

CHRYSSA & NEW YORK





From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, while living in New York City, the Greek-born artist Chryssa (1933–2013) made sculptural works composed of lights, letters, and symbols. *Chryssa & New York* traces the artist's innovative use of industrial fabrication methods and materials, including neon, welded metal, and cast aluminum. Taking inspiration from commercial advertisements and illuminated signage, Chryssa captured the energy of New York's urban landscape and the rapid shifts in the United States' social, cultural, and artistic climates that followed World War II.

Chryssa was interested in the way language dominated the city, and in the late 1950s she began to salvage letters from sign "graveyards." Working with professional metal fabricators, she assembled three-dimensional pieces of text in new ways, often entangling the letters in abstract compositions. *Americanoom*, 1963, and *Times Square Sky*, 1962, are examples of how Chryssa combined industrial refuse with a pioneering use of neon light as fine art. In New York City, Times Square was the epicenter of neon. For Chryssa, an émigré artist, Times Square's dazzling cacophony of electric light, people, and traffic represented a bright new world of artistic possibilities in her adopted city, and she was dedicated to making art that embodied its spirit and spectacle. Her fascination with the famous intersection culminated with *The Gates to Times Square*, 1964–66.

This massive sculpture takes the form of a capital A. Some scholars associate her use of the letter with the first letter of the alphabet or of America. The shape also recalls ancient Greek stone portals. Chryssa's modern version of a passageway, with a narrow alleyway bifurcating the sculpture, comprises a vast assortment of materials and techniques arranged in four freestanding vertical layers. There is a row of cast aluminum with a pattern of bolts and a grid of metal scaffolding reminiscent of the supporting structures of Times Square signs. Rolled-up pieces of paper, originally templates for metal-cutting processes, are encased in a transparent box mounted at the top of the work.



Left Chryssa in her studio at 863 Broadway, New York, from Pierre Restany, *Chryssa* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977)

Chryssa, *The Gates to Times Square*, 1964–66. Cast aluminum, welded stainless steel, neon glass tubing, acrylic sheet, and paper, 120 × 119 × 120 in. (304.8 × 302.3 × 304.8 cm). Collection of Buffalo AKG Art Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List, 1972. © The Estate of Chryssa, National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation

Chryssa made multiple neon studies related to *The Gates*. For these works, she shaped brightly colored neon tubes into letter-like symbols and placed them in acrylic sheet boxes. She wanted the glow of the neon pulsing through the darkened plastic to mimic the behavior of urban light at night. She derived the shapes for her neon “letters” from old industrial signs that she found and reworked into new forms and characters. She incorporated this invented language of symbols and characters into the final iteration of *The Gates*.

Chryssa understood light as an expressive medium akin to a stroke of paint. She experimented with black light and manipulated the sequencing of the flashing neon in her sculptures. In *Study for the Gates #15*, 1967, a vertical stack of eight tubes lights up progressively at six-second intervals to express, according to the artist, “the upward movement of a flight of birds.” In addition to using artificial illumination, Chryssa also made a series of works that harness the effects of sunlight. She called these “experiments with static light” or Projections. They feature protruding white or metallic pegs organized in configurations of signs, letters, or abstract shapes. Some of the tablet-like reliefs and boxes consist of three-dimensional letters that are intentionally hard to decipher and only become clear when viewers stand in unexpected vantage spots.

During this time, Chryssa was part of a vibrant artistic community around the Coenties Slip, a neighborhood at the lower tip of Manhattan. Along with artists Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, Chryssa explored new approaches to abstraction and its relationship to nature and light, as demonstrated by the Cycladic Books. In this series of tablets, she intended the flat blank “pages” to be inscribed with passing natural light. Chryssa first made these works by pouring plaster into cardboard boxes. The boxes’ horizontal and vertical seams created ridges and flat planes in the set material. She later replicated these forms in marble and terracotta. The unadorned works reminded her of Cycladic figures she

encountered in her native Greece. She was deeply influenced by these early Bronze Age works, and she occasionally placed them alongside her modern reinterpretations in exhibitions. In this presentation, examples of Cycladic sculpture from the Menil's permanent collection are shown adjacent to Chryssa's works to draw out this connection.

The exhibition concludes with the Newspapers, a series of works she made with discarded newspaper linotype printing plates, beginning in 1958. After applying ink and paint to the found plates, Chryssa stamped them in precise grids across paper or canvas. The resulting compositions are filled with weather reports, crossword puzzles, and advertisements for automobile tires. Examples of the Newspapers were shown at the artist's first solo exhibitions in 1961, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City. The series' commercial process and subject matter predate what became known in the early 1960s as Pop Art. At the time, Chryssa was considered a leading artist of her generation.

With a poetic ability to draw out abstract forms from everyday life in the city, Chryssa's prescient work from this New York period stands at the forefront of mid-20th century American art.

Born in Athens, Greece, Chryssa studied art in Paris and briefly at the California School of Fine Art, San Francisco, before settling in New York City in the late 1950s. *Chryssa & New York* is the first major survey of the artist's work in the United States in more than fifty years.

Michelle White, Senior Curator

Adapted from the essay "Chryssa's New York Work" in the exhibition catalogue *Chryssa & New York*, edited by Megan Holly Witko, Sophia Larigakis, and Michelle White (available at the Menil Bookstore).



Chryssa looking through disused signage,
New York, 1956. Photo: Henry Groskinsky

Cover Chryssa, *Americanoom*, 1963. Aluminum,
welded steel, stainless steel, and neon, 90 × 108 in.
(228.6 × 274.3 cm). Collection of the Lowe Art Museum,
University of Miami (Coral Gables, FL). Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Aron B. Katz, 82.0226. © The Estate of Chryssa,
National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens.
Photo: Oriol Tarridas © Lowe Art Museum

Chryssa & New York is co-organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and Dia Art Foundation. The exhibition is co-curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, the Menil Collection, and Megan Holly Witko, External Curator, Dia Art Foundation.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

CURATOR TALK

Michelle White on Chryssa

Sunday, November 12, 3–3:30 p.m.

Main Building

CURATOR TALK

Danielle Smotherman Bennett: Shining Light on the Past, Chryssa, and Ancient Art

Sunday, January 21, 3–3:30 p.m.

Main Building

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

DACAMERA Stop, Look, and Listen!

Saturday, February 3, 3–4 p.m.

Main Building

Copresented with DACAMERA

PANEL DISCUSSION

Sign of the Times: A Conversation on Neon and Chryssa

Participants include matt dilling, Lite Brite Neon Studio; Meryl Pataky, She Bends; and Joy Bloser, the Menil Collection

Thursday, February 8, 6–7 p.m.

Main Building

LECTURE

Prudence Peiffer on *The Slip*

Thursday, February 15, 7 p.m.

Main Building

FILM SCREENING

Geometry of Light

Friday, March 1, 7 p.m.

Main Building Lawn

Copresented with Aurora Picture Show

Menil members enjoy additional events.
To join and learn more, please visit menil.org/support.

EXHIBITION DATES

September 29, 2023–March 10, 2024