

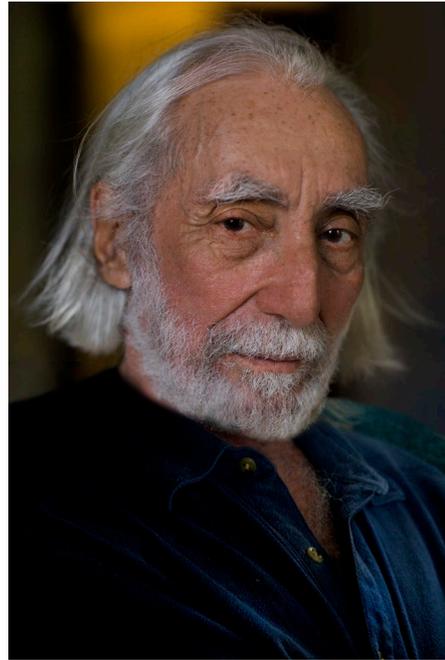
**Richard Nonas (1936–2021)**

*“Sculpture—the object I make—is the way I define my own existent reality, the reality I try to communicate to you. It is how I grasp the contradictions of my world, find its submerged edges and discover the forces that hold it together at the same moment that they rip it apart. Sculpture is how I attempt to open the world for us both to see.”*

—Richard Nonas, 1992<sup>i</sup>

We are devastated to announce the death of **Richard Nonas (1936–2021)**. A leading artist of the Post-Minimalist generation, Nonas’ six decades-long career developed a body of sculpture that engaged with the perception of space, place, and time.

Richard Nonas was born in 1936 in New York. He studied literature and social anthropology at the University of Michigan, Lafayette College, Columbia University, and the University of North Carolina. After 10 years as an anthropologist, teaching at the University of North Carolina and Queens College, and conducting fieldwork in northern Ontario, Canada’s Yukon Territory, the Sonoran Desert, northern Mexico, and southern Arizona, Nonas returned to New York in the late 1960s. There he began investigating how a space can be changed by the art that is put in it, and how that space then, in turn, affects people as they pass through it. The artist’s early experience as an anthropologist, as well as his ongoing interest in literature, long informed his practice, illuminating what he described as “the tyranny of place”—the complex interactions between the physical, the spiritual, and the emotional content of a site.



Richard Nonas, 2010; photo by Jan Meissner

*“What I realized in Mexico was that there are physical places, spaces deeply imbued with human meaning, that can have a great deal of power over us, places that affect us in an extremely worldly way. Those places are still models for the kind of art that I want to make. But I cannot do that directly. What I can do, though, is to make objects that function as tools to force those powerful places into existence.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Nonas’ engagement with the perception of place became central to his decades-long sculptural practice. In the 1970s, Nonas and a group of intrepid artists began creating and showing works in alternative spaces, including the Clocktower and 112 Greene Street. Nonas was at the heart of this pivotal rethinking of how art could be shown and experienced.

His often crudely constructed works are made in the simplest and most direct ways available to him. Using materials that operate in the interstices between nature and culture, Nonas often reiterates his sculptural arrangements using different materials, such as wood, steel, and stone. The immense difference between how those materials feel—what they convey, and the way the viewer reacts to them and interacts with them—is key to his work. For Nonas, a line arranged in a space using wood elements is slower, more absorbent, more porous, whereas the same line in steel is hard, fast, and cold. “What I’m after,” he has said, “is one-thing on the verge of becoming another-thing. A kind of double vision, a queer propinquity, an unexpected juxtaposition—or even just a strange combining of everything that’s actually and already there.”



Installation view of *Richard Nonas: all; at once* at Fergus McCaffrey, New York, June 27 – August 9, 2019; photo by Richard Nonas

The artist has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and abroad, making small and very large works both indoors and out, and has written extensively on the culturally dependent intellectual and emotional meanings of sculpture, space and place. His works appear in numerous collections such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts; Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Panza Collection, Varese, Italy; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and MAMCO Geneve, Switzerland.

In recent years, Nonas has exhibited worldwide with Fergus McCaffrey, New York, Tokyo, St. Barth; Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; OV Project, Brussels; Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris; P420 Galleria d'Arte, Bologna, Italy; Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan; Galerie Pietro Spartà, Chagny, Bourgogne, France; and Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf, Germany. Further, he has been the subject of several museum and institutional exhibitions, most recently including: FiveMyles, Brooklyn (2020–21); Musée Gassendi, Digne-les-Bains, France (2019); MAMCO Geneve, Switzerland (2019); 'T' Space, Rhinebeck, New York (2018); the Art Institute of Chicago (2017); MoMA PS1, New York (2016); MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts (2016); and the Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis (2012), among others.

Richard is survived by his partner, Jan Meissner, and her son, Stefan Zeniuk, and we share our deepest sympathies and sincerest condolences to them.

**Commenting upon Richard Nonas' life and career:**

“Richard combined rough and pure. He taught me about the north. He always looked surprised and confident at the same time. He made the worst coffee. He created the first real art world I was part of.”

—Laurie Anderson

“Richard had a peculiar intellectual perspective gained from his early studies in anthropology, which became an essential perspective for me—as a curator, a show organizer, for these site-

specific installations in urban ruins and unused real estate. He was my most trusted advisor for taking all of these spaces—he certainly advised me to take PS1. He articulated artistic vision in a way that I could understand.

“Richard and I saw *The Godfather* together—and when Marlon Brando and Al Pacino turned to Robert Duvall and said, ‘You can’t be in the room, you’re not a wartime consigliere,’ Richard turned to me and said, ‘I am your wartime consigliere.’ I always called Richard my consigliere. We joked about that for the last 50 years.”

—Alanna Heiss, founding director of MoMA PS1 & director of Clocktower Productions

“*To restore silence is the role of objects.*’ —Samuel Beckett

“Yesterday, I was shocked and saddened to hear of the passing of Richard Nonas. I knew him over 30 years. He was the real thing—very rare in today’s art world. Looking at a book he gave me, *Richard Nonas Sculpture 1970-1988*, he signed it with: ‘*Space to space, place to place. Richard*’ That short poem/dedication had a deep resonance for me. My first book *Anchoring* (1989) was in unity with his values of the importance of place as a core aim in our creative works. He was a key critic in our design for the Kiasma Museum in Helsinki. I remember fondly Richard looking at our model, explaining the importance of the right angle between the wall and the floor.”

—Steven Holl, Steven Holl Architects

*Text will be updated with additional quotes and statements.*

**Please note: in accordance with the artist’s wishes, no funeral will take place. A memorial service will be announced at a later date.**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Nonas, *Richard Nonas. Between Old Times: Sculptures for a Changing Castle* (Warsaw: Center for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Bacon, Alex. “Richard Nonas with Alex Bacon.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2, 2013. <https://brooklynrail.org/2013/03/art/richard-nonas-with-alex-bacon>.