

Dia:



Chryssa & New York
March 2—July 23, 2023

Dia Chelsea
537 West 22nd Street
New York, New York

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When the Greek-born artist Chryssa moved to New York in the late 1950s, she was immediately struck by the commercial landscape of her newly adopted home. In particular, she was profoundly moved by her first encounter with Times Square. This famous illuminated intersection (and later, transient urban space) would go on to serve as a key source of inspiration for her pathbreaking embrace of industrial processes and found commercial materials, most recognizably neon. Chryssa was at the forefront of adopting new technologies and ways of thinking about the intersection of art and everyday life in the United States following World War II. *Chryssa & New York* presents works that exemplify the artist's practice during her formative years in the city.

Key among an influential group of artists introducing industrial methods and electric light into the visual arts (including Stephen Antonakos, Dan Flavin, and François Morellet), Chryssa began working with neon in the early 1960s. She incorporated neon elements and repurposed urban signage into works such as *Times Square Sky* (1962) and *Americanoom* (1963), and this combination of materials would soon define her work. She often gleaned discarded letters from sign "graveyards" or worked in partnership with professional sign makers and neon fabricators to create her sculptures.

Chryssa's interest in unconventional materials culminated in the large-scale and encompassing work *The Gates to Times Square* (1964–66), which measures ten feet deep, wide, and tall. Structured on the form of a bisected capital *A* and composed of a complex set of layers, *The Gates* is an homage to the density and energy of Times Square. A small set of red letters from scrapped signs, sliced into fragments and enclosed in plexiglass boxes on each side of the work, serve as building blocks. Chryssa refabricated these forms in metal and neon, repeating and stacking them throughout the structure, to create a dense array of letterforms that paradoxically do not convey meaning. Rolls of cut-out paper fragments—the same shapes used by the artist in her process—are encased in plexiglass at the apex of the sculpture. The artist further investigated these forms in a series of *Studies for The Gates*, which she made during and after completing the titular work. In each study, she positioned a neon sculpture in a gray-tinted plexiglass box that evokes the atmospheric effect of urban illumination after sunset. She also displayed the electrical mechanisms that power the work. The formal elements of her sculptures are paramount, and Chryssa believed they would endure beyond the limited life span of their technology. "Fortunately, there is the sun and the moon, day and night," she said. "Without electricity my sculpture will still survive."¹

While the first gallery displays Chryssa's later work in neon, the second half of the exhibition examines her early practice, beginning with the Cycladic Books, which she made in three different materials: plaster, terracotta, and marble. The reductive sur-

faces of these Books are activated by what the artist termed “static light,” that is, the interplay of depth and shadow caused by shifting natural light.² Chryssa serendipitously created the first of her Books while casting forms in an open cardboard box. The raised ridges created by the folds and creases nod to the austere forms of the preclassical Greek figures referenced in the series' title.

Much of Chryssa's work with natural light was created while she was in dialogue with a loosely connected group of artists living at Coenties Slip in Lower Manhattan. Through her relationship with Agnes Martin, Chryssa was on the fringes of this contingent, who lived and worked in the neighborhood near the South Street Seaport in the late 1950s and early 1960s.³ The cohort included Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Lenore Tawney, and Jack Youngerman, whose varied practices, deeply influenced by nature and the artists' proximity to the light and reflections of the East River, set the stage for new strategies of abstraction.

Chryssa's interest in capturing light is evident in a series of relief sculptures known as the Projections, which draw on her fascination with the signs and symbols of mass communication. Depicting arrows, as used in street signage, and bold individual letters, these works feature three-dimensional protrusions—or pegs—that catch and activate changing light. The resulting shadows complicate and obscure the clarity of the otherwise recognizable forms. Chryssa's focus on obfuscation within works that take systems of legibility and communication as their point of departure connects these early efforts to nascent Pop and Conceptual movements.

