

Manolis Baboussis and the Detective's Gaze

A linear and spatial course of correlation and confrontation

Manolis Baboussis is aware that there are two ways to have an exhibition in a great museum such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, which inaugurates an exhibition as a tribute to an artist who expresses himself through the medium of photography. The first, most frequent and well-known is to suggest a retrospective display, based on chronological criteria. Since an artist with an output of certain history and depth, who has accomplished remarkable works, is selected, it is useful to determine his linear course. The chronological sequence shows us the way the artist's thought has developed by moving deeper into the essence of his ideas and personal language, through the main landmarks of his creativity. The second way, more inventive and rarer, is to consider the exhibition as an opportunity to re-phrase everything he has done so far. The artist is governed by the agony to reconsider his course by offering us alternative and diverse readings; he thus seeks, and often finds, new ways.

The images in the exhibition form part of a new course within space that becomes inventive as well as interactive, since it is being formed while starting to converse with the viewer. In this case, the latter is called to explore the chronic coherence and the new correlations, through which the artist, currently Baboussis, reconsiders his own look. Each one of us leaves the exhibition having formed ideas not only regarding his art but also on the way Baboussis grasps reality and defines associations among things.

Such a situation, so very powerful and simultaneously contemplative for everyone of us, finally transfuses into ourselves a way of consideration which alters *our own* fashion of looking at things or of defining associations, making adaptations and comparisons, either in accordance with the artist or moving away from him. All this shows at once that, apart from their poetry and beauty, Baboussis' works contain aesthetic values and furthermore aim at promoting either a deeper association with reality or an exploration of the artistic language - with its help the artist's look and objects acquire mutually a constant dialectic association. No matter how fine it all sounds, we should take things in their proper order.

It is true that Baboussis in this exhibition endeavours to go through thirty years of output through the construction of spaces and stills that function in correlations, encounters and confrontations, in a way which is occasionally poetic or analytical and sociological. Through such enterprise, he wishes to clarify that he doesn't regard his works as masterpieces but as looks and reflections which form part of an evolving work, to which such a process offers new freshness and vitality.

Yet, what allows him to challenge, fascinate, excite and render us thoughtful with correlations, is his long, laborious, creative work accumulated through time. Therefore, before we submerge ourselves into it and experience the stimuli it suggests, we should try and define the course his images have dug up with the passage of time.

A humanistic look in the absence of human beings

Baboussis appears in 1973, with a series of photographs of mental hospitals. In his colour images of passageways among hospital beds, the frontal perspective of the camera frames the symmetric row of beds from the corridor, accentuating the point of departure towards the background. Thus, the eye stops either on an empty wall or at an open window-sill overflowed with light. Finally, as the look is unable to move further returns, starting to explore spaces, which are temporarily uninhabited. The most remarkable fact about such frosted, sterilized gazes, is the total absence of men. Not a soul in the wards. The patients are elsewhere. If anyone wishes to speak about them or their very presence, one should trace the hints of their existence, which are present in the place: the crumpled bed sheets and the light on the pillows, for instance.

"Even in their absence, men leave behind traces of their existence", Baboussis says. In other stills, the artist has photographed the patients, after giving them musical instruments. Now we can imagine the pillows - seen before and presently absent - and wonder: what association is ever possible between such miserable, confused and tormented faces and the austere, ascetic organization of the beds they lie on at night time?

These photographs precede similar ones by the photo-artistic German school - which attempted a broadened conceptual use of the architectural image, without human presence, in order to speak to us about our very destiny as human beings, in contemporary social city-planning. Two questions are raised spontaneously, what similarities and what differences are there between the approaches? And is such a method significant and why?

