

MINUS SPACE

(excerpt from)

Three Greek-American Artists

Stephen Antonakos, Nassos Daphnis, Cris Gianakos

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This lecture discusses the artwork of three Greek-American artists who live in New York: Stephen Antonakos, Nassos Daphnis and Cris Gianakos.

Antonakos was born in 1926 in Agios Nikolaos, a village in the mountains of Laconia, in the Peloponese, southern Greece, and went to New York four years later with his family. Daphnis was born in a village close to Sparta, also in the Peloponese, in 1914 and arrived in the United States at the age of 16, following his father, while Gianakos was the only one to be born in New York twenty years later, in 1934, but growing up in Crete until the age of five. The above three artists share in common the strong Greek roots which they harmonically interweave with contemporary formalistic and conceptual concerns, using the language of geometry as one of the main means to arrive to an artistic result.

Geometry, as a science, had not yet been discovered (by the 8th century B.C.) Traditionally, the shift from Egyptian experimental geometry to scientific geometry is attributed to Thales of Miletus who was active in the early 6th century B.C. and who has, most probably, coined the term. The word "geometry" derives from the combination of the Greek noun which means "earth" and the verb which means "to measure" and actually describes the origin of the Egyptian empirical activity as has been handed down to us by Herodotus who lived during the classical period and is considered the father of history. According to Herodotus, Egyptian empirical geometry concerned the redefining of the boundaries of the farm areas after the yearly flood of the Nile River, an activity that symbolized for the Egyptians the revival of the principle of order and law on earth.

Cris Gianakos' theoretical stand in being called a geometrical artist is clear-cut. To him the term "geometrical art, as used by most writers on modern is, confines his work to the use and artistic application of the science of geometry and disregards the conceptual and poetic aspect which is present in much of the art of this specific tendency. Gianakos, like Dahnis and contrary to the minimalist credo, places emphasis on the implications of a work of art and on its codified message to the viewer. Furthermore, he stresses the creative aspect of the human instinct as well as the free associations evoked by forms.

As we have seen, he is not the only one to believe that the use of geometrical shapes, structural concerns, and order should not be connected to mere illustrations of scientific principles. Gabo, the Russian Constructivist we have referred to, one of the rare geometrical artists who had a deep knowledge of mathematics and civil engineering - due to the scientific academic background he had received in Universities in Munich had professed the same thought. In a lecture on the Fine Arts, given in 1959, Gabo said: "...I have to defend my own art from the accusation which I often hear—that my sculptures are mathematical formulas—and to insist that I can quite well use a rectangle or a circle whenever I need these shapes in my image without paying a heavy toll and tribute to the scientist for them, and that I do so on my own inherited human right of vision. I have to remind the public that my ancestors, the artists of the cave, saw the sun and moon and represented them as circles long before the scientist had made a compass to draw a circle and calculate its measurements".

Gabo's influence on Gianakos does not only lie in the latter's negation of the supremacy of mathematics over the instinctive use of pure geometrical shapes; it also lies in the aspiration to grasp the collective consciousness of the era and express through art what Gabo has described as "the new outlook on the world around". This direct relationship to modern reality is elaborated by Gabo: "From the very beginning of the Constructive movement it was clear to me that a constructed sculpture, by its very method and technique, brings sculpture very near to architecture. My works of this time, up to 1924, are all in the search for an image which would fuse the sculptural element with the architectural element into one unit."

Gabo's thought is in accord with Gianakos' theoretical ideas. The ramps, his most characteristic works from the mid 70s onwards, are closely related to architectural structures; the artist admits observing construction sites and

being attracted to buildings and bridges that are under way, their engineering left bare. For Gianakos, it is the process that counts; therefore, many of his rampworks are open sculptures that allow the viewer to see in detail their skeleton, get a clear sense of its method of construction and a deeper understanding of his personal creative act. This pragmatic and down to earth, structural approach coexists with the conceptual aspect of Gianakos' sculptures which is partly due to the use and significance of the diagonal, one of the most dominant forms in his art.

Heraclitus, who also propagated the unity of the opposites, had written that the "way up and the way down are one and the same", a statement that has received since multiple philosophical interpretations. According to the neo-platonic view, Heraclitus referred to the voyages of the soul, a conceptual concern that can also be detected in Gianakos' sculptures. His ramps, which are Heraclitian in spirit, stand both as an ascent and a descent, as levitation and fall. However, the visual strength of the diagonal tends to finally lead the viewer's glance up and into the sky. Gianakos discreetly helps the spectator reach the "upward-leading experience" we have come across by appropriating perspective in nature: the distance tricks the human eye-sight, making the diagonal shape which has equal width frequently appear thinner as it recedes in space; it penetrates infinity and dynamically draws the viewer along.