She interrogated other forms of communication in her Newspapers series. For the largest of these works on canvas, Chryssa created grids of letters by repeatedly stamping the surface with printing plates salvaged from newspapers including the *New York Times*, then based in Times Square. The quasi-mechanical method she used to reproduce stock indexes, weather reports, advertisements, and classified ads predates the repetitive use of everyday images that would come to define Pop art. By obscuring the legibility of text and letters across media, Chryssa sought to question the limitations of language and draw attention to the poetic potential of form and light. In a lecture delivered at New York University in 1968, she stated: “I have many doubts about words that have been established and used in the vocabulary of art. I am desperate because, although they include so many possibilities of interpretation they finally establish a limited understanding.”⁴

– Megan Holly Witko

notes

1. Chryssa, "A Lecture by Chryssa Given on January 10, 1968, at New York University," *Chryssa & New York* (New York: Dia Art Foundation; Houston: The Menil Collection, 2023), p. 31.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
3. Megan Holly Witko, "Chronology," *Chryssa & New York*, p. 165.
4. Chryssa, "A Lecture by Chryssa," p. 27.

further reading

- Chryssa: Cycladic Books 1957–1962*. Athens: Nicholas P. Goulandris Foundation, Museum of Cycladic Art, 1997.
- Chryssa & New York*. New York: Dia Art Foundation; Houston: The Menil Collection, 2023.
- Hunter, Sam. *Chryssa*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1974.
- Restany, Pierre. *Chryssa*. Translated by John Shepley. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977.
- Schultz, Douglas. *Chryssa: Cityscapes*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1990.
- Waldman, Diane. *Chryssa: Selected Works 1955–1967*. New York: Pace Gallery, 1968.

about the artist

Chryssa was born in Athens in 1933. She studied art at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, and the California School of Fine Arts (now San Francisco Art Institute) before settling in New York in 1958. Following her first solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in January 1961, Chryssa was the subject of a one-person show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in November of that same year. Her use of neon was at the forefront of the light art movement. Chryssa's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1963); Documenta, Kassel, West Germany (1968); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1972); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (now Buffalo AKG Art Museum), New York (1982); and Tate Modern, London (2015). She died in Athens in 2013.

checklist

1. Five Variations on the Ampersand, 1966

Neon and plexiglass, 5 units
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of D. and J. de Menil

2. Times Square Sky, 1962

Aluminum, steel, and neon
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, 1964

3. Americanoom, 1963

Aluminum, steel, stainless steel, and neon
Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Aron B. Katz

4. First Preparatory Work for a Neon Box, 1962

Neon and plexiglass
Robert Rogal | RoGallery, New York

5. Study for the Gates #14 (Clytemnestra) from "Iphigenia in Aulis" by Euripedes, 1967

Gas-filled glass tubes (fabricated 2023), glass, plywood, metal, wire, and rheostat
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; gift from the Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (gift of the Stratford Investment Company), 2018

6. Study for the Gates #15 ("a flock of morning birds" from "Iphigenia in Aulis" by Euripedes), 1967

Gas-filled glass tubes (fabricated 2023), glass, plywood, metal, wire, and sequencer
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972

7. The Gates of Times Square, 1965

Neon and plexiglass
Collection Irene Panagopoulos

8. The Gates to Times Square, 1964–66

Cast aluminum, stainless steel, neon, plexiglass, and paper
Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List, 1972

9. Study for the Gates #2, 1966

Neon, acrylic, steel, and paint on wood
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Howard and Jean Lipman

10. Automat, 1971

Neon and plaster
Abrams Family Collection

11. Cents Sign Traveling from Broadway to Africa via Guadeloupe, 1968

Neon and plexiglass
Brooklyn Museum; gift of Sidney Singer

12–31:

Cycladic Book, 1957

Plaster
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST); donated by the artist, 2002

32. Untitled, 1955–58

Plaster
Collection Jacquelyn Schwimmer

33. Letter "T", 1959

Cast aluminum
Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York; gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1961

34. Arrow: Homage to Times Square, 1958

Paint on cast and sheet aluminum
The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection, Albany, New York

35–37:

Cycladic Book, 1957–62/1997

Marble
D.Daskalopoulos Collection

38. Cycladic Book No. 5, 1955

Terracotta, plaster, and oil paint
The Menil Collection, Houston

39. Cycladic Book No. 2, 1955

Terracotta and plaster
The Menil Collection, Houston

40. Cycladic Book No. 8, 1955

Terracotta
The Menil Collection, Houston

41. Large Untitled Letters, n.d.

Plaster, paint, wood, and plexiglass
Collection Adelaide de Menil

42. Small White Letters, ca. 1960

Plaster, wood, acrylic, and glass
The Menil Collection, Houston; gift of Adelaide de Menil Carpenter

