* of 2014, while in a 1978 piece it serves as pure presence and background, with a boat featuring in the foreground. The latter is a recurring archetype in Kounellis' imagery, as a metaphor for travel and exodus.

The reference to the migrations of the twentieth century – Kounellis himself comes from a family that moved from Greece to Italy – can also be found in his use of coats. As containers of lives and memories, a simple coat folded on a hanging chair, along with a hat and a pair of shoes, is enough to evoke the presence of something akin to a self-portrait (*Untitled*, 2007). This work is featured in the last section of the exhibition, *Painting as scene and icon*. Here the exhibition space becomes a suspended stage and the works are presented not as paintings to look at, but as presences that question us.

While painting is traditionally only a visual art, Kounellis wanted to involve the viewer's entire body. In the 1988 installation that closes the exhibition, the smell of the grappa contained in the hundreds of glasses that make up the work – surmounted by shapes in lead that allude to the pictorial forms created by Hans Arp – envelops visitors before they have fully taken in the composition with their eyes. This piece is a living organism, which changes over time and ages: "it is painting in the most radical sense – a painting that no longer wishes to stand still", concluded Vincenzo de Bellis.

On the occasion of the exhibition, a catalogue in Italian and English will be published by Mousse Publishing, with an introduction by Giancarlo and Danna Olgiati, a historical/critical essay by Vincenzo de Bellis and an essay by Bruno Corà. The volume is also accompanied by biographic and bibliographic notes and detailed information on each work.

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati

La Permanente 2026 – 2027

The Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati, which is open to the public in the exhibition space adjacent to the LAC cultural centre, renews the works it shows on an annual basis, drawing on its own extensive collection spanning 120 years of art history, from the early twentieth century to the present day. The main focus of the Collection is Italian art that looks to the rest of the world. In conjunction with the exhibition "Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore", the space dedicated to the Permanent Collection will be showing very significant works by the artists listed below, while the final room hosts the Futurist Archive, which boasts 1,200 original publications.

Franco Angeli
Giovanni Anselmo
Giacomo Balla
Domenico Bianchi
Alighiero Boetti
Pier Paolo Calzolari
Ettore Colla
Roberto Cuoghi
Fortunato Depero
Piero Dorazio
Luciano Fabro
Tano Festa
Günther Förg
Natalia Goncharova
Antony Gormley
Wade Guyton
Ilya Kabakov
Anselm Kiefer

Alberto Magnelli
Anna Maria Maiolino
Virgilio Marchi
Eliseo Mattiacci
Mario Merz
Nunzio
Giulio Paolini
Pino Pascali
Giuseppe Penone
Gianni Piacentino
Michelangelo Pistoletto
Enrico Prampolini
Walid Raad
Pietro Roccasalva
Ugo Rondinone
Emilio Vedova
Christopher Wool
Gilberto Zorio

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Opening times:

Thursday - Sunday: 11 am – 6 pm
Admission free

Press contact

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Press images

01.

Jannis Kounellis

Z/3, 1961

Tempera on canvas

135 x 165 cm

Torino, GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte

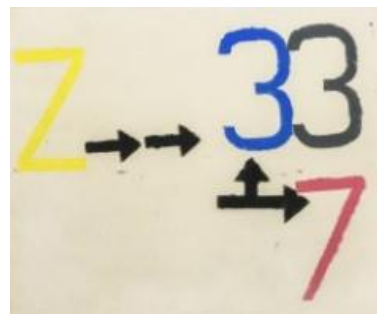
Moderna e Contemporanea, Museo

Sperimentale. Courtesy Fondazione Torino Musei

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis / 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: Paolo Robino 2019



02.

Jannis Kounellis

Untitled, 1967

Black cloth rose applied to canvas with

automatic buttons, stitches sewn onto

canvas to form a rose

226 x 188 cm

Private collection

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis / 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: Giorgio Benni



03.

Jannis Kounellis

Untitled, 1967

Burlap sacks, canvas

200 x 240 cm

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgati,

Lugano

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis / 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: Studio Pagi



04.
 Jannis Kounellis
Untitled, 1978
 Hessian, boat model, pigment on canvas
 132 x 78 x 59 cm
 Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia
 © Estate of Jannis Kounellis; 2026,
 ProLitteris, Zurich
 Photo: Carlo Vannini



05.
 Jannis Kounellis
Untitled, 2007
 Iron, spray paint on canvas, chair, coat, hat,
 shoes
 200 x 180 x 41 cm
 Collezione Gianfranco D'Amato
 © Estate of Jannis Kounellis / 2026,
 ProLitteris, Zurich
 Photo: Pedicini fotografi



06.
 Jannis Kounellis
Untitled, 1969
 Burlap canvas, wool
 265 x 345 cm ca.
 Private collection
 © Estate of Jannis Kounellis; 2026,
 ProLitteris, Zurich
 Photo: © Agostino Osio for Alto Piano



07.

Jannis Kounellis

Untitled, 1998

Burlap sacks, soil, iron, fabric

Variable dimensions

Private collection

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis; 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: © Agostino Osio for Alto Piano



08.

Jannis Kounellis

Untitled, 2005

Soil, cactuses, lead rolls, fabric

30 x 360 x 360 cm

Private collection

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis; 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: © Agostino Osio for Alto Piano



09.

Jannis Kounellis

Untitled, 1988

7100 glasses, grappa, lead

Variable dimensions

Private collection

© Estate of Jannis Kounellis; 2026,

ProLitteris, Zurich

Photo: © Agostino Osio for Alto Piano



10.

Installation view

Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore

Collezione Giancarlo e Danna Olgiati,
Lugano, Svizzera

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11.

Installation view

Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore

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Lugano, Svizzera

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12.

Installation view

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13.

Installation view

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Lugano, Svizzera

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14.

Installation view

Jannis Kounellis: Io sono un pittore

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