

A discussion between Manolis Baboussis and Denys Zacharopoulos

D.Z: Why *Possessions*? What does it refer to and what does it signify? Is it the title of the exhibition, of the book or the works? I imagine that it has to do with the various units, which organize the work as well as its history, your approach and your way of thinking. But why did you not choose only *units* as a title? What is it that urges you to insist on this notion of occupation, which involves appropriation, conquest, capture, annexation of one thing into a different unit, the power of the owner, of someone who not only owns something but appropriates it totally and completely? Is it associated to photography itself as well as its function or to the theme which each time organizes the units here?

M.B: We can have an approach through both name and image. My photographs are untitled; they are the product of an action of the gaze: recognition. The title, in a wide sense, concerns possessions: of spaces, people and things. On the photographic representation we receive the image, which is being structured, at the taking, at the invisible carrier of the look we deposit. What we take in return is an image. An encounter, an experience. In Greek, the word "*kata-lavaino*" means "to take something", to receive, to understand. I own, but I do not have the power the possession involves. It is a different, silent possession of the image. And yet the silences of the powerful and of the abandoned are not identical. There is a difference between the silence of a concert audience and the silence of a graveyard. There, on the graveyard, I observed the fresh flowers deposited on a small mound of soil, in a minimal architecture. It contains a relic, which now possesses nothing. It might occupy a place in memory.

D.Z: What is it that you call *memory* in relation to photography? Is it some psychological function? A historical one? Is it nostalgia or documentation? Register or experience? Do we take photographs with memory, by memory or is it the photograph that creates memory and projects it onto the future, in a further continuity? And whose experience does it concern most, the photographer's or the viewer's?

M.B: We do not take pictures by memory, as we do draw without models, but we project memory, we transfer a quality of the existing present elsewhere, not the same and identical, but transformed by our look. That is always magical. The quest is not about memory and time, it is about sign and truth. We find ourselves face to face with the experience of the image, which is another thing. What is interesting is the form of the procedure of the associations among the images. And the photographic image is a decision; it is a product of critical judgment of what we do.

When we start making one or the other, an image for instance, we make decisions. *Apophasis* (decision) in ancient greek is both position and negation. I do not know whether photography can provide the denial of vision when, by its nature, it registers material reality. A denial involves more seeing into what is going on around us...

D.Z: Photography is deeply interlinked with the notion of objectivity, with an objective approach, which represents reality with exactness. What you say, through your work, your relation with photography as we see it developing in time and through the units that present it to the audience or to the specialist. Which is the essence of that decision and possession for the photographer who in this case is you, and not only a historical or theoretical entity generally and abstractly? Is it, ultimately, a denial of reality or a plain dislocation of our relation to it, which can go beyond the denial to position etc? What is the issue, vision or the object? The procedure, which decides for the photograph or the reception of the theme it represents?

M.B: Every photograph creates its own reality, while it owes its richness, to the small fragment of reality that it contains, and that is one of its charms, which flows between certainty and uncertainty, between fictitious and real. There are many ways of vision. The objective approach, historically, preserves a type of effectiveness. What is interest-

ing is to awaken the deactivated element, which is contained in familiarity. I photograph in order to encounter something, a relation, others, possibly difference and different things. The importance lies in the form of experience and the return of the gaze. Possibly, if I detect the slightest crevice in some of the most solid networks of opinion I will manage to have a ray of light pass through the image so that it can illuminate the differences, the gaps among every image, the rhythm which does not define one instant but conditions their successions. Every image needs the previous and the following one; duration is a basic element in breathing and in art. But art has neither childhood, nor adolescence, maturity nor old age, only artists, who die a natural death.

D.Z: The arrangement of your photographs in your exhibitions, books or catalogues is independent of their time sequence. Does such a procedure of crossing and juxtaposition of works function additionally to time and space or does it only arrive in order to reorganize a closed circuit of possibilities which concern only the artist's work, the morphological or even formalistic dimension of the linguistic process? How and through which thoughts do you decide which is important, what bears significance and what does not for the arrangement of your work and for the individual works and their respective units?

M.B: When I juxtapose, each photograph shows an experience of the visible world and a topos of my biography. I mix them together, so that they can explain one another. Not one after the other, but that *and* the other. I prefer the union of two different senses in a new, unexpected one. It is possibly a stop, a station with a different development each time. I prefer to perform the juxtaposition of the images through a form of architecture of the gaze. Each image is connected to the other not only in terms of plasticity but also through a simultaneous advancing course, a constant construction, a series of multiple thematics, and each is supported by the other and at the same time participates in the general development. The difficulty at this point is that the associations must flow and acquire form with the consideration of the different alternations.

