Antonakos: The Poetics of Neon

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On a night walk through midtown Manhattan in 1960, Antonakos looked up at the neon signs that momentarily, through some hitch in perception, did not speak their message. Instead, he saw, in its chromatic glory, the medium, the glowing residue after its divorce from verbal meaning. Such rare moments are sanctified in modernism, particularly with the birth of abstraction, when Kandinsky saw something at twilight that yielded not its identity but an unstable congress of shapes and colors. Antonakos has resolutely rejected attaching any literary meaning to his neons, a posture he maintained until the enveloping chapels insisted, against the post-modernist grain, on making available a spiritual coefficient.

Antonakos' early work slummed in the rubble of everyday living – rags, shoes, burlap, hats, tin cans, umbrellas, broken chairs – a dump heap trousseau for one of Beckett's tramps. The oddest acquisitions of this street scavenging were discarded pillows. Antonakos' pillow-works are almost savage, a violence enhanced by their benign original function. They are hammered with nails, stuffed with wooden letters, slit and gutted as found objects tumble out of the herniated fabric. "The use of yielding and pliable materials introduced a new range of sensations, above all associated with the human body," says Irving Sandler.

The "Pillows," given what appears to be Antonakos' peaceable nature, are shocking. Site of security and repose, preface to dreams, the empty pillow calls up a comfortable sentiment that is brutally violated. Antonakos indicated to Sandler that his "Pillows" metaphorically enacted the sleeper's darker thoughts. If so, the artist did not carry this harsh vision with him as he moved on to those light-struck fields of color for which he is best known. *One Pillow* in 1963 short-circuited the expressionist voltage to a quasi-surrealist confection. A striped pillow proffers two registers: on top, three red light bulbs in a row, pull-chains hanging; below, a wooden shelf from which three red rings dangle. Given the associations of the bulbs and the matching rings below, the sexual connotations are blunt. This work will always be quoted by Antonakos commentators; it marks his first exhibited use of appropriated light.

One Pillow, 1963

Transitional works always have a retrospective fascination as they utter their blurred "eureka." For what is discovered is not yet fully understood, and this fusion of discovery and puzzlement gives them an

alluring alertness. *White Light* (1962) is a peculiar nest of chair parts, paint, fur, metal, and light. Rarely has collage been pushed into such a fever of contradictions, particularly neon swaddled with fur. Out of *White Light*'s little whirlpool of possibilities came a grand idea: that neon itself, naked, adorned with nothing but its own color and light, could collage entire environments. Light always asks, "Where am I?" Antonakos' neons, first rigorously abstract, would eventually become not just an illumination, but a kind of blessing, as light always is, particularly as darkness gathers.

White Light, 1962

Light has often been seen as a potency within which process and stillness, fact and metaphor, desire and yearning circulate. For years, while he clarified his formal vocabulary, Antonakos suppressed this voice in the interests of minimal probity as he extended to neon the aesthetic of the era. Since 1965, Antonakos has conducted an intense, orderly, and prolific examination of neon, oscillating between line and volume, sculpture and drawing, accumulation and reduction, gallery and outdoor site. Each of these issued an invitation, and Antonakos accepted them all. *The Blue Box* (1965) illuminated a transparent volume; *Corner Neon for the Rymans* (1970) began an intense period of drawing with line, letting the neon do the work. Line and volume marched along towards a mastery of means that put Antonakos in full command of his medium.

The early neons, whatever their configuration, are declarative. Light does not comment on itself, any more than water does. Between 1971 and 1975, two changes occurred. One opened up a new arena for the artist, of which, more later. The second revealed a dimension to his thinking that helped compose a more complex portrait of the artist than hitherto revealed.

In 1971, Antonakos started an enterprise that brought into play aspects of what we think of as the modernist mind – restless, ironic, suspicious of convention, witty, occasionally scathing. Far from home, in Fresno, California, he wrote to about eighty of his colleagues back in New York, asking them to send him a package with something inside. (Antonakos frequently used the mail with a delightful insouciance. At one point, I received from him a series of postcards of New York, each with a part of the scene carefully excised. In one postcard, the two towers of the World Trade Center were prophetically removed. Held up, the light streamed through. Indeed, these altered postcards were light-works of a sort.) Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Christo, were among those who replied, an implicit endorsement of Antonakos' standing among his colleagues. The makeup of each package said something about the sender, at the very least, about their postal habits. The motley group was exhibited together on a single wall. Now, stimulated by the mystery of concealment posing for a hoped-for surprise, Antonakos sent various series of packages out to different groups of friends, requesting that they be opened on a certain date. Other series he sent out were meant never to be opened.

