ANTONAKOS: RED + PANEL DISCUSSION

HOW ONE INCOMPLETE SQUARE, ONE INCOMPLETE CIRCLE, TWO OVALS, 26 RECTANGLES, AND ONE 1960s MODEL FOR A MASSIVE NEON SPARKED A DISCUSSION AMONG THREE ART HISTORIANS AND THEIR LIVELY AUDIENCE AT THE SHIN GALLERY ONE EVENING IN THE SPRING OF 2019.




Robert Mattison: Marshall R. Metzgar Professor of Art History at Lafayette College. He organized *Antonakos: A Retrospective,* Allentown Art Museum, 2008. His books include works on Robert Motherwell, Grace Hartigan, The Meyerhoff Collection, Robert Rauschenberg, Theodore Stamos, and Franz Kline. His monograph on sculptor Ronald Bladen was published in 2019. He is the director of the Franz Kline catalogue raisonné project.

Phyllis Tuchman: Well known New York-based art writer and historian. She has published in Artforum, Art in America, Art and Auction, Artnet, Smithsonian, Vogue, and The New York Times since the 1960s; has published books on Beverly Pepper, George Segal, Brian Hunt and others; curated *Robert Smithson's New Jersey* at the Montclair Art Museum; and has taught at Williams College and Hunter College, CUNY.

Jacqueline Allen: The Mildred R. and Frederick M. Mayer Director of Libraries at the Dallas Museum of Art. Her special interest with artists' legacies includes not only collecting and saving, but also exhibiting and encouraging the study of printed materials that document artists' chronologies, activities, and exhibitions of their art. She has worked in art libraries for over 25 years.

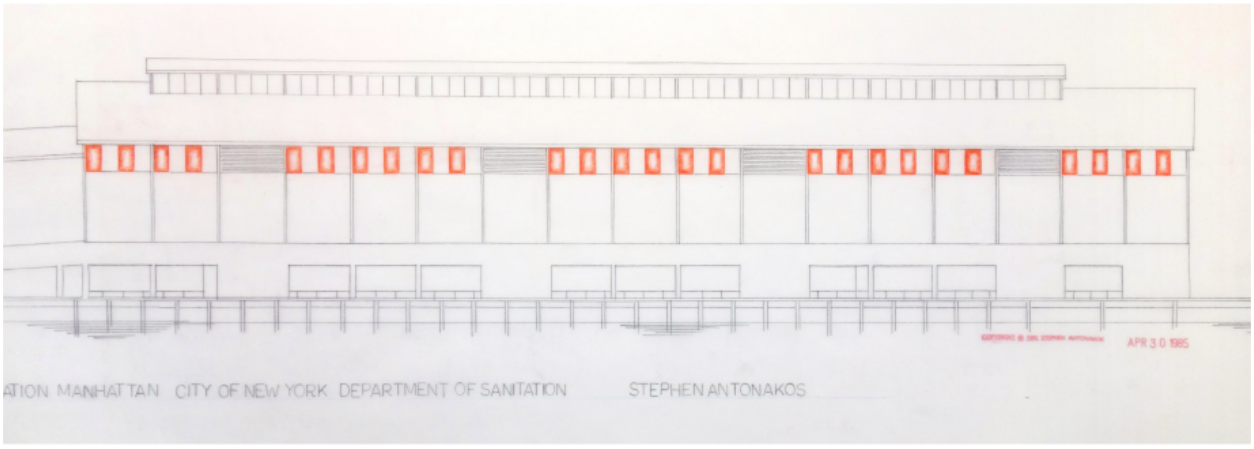
Stavroula Coulianidis: Associate, Shin Gallery: Welcome everyone!

