

The Sheet of Paper as Space – Some Remarks on Stephen Antonakos' Drawings

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Sewlage, November
1961



Sewlage, 1959



Wall to Floor Neon,
1969

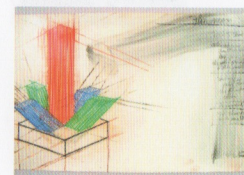
Anyone who wants to seriously familiarize himself with the drawing oeuvre of Stephen Antonakos must traverse a vast territory upon which I can cast only a few spotlights in the space of this essay. Drawing was already his primary activity as a child, and in the 1950s at the latest his interest in the medium of drawing manifested itself in more mature work when, in what he called "Sewlages," Antonakos began using a sewing machine to attach various pieces of fabric to canvases. These early works not only foreshadow Antonakos' idea of the physical penetration of the surface of several materials he uses, which we can later observe in purest form in his "Cuts" and some neon panels; equally markedly, the sewing machine's seam replaces the line of drawing which structures the surface, though here it seems organic in comparison with the later, usually purely geometric shapes. Even in the three-dimensional works from this time, we can make out genuinely "draftsman-like" elements. For frequently the pedestals formed of thin rods on which Antonakos' assemblages rest function as lines that cut through the three-dimensional space, as if effecting a clear spatial localization of the objects sitting on them.

It is well known that, at the beginning of the 1960s, Antonakos intuitively found the medium that would decisively shape his future work. Fascinated by neon surrounding him each day and evening in the urban space of New York, he began to explore the artistic possibilities of this medium. The first excited steps on the way to mastering the "unknown" are reflected in numerous drawings for possible neon works, in which Antonakos repeatedly noted his questions about the technical realization of his ideas. After initially making some object-like neon sculptures without direct relationship to the exhibition room, he rapidly began giving central importance to taking the space surrounding the works into consideration – the illuminating elements now intervene directly from the floor, the ceiling, or the corners of the exhibition room into the architecture and can no longer be perceived separately from it.

As in *Wall to Floor Neon* from 1969, seven lengths of red neon tubes in the center of a long narrow room stretch lengthwise coming to a perpendicular blue line of neon, skipping over it in an arched "bridge," continuing on and separating into three sets of seven – one continued red, the green set at a 30-degree angle and a second red set at a 45-degree angle, then hitting the opposite wall. Erasures, smudging and repetition of line imbue what otherwise could be a technical "shop" drawing, with the mystery and emotional quality of the glowing light. It is fascinating to follow how, with the simplest means, Antonakos manages to articulate these spatial aspects of his neon installations in the medium

of drawing and to simulate the effect of emanating light on our perception. In *Outside Corner Neon* (1972), for example, there are four circular forms arranged one above the other that are mounted, centered, on an outside corner. The inner ring of each of the circles is colored red, while the adjoining outer ring “glows” in blue. The diffuse violet radiance that hints at a circular form and is reflected on the walls is brought into the picture with a sprayed fixative, which sometimes pooled on the paper and loosened the pigments from the colored pencil strokes. With this technique Antonakos blurs and brings the pigments into form in equal measure. Nothing about this drawing seems superfluous, and Antonakos succeeds in giving extraordinarily clear visual expression to a phenomenon that calls on us to reflect fundamentally on visibility. For *Outside Corner Neon* and *Inside Corner Neon* (1970) both already give signs in the medium of drawing that the perceptual situation of Antonakos’ neon works differs markedly from a traditional view of art. Here the viewer no longer simply faces a work of art, but himself becomes part of the work, along with the exhibition architecture. The crucial aspect of this perception structure lies less in the unavoidable participation of the viewer than in the realization that the visible is fundamentally not seen from the outside, but from the inside. This corresponds to the artist’s declared hope for his work “to reach the inner life of the individual viewer, to allow for the possibility of a more conscious sense of self in the experience of art.”¹ To avoid frequently expressed misunderstandings, let me briefly note that the use of neon in Antonakos’ work clearly has nothing to do with aesthetically ennobling everyday objects or with trivializing art, as we encounter in dialectic manner in American Pop Art.

For several years, drawing thus stood in the service of the preparation and preliminary visualization of neon works Antonakos wanted to build, although, as we have seen, he was already interested early on in giving them their own aesthetic power. They were not fleeting sketches, but painstakingly elaborated works on paper, carried out with sparse means. In the middle of the 1970s, the drawing consequently emancipated itself from its direct relationship to the neon works. The lines and forms on the paper were now set in a relationship analogous to that of the neon tubes in the room: real objects without any reference to anything outside the sheet, which was understood as autonomous space. In serially organized sequences of drawings, Antonakos turned to variations of the circle and square, among other things, or played with fragmentations of these basic geometric forms. Comparing the approach to seriality in Antonakos’ oeuvre with that of Minimal Art or Conceptual Art makes it obvious that he can only marginally be brought into connection with these tendencies in the art of the 1960s. For unlike Donald Judd, who industrially produced “one thing after another” and often combined a large number of identical elements in a work, and unlike Sol LeWitt, for example, whose serial approach essentially resulted from the consistent following of certain premises, Antonakos’ drawings always have something intuitive and subjective about them. Even if the artist probably did not intend them this way, a series of 11 sheets from the year 2000 can be read as an affectionate, humorous parody of conceptual working – ten violet and one green oval cavort on the first sheet, while on the second, nine violet and two green ovals are seen, etc. until on the eleventh sheet all the oval forms are colored green.