Package Project,
1971 – 1972

Curiosity hovered around the unopened packages, detaining sender and recipient in a limbo of promise

deferred. Both series secured the recipients' attention and could be seen as a slightly wicked play on the relation between artist and audience.

The invocation of time led to a third stage of Antonakos' conceptual work. Three handsome rectangular boxes were made, "one wrapped in lead, the second plated in bronze, and the third plated in silver," as reported by Irving Sandler, whose book on Antonakos established the indispensable base-line for subsequent studies. The contents of the boxes are known only to Antonakos. This playing with time, suspending it, giving it a destination, preserving the deferred present in a sarcophagus, dates witnessed by the U.S. mail service, all involving concealment, provocation and disclosure, bespeak a supple intelligence somewhat masked by the neons, which always insist on the "now." Part of the value of this conceptual aside in Antonakos' work is that he sent you back to the neons for evidence of subtlety and elision, which, as we shall see, is a component of several neon constellations.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan – the unlikely host of public art's most daring excursions – Antonakos in 1973 produced an extraordinary work, called simply *The Room*, which had major implications for his future. Situated outdoors near a quite successful example of modernist architecture, the 16 x 12 x 16-foot structure was a cube with two doorways. The top was open. Inside, its corners were occluded by four square pillars, turning the inner space into a Greek cross. The cube, white by day, flushed crimson by night, was illuminated by four different neon configurations on its outside corners. One of the most notoriously difficult sites to work with is across the edge of a V. This area Antonakos has made his own. The previous year, he did what you might call a proposition for using inside and outside corners, called *Red X Inside Corner Neon* and *Red X Outside Corner Neon*. The former was easy: Tatlin had already been there, had mounted, in 1915, a piece in the vortex of space that energizes every corner. Antonakos' "X" in the inside corner was supported by the friendly adjoining walls. On the unfriendly outside corner he projected four neon tubes forming two interrupted lines pointing outward like cat's whiskers. Corners became a favored site for Antonakos' neons. Even more important, outside and inside, the public domain and the intimate enclosure, became the subject of a continuing meditation.

The Room, 1973

The inside of *The Room* was suffused with a warm salmon-colored light emitted by doubled neon rectangles stretched from corner pillar to corner pillar. The visitor, like the walls, reflected light, became a bearer of light in the tinted air through which he/she moved. Thus began Antonakos' quiet definition of the viewer as more than an observer, as a figure in the area of colored light. Through uncompromising abstract means, a palpable, nameless experience was made available. Thus began an intermittent series of rooms with neon, culminating in the "Chapels" from around 1991 to the present.

Antonakos has been fortunate that his public commissions have enabled him to test, and prove, neon

propositions outside the gallery, indeed, sometimes on the outside of the gallery. In 1974, the then director of the Fort Worth Art Museum, Richard Koshalek – one of the rare directors capable of the grand gesture – invited the artist to transform the museum's face. The resulting *Ten Outdoor Neons* helped Antonakos to define further his vocabulary of line, arc, angle, incomplete circle and square on a greater architectural scale and to study the birth of neon in twilight to full-term darkness and its subsequent swoon into daylight.

Commissions allowed Antonakos to voyage forth, in several joyous excursions, into the clamorous matrix of the city – to public buildings in the United States and such countries as Greece, Japan, Germany, France, and Israel. This return of language-divested neon to public spaces is deeply ironic. How successfully he had accomplished this was certified by the positive public support that vanquished a small group's objections to his bilateral installations for the Tacoma Dome (1984), a veritable tour-de-force of flaming geometrics.

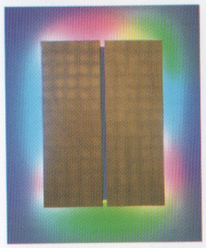
Green Neon Incomplete Circle, 1974

The neons for the 19th Sao Paulo Bienal (1987) sent families of mostly horizontal lines on either side on a collision course to the center, squeezing mostly vertical lines into an explosive tizzy. Yet, several works, including *Incomplete Neon Square* (Documenta 6, 1977) and *Neon for William Patterson College* (1995) were singular and reductive. This polarity is a consistent pulse in Antonakos' oeuvre: works of extension and excess interrupted by works confined to a single arc, a lone circle, an incomplete square. These signature forms, also seen in drawings and prints, are not Platonic geometries, but rather hallucinations of order, pliant signs of thinking, as language is. Each of these forms asks the eye to close the circle, complete the square, jump the gap between almost touching lines. This is the language of gestalt, and it is played – spoken – with a wit and discretion that engages the spectator's urge to talk back.

