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## **An introduction to the work of Manolis Baboussis**

The history of photography in Greece, like every history that concerns contemporary times has generally remained deficient as far as the fields which constitute it and unformed, as far as the categories which specify it are concerned. The case of Manolis Bamboussis is particularly characteristic, from that point of view. His artistic development in the past thirty years clearly describes an essential turning in the conception of photography and art. His work participates in the reconsiderations of the age and actively influences the historical reality of a certain reflection, sensitivity or practice. Beyond any clear aesthetic criteria, his artistic practice fits that dimension in which historical discourse becomes a primary presupposition for an understanding and an evaluation of the work. Since the seventies, the visual research that defines the substance of Bamboussis artistic investigations displaces systematically the conceptual limits of a photographic practice. Throughout his journey, he develops consecutive series of works, consequent interpretative points of view and methodological hypotheses that redefine the meaning of photographic conception and play a principal role in the activation between photography and the visual arts. By means of such displacements, Bamboussis opens new perspectives and sets landmarks in the history of contemporary photography. Based on such data one can claim without exaggeration that Manolis Bamboussis is the first artist in Greece, who focuses systematically and consciously creates photography as a unique artistic practice and thesis, as a theoretically structured discourse and history, as a fulfilled expression and a material substance for a contemporary artwork.

In the generation of the seventies, in which Manolis Bamboussis is historically registered both because of his age and of the nature of his work, photography inaugurates internationally a new perspective and constitutes, for the first time in history, a determining difference through which a semantic shift in the knowledge, the practice and the history of art occurs. Photography displaces — even substitutes —, the basic paradigm, which was given until then by painting and on which the conceptual structure of the work, the philosophy of artistic practice, the determination of technical conception, the historical background of the image, the aesthetic processes of visual discourse and the relations defining in the art the notions of truth and lie and its references to reality, were based. A period in history, in which from Nadar to Bresson and from Delacroix to Rauschenberg, photography represented a new technique or technology, tool or evidence, representation or chart, graphic processing or sentimental aura of the object, an iconographic juxtaposition or reference, is left behind in order to reach the point from which photography becomes the genuine topos of the pictorial work. In Greece, as in most parts of the world, photography dynamically enters the work of younger artists since the sixties. During the first phase it enters, a) either as a model, which the visual work represents or imitates b) as the background on which a sculptural or a visual event takes place or c) as document, which represents a fact a posteriori or offers duration to a time limited activity, (like a happening or a performance) or d) as a historical or biographical object which is included in the material data of the work and is added in the range of the artist's possibilities thus extending the contemporary space of historical or personal memory, immediate reality and sensitivity, etc. Through such possibilities, photography is legitimized in the domain of visual arts as new "subject matter" and "practice", which is incorporated more and more organically into the repertoire of contemporary artists internationally. Furthermore, there are artists like Kessanlis or Samaras, who dynamically transcend the mentioned possibilities in order to mark the function of photography drastically and decisively by attributing new roles. Since then, photography is no longer a juxtaposition of images or some reference to information but matures and becomes free and autonomous, acquiring an increasingly composite, specific and autonomous aesthetic and theoretical discourse, which the following generation receives, systematically elaborates and develops into a genuinely cognitive and expressive domain for the arts and a locus of sensitivity and thought.

Ever after, the discourse of contemporary photography does not only transcend the typical limits of the visual object but both displaces and transforms the dimension of the

photographic agent, namely the aspect which accepts the lens as an eye and photography as a result of "happy instant" or "coincidence", around which the photographer hearkens, lurks or grasps it as an image hunter. Through such transition, which elevates photography from a predicate of reportage onto a subject, as far as the role of the artist is concerned, the main photographers of the generation of the seventies, either gradually or through ruptures set the basis for a much wider and sophisticated conception and process, for cognitive and conceptual procedures of the contemporary photographic work. Such transition could be considered as a fundamental "difference" in relation to what is received as photography in the realm of visual arts. A new dimension is thus internationally ascertained by a number of artists, among them Manolis Bamboussis, and together with the establishment of photography as a purely artistic, visual and theoretical praxis and practice and paves the way for a far more essential knowledge of the history and theory of photography itself, for the material and scientific definition and comprehension of its critical and theoretical discourse, for the aesthetic development and artistic differentiation of its existential range of possibilities as both photographic discourse and photographic work. One could maintain that by means of the positions and the works that determine internationally the years of the seventies, photography passes from the stage of an automatic representation or a simple reproduction of reality to a dimension that establishes a genuine presentation and an original production of meaning and signification. It passes with a difficult and complex transition from the time instant to the space of history and from exogenous impressions to an endogenous discourse of the art.

As this essay is limited within the frame of an introduction, let me insist at this point that as far as every aforementioned condition is concerned, the role of Manolis Bamboussis in Greece is particularly significant. There are exceptional artists within his generation, who use the "subject matter" or the "object" of *photography* in both multiple and original ways within the context of painting or sculpture, collage or photo-montage, installation or performance; nevertheless there is almost no-one who has tried or shown interest in passing from the domain of photography into the visual realm, not by creating "artistic" photography (something that the inter-war period commercial studios knew excellently how to do with artistry and imagination), but through the laborious route of establishing and fulfilling a genuine visual consideration and practice of photography itself. Manolis Bamboussis is possibly a soloist in Greek reality, being a genuine visual photographer with clarity and method, who manages to offer photography the dimensions of an unedited expression and integral visual artwork via his rich intellectual nature and individual course. Since the mid-eighties and thereafter several and remarkable delegates offer such perspectives; yet such endeavours and initiatives had been quite rare at their point of origin, back in the seventies. The fact that since the very start, it is the dimension of time that constitutes the terminus of his work, the existential presupposition and the metaphysical question posed, not solely as a theme of representation or as plain documentation of the city or architecture, but as genuine social concern and intellectual conception of the visual/photographic work itself. He is not satisfied with the past time of representation or documentation; he dynamically elaborates the artwork's present time and its presence within photography, the presence as photographic work and visual discourse.

