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## **Jannis Kounellis' installations from Germany to Israel: A continuous narrative.**

### **Images of a „traveler“**

Jannis Kounellis, associated with Arte Povera since 1967 and other artistic trends that began to emerge in the 1960s, such as installations, conceptual art and performance, wandered in various centers of contemporary art, including Rome, Berlin, Paris, London, New York, Chicago, Moscow, Tel Aviv and many other cities. Throughout his journeys, he cooperated with some of the most representative artists of contemporary art, such as Luciano Fabro and Mario Merz. At the same time, he developed a special visual language that always followed the development of contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> Kounellis traveled to different geographical locations and architectural spaces, usually empty in terms of objects but full of stories and memories. He gathered information about each of them and emphasized the value of diversity and cultural differences, trying to bring up experiences and everyday images to the surface.

These journeys were not limited to space but continued through time, creating images in exhibition spaces, as he described his installations, with many historical references combined with cultural history and personal experiences. Kounellis traveled to different places to find, as he said, the „Other“ (person), to be related to his environment and identified with his place. Wherever he went, he tried to immerse himself into the culture and history of each place and incorporate it into his work, creating new images in the space that emerged from cultural narratives. One of the factors that helped him to read the characteristics of each place and to interpret this experience in terms of its cultural system and its history was the fact that he led an almost nomadic life. In addition, although he was usually trying to create narratives related to ancient civilizations, he was also asking questions about the present and the future. This is due to the nature of nomadism, which is characterized by mobility and contact with nature, in stark contrast to the sedentary lifestyles prevalent in modern society. Nomadism embodies a dynamic force that challenges conventional notions of social organization and drives humanity toward innovation and growth through its inherent connection to nature and constant movement. Germano Celant was the first to refer to Kounellis' nomadic nature. In 1968, he described all Arte Povera artists as „nomads“ moving through different cultural histories and described their works as images of „the nomad or the traveler“.<sup>2</sup> He also referred to Mario Merz as a „nomad“ in an article in *Artforum* in December 1979.<sup>3</sup> As nomads, these artists developed a special relationship with each environment they entered. They used local materials and objects, and they rejected traditional techniques. The nomadic nature of Arte Povera, a concept that Celant developed, refers to the movement of artists in space and time. In his view, the artists of Arte Povera were trying to capture the energy and mobility of their work.

The wanderings of Kounellis in different geographical places began at the very first moment of his artistic career when he left Greece and went to Italy. Since then, the cultural memory of each place has always been a motivation for his work. In this way, Kounellis' aim was to bring to the surface experiences and memories that reflect the history of different cultures, races and pasts. His deep under-

standing of the characteristics of each place is derived from his nomadic way of life, which allows him to become intimately involved with the cultural backgrounds and histories of different places. As a nomad, he develops a special relationship with each environment he enters, using local objects that serve as vessels of great significance.

### **Jannis Kounellis as a wandering historian-observer**

This study focuses on Kounellis' stops beyond Italy, Germany and Israel, mainly since 1990, to present information based on cultural memory. It focuses on his work in these two countries, considering the different historical, social and cultural aspects that mark the artists' places of action and that were of concern to him during the creation of his installations. This approach relies on peripheral participatory observation, cultural memory, and the presence of materiality, to explore how the artist creates installations with different narratives through histories of ancient civilizations. The stories are reflected in the materials and objects that he uses in his work, and they help the artist to create images in space that, on the one hand, carry their history and, on the other hand, are filled with personal stories. These references can already be found in his first exhibition in Israel, in the port of Jaffa, a historical site marked by the events of the First World War and the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948. It's a place that, even though it's in the Middle East, in the southeast of the Mediterranean Sea, Kounellis shows that he's very familiar with. This is due to his origins and his experiences in Piraeus, an ancient port on the Mediterranean, which was also affected during the First World War as well as the Second World War when Greece was occupied due to its strategic importance.

Among the stops Kounellis made in Germany was Pulheim, whereas he found himself in Israel in Tel Aviv and Jaffa several times. Kounellis plays the role of a wandering historian and observer, gathering information and experiences. The tool that he used was the peripheral participatory observation, introduced by Peter and Patricia Adler. It requires the observer to be integrated into the space to capture the actions and meanings of the space being studied from within. In this method, the observer spends his or her time examining either the daily events of a community of people or their environment.<sup>4</sup> Following this method, Kounellis, like other Arte Povera artists, tries to gather experiences, information or even feelings about the culture or the ancient civilizations who lived in these places to formulate them in his work.<sup>5</sup>