A radical change in Antonakos' art began around 1980, when he was in his mid-fifties. In his previous method – line, arc, incomplete square and circle – the reading was uncompromisingly abstract. True to Minimalist credo, the work insisted on being no more or no less than itself. This is what gave Antonakos' work its conviction and authority. The work is based on drawing, and like any line drawing it speaks of figure and ground within which lines and curves play with gestalts. If there is a vocabulary, it is one of "almost" – almost touching – of "not quite," of avoidance and encounter, of occasional rhymes (parallel lines, doubled arcs), which "prove" the perceptual propositions referred to above. But around the turn of the decade, works of this kind became scanty as they were replaced by hypnotic effusions with an entirely different attitude to light.

When they stand free, neon lines incise themselves on the atmosphere with a hard clarity. Backed with a surface, they exude a halo that softens their linear probity. Antonakos now invented a series

of remarkable works invoking the halo, his "Panels." A shield of wood – surfaced with paint or metal-leaf, a simple rectangle or disk, or one incised, or with edges, corners or inner "windows" cut – hangs out from the wall a few inches, the colored neon tubes behind its edges reflecting on the wall, blooming outward. The quality of this light, sharply edged at the panel's margin, fading as it oozes outwards, is difficult to fix. It is too easy to denote it "poetic," which immediately subverts its mystery. For in it several paradoxes are embodied – active process reduced to slow motion, then overcome by stillness, light as atmosphere and light as palpable substance, light as a secular glow aspiring to a spiritual emanation. And in front, the square, occluding darkness. These panels, in pools of ambient light inviting different moods, are cousins to Rothko's luminous rectangles. They are among the glories of post-war American art, and they signify a substantial change in Antonakos' thinking.



Saint Peter and Paul, 2003

Whereas earlier works were untitled or titled descriptively, the Panels are often dedicated to family, to Greek sites (*Ancient Sparta*), or to spiritual figures (*Saint Katerina*). A great change had taken place, as signalled unambiguously by the installation *Chapel of the Saints* in the Fortress of Saint George, on Rhodes. On the walls of the ancient stone barrel-vault several iron panels floated in light. At one end a white marble cross stood over twelve votive candles. Thus was announced the series of chapels that became the exhilarating climax to Antonakos' long journey.

There may be a late stage in an artist's work when precedents, models, influences drop away. The wary eye most artists keep on current activities shifts to inner convictions that need no reality check beyond their own certainty. Sometimes this is called a "style of old age." The aging artist knows what he is doing and does it. The chapels are such works, summations of a lifetime's engagement with light. Architecture and light engage each other in a reciprocal embrace. Antonakos' work always needed architectural space, just as painting needs a wall. Now, in a series of ingenious models, Antonakos began to design, in a single conceptual arc, light-works and their site.

Chapel of the Saints, 1993

In these intimate chapels and meditation rooms, as with Rothko's work, the spectator/participants cycle through the phases of their own psyche in a category vaguely called spiritual. Some of Antonakos' designs for chapels do, however, fix meditation on a powerful sign, the cross. These chapels, traditionally the sites of prayer, ask the question of how an art resolutely devoted to the effect of its means and nothing more, plays within an environment that is decidedly spiritual. How does the introduction of the cross, sign of martyrdom and transcendence, and the chapel, consecrated site of worship, affect its interpretation?

Chapels – small, intimate, white, shining – speak a concise vernacular in Greek towns and villages. In the *Small Blue Chapel* of 1997, a memory of vernacular architecture converges with the environmental

sophistication of installation art; contemporary aesthetics with emblems of faith, light with darkness. Inside rhymes with outside, blue hollow with white mass. It is an economical work of rare eloquence.

Most of the chapels exist in model form and they increase in architectural ingenuity. Through the door of the *Underground Chapel* (1992-96), deep oval steps each bear central rectangular double steps, formalizing the ceremony of descent. *The Chapel of the Golden Cross* (1997) puts together a complex of leaning and standing rectangular planes and transparent gridded windows, as do others, particularly the *Chapel of the Martyrs* (1998), the sole occupants of which are a blue cross and a single chair, offering a place for contemplation. The work Antonakos created for the 1997 Venice Biennale, the *Chapel of the Heavenly Ladder* introduces a complex set of Christian symbols. All these works abandon the word. They are composed of silence and light. Antonakos' rooms, at the end of a long creative life, may open, through contemporary means, access to a thousand-year-old tradition. If so, it is the crowning achievement of an art that began in emphatic nominalism and ended courting, against the grain, transcendence.

Model for "Underground Chapel", 1992 – 1996