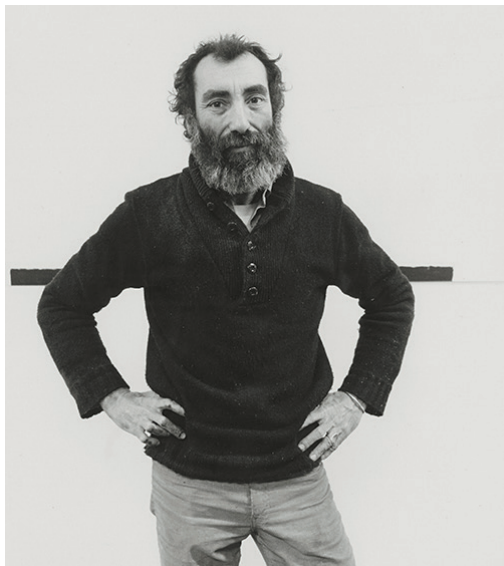


May 2021

Richard Nonas 1936–2021

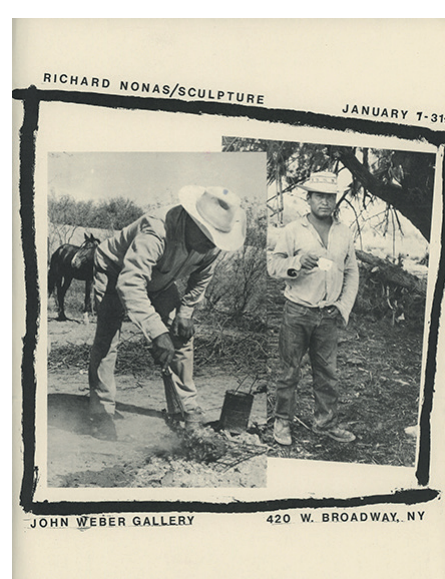


Originally, Richard Nonas had studied literature, with a focus on Faulkner, and then ethnology. In the 1960s he conducted ethnographic fieldwork and lived for this purpose among the Cree Indians in Northern Ontario and Yukon. This was followed by years of research among the Papago tribe in Mexico. Instead of writing scientific papers and books about this experience he later discovered in sculpture the appropriate means to give form to his observations and emotions—sculptures made of stone, wood, steel, but also of crayon and paper, photographs and words:

“And making sculpture? | I start with memories of how places feel. | The ache of that desert, those woods, that room opening out. | Places I’ve been, places I’ve seen and felt. | And felt always with some component of unease, apprehension, disquiet, fear even, discomfort certainly. | Memories of places that seem always slightly confusing, slightly ambiguous. | Places whose meaning slips away, but not too far away. | Places that tantalize, tantalize by their approach to—and lack of—clarity. | By their existence on—and insistence on—an ambiguous edge.”



Nonas belonged to that loose-knit group of artists who presented exhibitions and performances at 112 Greene Street in New York in 1970; he also participated in the alternative art spaces at the Clocktower and at P.S. 1. Like his peers, Robert Grosvenor, Barry Le Va, Gordon Matta-Clark, Jackie Winsor and others, Nonas was looking, without a manifesto or program, for specific forms of art practice that would move away from Minimalism. The handling of materials played a central role here. Making sculptures implied reflection on the shifting around of matter, feeling the resistance offered by the materials, their weight and their mass. Wooden beams and pieces of steel found in the street were laid out on the floor in simple configurations, rather than being erected vertically. This performative sculptural practice drew on the example of the productions of the Grand Union dance company and of the dancers Trisha Brown, Caroline Gooden and Steve Paxton, to which Nonas contributed.



A further constitutive factor, namely the context—urban or rural—was introduced when Nonas started to make outdoor sculptures; the first of these was realized at the Brooklyn Bridge event in 1971. When visiting a site, Nonas tried to ascertain the personal and social significance with which it was imbued, to understand the relationships between nature and a specific culture and to mark the place with his sculpture. He was content with elementary formulations, a limited number of sculptural types, which he evolved; these varied in impact according to the site at which they were located. In this respect, Nonas’ practice can be compared with that of Fred Sandback; the latter also used his thoroughly pared-down sculptures to intervene in a space, resulting in a corresponding differentiation of their forms. For Nonas, the studio was of fundamental importance—not so much as a site of production, but much more as a place of observation and thinking about sculpture. His atelier was an emotive place made out of all kinds of things—found objects, everyday items and sculptures; there were kayaks mounted on a wall that Nonas had built himself and used on the Hudson River until recently.



Nonas way of working meant always being on the road; he travelled not only to exhibitions in galleries and museums, but also to faraway places in order to make works. The material and immaterial tracks that he left behind here and there were manifold, especially across Europe—in an old tower in Umbrian Spoleto, in Swedish quarries, with Polish artists who had grouped around “Solidarnosc” (Solidarity), in the Swiss canton Uri, where he published the book Hier, jetzt oder nirgendwo (Here, Now or Nowhere) with the photographer Doris Quarella, and in the hamlet of Vière in the French Mediterranean Alps, where he recently erected a sculpture that can only be appreciated in the round on foot.



Richard Nonas died just as a monograph about his oeuvre was in the making, on which I had started to work as its editor last autumn. Fabien Faure at the Université d’Aix-Marseille and Richard Shiff at the University of Texas at Austin are co-authors. The book will be published in 2022. The portrait of the artist was taken by Doris Quarella in New York in 1978, while the photos of the Annemarie stem from the Texas Gallery in Houston and the Exhibitionerien Galerie in Zurich, 1978 and 1985 respectively. The view of his studio was taken on the occasion of my first visit to Nonas in April 1991.

Dieter Schwarz