

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

## Stephen Antonakos: Neon and Geometry

Vincent Katz | February 2024



Stephen Antonakos, *Saint George*, 1989. Royal blue Varathane on wood, neon, 35 1/2 x 35 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches.

“Royal blue Varathane on wood”—and it is indeed a very dark blue, transmitting almost a feeling of black. The strokes, painted with a wide brush, have a passionate intensity, though they may in fact have been laid down slowly. A meeting point of several strokes occurs at the painting’s lower right corner. The support for all this activity is a 2-inch-thick chunk of wood, its edges neatly and irregularly serrated. From behind the panel, the neon glow familiar to followers of Antonakos’s work emanates, a kind of rainbow effect here, with a green preponderance at the bottom, blue at the top. The dark, plunging strokes of the surface alternate with the light, evanescent tones of the neon, creating an intriguing equilibrium.

A recent exhibition of Stephen Antonakos’s work at Bookstein Projects felt like a finely-honed mini-survey. Works ranged in date from 1989 to 2013 and in medium from works on paper to neon-based paintings to works including found objects. Thus, while it did not go back to Antonakos’s earliest works, and it did not include neon-only pieces, it did feel comprehensive. Antonakos, who was born in Lakonia in Greece’s Peloponnese in 1926, moved to New York as a boy and lived there the rest of his life. He died in 2013.

The exhibition took its inspiration from the recently-published monograph *Stephen Antonakos: Neon and Geometry*. All the works in the show referenced bodies of work in the monograph. Going through the exhibition felt like taking a tour through Antonakos’s life, at least the last few decades of it, as some of the work itself is based on traveling and making art from the scraps that travelers accumulate along the way.

The medium for *St. George* (1989) is

*Top Soil from Lycabettus Hill #2* (2000) consists of soil from the Athens landmark sealed in a plastic box, placed inside a framed enclosure with a label and a stamp. Antonakos was fascinated by detritus, often quite beautiful detritus in his case. Unlike Rauschenberg's found stuff, for example, which gained some of its power from looking like it was discovered on a trash heap, Antonakos's items are often pristine, more like tourist's prizes. Carefully handling these discovered things, Antonakos exhibits as well the taxonomist's pleasure in labeling them, often stamping his works, as in this case, with his name and the date, sometimes adding text by hand in pencil.

*Last Collage (50 Units)* (2001–02) is exactly that—fifty boxes (that is, framed units) each with a branch or two or three, a coin, “ANTONAKOS” stamped in red, the name of a place written in pencil in block capitals (BENAKI MUSEUM, ATHENS, e.g.) and a date, also stamped. The mind starts its secret inquiry, attempting to fill in the blanks. Were the twig and coin found at the location indicated? Does the date given reveal the date Antonakos was at the location? Consecutive dates seem to allow us to track the artist's whereabouts, GPS-like. But how much of this is true, or supposed to be? *Last Collage* recalls Antonakos's time-based package work from the sixties and seventies, in which he would send someone a package with an instruction such as, “Not to be opened until...” There is a play in Antonakos's work between something that seems so straightforward on one hand and on the other maintains a mystery, or unknownness, that may or may not be revealed at a certain point in the future. This mysteriousness links up to senses of spirituality in Antonakos's work. Increasingly with age, Antonakos became interested in places of worship, particularly Greek Orthodox chapels, and his neons gathered ever-more ethereal connotations.

Some works in this exhibition rely on materiality for their effects. In *Spring Series #78* (2006), a fold of vellum, giving a feel like of plastic, has been colored in blue pencil, suggesting an ocean wave, delimited, as are many of Antonakos's works, by precise mounting, frame, deep inset, and a demarcatory pencil line at the bottom of the mount, below which one can see the artist's signature in cursive. The brushwork on the recto of the sheet is half covered by the fold-over, revealing an opaque verso.



Stephen Antonakos, *Top Soil from Lycabettus Hill #2*, July 11th, 2000. Soil and mixed media on paper, 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 3 inches.



*Installation view: Stephen Antonakos: Neon and Geometry, Bookstein Projects, New York, 2023.*

In some of Antonakos's latest pieces, material and spirit seem to work together and sometimes to struggle against one another. *Site – 16 units* (2012) is a large set of Mylar sheets with gold leaf laid down on them. The precise and varying choices of cuts gives these works the feeling of ancient shapes, perhaps temple walls. Two crumpled gold-leaf-on-Tyvek pieces with horizontal pencil lines, below which the artist's signature—*Terrain #18* (2012) and *Terrain #23* (2013)—fascinate by their regal material and also by the way that material, and its connotations, has been roughly or spontaneously handled, leaving a topography that could only have arisen at that particular moment.

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