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He Grew Up Without Electricity. Then He Became Obsessed With Neon Lights.

M. H. Miller | September 21 2026

One evening in the late 1950s in New York City, the artist Stephen Antonakos left his West 29th Street studio and began to walk downtown toward his apartment. As the story goes, at some point during this walk he had a near-religious epiphany after seeing a restaurant's neon sign. Neon wouldn't have been an unfamiliar sight for Antonakos, who worked in advertising by day and at night made exuberant sculptures out of found materials like pillows or empty sardine tins. Back then, it was still a part of the urban landscape, though by the early '70s it would begin to be replaced by more affordable and practical LED lighting. Having lived in New York since the 1930s — except for two years in the Army during World War II, when he was stationed in the Philippines — Antonakos grew up around neon icons like Radio City Music Hall and Katz's Delicatessen. But it was as if he were seeing neon for the first time: the intensity of its color, the way its glow called attention to itself. He'd later describe the moment as finding "what I didn't know I was looking for."



The Manhattan loft of the artist Stephen Antonakos on West Broadway in SoHo. The artist lived and worked here from 1967 until his death in 2013, and it's been kept intact by his widow, Naomi Spector Antonakos.

Photography by David Chow



The artist's "Blue Cube With Red Neon," from 1982, in the studio.

Neon is a natural element (number 10 on the periodic table) that was discovered by British chemists at the end of the 19th century. In 1910, the French engineer Georges Claude patented sealed glass tubes that combined neon with an electric current. Claude planned to sell his invention as lamps, but their intensity proved more useful in advertising; in 1925, a Packard car dealership in Los Angeles was one of the first businesses to install a neon sign. In the 1960s, neon had a powerful influence over American contemporary art. In addition to Antonakos, artists who worked with the material included Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichali (another Greek American, who went by the mononym Chryssa), Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman.

But few artists explored neon with a deeper affection than Antonakos, who treated it less as a material than a medium unto itself. He was the

subject of numerous gallery and museum shows and made more than 55 large-scale public neon works in places ranging from the facade of a Tel Aviv power plant to a terminal at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. Yet the greatest showcase of his art is at his home and studio on West Broadway in SoHo, where he lived and worked from 1967 until his death, at age 86, in 2013. The loft, which can be visited by appointment, has since been preserved by the artist's second wife, Naomi Spector Antonakos, now 87, who was born in Massachusetts and worked for several of the New York galleries that represented her husband. The two married in 1972, and the couple raised their daughter, Evangelia, now the head of the department of math and computer science at Bronx Community College, there. (Antonakos had a son from his first marriage, also named Stephen, who died in 2020.) The family slept in bedrooms scattered around the space, none of which had walls that reached the ceiling in order to maintain a continuous flow. Antonakos worked in the northwest corner of the loft, using a utilitarian drafting table and a metal desk, a section of its surface covered by a blue neon rectangle under frosted glass.

When he moved in, the 5,000-square-foot space was raw and virtually uninhabitable. There was no kitchen or even refrigerator. The bathroom was little more than a closet with a trough. SoHo, which had only recently acquired that name, was largely undeveloped, full of abandoned manufacturing spaces with high ceilings and large

windows. Antonakos's studio evolved alongside the neighborhood, where he and his wife became social fixtures, befriending other artists, including Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt and Richard Artschwager. The place came together, Naomi told me during a recent visit to the studio, based on "Stephen's instinct. It's very subtle and it's just him."

Antonakos was born in a village in southern Greece with no electricity, where natural light was taken seriously. "We can't imagine the darkness," Naomi said of her husband's upbringing. "If there's no moonlight, you cannot see your hand, much less your feet." In interviews, Antonakos recalled how he'd sometimes lie awake in the early hours before dawn, waiting for the sun to arrive.

The center of his universe was the Greek Orthodox Church. "To enter the chapel was to enter another world," he once wrote in an artist statement. "Being inside it was like being plunged deep inside my own feelings and finding a paradise at the same time." When he was 4, his family (he was the youngest of four sons) moved to Manhattan's Upper East Side. Later, they lived in a Greek enclave in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, near another Orthodox church that became vital to him. He remained very religious throughout his life: Near his worktable, he covered a small section of the wall with religious items.

Some of this iconography appeared explicitly in his work, most famously in 1965's "The Blue Neon Cross," a modified crucifix bisecting four differently colored neon squares. But more often his pieces display an almost primordial sense of minimalism. In one area of the studio is a scalene triangle in green neon; in another is a board painted solid white and backlit by blue neon. These suggest a rare confidence that the critic David Ebony has described as a "what you see is what you get approach." The art historian Irving Sandler called Antonakos "essentially a classicist in the Constructivist tradition" — his forms have no symbolism or meaning outside of themselves. Antonakos himself once explained his working method as "I place things in space."

In the 1970s, he began designing free-standing rooms that incorporated neon pieces, but his process was always simple and straightforward, even as his neon works grew very large. He'd draw detailed, to-scale renderings of neon installations in colored pencil on



Antonakos's "Neon Table #1," with three drawings from 2007 hanging above it. In the background is "Now" (2012)

brown paper. These plans would be sent to Spectrum on Broadway, a neon sign maker in Woodside, Queens, that was his chosen fabricator.



The area where Antonakos worked, with, from left, “In the Beginning” (1999), “Neon Desk” (1990) and “Plea” (2005).

As an artist, Antonakos seemed to have little interest in the answers to big questions. What fascinated him more were the questions themselves — and materials, like neon, that sometimes seemed to elude interpretation altogether. In 1971, when he was teaching briefly in California, he wrote to friends in New York, asking them to each send him a package. He didn’t know what he’d been sent and never intended to open the packages, preserving the mystery. “I do not want to tell people how to experience art, mine or anyone else’s,” he once said. “I simply want to try to find for myself ways of putting things together visually so that the possibility for a kind of higher consciousness may occur.”

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