ROBERT MATTISON: I am delighted to be here. Stephen has changed so many of our lives: the way we perceive space, the way we understand light. I imagine Stephen would have absolutely loved this exhibition. With relatively few works, we have some high points: the assertive 1960s

model here, if made full-scale, would make you feel pushed back against the wall by the vibrancy of some 6,000 neon tubes. It sets forth dynamism — and emotion. The 1978 *Incomplete Circle* drawing behind me reminds me of Matisse's *La Danse* at MoMA — it is a circle of life yet the hands don't quite join. The 1982 Neon Canvas here is both a physical object and a spiritual one. The long 1985 sketch for his *Neon for West 59th Street* beats out the rhythm of red neon rectangles extending across the Hudson. Stephen bridges the gap between intimate structures and large scale Public Works. I particularly love here the two small 2001 drawings in a corner. You don't see them right away — only when you look back from the deep space of the gallery. Though quite similar at first glance, their active ovals and static fields reveal the great, definitive power in the placement of forms. Stephen's very subtle variations open us up to all sorts of emotional connections and intellectual responses. He has said that something should happen between the work and the individual viewer. This succinct exhibition demonstrates his idea that everything depends on placement. With only six works, it suggests the breadth of his career. I think that none of us see the world in quite the same way once we've experienced Stephen's art.

PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: Stephen Antonakos made all our lives richer. Over the years he brought pleasure to countless people who attended his solo shows in museums and art galleries. Working in neon since the 1960s, he revealed countless ways to dazzle viewers. You have a mere hint of that here in the Shin Gallery.

I've always been impressed by what he achieved as a public artist. He reached the man on the street, the occupants of automobiles and buses traveling along streets and highways, perhaps even travelers in airplanes. I always enjoyed seeing the Antonakos on the side of a building near an exit from the Lincoln Tunnel. Alas, it no longer exists. Another intriguing work, present here in the gallery in a working drawing, is comprised of neons you see when you're going south on the West Side Highway around 59th Street. Alas, they are momentarily turned off. You can see *Neons for Buttonwood* near the Philadelphia train station, along Benjamin Franklin Parkway.



1 (detail)

JACQUELINE ALLEN: I first became acquainted with the work of Stephen Antonakos in a substantial way in 2015 when the Dallas Museum of Art acquired his major work, *Hanging Neon*, and 11 drawings. In conjunction with those acquisitions, the Mayer Library was offered a substantial collection of ephemera and catalogs from the studio. We of course accepted the offer, and a large box full of perfectly arranged folders soon arrived at the library. As I reviewed the materials I realized how much we could learn about Stephen, his lengthy career as an artist, and our new acquisitions from just these files. The Mayer Library has a collection of over 20,000 artist files in its vertical file collections. They are a wealth of information and a material type that makes art museum libraries unique. So, I decided to create an installation of the materials during the DMA's first presentation of *Hanging Neon* and the drawings, in 2016.

STAVROULA COULIANIDIS: Thank you all so much. Yes, Antonakos has worked in so many directions, but I wanted to talk about neon itself. Maybe we can go a bit deeper into neon as a natural element and what it means in his work.

NAOMI SPECTOR: Neon is an element of the earth, like gold, like oxygen. It is #10 on the periodic scale. Antonakos used it as he did canvas, paint, pencil, or paper — each for its own particular abilities. Neon, of course, has some extraordinary qualities: intense color, flexibility, and visibility from great distances. The work is all abstract geometry and placement. He said, "The square, the angle, the arc, the line — they last forever."

RM: I think the connection of light and space or the idea of movement in an environment, is that light is the key. And neon is just so beautiful, it activates the environment. It highlights outdoor spaces. I live in Pennsylvania so like Phyllis every time I would leave the city I would look for the *Neon for 42nd Street.* Near my college, not so far from New York, in Bethlehem, we have his Public Work *Transformation* in a wonderful cultural site called the Steel Stacks.

Its beautiful forms there communicate both with nature and with the industrial environment. It goes both ways. It makes multiple connections and involves the viewers, who complete and extend and respond to it. It is the perfect medium for a kind of universal communication.

PAUL SCHIMMEL: It changes from something very aggressive with Stephen into something rather sublime.

PT: Exactly.

PS: (pointing) I would love to hear more about this untitled model from the 1960s.

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RM: Stephen was really looking beyond the physical neon construction itself to the closed room, or gallery, which would be saturated with colored light and which really defines the scale of the work.

NS: Yes, many of them, like this one, were conceived of as Rooms.

PS: And he saw them being in a room what size?

NS: Some nearly filled the space physically like this one, and some were very spare.

PS: And where would you come in, how would you approach it?

NS: Doors on two sides.

PS: And he made these models? NS: Yes.

PS: And how many are there?