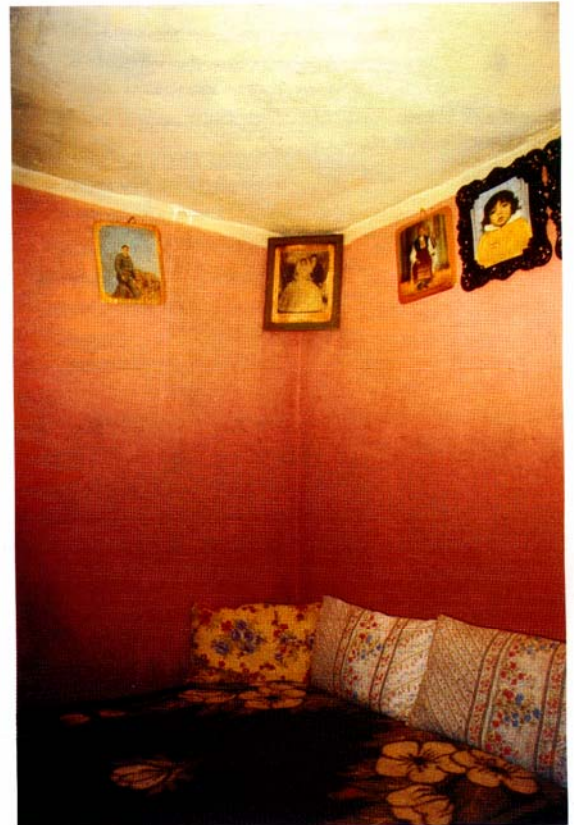
German artists focus their attention on public buildings, banks, stock-exchange premises, libraries. In their works, they speak about invisible beings, which rather represent functions (as students, clerks, managers) than sensitive, emotional human beings. To be clear, their language intends to indicate what has been lost in contemporary mass society and to speak about the identity of places no longer drawing from the historical, cultural past. By merely detecting in the architectural structures, what is not compatible and friendly with our role as social beings, the images denounce it or rather silently instruct us to criticize it. Early enough, Baboussis is interested in transparent architecture, prompting us to recall its association with the lives of people who live and reside within it. As far as men are concerned, the artist is interested in both the existential and the private aspects - emotional and senti-

mental - and not merely the rational: this is the reason he focuses his attention on architectural forms and institutions related to private life, on sides of our human nature, which present difficulty in becoming compatible with the norms of organized social life. Hence, his interest in mental hospitals where the image of restricted space comes into painful confrontation with the individual who has to reside in it. Subsequently, he follows his own current of personal emotions and daily life, in the photographs he makes in the '80s and '90s, while travelling about Greece. Here, he performs his narration while photographing such sentiments in private houses and the family space, which represents the most intimate of instances: the bedroom, the culture, the way of life and the emotions of his Greek compatriots. Underlying the lyric and poetic profile, lies the most apparent difference between the German poetic approach and Baboussis' Mediterranean one, the antithesis which Simon Weil expressed as "the language of the square and the language of the bridal room". There is an additional antithesis resulting from the different ways they have both developed, photographers of objectivity on one hand and Baboussis on the other.

Both sides bear deeper anthropological and sociological interests. They both have an intense feeling of what we currently describe as "interactive", which means that they both bear the desire to "carry away" the *other* person, the viewer's ego, the one gazing - in short, all of us - by inviting him to penetrate the image and decode the meaning behind the facade of places, together with the creator.

The German artists, as students of two remarkable photo-artists, Berndt and Hilla Becher draw from an apprenticeship, which connects art and photography. This is due to the influence of the great German writer Walter Benjamin. From the '30s already, Benjamin had realized that recording on camera was a form of an absolutely unedited image, since due to a form of technological unconscious, one could become the bearer of involuntary revelations. Contrary to voluntary inscription, such as design, photography carries on the image everything which is present at the moment the photograph is taken, what the photographer consciously overlooks or neglects, included. This singularity, which is due to the automatism of the photographic act, has often been considered as a disadvantage, which, however, can only be healed through "retouche" and not as a feature, one can profit from. Nevertheless, reading the photograph in posterior allows us, for the first time, to explore in depth and to discover, through prolonged attention, truths and details that conscious life, as it is based on habit and stereotypes commonly accepted and in constant evolution, is unable to recognize and admit. This explains the parallelization of the photographic image to an after-crime scene.