Gianakos constructs his sculptures out of permanent industrial materials that are also used in architecture, such as wood, steel, metal, stone, and glass. These materials are usually left intact, demonstrating their natural substance and reminding us that they are actually more primeval than they are new. The artist enjoys delving into the past, evoking memories that may be further associated with his rampworks. He refers to the inclined street where he used to play as a child and to his reminiscence of struggle. The playground is another vivid flashback; indeed, some of Gianakos' ramps—such as "Styx" of 1987 which is permanently installed at the University of Long Island, set against the New York City skyline—recall unusual playground slides. "Styx" is composed of two converging diagonals that are connected to each other by means of a horizontal passageway that originally served as a stage upon which dancers performed. Gianakos invites the viewer to physically experience this work of art, to walk on it, explore it, and get a sincere feeling of it both by ascending and descending it. In "Styx", the simple viewer senses "the upward leading experience", as in most ramps, but the active participant reaches a heightened perception as he is initiated to the full Heraclitian truth of ascent and descent as being parts of an harmonious whole.

When thinking of the historical past, Gianakos mentions that the pyramids of Egypt may have also had an influence on him. The simple geometrical shape of these monumental royal tombs occasionally appears in the rampworks; however, in following his personal concerns, Gianakos transforms the closed and smooth pyramidal form of the Egyptians into an open structure that once again displays its complex support system.

Greater in importance is the artist's recollection of his archaeological visits to the palace of Phaistos on the island of Crete. Gianakos' mother is Cretan, from a small village named Kasteli; after his first return to Greece in 1957, Gianakos began systematically coming to the island to spend part of his summer vacation. During one of his early stays, he went to the Minoan site of Phaistos where he returned several times. Walking through the passageways of Greek antiquity and observing how light softened the edges of the timeless stones, Gianakos experienced a unique mystical journey that took him far back in time.

The labyrinthine paths of the palace of Minos were geometrically simplified by the artist and turned into straight sculptural passageways with high walls and intricate support systems. On a first level, these works recall contemporary bridges or tunnels more than they recall their original Minoan inspirational source. On a second level, however, one observes that Gianakos has taken into account the viewer's perpetual change of psychological moods as he or she traverses the works, a concern that was seriously considered in Minoan architecture as well.

Gianakos' sculptural paths that unite two different spots in space, allegorically portray the passage of time and poetically set off the neo-platonic notion of the "voyage of the soul", alluding to the spectator's transition from one existential state of being to another.

Participation and physical experience, as we have seen, play an important role. Recently, Gianakos has gone a step further, creating out of cubes and other elementary shapes utilitarian sculptural benches that recall the Bauhaus credo "form follows function". These works, that fully retain their artistic quality, naturally derive from the black monochromatic series of sculptures, in which the ideas of smoothness, clarity, exactitude, and geometrical reduction have been fully exploited.

Gianakos likes to frequently juxtapose these functional sculptures, which invite the viewer to rest and contemplate, with his drawings and paintings; these two-dimensional works are always executed on mylar, a

material used by architects when designing their construction projects. Imbued by the memory of Phaistos, the drawings and paintings occasionally depict blurred edges; usually, however, they are characterized by the clear precision and accuracy of geometry as well as by the reduction of the color scale to black and white.

Knowing Gianakos and his delight in interweaving different moments in time, it comes as no surprise that he would attempt to openly fuse the ancient Greek spirit with today's hardedge geometry. Actual interventions on historical Greek sites, in the sense that Antonakos intervenes on modern buildings, are strictly forbidden for obvious reasons. Gianakos overcomes this problem in a Platonic way, emerging into the realm of ideas which is removed from actual reality. He prints photographic images of archaeological sites and sculptures on mylar paper and traces on them imaginary, minimal interventions. His direct goal is to reveal the hidden geometry in ancient Greek architecture and art and to demonstrate its deliberate similarities to the current world. His indirect aim is possibly to extol the uniqueness of geometry as a language that was favored in the past and is still favored today not only by mathematicians but also by philosophers and artists.

As Odysseas Elytis, the contemporary Greek poet and Nobel prize winner, wrote: "taking advantage of the minimum in order to extract the maximum out of it, is the hardest and most Greek of secrets".

It is precisely this timeless truth that the three Hellenes of the diaspora possess, a truth that is strongly reflected in the laconic nature of their art.