

**Busts, Manolis Baboussis' Automated Teller  
Machines**

Baboussis has in the past presented us with images that deal with how complex cultural and anthropological conditions are reflected in the space around them. He has studied the relationships of people to their environments, from their confinement in empty colored rooms to the staring at "monuments either from our viewpoint as observers or from that of crowds always looking around themselves" in an attempt to comprehend the city around them.

In his Athenian "monuments," he was much more concerned with monolithic forms and sculptural minimalism than with the specific models of typological analysis. He struck a balance between the social aspect of his subject matter and the pursuit of an iconic object incorporated into "non places," in ordinary, enigmatic spaces.

Now, he conveys information about interiors and urban spaces through a frontal perspective on the flat surface of a square which, in turn, is monitoring us. He transposes the conventions of archaic frontality to the archetypal technological icons of today's urban environment in a ritualistic act of serial repetition.

1970: Conceptual artists begin using photography as an anonymous means of recording the concepts and events they create, without considering the photograph's linguistic and communicative structure, or its historical perspective.<sup>1</sup> When, in 1973, the same confined space of "pure" photography is monopolized by black and white film and the rationale of photojournalism, Baboussis provides patients at a mental hospital with musical instruments, and creates a series of color portraits based on the results. He photographs "the event," but at the same time also photographs the empty interiors.<sup>2</sup> The sanctuary of the mental hospital sparks his interest in institutional spaces. In that frame of mind, the Turkish toilet he photographs during this period is related to his color photographs of public office spaces. This work continues with the groups of empty colored bedrooms he photographs during his travels around Greece: the x-raying of a culture of the familiar which still retains its currency.

Years later, when he became involved with automated (bank) teller machines, he found himself dealing with the same institutions – this time in an almost overwhelming fashion.

ATMs are the legitimized payment services of our society; they are the representatives of a greater machine of financial control. For this reason, they can be found in a metropolitan center, in a picturesque mountain village, in the middle of a jungle, in the sand by the sea, and in our bedrooms. They are a sort of robot with which the user performs enacts a primitive dialogue that also occasionally contains elements of confiding or entreaty.

Baboussis photographs the ATMs absolutely frontally, so that they resemble I.D. photos: the I.D. photo of a machine.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, sense of the documentary or archival they project is so strong that it makes them also function like parts of a study in physiognomy, similar to those presented by Cesare Lombroso in the early twentieth century.

Baboussis presents us with machines from a variety of countries. Thus, they function like an archive of physiognomies of different "nationalities." The significance of this work is inevitably involved with the concept of series,<sup>4</sup> although the images of the mass have no specific sequential arrangement. In this case, the esthetic of the minimal seems to share an intangible and inexplicable kinship with the sensibility of conceptualism.

The artist concentrates on a flat detail of the ATM. He commutes the confinement and information of interior spaces to the other spaces of "faith" of our time. By isolating the ATMs, he composes their geometry, and creates autonomous works. He does not favor the romantic notion of the machine possessing a soul; he does not humanize it. He talks of "elegant beasts," and notes that he places his own machine (his camera) opposite this other machine to stress their common mechanical and automated provenance. He comments on the rigidity of their recording capability: the model and the testament of its operation has become one and the

same. He chooses to take pictures in a present time, in which no single privileged moment is severed from the continuum. The surprising and shocking hold no attraction for him. Rather, he appreciates the permanence and neutrality of these moments.

But is Baboussis' photography "neutral"? Yes, in the sense that it does not include supplementary elements. No, in the sense that it approaches the subject with some preconceptions: it views the ATM as a containment, a sarcophagus in the center of town (and of course not just this). However, there is nothing of the dramatic in Baboussis' photographs. The light on the ATM screen resembles the light of a candle on an alterpiece, but here there is no stylized imagery. Metropolitan iconography is shrunken and transmitted live on screens and reflective surfaces, mirroring the traces of passersby and the shadow of the photographer's own physical presence.

The size of Baboussis' prints is more or less the same as the actual object; he hangs an object on the wall. The viewer's experience becomes personal despite the frigidity of the subject matter.

He uses the photographic medium without manipulation, systematically broaching notions of the commonplace and banal as seen in the most rarely noticed of consumer objects. He finds, recognizes and reveals a preexisting viewpoint among the order of things. Yet, no matter how frigid and "aesthetically indifferent" they are, these machines are indisputably objects of design; they follow a strict typology that causes the user to recall a monument from the future. But beyond the "joy" of money, nothing else here provokes mirth.

However, just as the recording of this architecture is able to do, the photographs of ATMs record the political workings of the society we live in, without touching upon or ever showing the monitoring presence. Closed circuit cameras monitor ATM users. Meanwhile, besides recording your picture, the actual transaction is recorded. Some central control system knows where you were and when you made a deposit or withdrawal. Time and place are registered.

Deleuze notes that these are the societies of control that are superseding disciplinary societies. "Control" is the name Burroughs suggests to define the new beast and what Foucault recognizes as our near future.

Philippe Dubois insists that with photography, it is no longer possible to consider the image outside of the act that brought about its existence.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Baboussis' ATMs, along with the act that generated the photographs, we consider the act that imprinted the photographer himself. These photographs open up a number of interesting perspectives. They function equally as urban totems and as parts of a vast tradition of two-dimensional visual art.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Daniela Palazzoli, *Incontri-international d'Arte Contemporanea*, 11/73-2/74. Centro Di/Editioni 1973.

<sup>2</sup>In 1975 the artist exhibited his color interior photographs – precursors of the sensibility of contemporary photography in the 80s. ZONA Gallery, Florence 1975.

<sup>3</sup>The codified view of the portrait evolved in a different way from the social/class series of A. Sandler to R. Avedon (*American West*) and to T. Ruff (*Portrait-Identities in the Aperto 1988*). But of course in these cases we have people, not machines.

<sup>4</sup>In this process the approach may differ, accordingly: Warhol phlegmatically repeats the same object. The Bechers place a three-dimensional sculpture in a space (anonymous sculptures, 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Dominique Baqué, "La Photographie Plasticienne," *Edition Regard*, Paris 1998, p. 104.