As a result of his association with architecture, which he studied with pioneer architects and teachers in Italy, Bamboussis learns how to project new dimensions of space on time and simultaneously, how to seek systematically and insistently the place and the position of man within or on it. The question mark of human presence constitutes also the present of its absence. The artist's work and development within thirty years undergo a number of stages and refold throughout the folds of discourse and of image. They do not cease yet, to resound with a number of common questions and quests that retrospectively constitute constant parameters and establish a continuous and reliable relation of his work to photography itself as well as a relation of man and time. From the human prey and the abandonment of man in psychiatric institutions to the unballasted gatherings of illegal immigrants and refugees in skeletons of buildings and open spaces, from the automatic circulation of crowds in markets and harbours to the masses of audiences in football terraces, from the empty city streets to the landscapes of night, from the depths of offices, banks and boats to dancing floors, dining rooms and the amphitheatre of the Hellenic Parliament, the human presence in Manolis Bamboussis' work constitutes a response of the image, which critically identifies a tragic dilemma and poetically intensifies the feeling of absence. Space becomes a metaphysical cenotaph of social reality or a tragic landscape of absence. The artist performs on absence and through it. It is not maximalistic iconography that transcendence constitutes but, to quote a phrase of historical avant-gardes, as a *discourse on the minimal of reality*. The systematic references of the artist to cemeteries, bank

safe-deposit boxes, museum storehouses, public service archives, pharmacies, institution and hospital depositories, urban-planning lists, tax and internal revenue protocols etc., is not circumstantial. Organically a contemporary of his time, Bamboussis is an offspring of utopian architecture, of anti-psychiatry, of the denouncement of bureaucracy, penitentiary control and police inspection, which classification and identification inflict, he is a son of Deleuze, Castoriadis and Foucault. And as Foucault in the last lines of his *The Order of Things* visualizes the approaching end of anthropocentric knowledge passing like a wave on the sand and erasing the human face, it is in a similar move that Bamboussis' photography records such motion and specifies it by erases the contour of the "face" in order to open himself to the space of its absence. Photography now functions as the event of the effacement of any face from the rhetoric of direction and the discourse of space arrangement. The opening into space and such gesture, which obliterates the central theme detaches and frees photography from the realm of iconography and subverts the illusionary domination of the spontaneous and plausible eye of the photographer – they are established by Bamboussis in his work, as an original archaeological practice of visual discourse.

Space is the philosophical presupposition of such practice. The effacement functions not as a cancellation of space but as the detection and revelation of place, as a rekindling of significance and as refolding of the surface. It is the emergence of absence that critically intervenes on the image's surface, revealing the seams of a predetermined arrangement and structure, which constitute the organization of meaning. With the revelation of the semantic structure and through the seams of visuality the organization of discourse also appears, the one that registers and classifies knowledge; the artwork arrives in order to attribute significance to the present time, critically, as the surface of photographic function and poetically, as visual reality. Space, in Bamboussis' photographs is namely architecture, not solely in the primary edificial sense or urban planning, but in the wider sense of conceptual construction, of the system which defines the logos of systems, the defining correlations, the dependence of authority on man, the drawing and design of space, the space-planning as organization of meaning and the order which governs the form and function of reality. He achieves the specification of the frame of photographic practice, of knowledge as a systematic arrangement of discourse and as a detection of the boundaries of meaning. Such negotiation, between the detection and the arrangement of the boundaries of meaning, functions as a dynamic opening into the space of photography. By effacing the central theme of the image constituted by the anthropocentric authority of discourse it passes on the photographic film in order to reveal unexpected passages through the arrangements and pleats of meaning. Such passages displace conventional boundaries and functions each time, they broaden the space of action and allow the establishment of the visual event as a genuine practice of poetic discourse, beyond the metaphysics of the image.

In Manolis Bamboussis' work, such displacement and establishment of a critical visual discourse of photographic practice is fundamental both in the history of photography in Greece as well as internationally, within the frame of the quests, which since the seventies and eighties qualify photography in its relation to conceptual space and to visual discourse and found its physical and spiritual dimensions, through such wider reconsiderations. Via such perspectives, the material essence and the definition of size and scale of the work now constitute significant aspects of the art of photography, as it is not reference and representation through the image what makes the terminus of the work, but the physical and material fact of the construction and the genuine space of the viewer and the visual event. The work of Bamboussis is pioneering in Greece, as far as such dimension is concerned; he consciously and actively participates in the redefinition of the photographic artwork, together with the most remarkable European photographers. From the projection of transparencies and the performance in social spaces of the early seventies to the photographic ensembles and the reorganizations of a formalistic registration of space, from whatever is about man in social space or beyond man in the organization of social design and planning, from place as it is described by the traces of primordial enterprise to the spectacular productions of contemporary techniques, from the panoramic view of the social market to the fantasy of diffusion of scientific predominance, the work of Manolis Bamboussis both registers and analyzes, describes and transforms, reverses and renegotiates, displaces and deconstructs, reflects and challenges the boundaries of the image and the procedures of viewing, the limits of sensitivity and the protocols of meaning and thus establishes systematically and obsessively, an original and essential discourse of contemporary photography in Greece and an open critical dialogue with the prospects of contemporary art internationally.