From the beginning, Baboussis is escorted by two formative experiences: the quality of being both a photogra-



Δυτική Μακεδονία / Western
Macedonia, 1981

pher and an architect, which coexist, complete and reinforce each other. His formation as an architect takes place in Florence, within the context of radical architecture. I asked Adolfo Natalini, his professor at the architectural school in Florence to comment on that period and here is the answer: "Baboussis explores the sky, the earth, architecture, places and things, with the same passionate gaze. In the late '70s, so-called radical architects and I dealt with material culture. In the university, we urged students to explore their places of origin, in order to discover the roots of creativity. The students employed photography, design, written scripts and tape recording in order to register instruments, objects, architecture and human activities in scientific strictness. Baboussis has been one of my best students (he was already a great photographer). My teaching presupposed doings quite diverse than that of traditional planning, but naturally, included drawing, constructing, use and recycling; activity nothing but ordinary, and objects in which the values of use and exchange coincided. Baboussis had attended my lectures at the university with high interest and the innovative views of radical architects must have helped him (as it was the case with all our students) as they became researchers rather than producers of images, moving among anthropology, biology and architecture".

By combining his competence in a humanistic science - such as architecture can become, when it seeks the best way to organize and equip the spaces we inhabit - with his knowledge of photography (and the acceptance of the power enveloped in the photographic unconscious), Baboussis occupies a strategy, which is both deductive and inductive. Both methods of intuition and construction question and incorporate each other, in a process of continuous analysis and synthesis. Architectural image is simultaneously both an indication and a pretext. Nevertheless, the critical approach is not suggested in explanatory a manner: it proceeds slowly, in silent steps, employing the eyes - the artist's and our own - in order to reach heart and mind. Everything is being performed within the context of one key-question: in short, where does his dislike of the image, of ordinary depiction, draw from?

Familiarization with the invisible in a world of immaterialization

It is acknowledged that on artistic level, one of the most significant features of such "photography of silence and whisper" who speaks about us by displaying *other* things is the only capable of being photo-art.

Since it does not display the meanings it wishes to depict, it cannot be described as documentary. It is art, or nothing. That is true. Another point we should underline is the interactive aspect of such a form of communication. In order to realize this type of image, we cannot trust what we see. On the contrary, we should activate, deep inside us, a process of causality with the clues that distinguished photo-artists gather for us on the "crime-scene". They collect clues and register traces, so that we can study them in peace, as the detective guesses the weight, height and sex of the individual, from a footprint on the sand. What counts most, in relation with the society of communications and particularly the mass media, in which we are all involved, is that this process renders us completely destabilized. For the first time, we are asked to act collectively and communicate through indications transmitted in a rather different and unusual manner than via impressive pictures and forms which offer fascinating optical illusions followed by others and ultimately deprive us of the ability to think. In a world where everything is being transformed into image - no matter if we are aware or unaware of the fact - with the speed our society of consumption orders, in our everyday environment, which traps our attention, what is suggested as message, starting from television, is more often virtual rather than real.

Here, we face the opposite. Since what we ought to decipher is the invisible, or rather the relationship between what we see and the invisible, for which we only occupy a clue, originally we do not know where we should look. Then, we realize that what we should do is sink deep within ourselves rather than look outside. In order to feel and comprehend, we should return towards our own reserves of vital experience, of the authentic and true we have witnessed in the first person singular, which lies silently kept in our subconscious, our memory, our desires and dreams. The picture will no longer speak for us. Looking, in order to see, is no longer sufficient. In order to feel and realize, we have to enter the particular situation and invest it with our own reserves of memory and sensitivity. With Baboussis, we have to take the place of the mental hospital residents and of the inhabitants of Greek houses, in order to face their absence. This is the only way to understand how they feel.

Such an approach, incorporating the visible within the invisible that we are invited to adopt, is an antidote to the forms of visual communication and the images, so very abundant in the world which surrounds us. Furthermore: If such visual and mental exercise proves always useful, it becomes essential in an immaterializing and increasingly impenetrable world to the superficial glance of the viewer, who does not associate seeing with observation and understanding.

American sociologist Alvin Toffler analyzed in depth, the transience from industrial materialistic society - an obsessed producer of goods, objects but also of images destined to move about - to the new electronic, immaterial society. In his book *The Third Wave* he profoundly analyzes the mechanisms of immaterialization of post-consumption society. He follows, for example, the course of money - object of exchange - since the phase of the exchange of goods to currency and present time multinational companies and globalized society. Coins and banknotes are becoming extinct and are being replaced by credit cards and personal identification numbers, which

provide access to our accounts. Notably, there are certain companies that issue their own credit cards and carry out interior monetary transactions for their clients, in fact they somehow issue currency - a privilege so far attributed exclusively to the state.