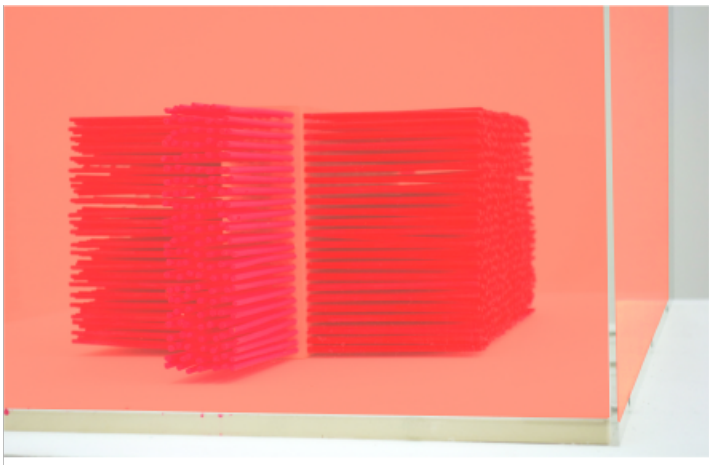
NS: Oh maybe 15.

PS: And none of them were ever realized?

NS: Not the massive ones, like this one, but a few of the more spare, linear ones were made.

PT: One of the things I love about this show is also that it is a reflection on red. But if that model were to be made, would it be bigger than the space?

NS: The side walls would be about 40’ long, and the work itself in proportion.



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PS: That is such an interesting thing. Very impressive.

RM: And with that, the intensity is serious. You’d be walking through a space filled with red light. There is such intensity in the color. There were other events that had an aggressive sort of quality about them . . . .

PT: It is fascinating that Stephen chose to work with neon and stay with neon as opposed to fluorescent tubes because ultimately we have all seen fluorescent tubes go the way of early cars. Stephen was working with a light source that could keep generating.

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PS: The Arte Povera artists often used neon — a different culture.

PT: Paul, it is interesting you bring up Arte Povera. When I saw the show at Dominique Levy, I was like “Oh my god, there are neon tubes!” and I found it fascinating because the feedback on the Mary Weatherford show at Gagosian is kind of bizarre. Stephen was working with his Neon Canvases for years and years and no one said it was bizarre.

It was just rather matter-of-fact. It was just an outgrowth of what he did. It’s kind of astonishing, comparing the reactions.

Audience 1: Mary saw Arte Povera and finally figured out a way to move forward.

NS: Stephen’s evolution was more gradual, based on his own use of materials.

PT: That’s what is so interesting, now, about looking back and seeing that he made it look so not out of place.

RM: I think also, these are such conceptualized pieces.

PT: And that’s part of Stephen’s confidence and decades of work.

SC: I remember Naomi saying that if she could describe him in one word, it would be “ready.”

NS: Yes, this and one more word, “hsichía.” It’s a Greek word that means stillness, but an alert, open stillness, the feeling he hoped people would find in his Chapels and Meditation Spaces.

SC: He was Greek Orthodox, like myself. I understand. In all his work, especially the later work, the spiritual resonates.

NS: Some of his Neon Panels, which started in the early 1980s, were named for saints. Overall, he considered individual saints in their aspect as martyrs — people who in a dangerous world tried to make things right and who suffered consequently. He wanted to acknowledge their courage, to have them be known here and now. With the Chapels, which he began in the late 1980s, people became more aware of the spiritual aspects — especially in Greece.

RM: His belief system came from his background. Back then, people were so pragmatic, but with Stephen the emotion and the spiritual in his work were so clearly rooted in his central personality we were compelled to take it very seriously.

SC: Yes, I think exactly that. It shows in so many of his works.

RM: Some of his Chapels are clearly religious structures, but a number of others are not. They just have a feeling in them, a way of holding space and light — an aura. You can communicate without being direct or literal, and many of his most successful spaces do this, purely formally.

NS: There was an invitational show in Japan in 1989. He planned to show four of his Neon Panels, but when he arrived he was taken aback by the high-tech activity and noise in the galleries. He felt had to leave, but the mindful curator suggested a gallery of his own. This became *Remembrance*.

Stephen stayed there for days, and saw how visitors entered busily, rushing, juggling brochures, schedules, notes — and he “saw their shoulders go down” as they slowed down, somehow relaxed, relieved. This was the turning point, the beginning of his Chapels and Mediation Rooms.