D.Z.: Apart from your early photographs of actions, you have also photographed empty, interior spaces with great emphasis on the architectural structure, which encloses and attributes meaning to spaces and to the experiences of life. A reciprocal relation and a cul-de-sac between the enforcement of the social status of things and the metaphysics of a certain absence penetrate most of your work.

M.B: In the early 70s, in the Volterra series of works, I started to be interested in whatever is not friendly to human existence as it is reflected on architecture and empty spaces. A certain sensitivity, which later developed together with other quests. In '73 we did not process pictures in the form of *photo-tableau*. I presented my first works in the form of the projection of about 30 transparencies. Absence had always formed part of the quest.

Absence is both threatening and liberating. The little child cries because he is waiting for his mother. In the image of Volterra, in 1973, when I confront the numerous empty beds facing one another arranged in military order, the accumulation, a crowd, they do not appear to be conversing with confusion and weakness, possibly because their tenants have been released through the diffusion of light coming from the sky and the only exodus that the opening of the window permits.

It is as I am filling a well organized, living world with isolation, sorrow and silence. I am *freezing* its flow. This is possibly because I used to play the "dead or alive" children's game. With the "resurrection" I sent away all sorrow, it is only the gesture that is left hovering on the image. The charm of each of the two pieces may lie in the absence of the other. Giorgos Seferis wrote that trees keep the form of the wind; places the form given by man. But when I compose, a number of things reflect a homogenized social organization or a particular culture, as in an organized cemetery or a venue of massive entertainment, in a hospital or in the similar trophies on a stand. I focus on a certain organization, on certain geometry. It is possibly all about a game, which traces tragedies. In tragedy the plot reaches its climax and ends in death. I often think about the prospect that a tree, a stone, a damaged side-walk, a letter, a book, the geography of things in daily life will all continue to exist after I am gone. Things will live and exist in my place; I hope this also applies to the earthen path by the sea.

D.Z: What do landscapes signify in your work? Landscapes are an important category in photography and from its early origin it has been associated to the subjective reception of nature, of the instant, something that in your work exists intensely only when it passes through other filters and sensitivities, less linked to the procedure of impression and more as surfaces of the world, as aspects of the structure, as an archaeology of feeling and the return to the city's limits, of urban society, urban planning, architecturally, socially and politically.

M.B: Landscapes indicate human intervention, irrationalism and domination. The violent antithesis.

Threat, repulsion, attraction, impetus, violence and beauty, all coexist.

I used to believe that if I fell into the water from a high place, I would sink. I later came to realize that the watery surface of some sounding sea with no horizon, the eternal frothy waves could rise like a concrete wall, like the free impetus of the subconscious. In its own depths, the unknown also lies as a threatening ambush. I love the sky, the rain, and the wind as they compose domains of motion. On the contrary, I consider the Athenian landscape as a topos of both dream and nightmare. As a juxtaposition of traces, evolving from successive layers of irresponsibility, indifference and abandonment. It offers the view of patches, of a worn-out garment, even in the king's new outfit, in cultural life; we come across it throughout Greece. A landscape, deprived of any diachronical imprint of its own history. We witness the withdrawal of all personal responsibility, the dislocation towards the –ever–, defining political responsibilities. The victimizer, the victim, the asylum, and the crime scene: We know all about the beginning and the end of the city. What about the in-between?

D.Z: I understand then from your words that the relation between landscape and city is equally important, even than the work itself. Possibly, as the presence-absence of man exists in interior spaces, also in outdoor space there are the friendly and hostile elements that repel one another, so the dialectic of enforcement and irresponsibility, of the accidental and the systematic is being constructed. And those successions and parallel repulsions constitute partly or at certain points, those in-between spaces that appear to occupy you more as years pass and seem also to follow together with your own life also the life of your work, of Athens, of society...

M.B: It is true that the changes do not contradict the needs of people like the change of a house, furniture, hairstyle, clothes, car, friends or wife. We do change the form, but what about the structure of things? In those cities of indifference, life has been excluded from the surface meaninglessly, from the building facades and plans with no measure of life. When a stretch of land is intact one day and on the following the excavator digs it up, the soil gives way. Its form changes. The demolition creates before me a magnificent park of the wild destruction that should be preserved and treasured like a precious thing. Especially for Athens, let it be placed, in the archaeological grand promenade around the Acropolis, an excavator as a piece of sculpture, as a symbol of the demolitions that come after wise "judgment". As a war monument. Wars do not take place for the beautiful Helen of Troy, for a beautiful cause, for beauty. They are spectacular like life and every great disaster. I am like an acrobat walking down the discipline needed in order to be able to define and distinguish with exactness the fascinations which inhabit the loose, unshaped context of the city.. It is environment of hyperbole and exaggeration, a site at war. Like walking on a tight rope, between thoughts and senses caused by decay and the anarchic ephemeral coexistence of recent and older history and the Disneyland of fake tradition and the upgrading, which surrounds us. Disorder or organization are not inflicted by time but by human actions.

