

## The Ladder of Light

OR

Stephen Antonakos opens a door in the ceiling

By Savas Michael

### The Arrow: the Simple and the Mystery

1. *It is like a series of rooms: you enter a new room and experience it all, and on the other side of that room there is a door to a new room. Or may be the door is in the ceiling. Anyway the ideas and the possibilities still seem endless to me.*

With these words by Stephen Antonakos ends our journey through the series of rooms where is expanded the great retrospective of his Oeuvre in the Benaki Museum, organized with sensibility and wisdom by Katerina Koskina. But the journey actually does end? Or these words remind us that this retrospective is like psychoanalysis in Freud, both terminated and interminable?

The inscription of the words is situated at the end of an interminable journey, not in its beginning. Stephen Antonakos (SA) was always adamant on that: his visual work is not the execution of an a priori given theoretical-programmatic agenda. It is its own self; it says what it has to say by itself, exclusively by its own means, in an open and interminable dialogue with space, time and the subject of seeing.

From this vantage point, even before the conclusive words of the retrospective- which leaves open the beginning of another journey by revealing the unexpected possibility to open a door in the ceiling of the last room- another point has to be grasped. The retrospective itself as a whole and in the relations of that whole to its parts, revolves as a galaxy around three focal points: the three new works that Antonakos created on that occasion, the *Arrow* in the external wall in front of the entrance of the Museum, the *Leap* in the entrance of the retrospective itself and the *Chapel of Saint Dionysius* in the atrium.

The *Arrow*, which, as time passes, becomes shining and bright in the evening as it cuts perpendicularly the modern building of the Museum in Piraeus Street, give us already the emblematic sign that made Antonakos world wide well known with his luminous neon installations in public spaces, from New York and Los Angeles to Bari and Tokyo passing by the Athens Metro Station in Ampelokipi.

But the Arrow does not simply announce the specific show of a specific artist and in no way its "decorates" the building. It reveals the

"two keys", as Naomi Spector had called them, that open the door of the work of SA: the Simple and the Mystery.<sup>1</sup> The Simple is not the reduction to the elementary, to the poorest in determinations but the grasping of the essential, of the unity of diverse determinations and multiple relations, which, in its turn, it becomes the door opening to the Mystery, to the substance of the hoped, the examination of things invisible<sup>2</sup>. "There is promise in the unknown"<sup>3</sup>, including the expectation to make visible the invisible.

The Arrow of SA is simple. But as the artist himself has said "*there nothing more mysterious than the Simple*". The Arrow poses the riddle of itself. What is its direction? It moves from the highs, from heaven to the entrance of the space of Art? Or, on the contrary, it flights from the space of Art towards την υπερφαή και ακροάτην κορυφήν, ένθα τα απλά the super-bright and most extreme summit where everything is simple, according to Dionysius? Or, finally, is it this ambiguity, the unity of the opposite directions that defines the labyrinth of the Simple?

### The Leap: beyond the limits

2. In the entrance of the retrospective, we meet the *Leap*, the second work specially created for it, a neon tubes installation.

Open geometrical shapes that pose limits between forms and space, and, at the same time, eliminate these limits; luminous incomplete circles that call your imagination to complete them produce a field of tensions, which transforms the static geometry into a dynamic process, into an impulsive movement that supersedes the framework and tends into the άνευ ορίων άνευ όρων, the "without limits without conditions" according to a famous line by the great Greek surrealist poet Andreas Embiricos.

The *Leap* is, in a certain manner, both the door opening to the world of SA and, at the same time, the map of that world.

One of the most important achievements of this retrospective, as it is presented by Katerina Koskina in the halls of the Benaki Museum, is the rejection of the myth that sees SA's work as limited into an imaginative use of one single medium, neon, to produce sober abstract geometrical forms. The retrospective, on the contrary, makes explicit the inner coherence of SA's oeuvre in all its successive phases of a long march, with a diachronic and synchronic mobilization of the most diverse or contrasting media, in a permanent dialogue with a diversity of currents and languages of the avant-gardes of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the New York School, Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art).

The thread connecting all these wanderings, the constant aim of the visual artistic research is, to use the words of Antonakos himself, to bring into light "*those strong, still unrevealed possibilities which life hides for*

all of us"<sup>3</sup>. His tools for their discovery, according to the artist, are "our spirit, energy and the ravishing features of the natural world"<sup>6</sup>.

