

ARTFORUM

Passages

Stephen Antonakos (1926–2013)

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Stephen Antonakos in 2008.

commissions of unprecedented scale and complexity—from college theaters to corporate headquarters, arenas, metro stations, even airports—crisscrossing the United States, Europe, and the Middle and Far East.

Born in the village of Agios Nikolaos, Greece in 1926, Antonakos was four when his family emigrated, settling in New York. Determined to become an artist from an early age, he studied at the New York State Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences and later began working as an illustrator. While familiarizing himself with the New York art scene of the 1950s, he was particularly attracted to the burlap assemblages of Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana's lacerated canvases, and began to use discarded cloth remnants to create sewn fabric collages and vividly-colored mixed-media constructions. His fascination with the street led him to consider the signage of shops and restaurants and his subsequent discovery of the clarity and intensity of neon.

While Antonakos acknowledged affinities with Minimalism, he maintained that his preference for cubes and rectangles was actually rooted in vivid memories of the small village church of his birthplace. A profound desire to imbue his art with a spiritual dimension prompted the creation of installations he characterized as chapels and meditation rooms. Chosen to represent Greece at the 1997 Venice Biennale, he conceived the *Chapel of the Heavenly Ladder*, an eighteen-foot, six-inch by twenty-three foot by forty-foot structure comprising rusted iron and exquisitely modulated neon light. Situated in the gardens near the entrance, this remarkable little structure was one of the most visited and admired installations of the biennial.

Throughout his long career, drawing played a crucial role in the conception and evolution of Antonakos's sculptures, but it was also an ongoing, independent practice and a constant source of discovery. I had the pleasure of curating a retrospective exhibition surveying five decades of his drawing at the art gallery of The Graduate Center in 2005. Ever responsive to the immediacy and freedom afforded by the medium, he described its challenge: "I start with the site, the page—I have a basic idea about one or two forms I want to make, but then the drawing tells me what I want to do next . . . it takes over."

Although he suffered from health problems in recent years, Stephen Antonakos never stopped working and exhibiting, and in the seven months before his death on August 17, he had solo exhibitions in East Hampton, New York, and Berlin and participated in major group shows at the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton and Grand Palais in Paris. If his works reflected the rigors of Minimalist aesthetics, they also conveyed the profound humanism that was part of his DNA.

<http://artforum.com/slant/section=passages#entry43820>

STEPHEN ANTONAKOS BEGAN to investigate the aesthetic possibilities of neon in the early 1960s and within a few years it had become his signature medium. He initially employed it in moderately-scaled geometric structures and subsequently produced site-specific installations of circles and squares on the walls and ceilings of galleries as well as the homes of such artist friends as Robert Ryman. However, in 1974 a commission to create temporary sculptures for the Fort Worth Art Museum's exterior heightened his consciousness of neon's capacity to redefine the scale and character of architecture. Increasingly in the following decades, Antonakos embraced outdoor and indoor public