Space is a crucial element for Kounellis, as he develops a personal relationship with the culture and history of each place. This cultural reading of himself changes the narrative of his works depending on their location. He also stressed that „you can learn a lot from the place. There are different places in Italy and different places in Germany. You learn to love the other person for the differences that he or she has. I have never had the belief that we are all the same“.<sup>6</sup> However, Kounellis is not only interested in space in the sense of geographical location but also in material, architectural and mental space. After approaching a specific geographical space, he focuses on the architectural space in which he sets up his installation. Kounellis integrates space into his work, combining with the vivid imagery of the place's history and architectural narrative. His focus is not only on the physical structure of the building but also on its inherent functionality and essence. By infusing the space with layers of meaning and context, he seeks to reveal the dynamic interplay between space, history, and human experience.<sup>7</sup>

At each juncture of his creative odyssey, Kounellis deliberately selects existing architectural structures as the sites for his installations. These structures, carry the weight of their rich histories and

myriad transformation and, embody the passage of time through their diverse functions and adaptations. Kounellis' artistic endeavors have rarely taken place in architectural spaces that are still serving their original purpose. Instead, he gravitated toward repurposed 19th- and 20th-century industrial production sites, such as the Halle Kalk in Cologne. His installations found homes in warehouses, mostly located in port areas, evoking themes of traveling and exploring, as seen in Jaffa and Piraeus. He also ventured into private spaces and places of spiritual reverence, such as St. Peter's Church in Cologne and the Synagogue in Stommeln, infusing these diverse spaces with layers of profound meaning and aesthetic resonance.

### **Schweres Erinnern: Kounellis' installation in the Synagogue of Stommeln**

The synagogue in Stommeln, located in the town of Pulheim in Nordrhein-Westfalen, is another place where Kounellis is engaged in dialogue with the history of the synagogue. He participated in the "Synagogue Stommeln" project, initiated by Dr. Gerhard Dornseifer, the cultural director of the city of Pulheim. The goal was the creation of works of art within the synagogue that would engage with the architecture of the building and the inclusion of its history. In particular, the neo-Romanesque synagogue of Stommeln was built in 1882. In May 1937, Cologne's Jewish community sold the synagogue to a farmer who used it as a warehouse. The Star of David on the facade was covered with mortar, and the farmer promised not to use the building as a barn. When the Nazis tried to set fire to the building on 10 November 1938, the farmer defended the building by pointing out that the building he now owned was not a synagogue. Therefore, this synagogue is one of the few in Germany that was not destroyed during the pogroms of the Nazi regime against the Jewish population in Germany on the night of November 9 – 10 in 1938 (Kristallnacht).

In 1991, Kounellis, later followed by other artists such as Richard Serra, Georg Baselitz, Maria Nordman, Carl Andre, Rebecca Horn, and Erich Rausch, entered into a dialogue with the site of the past, the site in the contemporary form and its history. The installation bore the title „Schweres Erinnern“ (Difficult to remember) and was intricately woven into the historical narrative of the site, forging a deep connection with its past.<sup>8</sup> It consisted of twelve hooks and three carved beams. The carved beams were placed vertically inside the synagogue, forming an equilateral triangle. At the top of each beam, there was a stone, reminiscent of a capital, attached with wire to symbolically support the roof and the railing of the synagogue. The beams lift the stones upwards, a force that seems to be a counterbalance to the pressure of the roof on the columns. The existing symbolism in Kounellis' objects is profound and multi-layered. The twelve hooks, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, evoke a rich heritage deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. Meanwhile, the triangular formation of three beams evokes the iconic Star of David, symbolizing both Jewish identity and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity.<sup>9</sup> The stones adorning the apex of each beam pay homage to Jewish mourning rituals, reflecting a tradition of remembrance and reverence. Their significance extends beyond mere ornamentation, resonating with narratives from biblical texts, such as David's selection of stones before confronting Goliath. Through these symbols, Kounellis intertwines the essence of remembrance and preservation, closely aligned with the project's overarching goal of honouring the legacy and history of the Stommeln Synagogue.

Kounellis worked in situ at the Stommeln synagogue to create a direct dialogue with the architecture of this place and its tragic history. Although the original function of the space and the rituals had been interrupted, Kounellis' work emphasizes that the space retains its original identity. We can

also identify similarities between this installation and another one in the Port of Jaffa, demonstrating the continuity within the narrative that comes from interrelated connections.<sup>10</sup>

### **From the synagogue of Stommeln to the port of Jaffa**

These connections give continuity to the narrative of certain historical events, as in the case of an installation he created in Tel Aviv several years later. In 2007, Kounellis went from Germany and the Stommeln Synagogue to Israel, where thousands of Jews had been resettled, especially in the aftermath of the pogroms of *Kristallnacht*. Initially in the 1930s, over 60,000 German Jews emigrated to Palestine (Aliyah), most under the terms of the Haavar (Transfer) Agreement.<sup>11</sup> Then, after the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, a steady influx of Jewish refugees began to immigrate to the newly established state, resulting in the emigration of thousands of Holocaust survivors to Israel in the following years.<sup>12</sup>