This *Poetics of the discovery of the possibilities of life* is inherent to all periods of SA's work: in the first *objets trouvés*; in the sewlages with the remnants of everyday life in the modern Metropolis; in the boxes- "receptacles of feelings", the dreamy constructions and the surrealist "pillows"; in the conceptual art of the "packages" combining the necessary destruction of the cover with the discovery of an unexpected content; in the "time boxes", and in the travel collages of memory; in the drawings on velum, and the works with the light of neon tubes; in the installations in public places, which, without any violence, change not solely the relation of the space with itself but also the relation between everyday life with Poetry and the Spiritual; in the mysterious as well as revealing Panels of Saints and beloved persons; in the Chapels of the present and of the world to come.

From this standpoint, it has to be understood the persistent clarification by SA that he visualizes "real things in real space", without illusions, without symbols, without any imposing of a predetermined theoretical schema or agenda. The primacy of physical reality is a permanent condition for his art. But even when he uses the language of minimalism, he is not attached exclusively to the *thinghood* of the material, in the way that Donald Judd does, but he discovers *within* this primary material immanence the *possibility* as the *ἐπέκεινα της ουσίας*, the "beyond the Essence" that Plato sees outside and beyond the material reality as the Good, το *Αγαθόν*.<sup>7</sup> For Antonakos, the material externality is the necessary condition of development of spiritual interiority.

His visual research moves towards the Place without place where *everything is simple* as Dionysius Aeropagites writes. Maxim the Confessor commenting this point writes: "Where everything is simple. Simple and absolute are those that are thought without symbols and seen as they are, not allegorically"<sup>8</sup>. Every illusory or representational artifact is rejected. Without predetermined theoretical schemata but with the *docta ignorantia*, the wise ignorance demanded by Nicholas Cusanus, SA seeks to make appear what is not apparent but nevertheless is immanent to the apparent- the infinite possibilities, the potential of life. Angelus Silesius calls it *Schein im Schein*, semblance within semblance<sup>9</sup>- something like the Light behind the Panels of Antonakos, where, in his last works, an Opening permits the Entry.

This movement towards light cannot but to be a *Leap beyond the limits*.

3. Stephen Antonakos's oeuvre is a visual meditation on *limits* and *possibilities*, the possibilities of overcoming limits, first of all.

function  
dynamic

In the classical concept of the Ancient Greeks, the limit of a body is its contour, the *πέρας*, what delimits it and determines the point beyond which stops to be its own self. For the Moderns, on the contrary, as Deleuze remarks, particularly for Spinoza, limit becomes dynamic; it ceases to be a *limit-contour* and becomes a *limit-intensity*: "a body reaches or exists up to the point reached by its own light, up to the extreme end that its action can achieve" Maite Larrauri writes.<sup>10</sup>

The limit-contour finds its clearest expression in ancient Greek sculpture. The limit-intensity, on the contrary, appears in Mondrian's paintings not in the contour of the squares but in the intensity of the colors. Antonakos makes manifest the relation, the opposition, but, above all, the *interpenetration* of both these opposites: of the limit-contour of the geometrical shapes with the limit-intensity of neon light and of colors both in his works with neon and in his drawings with colored pencils on velum. In the latter as well as in his "cuts" or the collages on paper of his Berlin period, the limit of the form and of the surrounding space tends to disappear, as it is already noted.<sup>11</sup> It emerges out of the space and disappears in it as a moment of the permanent metamorphosis of reality. It is no more a limit but a *threshold* between different levels of reality.

"We have to distinguish very carefully", Walter Benjamin writes in *Passagenwerk* [the Arcades Project], "between limit and threshold. The threshold is a zone, more precisely a zone of transition"<sup>12</sup>. The visual artistic research of SA permanently passes through zones of transition, from one level of reality to another, from threshold to threshold, from a room to another room, until the moment comes to open the unexpected door in the ceiling of the room.

4. Antonakos supersedes as well, by successive transitions, the limits separating the different currents of the Modern in art and in history.

He supersedes the limits between geometrical and lyrical abstraction, between the abstract plasticism of a Mondrian and the abstract expressionist gesture, as for ex. in his 1986 work *For Stephen Rosen*, a lyricism which reaches its climax in his breathtaking *Sky of Mani* of 1987.

In this way he goes beyond the demarcation limits that marked and distinguished two opposite directions of modernism from its inception: from one side, the *Black Square* and the suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevitch, and, from the other side, the *Large Glass* of Marcel Duchamp and his ready mades. While always closer to the spiritual world of Malevitch, Antonakos never has stopped, as Athina Schina has rightly remarked,<sup>13</sup> to "graft" reality on to his works, with *ready made* and *objets trouvés* that challenge the limits between art and reality. A testimony for that are his travel collages, living memoranda of the passages of the artist



from different places on the planet to realize his neon installations in public spaces.

