

Chryssa, Artist Who Saw Neon's Potential as a Medium, Dies at 79



Chryssa
Contemporary Greek Art Institute

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Chryssa, a Greek-born American sculptor who in the 1960s was one of the first people to transform neon lighting from an advertising vehicle into a fine art medium, died on Dec. 23. She was 79.

Her death, which was reported in the Greek press, was not widely publicized outside the country. Perhaps fittingly for an artist whose work centered on enigma, the place of her death could not be confirmed; the Greek news media reported that she was buried in Athens.

Chryssa, who used only her first name professionally, had lived variously in New York and Athens over the years.

A builder of large-scale assemblages in a wide range of materials — bronze, aluminum, plaster, wood, canvas, paint, found objects and, in the case of neon, light itself — Chryssa, whose work prefigured Minimalism and Pop Art, was considered a significant presence on the American art scene in the '60s and '70s.

Exhibited widely in the United States in those years, her art is in the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Reviewing an exhibition of Chryssa's neon sculptures at the Pace Gallery in Manhattan in 1968, The New York Times called one work, "Study for the Gates No. 15," "a pure, lyrical form," adding, "It transcends 'neon-ness' to become a sculpture of light devoid of pop or Broadway associations."

New York, where Chryssa first lived in the mid-1950s, furnished the literal spark for her work.

She had long been fascinated with written communication and her early work, haunting and deliberately

obscure, focused on writing — in particular on fragmentary bits of text — as a medium of art.



"Large Bird Shape" Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Gift of Frank L. Gentile, 1982.

Some of her first constructions were made of newspapers (in the New York of the period there were a great many to choose from), employing them as a sculptural medium. Others incorporated pieces of old advertising signs. Still others assumed the form of outsize letters and numbers, training the viewer's eye on features of typographical anatomy, writ large.

Her first major piece, "Cycladic Books," made not long after her arrival in New York, was a series of plaster panels covered with barely discernible markings, like clay tablets inscribed with an unreadable script from the ancient past.

But in a midcentury urban epiphany, Chryssa realized that neon tubing — which had been the exclusive province of sign makers — could provide the marriage of text, color and illumination she craved.

"I saw Times Square with its light and letters," she said afterward, "and I realized it was as beautiful and difficult to do as Japanese calligraphy."

She began incorporating neon into her work in the early '60s and over time surmounted the fiendish technical difficulties the medium entailed.

One of her first major neon constructions, "Times Square Sky," was completed in 1962. An assemblage of large cursive letters cast in metal, it was topped with the word "air," written — airily — in pale blue neon.

In 1966, Chryssa completed "The Gates to Times Square," a brightly lighted sculpture considered to be among her masterworks. Built of cast stainless steel, plexiglass and neon tubing, it takes the form of an immense cube, 10 feet on each side, through which visitors can walk.

Inside, after passing through an entrance in the form of a large capital A, visitors are met with a counterpoint of symbols, text and colors.



“The Gates to Times Square” Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List, 1972.

The work is now in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo.

Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichali was born in Athens on Dec. 31, 1933. She grew up amid the Nazi occupation of Greece, a time when members of the Greek underground communicated with one another by writing furtive messages on the walls of buildings.

A 1966 article about Chryssa in *The New York Herald Tribune* suggested that this was the wellspring of her obsession with fragmentary text.

Chryssa began her professional life as a social worker, assisting earthquake victims on the Greek island of Zakynthos. Growing disillusioned with what she saw as government intransigence, she left for Paris, where she studied art at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and came under the influence of Surrealists like the poet André Breton and the artist Max Ernst.

Moving to the United States, she attended the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (now the San Francisco Art Institute) before settling in New York.

Her first solo exhibition in New York, featuring alphabetical and numerical constructions, was held at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1961. Reviewing the exhibition in *The Times*, Stuart Preston commended her “clear, classical, daylight sense of order.”

That year, Chryssa’s paintings, reliefs and sculptures were featured in a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim. In later years her work was seen at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and elsewhere.

Chryssa, who became an American citizen, moved back to Athens in the early 1990s but later returned to New York. Information on survivors was not available.

Some critics expressed discomfort that Chryssa’s artwork, with its layers of atomized text, could not easily be

interpreted. But that, she replied, was precisely the point.

As she told The Herald Tribune in 1966, "I have always felt that when things are spelled out they mean less, and when fragmented they mean more."