

MINUS SPACE

Cris Gianakos

By Stephen Westfall
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Cris Gianakos' reputation has until recently rested primarily within his activities as a sculptor. But he is also a painter who is gaining wider recognition for his atmospheric renderings of dark, solid geometric silhouettes on mylar. I bring up Gianakos' painting because it's important to the role the planar image plays in his sculpture, particularly the new works which are the focus of this exhibition. Gianakos' ramps are sculpture with a planar front, or "face." Even at their most attenuated or rail-like, the face of each ramp is a rectangle. The narrower planes slice through the environment with some of the partitioning power of Barnett Newman's zips. Other ramps present a broader field. The paneling of each of these planar images also reads as an interval, a unit of the grid. In the wider ramps the paneling can be arranged into quadrants in which the seams describe a cruciform. One proposed sculpture, *Orion*, goes so far as to display a blocky, squared cross underneath two slender angled bars in a kind of three-dimensional enactment of Malevich's Suprematist imagery.

Of all Gianakos' activities, the rampworks are probably the most richly engaged with the historic images of high Modernist culture. When Malevich died in 1935, a painted black square was mounted on a car in his funeral procession and installed at his gravesite. This may have been one of the more famous and earliest public demonstrations involving the display of democratically mute, non-objective geometric images but it was an action that was to be repeated in different situations and circumstances by such artists as Daniel Buren, Niele Toroni, Robert Smithson, Gene Davis, and, on a more intimate level, Robert Rymen. Gianakos' ramps likewise make an issue of their display. The suspended planes of the ramps are like billboards or the geometric punctuations in a landscape affected by gigantic industrial projects such as satellite dishes and water towers. Just as with the imagery of the artists mentioned above, the ramps ape the pragmatism and brutal efficiencies of industrial production while insisting on a non-utilitarian, esthetic content. There is something surreal in constructions of this scale having been abandoned by utilitarian purpose and it comes as little surprise that one of Gianakos' favorite artists is de Chirico. The empty colonnades of de Chirico's deserted plazas find a contemporary echo in the silent monumentality of Gianakos' outdoor work.

The exposed construction of the ramps recalls Tetlin's *Monument To The Third International* and other Constructivist models for sound stages, viewing stands, and kiosks. The ramps are, in fact, platforms. Viewed from the sides and back, their entire support structures are revealed and take on a theatricality of their own. Besides signifying and literalizing the action of support, the struts or studs are arranged in sets and sequences. If the supported planar image can be read as a whole, a gestalt, it's the exposed support system that temporalizes the work. As you move around the ramps you are made aware of the angular shadow patterns of light passing through the beams. One thinks of the flickering staccato of light in early film, the Cubist inspired sequences of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and the powerfully sculptural intervals of light and shadow carved out of the sky by the flying buttresses of Gothic cathedrals.

As with much late-minimalist and post-minimalist work, photographic documentation is not only crucial as a record of Gianakos' "Installations" but it also alters and informs their contextualization. Panoramic views reveal the unity of gesture within a piece and its singularity and isolation. Cropped close-ups intensify our apprehension of the forceful repetitions within his structures and the natural grains of his materials. Photography often uncovers deeper realities than what one experiences in the real time of a given situation. It was a photograph of a recent work by Gianakos, *Equinox*, that triggered my own associations with painting. *Equinox* is something of a departure for Gianakos. The piece is made more complex by the addition of plates of glass that lean against each set of beams in the support structure underneath the ramp. In one photograph light shines and splashes on the back of a plane of glass, starkly outlining the X-shaped silhouette of the crossing beams. The resulting image bears a striking resemblance to Gianakos' own paintings on frosted mylar in which light seems to envelop the dark, isolated geometric shapes. Gianakos has arrived at many of his images through the slow contemplation of his outdoor sculpture during twilight, so it makes a kind of circuitous sense that the film-noirish photograph of *Equinox* would refer back to his paintings.

The blurred outlines of his two dimensional forms suggest some of the dynamism of another one of Gianakos' heroes, Franz Kline. Kline was a master at setting massive, architectonic linear networks in a landscape space. The angular gestures of Gianakos' ramps and the diagonals and verticals of their support structures recall

Kline's rough-hewn calligraphy, as do his vigorous drawings and sketches for the sculpture. Moreover, there is a psychological affinity that Gianakos' work expresses with those abstract expressionists employing a drastically essential geometric imagery, Kline and Newman in particular. It is a quality that is also present in the sculpture of Richard Serra and Carl Andre. Easily mistaken for machismo, it is really a vigorous work-value, a labor intensiveness to the image.

The question that will be asked, inevitably, is to what does this labor lead? In every case it leads us to reconsider spaces we have in one way or another taken for granted. Andre's invisible columns of air, Serra's blockading planes of steel, Newman's continuous "present," and Kline's knots of black and pockets of white, all partition and isolate space in a manner which provides for a fresh apprehension of "inside" and "outside," "here" and "there." Gianakos turns these concepts into actions with his ramps. They expose a face and offer a marginal shelter, a concealment. They land at our feet and point to the sky. They are extensions of the Minimalist vernacular, to be sure, reinvigorated by a transformative metaphysic that seeks to retain history even as it orients us in real time and real space.