

## A TRUE PIONEER IN NEW USES OF NEON ART OF THE 1960s **STEPHEN ANTONAKOS** PASSES AWAY AGED 87

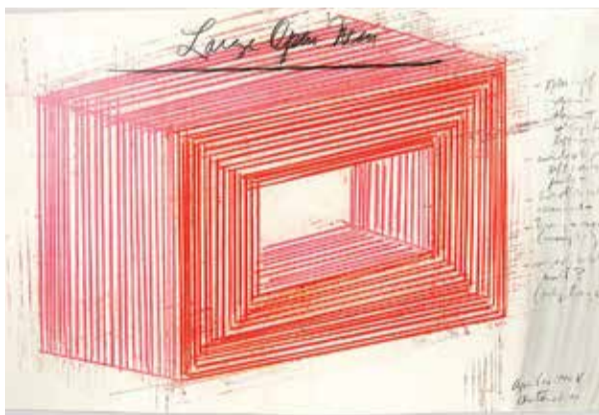
Bright and coloured glowing lights deriving from electrified glass tubes and bulbs will always be attributed to Greek born painter and sculptor Stephen Antonakos who died in New York last Monday at the age of 87.

Considered a pioneer in new uses of neon art since the early 1960s, Antonakos was born in Greece's Laconia region in 1926 before migrating with his family to New York in 1930 where he worked and lived for most of his life.

Antonakos' artistic career began in the late 1950s, when he began showcasing his work. But he only started experimenting with neon a decade later, after which his work went beyond gallery walls and embraced large public spaces, around the world.

# Pioneer of neon art le

“The neons are meant to be seen each for themselves, in combinations and as a total group. The forms are open, allowing architectural elements to be seen through them. This means that not only the columns, the ceiling and the walls, but the space all around them is brought into the experience of the art,” said Antonakos after completing his installation at the Perishing Square metro, Los Angeles in 1993 entitled “Red and Purple Lines - Pershing Square”.



**Large Open Neon, 1968,** coloured pencil, graphite pencil and fixative (Krylon) on paper. Collection of mimma Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Presented by the Art Fund under Art Fund International

Many will also be familiar with his metro art installation “Procession” that permanently adorns the Ambelokipi metro station, on the Attiko Metro line in Athens.

The source of most if not all of his ideas was his conviction that there is “a deep and natural affiliation between geometry and space”, at the heart of which his experimentation with neon lent a new perceptual and formal meanings to the medium.

“His use of spare, complete and incomplete geometric forms has ranged from direct three dimensional interior installations to painted canvases, walls, the well-known back-lit Panels with painted or gold-leafed surfaces, rooms and chapels. Throughout, he has conceived work in relation to its site — its scale, proportions, and char-

acter — and to the space that it shares with the viewer. He calls his art “real things in real spaces,” intending it to be seen without reference to anything outside the immediate visual and kinetic experience,” reveals his website.

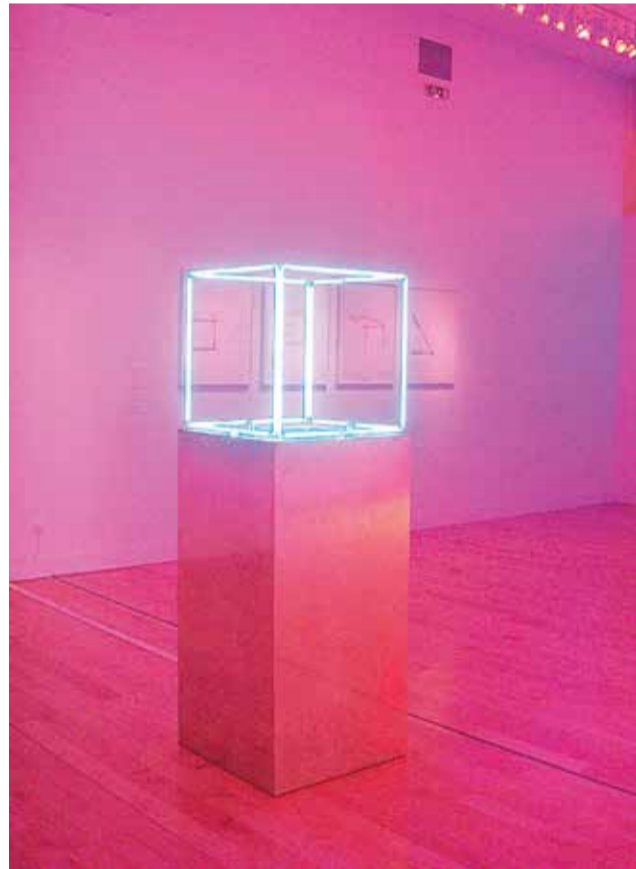
“Since the late 1970s he has made large scale public works with the same concerns plus the inevitably broader engagement of space and auxiliary light outdoors. Coloured pencil drawings on paper and vellum, often in series, have been an equally rich practice since the beginning. He has also made packages, artist's books, and reliefs of white wood and silver.”