SC: What you feel in those interiors has everything to do with light and space. It all seems to have come from his human experience.

PT: It’s astonishing: we have paintings, and we have sculpture. Yet Stephen defied categories. They’re all Stephen Antonakos — neither architecture nor sculpture. He just willed them into being.

Audience: (pointing) Yeah but that is architecture, those corner drawings are architecture . . . .

SC: A lot of people ask me if Antonakos was an architect.

PT: My dissertation was on minimalism and then I became architecture-crazy.

Audience: Has anyone here besides myself seen the Public Work in Israel? It's the most effective transformation of a building using a reductive aesthetic. It's fabulous, particularly when your'e driving at night — those hoops, so discretely placed. It's remarkable. I would recommend it if you're in Tel Aviv.

RM: It's the use of geometry. But you know, there's no geometry in nature. We invented that system in order to understand the world. And Stephen's work is tied to that. As in the Renaissance when Brunelleschi theorized, he was looking for universal principles in the world. Stephen is not far from that. He taps into that tradition.

SC: I think his incomplete shapes are important. They're seen throughout his work, especially in his drawings, as with this incomplete circle.

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RM: And you complete the shape. Our nervous systems, our perceptual systems are geared to completing the geometric shape. It is interactive, our completion of the forms: we are participants.

PT: I like how throughout his career he generated ideas that defied a sense of development. You know: you're not going from A to B: he just dreamed!

Audience: Did he leave any instructions for the model to be built?

NS: It can be done. There are decades of fabrication experience and plans.

Audience: It is an interesting idea, making something posthumously . . . .

NS: When a neon work has been made, exhibited, documented, it can be re-fabricated and re-installed any number of times for exhibition. Even works which were never made may still be fabricated.

JACQUELINE ALLEN: It is this extensive documentation that is so much like the work we do in an art library. When I received the Antonakos files, I went through them all and in the documents, images, and exhibition documentation, saw the complete sense of dedication, and drive, and possibility that Stephen showed in his work. We take our work in the library just as seriously, and have the same enjoyment in our effort to provide people with the opportunity to learn about art and the work in our collection. If someone reviews all of the Antonakos material we have now, there is so much potential for further experience and understanding. Our Preparators, the staff who install work at the museum, saw the case display and commented on how much they appreciated that we have this type of material in the library and talked about their installation of *Hanging Neon* when they saw the images included in the case.

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I never open an artist file and feel disappointed, ever. Even if there is only a single item, it may be of use. Just recently, a book was requested on interlibrary loan, and it turned out that we had the book in the artist file. It was the only item there, but it was the one we needed. It was a little, itty bitty book, too; but as far as documentation goes, the presence of vertical file material in the library is crucial. Artists should not be afraid to send materials to art libraries for inclusion in their vertical files. Now and into the future, the presence of the written and photographic legacy of artists in Art Museum Libraries is crucial. It is a great resource.

NS: Yes, rightness often depends on seeing the artist's records — and on the skills of experienced fabricators, curators, installers — and art librarians.

JA: Yes, our Conservators use our library materials in their work as a matter of routine. They rely on publications in their research when treating objects.

Audience: It is interesting: with neon sometimes they just send exhibition copies or a work is reproduced for a show. Collections have stockpiles of materials for reproduction. Some Arte Povera materials must be obtained from a particular fabricator. It is highly specialized.

PT: You're bring up something fascinating. In a way, these neon forms are handmade. You don't think of something "industrial" being handmade. It's great.

Audience: Who remakes things, how they are re-made, even if you're following a stencil — it matters, everything. And quality is what estates have to be in charge of.

NS: Yes, experience matters. Every Antonakos neon work is unique. If we don't have an authenticated work physically in neon, re-fabrication and installation are possible with the approval of the Studio or the Foundation. The Guggenheim Museum recently addressed this subject with its *Object Lessons: The Panza Collection Initiative Symposium*.

RM: So you're satisfied with the technicians who know Stephen's work. With them and the documentation you have, do you feel that when you pass on, work will be able to be fabricated authentically?

NS: Yes.