While the world of global communication of entertainment offers pleasant comfort of all types and colours, a pervasive network of supervised and interlinked institutions has created a system of management and control, which most of the times evades our perception and immediate attention, remaining undisturbed, so that it can control almost everything.

It is difficult for a photographer to depict something so impalpable as immaterialization. It is possible that his familiarization with the clues of the invisible has favoured Baboussis to find the thread's end in such Babel of contradictory signals, where the most significant things, are often the less visible. In order to describe the evolution of such a condition, Baboussis discovers a new symbol, a totem, with which we deal so often every day that we hardly even notice it. This monument of our immaterialized daily life, in one of the most globalized versions in our everyday monetary transactions, is nothing more than the ATMs (Automated Cash Machines). In 1997, Baboussis photographed frontally and in colour the "busts" of automatic cash distributors, which stand precisely as the interlink between the materialistic society of urban centres - the ones managing money - and the new mechanisms which exercise and control global economy through the electronic signal and pulse of bits. Practically, the ATMs are there in order to provide a specific service, no other than allowing people to have cash at their disposal at any time, without having to keep it in their pockets but on the contrary, by leaving it with the bank. Symbolically, behind the ATM lies the bank institution, as well as global electronic control. In a world, which has born and accepted globalization, human beings lose their identity as autonomous personalities and become digits, personal identification numbers, abstract entities. By displaying the ATMs - that is, by using them as a visible point of reference of an invisible process, away from circulation of capital which covers our financial life 24 hour basis - Baboussis invites us to reflect over the reality, where we find ourselves submerged: a reality extensively invisible, therefore unable to capture on camera. As it suits his photographic style, he discovers an object in common use, a familiar condition to the man on the street, and he selects it as both a natural point of reference and as a stimulus that could lead us all to more generalized thoughts. He continues his exploration of the associations which define financial and monetary value on one hand and invisible objects on the other; which they are nevertheless considered to be precious, as they are hidden in the crypt of a bank basement. Behind the metal shutters, lie the objects that each owner considers as valuable. If we compare the first images that Baboussis captured in mental clinics with the recent ones taken in bank basements, we realize that they are endowed with perfect circularity. The forms of the institutions constitute the visual level. "Value" is absent. The look jumps from the point of departure and, as it is hindered, returns towards the direction of the artist and of ourselves: we gaze together with him. The look recommences exploring the visual level and finally folds in its internal reserves to wonder what is missing here, and what lies beyond this very image.

**A new spatial course:
correlations and
confrontations shed
light on the look which
glances and the one
which sees**

We can consider the wall with the safety deposit boxes, either as impossibility or as challenge. We are aware of the fact that "values" are invisible, they lie behind the metal shutters, reinforced with well-made seals. We can only see the shutters, which obstruct visibility.

We might surrender and cease to imagine. We might as well convince ourselves that this is how we begin to visualize the value and power of a secret, of what lies behind and is not susceptible to common view. Once more, the sealed deposit boxes become the thread's end, the symbol through which we are able to resort to a broader perspective and discover our hidden administrative mechanisms. As Toeffler claims, "the year 2000 illiterate is not the one who does not know how to read or write, but the one who is unable to learn, unlearn and then re-learn". Like Baboussis, we must nourish our internal sight with correlations and thoughts, by poetry and passion.

In the present exhibition, Baboussis clearly selects the second alternative. This is when, the second way to "make" an exhibition, joins the game, that is, in order to shuffle the papers that the gaze has brought within his existential voyage, so as to re-suggest them to us in a variety of combinations, like a toy which is dismantled and then re-assembled again in a continuous retrospective and everlasting exploration.

Behind the world of the "innocent" objects, which control our lives, a new space opens wide, woven with fresh correlations, harmonies and antitheses, where the artist invites us to discover his own gaze, so that we can all become indefatigable, poetic and passionate detectives, capable of interweaving the discovery of reality with our own expectations and dreams.

Hence, a new course starts.

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