

Stephen Antonakos

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July 7 – July 25, 2007

Poros

Steven Antonakos, the internationally known artist of the Greek diaspora, lives and works in New York City. Among the first to use neon as an art material, he started incorporating it in his assemblages in the early 1960s, and by the mid-1960s neon was the main material in his work. Antonakos's work was included in the exhibition "New Forms, New Media" (Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, 1960), where his assemblages were exhibited together with works of Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine - contributing to the construction of a new sculptural concept. Antonakos's non-objective art has a strongly minimalist character. He has developed a vocabulary based on the dynamic tension between complete and incomplete geometric forms (rectangles, squares, circles, and lines) as well as vibrant colors. Antonakos's sculptures and paintings have a strong architectural presence. His work can be seen as originating from and reinterpreting the axiomatic aesthetic values of early twentieth-century modernism as established in the work of the Russian Malevich (suprematism) and the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy (Bauhaus). In that context, he has used material from advertisements and popular culture in a purely esoteric aesthetic way - an approach radically different from that of the contemporary American pop artists, who used elements from popular culture in the context of a dialogue between high and low art.

Antonakos's light sculptures, either simple neon tubes or combined with wood or metal panels or even canvases, evoke feelings of rhythm, motion, and spirituality. In addition to his 1990s neon sculptures, the Poros exhibition includes drawings, collages, and paintings from the 1960s and 1970s – essential points in the intermedium dialogue of his work as well as in the conceptual development of his ideas. In addition, the Poros exhibition includes

for the first time models of his large public works, sculptures in their own right.

The development of the architectural component of Antonakos's work can be seen in his early drawings from the 1960s and 1970s. One of his earliest drawings related to neon installations is *Large Neon from Wall to Floor*, January 13, 1968. The drawing is a study for his large-scale indoor room installations and complicated neon works (*Red Neon from Wall to Wall*, 1968), where numerous orange-red neon tubes spanned the entire length of a room, creating an overwhelming total space. Ideas for the neon sculptures are drawn in color and set within pencil lines depicting their architectural space. A few years later, in the early 1970s, Antonakos started reducing the number of neon tubes and returned to simpler and more minimal forms. The tendency, still present in works like *The Goal*, 2004, can be seen in *Red X Inside Corner Neon*, 1972, and its study, *Corner Neon*, March 31, 1970. At the beginning of the 1970s, Antonakos's drawings gradually shift towards being autonomous. The drawings are often studies for neon sculptures and installations, but at the same time independent formalist investigations. In that context, they prevision and are the starting point for his later paintings with colored pencils, which are not studies but independent works, as seen in the drawings of the Poros exhibition *On the Wall Circle Neon*, April 6, 1972 - December 20, 1972, and *On the Wall Neon*, May 24, 1973. The drawings present geometric forms in open white space, omitting references to architectural settings. The artist works and reworks the same drawing over a long period, sometimes a few months.

A turning point in the development of Antonakos's graphic work is the collages that he constructed in Berlin. In 1980, as a recipient of a fellowship from the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst, Antonakos spent six months in Berlin. During that time, he started working on collages, using silkscreenprinted colored papers. His geometrically oriented Berlin collages are independent graphic works. As seen in *Untitled Berlin Collage JA 31*, 1980, they depict his preoccupation with compositional interaction. In the top part of the collage, in the soft edges of the tiered green paper and its compositional interaction with the hard-edged cut lines of the other pieces of paper, there is a reference to his early assemblages with soft fabrics as contrasted to the geometrically oriented works that follow in the 1980s.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Antonakos started working on his drawings in colored pencil on vellum. He fills the paper using a colored pencil, with emerging geometrical forms. The works are characterized by a strong sense of texture created by the crossed pencil lines on vellum. The artist alternates the length of his lines and the pressure of his pen on the paper, creating subtle shadows and plays with the reflection of the light and the variations of tonality in a monochrome environment. *Untitled drawing (O#1)*, 1983, is a key work in this transition, with elements from both his earlier collages and his later vellum works like *Untitled (F#4)*, 1987. In addition to the interplay of the geometrical forms of squares and circles, the three soft-shaped elongated forms that cut the composition in half diagonally recall both his early fabric assemblage as well as the torn papers of the Berlin collages. They playfully interact with the glued, slim, sharply edged rectangular form of the yellow paper, placed parallel to them and cutting through the circular form on the left, so the work is also a collage. The dynamic configurations of geometric planes create sensations of motion and depth and resemble architectural volumes seen from an aerial viewpoint.

The subsequent single-page drawings form parts of sequences. *Untitled drawing (SH # 11)*, 1998, for example, is one of thirteen units. In thirteen square drawings of equal size (18 by 18 cm), two different-sized orange circles are placed on the same blue, textured background. The circles become independent elements in an abstract configuration/narration of movement, they increase and decrease in size, occasionally the orange circles disappear and become white, empty spaces – and in one of the drawings, a third black circle is added. Antonakos's work in series presents an almost hypnotic rhythmic flow. It brings to mind automatic drawing - the hand of the artist moving automatically, unrestricted, the work revealing his subconscious. Referring to *Journey*, a series of 72 drawings, Antonakos said: "For me, to draw is like entering somewhere new. ... I start with a basic idea. ... A drawing starts slowly. ... I never know where it will lead. ... My hand has a rhythm as it moves over the vellum. ... When I look at one of my drawings, at first glance I see the whole, but as I look closer my eyes move along and I can see how my hand moved over the surface. ... My pencil moves with my thoughts. ... Drawing is being alive. It's in front of you changing and moving."