From then on, Antonakos permanently installed over 50 large scale public works in the United States, Europe and Japan in locales such as the Fort Art Museum (1974), Hampshire College (1978) and Le Musee d'Art Moderne in Paris (1983).

Antonakos seemed to have grown with his medium. The mid to late 1980s was a period of resurgence in neon production. Sign companies developed a new type of signage called channel lettering, in which individual letters were fashioned from sheet metal. Although the market for neon lighting in outdoor advertising signage has declined since the mid 20th century, in recent decades, neon lighting has been used consciously in art, both in individual objects and integrated into architecture. This is how Antonakos worked along with conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman, Martial Raysse, Chryssa, Piotr Kowalski, and François Morellet as well as Lucio Fontana, Dan Flavinor Mario Merz.

Nowadays, there are several museums, specifically in the United States that are devoted to neon lighting and art, such as the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati and the Neon Museum of Philadelphia in Philadelphia.

“There is nothing more mysterious than simplicity”, was always the Greek-American artist's motto, a quote he often used at the entrance of



his exhibitions. In his last exhibition in Athens in 2011, he provoked the public with a work of art that depicted crosses, moulded chapels, icons, saints, angels and neon lights in a society that tends to exclude religious objects from artistic spaces.

“The cross is what you see. There is no mystery. It all depends on where you see it placed.

“I am Orthodox. I couldn't have made such works of art if I didn't have a religious faith,” he then said. “They would have been fake otherwise. Their truth, that which makes the difference, comes from faith.”

For more than 40 years, Antonakos staged more than 250 group exhibitions and over 100 solo shows around the world, including a recent 50 year retrospective seen in Greece and the United States.



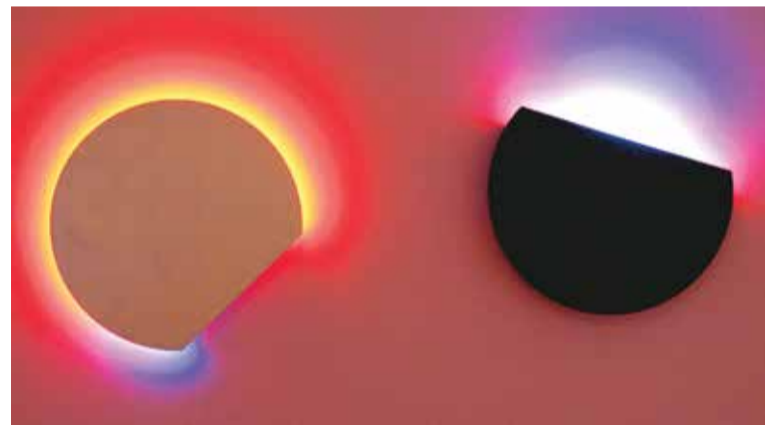
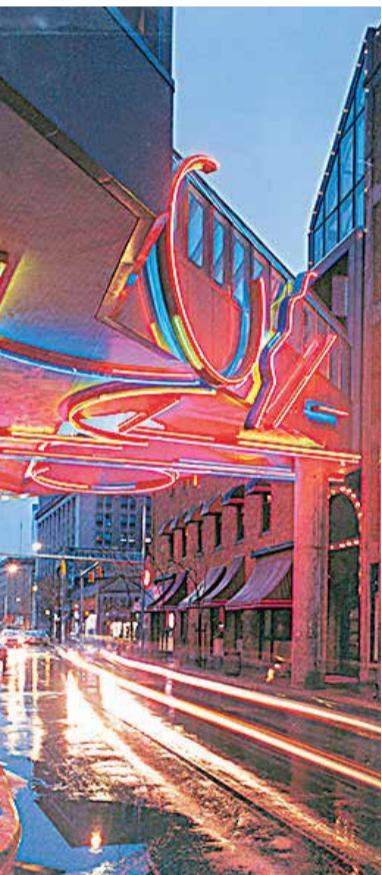




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# aves his 'light' behind



Installation at the Pershing Square metro, Los Angeles in 1993 entitled "Red and Purple Lines - Pershing Square"