43. Untitled Silver Box, ca. 1975

Plaster, paint, wood, and glass
University of California, Berkeley Art
Museum and Pacific Film Archive; gift
of Susan Meller

44. Bach, 1956

Plaster, wood, and glass
Greenwich Fine Arts

45. Study on Light, 1962

Aluminum and paint
The Menil Collection, Houston

46. Cycladic Movement, n.d.

Neon, plexiglass, and wood
Collection Irene Panagopoulos

47. Projection Letter F, 1958–60

Cast aluminum
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift
of Joseph H. Konigsberg

48. Projection #2, 1960

Metal, paint, and wood
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.;
The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981

49. Three Arrows, 1960

Cast aluminum
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
purchase, with funds from the Friends of the
Whitney Museum of American Art

50. N's, 1969

Painted plaster on wood
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; gift
of Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Wallace Oestreicher

51. Plaster Letter Plaque, 1962

Plaster and plexiglass
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; gift
of Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Wallace Oestreicher

**52. Bronze Tablet: Homage to the Seagram
Building**, 1957

Cast bronze
Greenwich Fine Arts

53. Bronze Tablet No. 2, 1956

Cast bronze
Collection Susan F. Meller

54. The Arrow, 1959

Cast bronze
Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of Mr. and Mrs.
N. Richard Miller, 1972

55. Newspaper II, 1961

Oil on canvas
Grey Art Gallery, New York University; gift
of Philip Johnson

56. Classified, 1960

Neon, oil on canvas, and wood
Collection Irene Panagopoulos

57. Les Toyota sales, n.d.

Neon, oil on canvas, and wood
Collection Irene Panagopoulos

58. Car Tires, 1959–62

Oil on paper
Abrams Family Collection

59. Newspaper No. 3, 1961

Oil and graphite on canvas
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

60. Newspaper, ca. 1962

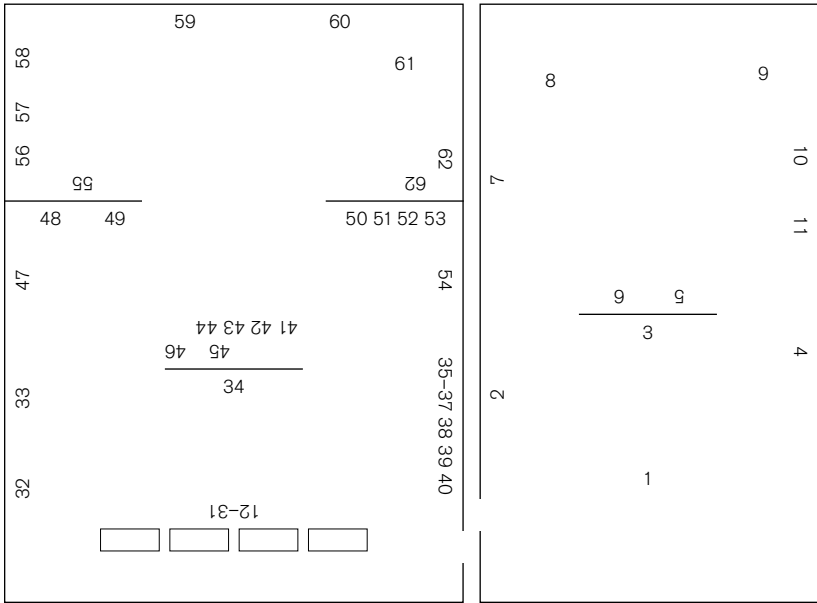
Transfer print and graphite on canvas
The Menil Collection, Houston

**61. Newspaper Sculpture (One Page of
Classified Ads)**, 1963

Cast aluminum
Collection Milly and Arne Glimcher

62. Newspaper Portfolio, 1962

Silkscreen prints on coated cotton vellum,
22 units
Collection Irene Panagopoulos



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Cover: Chryssa, *The Gates to Times Square*, 1964–66. Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York. © Estate of Chryssa, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (EMST). Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York