These installations, with all their geometrical and lyrical abstraction, reveal again possibilities of overcoming limits. The space of contemporary everyday life overcomes its own limitations through the artist's intervention and joins in a poetical dialogue both with the visual artistic element and the subject of viewing. The subject is called to an exodus from his or her routine adaptation to an alienated existence.

In the installation *Procession 2000*, for example, in the Ampelokipi Metro Station in Athens (the title could be not a reference to ancient Greek rituals but rather to the procession of holy icons in celebrations of Saints in the Christian Orthodox Orient) the limit between the everyday passage of metro travelers and the ritual of a procession of icons by the faithful people, the limit between the Sacred and the Profane, although not abolished, it is shaken, allowing the invisible possibility of a metamorphosis to appear; perhaps, the possibility of a sanctification of everyday human life.

The collages with objects collected by Antonakos have not the nature of a historical document, and, not at all, a neo-Dadaist character. They are not picked up from reality to claim the aura of a work of art. Antonakos, like Benjamin's *Collector*, "*frees these things from the slavery of their usefulness*"<sup>14</sup>, from their enslavement in the requirements of a utilitarian market society.

In the case of Antonakos, the objects are not freed solely from their current functions of use but from their uselessness as well, from corruption, as in his constructions and sewlages, the re-composition of the ab-jects of the metropolis of Modern Times. Antonakos brings to light what Benjamin emphasized: the "*non destructible character of sublime life in all things. Against all those who foresee decadence*"<sup>15</sup>, following the ideology of a negative but also linear conception of historic progress à la Spengler.

It is this non destructible, still unseen possibility of life that allows anew relationship with things, where- under definite conditions anticipated by Poetry, and Art- not solely the object but the *abject* as well can become *subject*.

"*In practice I can relate myself to a thing humanly*" notes Karl Marx in his 1844 *Manuscripts* "*only if the thing relates itself humanly to the human being*"<sup>16</sup>.

An echo of that statement can be found in the communication by Antonakos to Katerina Koskina in November 2007, in relation to his *Last Collage (50 units)*, twigs and coins on paper, 2001-2002: "*The choosing of the elements of these collages was almost not choosing, but just*

*finding things that passed through my day. You could almost say that they chose me*"<sup>17</sup>.

The genesis of subjectivity passes through the humanization of its objects; a humanization that does not stop to utility and uselessness but goes over to a metamorphosis of everything without limits without conditions.

### *The Chapel of Saint Dionysius or John Damascene in Manhattan*

5. The third focal point, around which the Antonakos retrospective revolves, its spiritual center, is the chapel that the artist creates as homage to Saint Dionysius. It is situated outside the proper space of the exhibition and, at the same time, in the innermost space of the interior of the Benaki Museum, its atrium.

As the Outer; physical reality, without substitutes, without illusions or symbolism, is the precondition to set a course to the Inner, towards subjectivity and the Spirit, now, the Inner as well, the innermost space of the most intense re-collection is full of openings to the Outside: the Cross in the sanctuary, the 12 holes, which as the 12 Apostles surround the Cross in the entrance, the windows in the walls. The Innermost is simultaneously the Open, as Hölderlin has grasped it and as Antonakos has seen it in his last panels as Entry- or, perhaps, an exodus?- into the inaccessible Light that shines behind.

There is interpenetration between the Outer and the Inner. The limits in Antonakos, as we have seen, never remain fixed; they are open to the "without limits without conditions", like his incomplete circles that wait and hope that the time will come to restore their integrity.

To enter into the chapel you are obliged to bow your head in the threshold to be able immediately after to look upwards. While the surroundings are reduced to the simplest abstraction, with one luminous neon line over the entrance and another to lie on the arm of a Cross, in front of the sanctuary there are two recognizable post-Byzantine icons by Andreas Sétorengo, the *Mother of God* and *Christ the Pantocrator*. "Pantocrator", Naomi Spector reminds us<sup>18</sup>, has to be interpreted not as the "All Ruler" but the "All Holder", Christ "*who contains and embraces all*". The sense of the name coincides with one of God's names given by the Jews: "*Ha- Makom*", the Place without a place where everything finds its place, what the Orthodox Christians call *the Land of the Living*.

The left wall of the chapel is <sup>slanted</sup> curved preventing the building to be a cube. A small change that changes everything. In the same spirit, a wise Hassidic Rabbi, rabbi Nachman of Breslau had said that the *Olam Abo*, the Messianic World to Come will be the same as our world but slightly "re-located". The "slight re-location" does not mean any petty

improvement of the existing order. It is the slight but crucial change that radically transforms the quality of everything. As the wall of the Chapel of Saint Dionysius, which is *curved* and the entire building cannot be a cube any more. *titbit*

The Chapel has the name of St Dionysius honoring the Saint who protects the city that honors the artist by this retrospective. At the same time this is the name associated with the Orthodox mystical theology of the *Shining Darkness*. This negative theology, through the Byzantine tradition of the icons and of the theology of the Light of Tabor, will re-emerge unexpectedly in Modern Times in the abstract visions of Kazimir Malevitch – and of his younger brother, Stephen Antonakos.