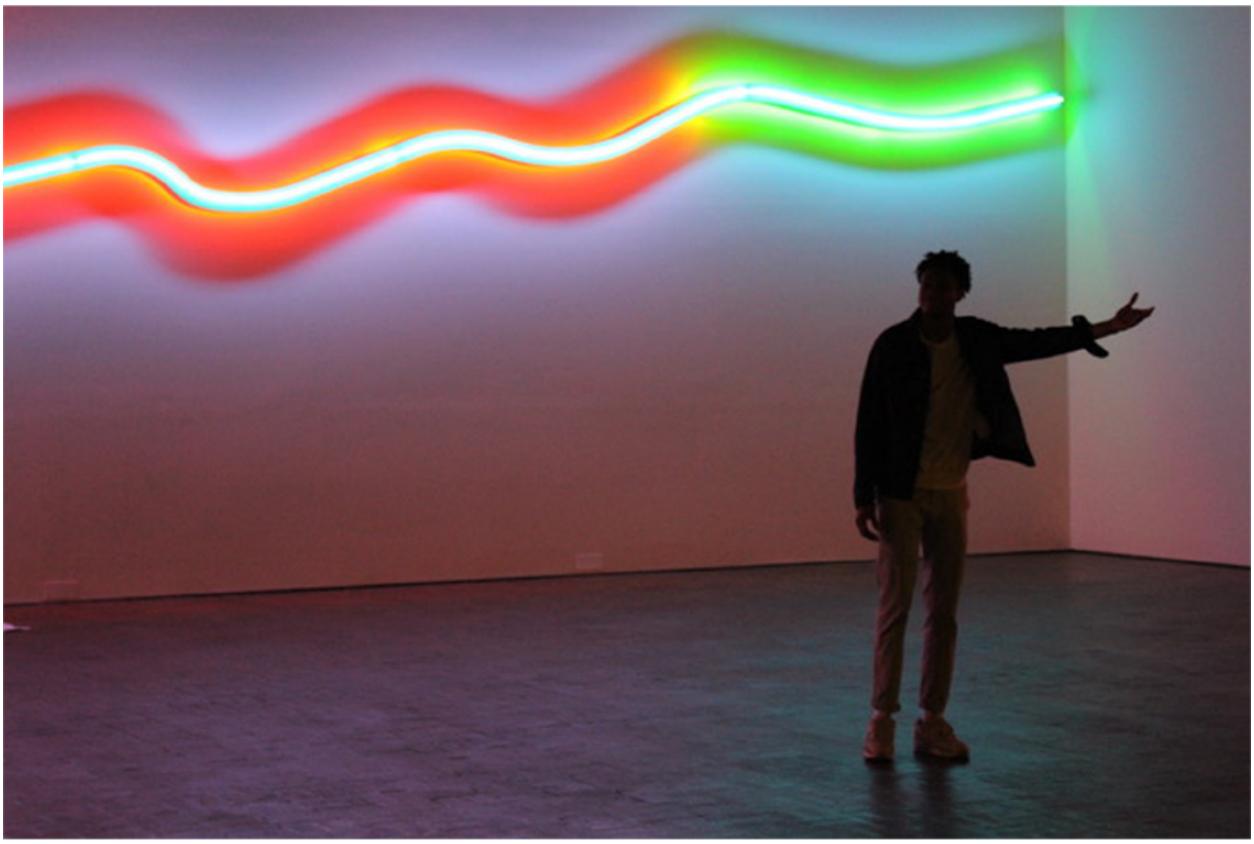
RM: That is very important.

PT: Back in the 60s there was some resistance to considering work not from the artist's hand authentic.

NS: Right. We have come a great distance. All this is important. But to the artist, what is most important beyond correct fabrication and installation is the work's meaning, how it is experienced. For Stephen, it was a viewer's reception of a work that made it complete.

I think of the poet Vincent Katz's words on seeing Antonakos's *Proscenium* last year:

> "There are waves, and there are beaches. There are wavelengths carrying
> beyond the beach and surf. . . . But the wave and the surge stay with us,
> are not transitory. Are stable, glowing, there in the museum, in the wilderness,
> still visible to all of us."



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This documents the panel discussion held at Shin Gallery, NY, March 12, 2019.

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Vincent Katz's words excerpted from Stephen Antonakos: Proscenium, a panel at the Studio School, NY, March 2018.