

# MINUS SPACE

## **This Strange, Intoxicating "Almost Nothing"**

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*"There is no beautiful surface without a tremendous depth" -- Nietzsche*

In discussing the work of Cristos Gianakos one can only start from reconsidering a question: what is the current meaning of that form of contemporary art most people call 'minimalism'? In this case minimalism does not stop at a sketchy, formalized, rational version or at a belated celebration of 'littleness'; instead it goes on to a dispersion, which is, in fact, in tune with the character of our times and our culture. But this expansion of minimalism and its references means that it has become just another 'style'; its spirituality and its moral stance have become weaker, and the same is certainly true of its ability to criticize the real.

Even a cursory review of its beginnings, in the early 1960s, will show the elements of a crucial friction: against the feverish apotheosis of the media and the metropolitan delirium of pop art and neo Dadaism, the minimalists soberly put forward the fundamental unity of the idea of the city, the economy of expressive mediums and an aversion towards chaos and 'urban congestions' in favor of a pure, almost impersonal cleanliness of forms. It was yet another debate about the "vacuum", a divesting of gesture, which drew its enigmatic character from the idealization of the form's "almost nothing". This debate recurs frequently in a complementary way to the frenzy of the "full", the horror vacui which goes across centuries of civilization, from the Baroque to post-modernism. In opting for the intoxication of the "almost nothing" minimalism attempted to overcome some of the most worrying concerns of modernity, approaching the essence of Piranesi's warning: "Excessive severity is an excess of insult".

Today we can safely claim that this insistence on unity, the aversion to violence and the reduction of differences to certain geometrical standards, has a mystical aspect to it. After all, we should not forget that minimalism associated itself from early on with some mystical theories -sometimes with Buddhism and Zen. In short we are dealing with a kind of art which employs this severity ("the excess of insult") to achieve an almost religious perception of the artistic outcome. Thus the "idea" assumes a leading role and becomes a kind of invisible ("unbuilt") reality; a space of truth which remains to be discovered. In other words, it is a poetic as well as precise quest for the what is hidden and for the constant elements of the form: this is what I think the meaning of minimalism is today. Harold Rosenberg wrote about minimalism: "instead of drawing principles from what we see, it teaches the eye how to see those principles".

The origins of this quest are of course in the monochromatic surfaces and the geometrical symbols of Malevich, the elemental constructions of Rodchenko, the calm composure of the de Stijl but also in the abstract compositions of Josef Albers who, contrary to Malevich, attempted to make visible an ambiguity of perception. But this backward hunting for origins and references may lead us even further back, for instance to the Apollonian element or the "ever geometrizing" of ancient Greeks. So it might be more appropriate to say that the aphorism "less is more" is a more universal, more timeless category and hence more suitable than modernism. The Greek poet Elytis takes this thought even further: "making use of the minimalism and extracting the maximum out of it is the hardest and most 'Greek' of secrets".

Like all artists who have adopted this attitude, Cristos Gianakos works on the material dimension of sculpture (the choice of a single basic material each time seems to dominate) and attempts to redefine our understanding of space and the environment. Although his work has a clear internal logic, one cannot see it today isolated from his perception of space and landscape. In fact we can say that this is the cohesive element and the outstanding trait of his oeuvre. Gianakos' interest is constantly focused on exploring his relationship with a specific space, which he turns into a site. This is why his works are site-specific, or in any case they want to appropriate the immaterial space around them, to redefine it, to pose some questions rather than just put some 'order' into its meanings, as one might think of first sight. The decisive element in all these cases is a double connective link: from the work to the environment and from the environment to the work, from the sculpture to the walls and from the walls to the sculpture, from the form to the city and from the city to the form. Gianakos' works are always based on a strict geometrical structure, which is incorporated into a specific space and renders it recognizable. This is why every detail of his constructions is a continuation and a pre-requisite of the form.

In his case the significance of the plain, pure geometry seems to be a double representation of the absolute (something which a lot of avant-garde artists strove for in the second decade of our century) and the semantic

restitution of on elementary, primordial gesture: that is, place something somewhere, separate it, support it, unite some of its elements, and so on. In this way the construction becomes tectonic and goes beyond a definition of space to an expansion of its original natural condition. It affords to space all the presence due to it rather than some egocentric feeling towards it.

A generalization is necessary at this point: According to Nietzsche, Wagner condenses in the most characteristic way the "dexterity" of expression, i.e. the apotheosis of the "expressive" at all costs. What is expressed after that is the egotism of the subject, not the form - the one medium, which is truly common to all people. Thus the poise and the serenity of the Homeric spirit gradually gives way to "dexterity" and the "beautiful passion". However, this poise, just like the expressionless mask of ancient Greek tragedy, was nothing but a struggle against "the terrifying view of the world: and the most vulnerable capacity of suffering" (Nietzsche).

Can we look at a work of art in this spirit today? I mean, a public artwork, which evades the subject's expressive or psychological roving to open up a much more wide and meaningful horizon? I believe this is a great challenge for contemporary art today. In discussing the "crisis of the subject", many younger theorists have talked of a shift of the artistic experience's focus from the subject to the work; to its objectivity. Indeed, there are more than a few cases where we get a great work of art when the agony, the neurosis of subjectivity remains silent. "A delicate spirit", writes E.M. Cioran, "detests tragedy and apotheosis".

I believe that Gianakos' artistic research moves and finds its meaning within these lines. Otherwise we would have to do with a mere formalism or, to put it in another way, the expression of a locked paranoia, which limits the artist's role to that of a technician of vision. It is only under such conditions that these formalistic-looking works acquire a non-formalistic attribute which allows them to take off. A good example of this is Gridlock: a work based on the tension between perfect abstraction and representation, between the object and the monument. The cross-shaped form is not only a tribute to Malevich—a quest for the original meaning of symbols—but it inscribes the urban plan of the city on the inferior of the diagonally placed Ottoman monument. At this point the link is double and two-way: from the city to the monument and from the monument to the city. This fact invests the work with a mysterious as well as paradoxical air.

The form appears here as a solidified idea which just "points" to the event, leaving it intact and liberating its symbolic and metaphysical capacity. The work is no longer a variety of images but a kind of awe, because this shape and this heavy material (iron) were inside us before we even saw them. Gianakos sets the conditions for a wider, more meditative field for our eyes, which have had their fill of excessive sentimentality. It is a field of refreshing objectivity, with no room for the aggressiveness and the hedonism of the form.