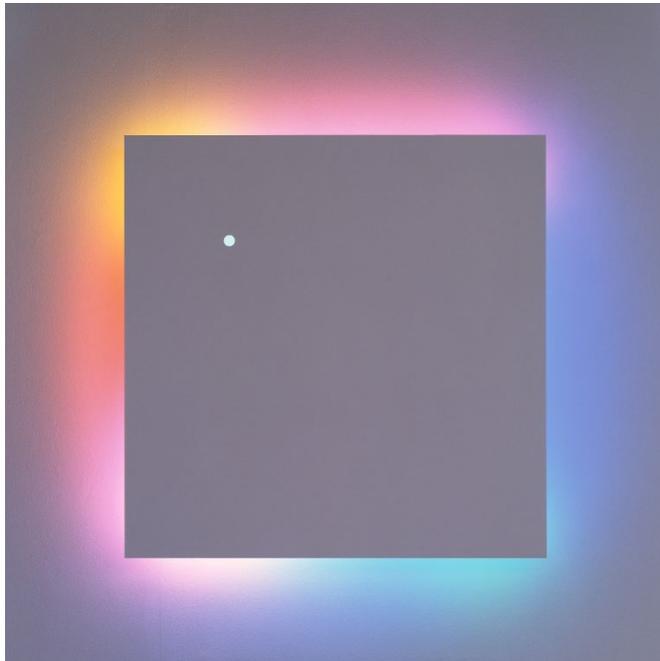


ARTFORUM

Stephen Antonakos

BOOKSTEIN PROJECTS



Stephen Antonakos, *For John Climacus*, 1999, Paint on Versacel, neon, 36 x 36 x 4 ¾".

The abstract objects created by Stephen Antonakos (1926-2013) are meant to goad people into considering the sacred, as strongly suggested by *For John Climacus*, 1999, a wall-mounted white square illuminated from behind by a rainbow of color—one of the works featured in "Neon and Geometry" at Bookstein Projects. Around 600 CE, Climacus, a monk, wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a text that describes the thirty steps (the number signifying the age of Jesus at his first baptism) that are required to climb to heaven and attain salvation. Christ described himself as "the light of the world" and said that "whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but

will have the light of life" —i.e., eternal life. "Seeing the light," or having a

spiritual awakening—what German philosopher Rudolf Otto called a "numinous experience"—involves an altered state of consciousness. Antonakos seemed to believe that art could save us from ourselves. One could even say that his output, despite its modern appearance, was steeped in the medieval tradition of *imitatio Christi*, lifting us to a richer plane of awareness.

For centuries, works of sacred art were seen via candlelight or under the rays of the sun, especially as filtered through the stained-glass windows of churches. Antonakos frequently worked with neon lighting, an illuminant that has an extraordinary life span—for instance, some neon shop signs can provide light for up to fifty thousand hours. If "the medium is the message," according to Marshall McLuhan, then Antonakos's neon panels suggest that God's brilliance is not easily extinguished. And because of their chromatic range, one can certainly understand the artist's neon pieces as systemic paintings, per Lawrence Alloway, or even as Color Field works, the latter framing resonating with Kandinsky's notion that hue has the ability to exert its influence "direct[ly]... upon the soul." Neon is what is called a "noble gas," a rare element—as uncommon as that transformative ennobling moment of "seeing the light." Antonakos had compared some of his art to "Byzantine icons, with their unspeakable, powerful spiritual presence." This, perhaps, is most directly touched upon in

pieces such as *Terrain #18*, 2012, and *Terrain #23*, 2013, crinkled squares of gold leaf on Tyvek, which materially and historically reference those icons in their gilding.

Antonakos called his neons "real things in real spaces," as though to justify their existence by aligning them with Donald Judd's "specific objects." But I think they are better understood in terms of Malevich's Suprematism, particularly his ur-Minimalist *Black Square*, 1915, which was deeply indebted to the religious icon, as art historians have argued, and more broadly to Kandinsky's idea of the spiritual in art. Antonakos's collage *Gibellina #1*, 2001, refers to a town at the northeastern tip of Sicily that was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt—resurrected—by artists, among them himself. The mixed-media work *Top Soil from Lycabettus Hill #2*, 2000, is another sacramental piece. The summit of the titular site is the highest point in Athens, where the Acropolis is located. Like *Gibellina*, it is a sanctified location (it is also where Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, has her temple). Indeed, earth is holy for Antonakos: The monumental grid of *Last Collage*, 2001-2002, is a kind of cemetery that contains framed bits of nature, such as dried twigs and leaves. The work even features old coins, calling to mind the ancient tradition of placing such objects over the eyes of the dead. These memento mori are spiritual gold, and as such are numinously privileged, for they promise renewal, salvation. Without question, Antonakos's work is a balm for these increasingly demoralizing times.

—Donald Kuspit

Kuspit, Donald. "Reviews: Stephen Antonakos – Bookstein Projects." *ARTFORUM*, February 2024. p. 113.