

MINUS SPACE

Cris Gianakos

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Cris Gianakos, the internationally known artist of the Greek diaspora, lives and works in New York City. Since the 1960s he has had a strong presence in the American avant-garde, and his work is part of the collection of numerous museums all over the world. Gianakos's work moves freely between different media, with his two-dimensional works, his sculptures, and his installations engaging in a continual dialogue. The exhibition in Poros includes stone, wood, and metal sculptures; monochromatic paintings on mylar and parchment, as well as collages and alterations on prints and photographs. The works chronologically span the last three decades, and are essential milestones in the intermedia dialogue of his work as well as in the conceptual development of his ideas from the 1980s until today. In the 1960s, Gianakos started experimenting with a key concept, central to his work until today: geometrical forms imposed on and intervening in the architectural and urban environment. In 1969, in the aesthetic context of happenings, he threw flour on the asphalt, forming a large X on a busy intersection in New York City, where the passing cars and people scattered it around and slowly made it disappear. The work was Gianakos's response to the contemporary abstract expressionist images. His abstraction was driven by chance producing compositions of the white flour on the gray/white asphalt. The work in the Poros exhibition Parameter No. 9, 1982 (page 76), the earliest work in the exhibition, echoes those early powder works and the chance images, in addition to referring to Gianakos's establishment of "parameters" for his site-specific works of the late 1970s, conceptually originated from those previous projects.

In the 1960s and 1970s, powder works had an ephemeral character. The resulting permanent element grew from the beginning of a visual vocabulary of diagonals (X) and the deriving of geometrical forms - triangles, squares, rectangles - and from the use of the preexisting urban and architectural context as a found object, in a logic rooted in Marcel Duchamp's readymades. The X of the powder works with its diagonal identity was the seed concept for the large site-specific ramp sculptures in the late 1970s. Gianakos was attracted by the diagonal's double identity as a sculptural/architectural element that also had cultural references and symbolism. His interest in the dynamic aspect of the diagonal, touching on the ground and extending infinitely, as well as its conceptual connotations is a subject on which he keeps working until today, as can be seen in his large site-specific ramp works (Gridlock, Thessaloniki Cultural Capital of Europe, 1997, Alaca Imaret) as well as the 2008 ramp sculpture in the Citronne Gallery exhibition. As Thomas McEvilley discusses in his essay in the catalog of the retrospective exhibition of Gianakos's work in the State Museum of Contemporary Art of Thessaloniki, the ramp provokes a multi-reading through a cultural web of associations. McEvilley points to conceptual affinities and establishes references between Gianakos's ramp works and ramps/ladders in the Sumerian stele of King Ur-Namnt (c. 2100 B.C.), the Egyptian temple of Hatshepsut (c. 1480), the Minoan palace at Phaestos on Crete, the temple of Apollo at Delphi, etc.

Gianakos has always been working simultaneously on large, site-specific projects and on smaller two-dimensional paintings in his studio, keeping active the enriching dialogue between large scale/small scale; outside/inside; monumental sculptural forms/two-dimensional paintings. The geometrical vocabulary of his site-specific works corresponds to his studio work from 1982, in the series of opaque acrylic paintings on parchment and mylar (e.g., Sacred Way, 1999; Site III, 1995; and Metropolis XVII, 2005). Their nonobjective geometric character and strong graphic quality of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal black forms have an affinity to two prominent American art movements of the 1960s: minimalism and abstract expressionism. His first geometric sculptures, the resin castings of 1967 to 1972, were minimalist. Yet their characteristic rough and layered exteriors and references to the Egyptian pyramids stand opposite to the immaculate, shiny minimalist surfaces as well as to the concept of sculpture as a simple object shorn of all suggestions of meaning or of human receptiveness, as seen in Donald Judd's Untitled, 1965, with its seven polished, identical, quadrangular cubic masses of galvanized iron.

Gianakos's work originates from and reinterprets the axiomatic aesthetic values of early twentieth-century suprematism. The work Metropolis (page 72) calls to mind Malevich's black square on a white field, with the black square representing feelings and the white field representing the void beyond feelings. In the painting Sacred Way, 1999 (page 74), a work which according to Gianakos connects to the Alaca Imaret project in Thessaloniki (1997), a large blue cuts diagonally across the rectangular parchment paper. Using multiple layers of paint on the paper, Gianakos alters it to a hard, opaque, gray-textured surface. The work has cultural, mystical, and spiritual references while, at the same time, being "objectless." It follows the suprematist logic where the dynamic configurations of pure

forms of geometric planes (both the cross and the diagonal) suggest the supremacy of "pure feelings." Gianakos has a strong interest in presenting both the architectural and formalist aspects of space as well as its cultural and intellectual dimensions. He reused photographs and altered them through the superposition of geometrical shapes, producing a series of rereadings of archaeological sites like the Olympia Stadium, 2008 (page, 71).

Gianakos was always attracted by the timeless quality of ancient art and has had a longstanding interest in geometric forms and classical proportions. In the early 1990s, in parallel to his photographic alterations of archaeological sites, he reused photographic images of ancient art works. In Alpha Series, 1991 (page 68), the solarized image of the head of an archaic kouros was first printed on mylar at a monumental scale (220 x 145 cm). The work is characterized by a linear precision and a rude massiveness, expressing the original contours of the block. Gianakos superimposed a red square covering the nose and the mouth, hiding the famous archaic smile. The resulting collage emphasizes the blocklike form of the kouros. The partial reversal of tone of the solarized image, with its almost apparitional quality, is dramatically juxtaposed to the form of the solid red square. Nothing could have been more different from the monolithic monumentality of the kouros head than the Hellenistic statue of the Victory of Samothrace with its tempestuous movement of the body and the power of the outstretched wings. That famous statue has been the raw material of a whole series of Gianakos's works, each one exploring different aspects. In Niki of Samothrace with Blue and White Squares (page 69), he first draws two diagonal red lines to indicate the center of movement and then places two heavy square forms (a blue and a white) creating an alternative sense of movement and rotation. In Niki of Samothrace with Two Rectangles, 2000 (page, 70), he creates two shadow rectangular areas, one corresponding to the headless body and the other to the stretched wings, tracing the stone blocks out of which the statue was carved. The artist playfully reencloses the statue in a geometrical solid block and at the same time reveals the process of sculpting out, bringing to our attention the fundamental aspect of carving and visually echoing Michelangelo's saying that the work of art preexists in the marble block and the sculptor simply "liberates the figure from its marble prison."