Kounellis goes to this place, the Jaffa Port (Main Gate Hangar, Jaffa, Israel) and searches for the history that this place carries on, concerning the movement of people to and from these lands (fig.1). The history of the place, seen from two different perspectives, the history of the Jewish people and the history of the Palestinian people, has left its mark to the function of the place where Kounellis has set up his installations. Here, echoing his approach in Pulheim, Kounellis delves into the fragmented history of the site, skillfully amalgamating its disparate elements into a series of installations. In these installations, there are multiple meanings and readings. In one of them, for example, chairs encircle the outline of a deceased human figure drawn in white chalk on the floor. In another circle, a dark stain resembling thick blood lies at the center. These symbolic elements serve as poignant reminders of the historical events that have left an indelible mark on the site. They evoke powerful images and invite reflection on the site's meaningful history.

In another installation, chairs form a circle draped with a white sheet, an allusion to funeral rites and Kounellis' connection to the world of theater. Elsewhere, chairs arranged in a circle are topped with sewing machines, symbolizing the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Nearby, a sack is placed on top of a chair in another circle. Unlike the black sack on the table, this one is blue, the only coloured element in the otherwise black and white installation. According to the Italian art critic and historian Adachiara Zevi, Kounellis was inspired to choose this shade after encountering a Palestinian woman wearing a dress of the same color while walking through Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> In another circle, he replaced the chair in the center with a coat rack from which black coats and hats were hanging. This choice carries a symbolic meaning, as it evokes the imagery of the Central European bourgeoisie, a group to which many Jews belonged. The absence of the person wearing these clothes in addition to the somber attire, is a poignant reminder of the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the fact that a coat rack is usually placed at the entrance of a home where individuals hung their outdoor wear before getting further into it, underscores the installation's depiction of Jewish migration to Israel.

In the center of another circle, formed by chairs, there are shoes placed one next to another forming a circle, which also symbolize the sense of loss. The chairs are different from one another and belong to several periods, referring to a number of events that took place there or are related to that place. Similarly, the shoes refer to the events that took place there, the destination of tens of thousands of Jewish survivors of the tragedy of the Holocaust, and at the same time the place of residence of hundreds of thousands of Arabs.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the shoes refer to a series of installations commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, such as those at the Yad Vashem Memorial Museum in



1 Photo of Jaffa port in Israel, 2022, Private Archive.

Jerusalem, the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland, and Hungarian sculptor Gyula Pauer's „Shoes on the Danube Bank“, an installation of 60 pairs of 1940s style shoes placed on the banks of the Danube River where Jews were murdered by Arrow Cross militiamen in 1944–45. Likewise, Israeli artist Sigalit Landau symbolizes the same event in her installation „O my friends, there are no friends“ (2011), which consists of 12 pairs of bronze shoes arranged in a circle and tied together with real shoelaces. Also in 1969, Israeli artists Joshua Neustein and Georgette Batlle scattered 15,000 pairs of shoes throughout the galleries of the Jerusalem Artists House, while the sound of recorded footsteps echoed throughout the exhibition space. The installation refers to the piles of Jewish shoes at Auschwitz and the Six-Day War in 1967.

In all the above mentioned installations, despite the absence of the human form, the shoes, which are either real or replicas made of other materials, retain their real dimensions. In Kounellis' installations, it is important to emphasize that despite its absence, the human being is a dominant element. This is documented by Kounellis' use of objects that have references to human and everyday life, subtly hinting at the ongoing human presence in space. Similarly, Kounellis endeavors to counteract the emptiness of the warehouse and fill the empty space with his installations, which are integrated into the memory of the space and introduce the tragic memories of recent history into this place.

To fill the space, Kounellis also uses the light emitted by nine old lampposts that he has placed next to each of the circles. These lampposts illuminate the spots where the installations are in a cold light, while the rest of the space is left in the dark. In the center of another circle, iron posts



2 Photo of Jaffa port in Israel, 2022, Private Archive.

are placed on each other, recalling the electric fences that once existed in concentration camps. Of course, similar iron posts can also be found in his other installations in Germany, namely in Pulheim and Halle Kalk in Cologne. But in the case of the Pulheim synagogue, the posts are placed vertically inside the synagogue, whereas in the Jaffa installation, they are placed horizontally and above each other. Through these installations, Kounellis wanted to express the loss of human life and homeland as well as the loss of identity and sense of belonging among the Jewish people. In addition, he attempts to point out the death of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazi regime, the passage of time, but also the human need to rebuild such as the Holocaust survivors' efforts to strengthen their Jewish identity and the Jewish community after the war. The Jaffa Port Warehouse is undoubtedly familiar to Kounellis, who grew up in a similar environment. This intimate connection has allowed him to unfold a series of narratives in his installations, infusing them with dramatic elements reminiscent of ancient tragedy. Throughout the installation, these elements are vividly expressed: the circular arrangement of the chairs which is reminiscent of the rhythmic dance of an ancient Greek tragedy, the play of shadows in the space which adds to the dramatic atmosphere and the presence of simple objects and fabrics which recalls the unadorned settings of ancient drama.