D.Z: In your photographs however, nothing takes place, as if nothing happens, there is no reference, action, plot or narrative. No event.

M.B: The event is the image itself. I prefer not to confirm or reproduce a certain event, the gaze can, freed from the pressure of a certain instant, become both fact and contemplation. It is evident that the viewing and the creation of a still image with no event definitely demands on the part of both creator and viewer more intense concentration, particularly in present times, a gaze, so that if the look ultimately encounters some obstacle collides with the wall and comes back to us. In photography there is always a distance from the theme, between the theme and the image and between the image and the theme.

A natural distance and a distance in time. Is there such thing as photography from point zero? At that point there is only eros and wrestling. You expect to cover a distance.

On the other hand, waiting can make the simplest image and a visual wound. The waiting space differentiates the waiting. We find ourselves facing the waiting gaze open to all possibility versions. Waiting in a doctor's surgery is definitely different from waiting before the theatre curtain or before an office desk. Waiting also includes postponement. For a considerable number of people, the dependence of paid employment, or the work itself is the postponement of real life, which never comes. Everything that interrupts the waiting is the switch that turns on life. When I performed project studies of school buildings as an architect, as an employee in the public technical services that constructed school buildings, the task might have proved to be particularly creative. I however experienced the barriers and standards of greek public administration as well as its stereotypes, clichés and views about education and the invisible Athenian contemporary architecture. I observed the half bodies within my working space, protected behind desks/ shields, the faces melting. I could trace the signs of a minimum personal space, a limit, a "setting" in the unfamiliar space. Everything went on slowly, desperately slowly: "That is impossible, we should not do the other, we cannot do that..." I observed the dependence and the tricks of the administration, the aimless parking of individuals, employees buried under dark blue files in dead corridors. It was a permanent, useless stop, for most of them.

D.Z: What relation can you detect between that stop and the lack of destination on one hand and waiting as constant observation that seems to seal human relations deeply on the other? What is the relation with the indecisiveness, the most immediate expression of which television and its context really is? How do you associate it with photography, with your own work, position and experience?

M.B: Television involves another type of waiting, waiting for the simultaneous, globalized "emotion". It favors the synchronicity of news bulletins and the consensus of consciences. Here, literally, whatever interrupts the waiting – turns on life. In my work, there are images of television settings, news bulletins, discussions and advertising spots which I had designed between 1987 and 1993, as an architect. That was a different experience, there, each notion and idea *appears* to be discussed. While I found the ephemeral element of the construction, the rapidness, the dimension of illusion, and the team-work as well as the experience of the cinematic process quite interesting, the problem was that there was too much energy, too much ado about nothing. The TV context solves any problem wrapped in a setting, in an ideology. It diffuses the feeling of deprivation and dissatisfaction in order to fortify the feeling of void and loss. It increases the control over access. It satisfies the waiting with the element of the "new", the unpredicted and the unexpected, which all awaiting individuals expect.

D.Z: In your work, daily life appears to take the place of photography itself and of its intricate logic. It is the topos of photography and the domain of administration of life, absence, presence as something going beyond the inertia of both landscape and architecture, so as to underline and stress the entire ensemble of symbolic relations, of significance and insignificance within society and reality. Do I understand it right?

M.B: When I decided to occupy myself with the automatism of daily life, the traces of future ruins which are replacing all contact effectively, I placed my camera, my own black mechanical box opposite the colour mechanical box frontally, at a distance. Machine to machine. The lens of one facing the eye/ screen of the other. Through the "window" of the photographic camera I enclosed within my frame, the ATM torso, that square frame. I put a film into my camera, conditioned certain figures and took a picture, a fragment of space/time. I inserted a credit card, pressed some number keys, took out some bank notes and collected the receipt for my transaction. Two takes recorded automatically in a fraction of a second. In time, I gathered together faces before ATMs, those elegant monsters that hide the cruelty of transactions. I remember that in my Rome days, I enjoyed observing the various 16th century icons used to ornament the city at the corners of streets or under windows, items of worship. When I observe those pictures hanging on the wall of the new space, I see an object printed on a flat sheet of paper, a monumental threatening form without volume, a church chancel. There is also another dimension hidden behind those surfaces, quite interesting for my work: safety deposit boxes, the habitat of precious phylac-