Floor Plan, 1969

The lines and forms developing through the four sheets of *Four Squares* (1974) can ultimately be grasped as similar subjective placings that seem to follow a previously determined concept; but this concept proves to be so elastic that it could have been realized in any number of ways. So even where the rigor of the form and its self-referentiality suggest inexorable consistency, this proves to be senseless, unless one means by this the coherence of decisions based on artistic subjectivity. And so it is not an analytical, but almost a musical experience to view the rhythmically progressing fragments of circles on the 26 individual sheets that make up the work *Incomplete Circle* (1975). Perhaps musical associations are fundamentally suited to Antonakos' work, when one considers, for example, the horizontally extended drawings in which he laid down the temporal pulsing of some neon works and that indeed resemble scores for light. In the neon installations that extend across several rooms, we can often observe repetitions of motifs or variations of forms that seem familiar from classical music, so that we can definitely identify rhythm and motion as essential principles of composition that we confront again and again in the drawings as well as in the neon installations. We can note that the design ideas underlying both groups of works seem more intuitively developed than conceptually construed. Their realization is always based on a specific use of the means and a well-considered relationship between the internal elements of a work and its form as a whole.



Untitled Cuts (JA 61),
Berlin, 1980

The early 1980s was important for Antonakos' drawings in two ways. First, in 1980, he moved with his family for a six-month period to Berlin in the framework of a DAAD stipend, where he began to work on large colored-paper collages for the first time and simultaneously further developed the "Cuts" he had already created in the 1970s. Second, in the late 1970s he discovered a synthetic French vellum as a surface medium, which soon became his major drawing support and opened up previously unsuspected possibilities of surface differentiation for his drawings. His works on this vellum as well as the "Cuts" and collages emphatically point from different directions to a striving to transcend the two-dimensionality of the drawing. In the "Cuts," the traditional flat surface of the drawing is indeed broken through, in that the cuts through the paper literally activate the real space, which appears under the surface and is integrated into the works. In 1981, Antonakos created with *Cuts* a remarkable artist's book that unites the idea of the sheet as space with the principle of the variability of perception, in consideration of the mental and physical activity of the "reader." The variously complex cuts made into the large-format white and single-color sheets give rise to forms, some of which extend through several adjacent pages and therefore become visible only as one browses through the spiral-bound book. This page-turning also allows one to see how the color of certain pages glows on others nearby. The dynamic of this process is repeatedly slowed and broken by pages with hardly perceptible cuts and changes of form. The unique experience in dealing with this object is by its nature difficult to describe because it is inevitably always different and new.

The works on vellum without cuts that Antonakos has created in the last 25 years are heterogeneous in concept and form, although three central groups of work can perhaps be differentiated. First, there are

rather graphic sheets, whose formal vocabulary is distantly reminiscent of that of Constructivism, though the colored compositions with strong contrasts and brilliant colors prove to be extremely autonomous. Then there are drawings I would term painterly, which usually contrast four-colored, non-linearly contoured color fields with the transparent background of the vellum. In these works, whose surfaces seem as if blown through by changeable winds, the various relationships and directions of strokes suggest motion, changeability, and thereby, ultimately, spatiality. Third, there are works in which Antonakos combines those organically spreading color fields with geometric forms, sometimes juxtaposing both with the translucency of the vellum. The latest drawings, on smaller sheets of a new, stiffer vellum, manifest a distinct, increased emphasis on the physical manipulation of the stroke-filled sheets, through such processes as cutting, folding, crumpling, and overlapping. Many of these works gain a fascinating complexity as the light and shadow which are cast on the vellum constantly transform and transcend the three-dimensional surfaces. In these drawings it becomes more obvious than ever that Antonakos tends to work with, not only on, the surface materials.



Spring Series, 2006

*"There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical."*²

Stephen Antonakos' oeuvre, which has consistently continued to develop for more than 50 years, is as simple as it is complex. It is simple in the sense that, at least since the beginning of the 1960s, it deals with seemingly simple phenomena in a formally clearly structured way. Line, surface, form, color, light, and space are set in relation to each other, and their relationship to human perception is investigated in a wide range of media. As I hope has become clear, this is true for the supposedly two-dimensional works on paper, as well as for the neon installations, to which descriptions of the oeuvre as a whole have generally and mistakenly been limited. Its complexity, in contrast, grows in the work from the circumstance that the chosen forms and materials, despite their everyday familiarity, still proclaim the mystical side of our existence. When we speak in this context of the mystical, the term means nothing more than that the phenomena elude unambiguous linguistic designation and yet their existence cannot be doubted. Almost without exception, Antonakos' works can be perceived on two connected levels. Along with the pleasure of grasping the arrangement of the formal elements of a work and the joy of their coherence, they also always address our sense of the inexplicable, of the pure subjectivity of feeling. A rhetoric of certainty is thus unsuited to the oeuvre, for a relationship of congruence between the visible and the expressible can rarely be created.

I merely hope that my sentences have indicated what one can meaningfully speak about in relation to the work of Stephen Antonakos; the spiritual center of this many-layered oeuvre, which in my opinion touches upon a universal harmony, like the work of Mondrian, cannot be written about – as Wittgenstein put it: It *shows* itself.

¹ Stephen Antonakos in a letter to the author, April 2007.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London 1922, p. 186.