Our transitional epoch of the Great Turbulences, of wars and revolutions, is the epoch where dominate the illusory representations of a declining society of spectacle; at the same time, the *Images are in crisis*, to use the expression by the great contemporary Greek artist George Hadjimichalis.

The Images are not symbols or illusory representations but visions of the invisible, of *"those strong, still unrevealed possibilities which life hides for all of us"* (Antonakos). Malevitch demanded that art should be founded not on the lies of representation but on *"science and life"*. Ilya Kabakov had said that Malevitch has closed in the palm of his hand all the previous history of painting and, then, he opened afterwards his palm showing the Black Square, with all the past within it but the unknown future as well. Antonakos comes out from the Black Square, demanding the rejection of all substitutes of the real. He becomes a defender of the Images/Icons in the epoch of the crisis of the Images, a John Damascene in Manhattan.

This direction of the work of SA, more and more explicit with his Panels and Chapels, especially following his work in the Castle of Saint George in the Old City of Rhodes, in summer 1992, made several critics to ask if there was a kind of re-conversion of the Greek American artist to religion, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the direct influence of his return to his homeland that he had left at the age of four. Against all those who saw in our artist a "re-born Christian", Naomi Spector rightly stressed that Antonakos is *"once born"*. His is the child of his epoch and of its contradictions, combining the Modern in its American apex in the West with the spiritual tradition of the orthodox East, the multicolored shining neon and the skyscrapers of New York with the Light of Hilarity spread by a candle in a small chapel of his native Laconic countryside.

But Antonakos never saw the one as the substitute to the other. In his entire oeuvre, in the means used by this uncompromising modernist and anti-post-modernist, his entire visual Poetics has as axis the *transcendence* of the limits institutionalized by the German theoreticians

of modernity separating and counter-posing technical civilization (Zivilisation) to spiritual culture (Kultur).

In the ceiling of technical civilization, Stephen Antonakos opens the door of spiritual culture. On the apex of the highest skyscraper, he lights his humble candle. He raises a heavenly Ladder of Light that passes through the opening of the ceiling of his chapel<sup>20</sup> and goes beyond it, higher than the highest skyscraper of the world.

Stephen Antonakos invites us to embrace Light.

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## NOTES

1. Naomi Spector, *Some Notes on Stephen Antonakos*, in the catalogue *Im Spiegel der Freiheit*, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt 2001 p.59
2. Epistel to Hebrews 11:1
3. Naomi Spector op. cit. p.61
4. Dionysius Aeropagites, *On Mystical Theology* paragraph 1, in Greek, Polytypon Athens 1983 p.36
5. Statement by the artist, quoted in the catalogue of the exhibition *Antonakos, The House*, curator Athina Schina Andros, Greece 2004 p.10
6. op.cit.
7. Plato, *The Republic* 509b 10
8. Maxim the Confessor, *Commentary on Mystical Theology* in Dionysius Aeropagites op. cit. p.55
9. Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, bilingual Edition in German and French, Aubier 1946 p.61
10. Maite Larrauri, *Spinoza y las mujeres*, Centro de Semiótica y Teoría del Espectáculo 1989 Fundación Instituto Shakespeare-Instituto de Cine y RTV Valencia p.10
11. Dianne Kelder, *Stephen Antonakos: Five Decades of Drawing*, New York, The Gallery of the Graduate Center, CUNY, 2005 p.5, quoted in the catalogue of the Benaki Museum retrospective 2007 p.168
12. Walter Benjamin, *Parsi Capitale du XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle Le Livre des Passages*, Cerf 1989 p.855
13. Athina Schina, *Domus* in the catalogue of the exhibition *The House*, Andros, Greece 2004 p.41
14. W. Benjamin op. cit. pp. 226-227
15. op. cit. p.852
16. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Progress-Moscow 1977 p.101
17. See in the catalogue of the Benaki Museum retrospective p.218
18. Naomi Spector op. cit. p.61
19. Linda Norden, *Residual Roots or To Go Home Again( Some Thoughts on the Art of Stephen Antonakos)*, see in the catalogue of the exhibition in the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art and Centre of Contemporary Art Ilcana Tounta 30 March-10 may 1993 p.16
20. See the work by Stephen Antonakos *The Chapel of the Heavenly Ladder*, 47<sup>th</sup> Biennale Venice 1997