teries. They bear a number and open with a key, which denotes their uniqueness. They are not exposed to common view like ATMs, or as treasures in a museum. They contain strictly selected articles. They formulate and build walls; they control corridors. Human bodies cross silent, long, narrow corridors and meet without coming into contact. As Carl Schmitt remarks, the procedure of such formulation takes place every day, at the microscopic tiny mechanisms, at large and small sizes, in every place where people exercise power over other people. In photography, they remain as the condensed indications of a "dead" space, a venue of deposit and confinement, which contains secrets.

D.Z: We now come to your recent work, which appears to emerge precisely through the administration of power and the structures it involves, of the allowed and the prohibited, the obvious and hidden, what you can openly say and what remains secret, of the individual and one's adduction and submission to a space of hierarchy. At the same time, such space both cancels and redefines man, the individual, the citizen, the teacher as well as the state itself and its institutions. It predicts and judges, it foretells the continuation of the structure and simultaneously makes decisions anew for itself and for everyone. Those spaces of judgment, court and school rooms, senate and academy halls, dean's houses, administrative board rooms and halls of ecclesiastical assemblies and synods, of all sorts of institutions and also of the most important institution in a country, the Parliament, constitute an original and long research and quest that has been occupying you for many years. It is an exploration of the aesthetic and symbolic dimension of space and the position of man in it. It is present in the full range of your work, from the early beginning to your recent works, in which through the absence-presence of man in the organization of space, you are setting a new sociopolitical dimension of the quest that founds your relation to photography.

M.B: The idea of my recent work originated in some thoughts about the employment and the evolution of the Athens Superior School of Fine Arts teaching staff members (ASKT), where I teach. I am interested in the judgment on artistic work, in the institutionally established mechanisms of access control. I observed as both judge and judged, isolated individuals trying to impose themselves on others. I originally used about 30 images; I broadened the theme by employing also other venues of judgment, which are simultaneously and alternatively being projected on two monitors. It is not a simple issue, naturally. It is a painful procedure, which condenses a system of values. Justice is an absolute value, it is positive. It is considered to be the foundation stone of democracy and freedom. Quality presupposes critical judgment as well as a certain morality. Critique like war tends to unite the crowds, in small or bigger groups against others, possibly smaller. It is the struggle of the good ones against evil. It is interesting that in older times, "crisis" in greek also meant some trouble, or tyranny. To judge is to distinguish and discern. I compare, I exclude, I decide. Finally, I condemn, I elect, and I reward: an activity that is part of the creative procedure itself.

D.Z: Is it namely a way to present the essential dimension of discourse through image and space? Is it discourse that decides and judges? Is it the direction of discourse as well as the dialectic procedure that define the administration of space, the image and the representation, the symbolic and pragmatist dimension of reality?

M.B: Most people speak facing ahead, a distance, namely one here, one there, one within and a limit. A threshold. An entrance. Are you then allowed to cross the entrance? Only on the precondition that they allow you to do so, on the condition that you pay, on the condition that you give in order to take, on the condition that you *belong* to a certain place, and nowadays, to certain countries. On the condition that you have something to say, which is possibly the most important thing. I decide. I knock softly and discreetly on the door, for a long time, but knocking more strongly is not enough. An essential condition is that the work exists; it is not the only one to take the permit. Are we not all annoyed by whatever hinders the passage, the movement from one place to another? *I enter*: museums, the Parliament, the Academy, bank basements, University Dean's halls, electorates, court rooms, the Holy Synod, television studios, offices, hospitals, Urban Planning administration and museum and factories' archives, into the network of institutional spaces, into the corridors of the accumulated precious secrets and the unwanted exhibition catalogues piled on the shelves and in trophy halls. In a vast graveyard. I imagine and realize all the



labour they must have taken and I am filled with sorrow. How much time, what perseverance so as to achieve so much, so little and useless.

And at other times, the taste of the effort, the working hours, the hours of contemplation and thinking they bear, are all thrown away as rubbish. But objects do not seek the sun, nor their liberty, they just reflect human actions and the value of their use. The hope and the curse lingers, of the future sightseeing sites that the north, south, east, west of the city, the dark avenues will select. The torch-light of electricians on mountains and cliffs, on buildings and yachts will always be a reminiscence of the night to the parvenus. Empty furnished pieces of land for sale.