## Conclusion

During his trips, Jannis Kounellis takes the history and culture of the places he visits and transfers them into his installations. He navigates through space, seeking out elements that reveal the hidden history of the past in these places and their surroundings recognizing their integral role in his narrative. Kounellis is aware that all of these elements function like puzzle pieces that fit together, and he knows that some are readily visible and tangible. In contrast, others are found in the scope of the unreal, encouraging the viewer to bring them back to his mind. Jannis Kounellis explores the complex interaction between the visible and the imaginary world. He delves deep into the essence of each place and he seeks to understand its reality to enrich his installations with new dimensions. Interested in material traces and mental narratives, experiences, values and meanings, Kounellis' cultural insight infuses his work with a dynamic narrative that evolves with each site's unique context.

This process transforms Kounellis from a wandering historian and observer into a storyteller. He strives to share his stories, enriching them with the unique experiences and interpretations of the viewer. Like the artist himself, his work transcends time. It deals with memory, political and social history, and poses thought provoking questions. Avoiding iconographic methods, Kounellis explores experiences, values, and meanings in his quest to provoke contemplation and understanding. Within this framework, meanings and connotations emerge, influenced by the subjective nature of memory and the distinctiveness of each place.

The memory and the cultural meaning of the objects are also visible. This is evident, for instance, in the stones that adorn his installation at the Stommeln Synagogue, as well as the shoes in his installation at the port of Jaffa. The elements in Kounellis' creations evoke experiences, symbolism and emotions to the viewer. They intertwine with the viewer's consciousness and form the very essence of the meaning within the artwork. In other words, these spaces encapsulate the memories, reflections and experiences of the 'Other'. Therefore, diverse narratives emerge, shaped by cultural memory, offering a unique interpretation of the artwork, and a different narrative of the work each time. Moreover, beyond the varying narratives, a shared narrative or fragments of a unified story based on historical events can be discerned. This is evident in Kounellis' installations at the Stommeln synagogue in Germany and the Jaffa port in Israel, a route followed by thousands of Jews, particularly following the night of November 9–10, 1938 ("Kristallnacht").

## Endnotes

- 1 Stephen Bann, *Jannis Kounellis*, Berlin 2004.
- 2 Nancy Spector, „Remembering Germano Celant, champion of Arte Povera and a noted curator, critic and historian on both sides of the Atlantic“, in: *The Art Newspaper* (May 2020), available at: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2020/05/29/remembering-germano-celant-champion-of-arte-povera-and-a-noted-curator-critic-and-historian-on-both-sides-of-the-atlantic> (Online available: 12.04.2022)
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- 6 Despoina Zeukili, „Γιά ννης Κουνέλλης: «Δεν μπορώ να σκεφτώ το τέλος της πολιτικής», in: *Athinorama* (February 2017), available at: [https://www.athinorama.gr/texnes/2519661/giannis\\_kounellis\\_den\\_mporo\\_na\\_skefto\\_to\\_telos\\_tis\\_politikis/](https://www.athinorama.gr/texnes/2519661/giannis_kounellis_den_mporo_na_skefto_to_telos_tis_politikis/) (Online available: 16.04.2022)
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- 8 Gerhard Dornseifer, *Synagoge Stommeln, Kunstprojekte; Synagoge Stommeln, Art Projects*, Berlin 2001.
- 9 Herta Kyphe: „Synagoge Stommeln - Kunst gegen das Vergessen“, in: *Gedenkstätten-Rundbrief 50* (September 1992), here pp. 18–19.
- 10 Scheps 2010, (as note 7).
- 11 Yf'aat Weiss, „The Transfer Agreement and the Boycott Movement: A Jewish Dilemma on the Eve of the Holocaust“, in: *Yad Vasem Studies*, Vol. XXVI, Jerusalem 1998, here pp.129–172.
- 12 Elihu Bergman, „Adversaries and Facilitators: The Unconventional Diplomacy of Illegal Immigration to Palestine 1945–1948“, in: *Israel Affairs* Vol. 8. No 3. London 2002, here pp.1–46.
- 13 Adachara Zevi, *Kounellis. Jaffa port*, Tel Aviv, 2007, here p.10.
- 14 Cathy Gelbin & Sander Gilman, *Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews*, Michigan 2017.
- 15 Bergman 2002, (as note 12).

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Fig. 1: *Photo of Jaffa port in Israel, 2022, Private Archive.*

Fig. 2: *Photo of Jaffa port in Israel, 2022, Private Archive.*

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