

ALMIN ZRNO

Jannis Kounellis, Sarajevo 2004

22 May - 19 August 2021



Curated by Amila Ramović, former Executive Director of the Ars Aevi Museum Sarajevo, organizer the Jannis Kounellis exhibition in Sarajevo in 2004.

The National Library of Sarajevo was bombed by incendiary munitions and burned to the ground on the night of the 25th of August 1992, destroying nearly three million books and rare manuscripts. It was one of the key events of the Siege of Sarajevo. Lasting 1,425 days, from April 1992 until February 1996, the Siege of Sarajevo—the longest in modern history—resulted in the death of more than 13,000 Sarajevans, among them almost 2,000 children.

In addition to the loss of life, cultural infrastructure was systematically targeted by Serb nationalist forces, as its destruction was intended to erase the city's multicultural memory and cosmopolitan identity. Vijećnica—built as the city hall during the Austro-Hungarian rule, later becoming the National Library—with its iconic architecture and situated in the heart of the Old Town, has long been known as the symbol of Sarajevo. Images of the flames bursting through its windows remain among the strongest testimonies and iconic representations of the besieged city.

In 1992, working from his Sarajevo shelter, Enver Hadžiomerspahić, Ars Aevi's founder and general director, conceived the idea to invite the world's artists to jointly form a museum of contemporary art in Sarajevo. More than 200 renowned artists from around the globe came together to create the Ars Aevi Collection through a series of founding exhibitions, starting in 1994, that were held in Milan, Prato, Venice, Ljubljana, Vienna, Istanbul, Podgorica and Sarajevo. Joining forces with them in 1999, the architect Renzo Piano designed the building for the future museum and donated a pedestrian bridge as its first constructed element.

Jannis Kounellis became one of the founders of the Ars Aevi Collection in 1996, at the invitation of Bruno Corà, and went on to strongly support the project in the years thereafter. His work remains on permanent display at the Ars Aevi Collection's temporary headquarters in the refurbished City Hall of Sarajevo.

In 2004 Ars Aevi invited Jannis Kounellis, together with the curator Bruno Corà, to create a project for Sarajevo at the still devastated library, which had been closed to the public for more than ten years. In May 2004, Kounellis came to Sarajevo with Michelle Coudray, Bruno

Corà and a team of associates to start the month-long process of building his installation, “the twelve doors of Sarajevo,” located in the Vijećnica’s destroyed central hall.

Returned to the site for the first time since the building’s destruction, more than 20,000 books from the Library’s original collection were used by Kounellis as the material for his installation. Next to these were reassembled fragments of the building’s columns that had been broken by the heat of the flames, worn pieces of clothing rolled up in sheets of lead, rocks from the local quarry, and other recognizable elements of Kounellis’s visual vocabulary.

The exhibition opened on 16 June 2004. During the three months it was on display, it was seen by more than 20,000 visitors. The installation, donated to Sarajevo by the artist, has an historic place in the cultural memory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is considered to be one of the most important works in the last phase of Jannis Kounellis’s opus.

Photographer Almin Zrno followed Kounellis through every stage of the installation’s creation. His photographs document the artist’s very encounter with the space, the intensity of the creative process, the human power invested in such a “construction from destruction,” and the magnificence of the delicate and monumental piece that emerged. Moreover, the images capture the artist’s concern “not to harm the space ... [but] only say a word or two,” and bring to life Kounellis’s spirit, in which the ethical and the artistic are never to be separated.

Amila Ramović