

"The Garden"

A retrospective exhibition by Manolis Baboussis

At the Athens School of Fine Arts

Opening: Monday 24 October 2022

Exhibition: October 25 to December 15, 2022

Curator: Barbara Polla

*"You have to do to live.
I want to live.
I have a lot to do."
Manolis Baboussis*

Manolis Baboussis is a Renaissance man. He is an architect, a photographer and a pioneer in the teaching of photography in Greece. A sharp critic of consumer society, he assembles materials, sculptures and spaces, he creates drawings and installations, he is a poet and a "gardener". He is all of these and more, and as such does not belong to any exclusive circle.

He discovered photography in his student dormroom in Florence, and in that minimal, almost empty space, the "camera" (the *camera*, which also means the room in Italian) brought the whole world within his reach. In Florence, he was a student of Adolfo Natalini and Superstudio, and experienced radical architecture and deconstruction from the inside. Later, he became a fervent connoisseur of architecture and an equally fervent believer in the possibility – the necessity? – of deconstructing. Deconstruct, to live.

Planting and passing on

"The Garden"? But which garden are we talking about?

Maybe the garden of Manolis Baboussis' birthplace in Athens? The place of his first games among trees and roses?

Maybe the gardens of Florence, where the young Baboussis went to study at age eighteen, the gardens of the Villa Vespucci where he lived, the gardens of Boboli or those of the Medici Palace?

Or the gardens of the Greek islands, the island of Kea where he plants trees?

All these gardens, of course... but more specifically, it is the garden of the Athens School of Fine Arts that the title of the exhibition refers to, to the point of including this garden in the exhibition itself. Indeed, Manolis Baboussis, who was not only the founder of the School's Photography Lab (1999), the first professor of photography, and vice-rector of the school, but also an ecologist at heart and in action, one day imagines transforming the school's parking lot into a garden. With the support of the rector Georges Harvalias, Baboussis, despite the objections of the users of the parking lot, planned the garden, organized and supervised the plantings,. In any case, the garden henceforth exists, an oasis of greenery and freshness now claimed by those who opposed it: "Our idea, our garden". Neither botanical nor geometrical, the garden became an architecture soon buried under a few hundred plants and trees and roses native to Greece: an ode to wild nature -- nature which knows so well how to grow as long as it is given the freedom. In the garden, a path leads to a sort of painted wooden hut – the "temple" of the garden.

The garden is an invaluable contribution to the life of the school, a precious legacy that the artist donated to his school. Thus, the architectural plans, the lists of trees that Baboussis had planted and countless images of this garden of almost paradise will be found in the exhibition, which is intended, among other things, as a tribute to this particular creative act. Symbolically, the garden is within the exhibition.

The car park will also be revisited, but as a relic of the past, because here, at least, the garden has invaded the space and nature has won. Visitors will be able to walk through the "real" garden as well as its representation and, in the Enchanter's cottage, dream of the lectures that the teacher gave at the time, in which he detailed the works as if he had personally known the authors, of Baudelaire and Nadar, of the first avant-garde writers and artists of the 1920s, of Man Ray and the Surrealists, of all the inventors, of Walker Evans, William

Eggleston, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Graig Horsfield, Susanne Lafont, John Coplands and Jeff Wall, Louise Lawler and Sophie Calle and so many others....

Baboussis is indeed driven by the same passion for the history of photography, for architecture and for plants.

A discovery exhibition

Manolis Baboussis is a man of the present, bubbling with the desire to do, to create and to show. He is full of rage at times in the face of the limits, the walls that oppose his creativity, and full of a fierce desire, too, to bear witness to environmental and social disasters, to represent them, and to elaborate a way to think about the void.

As soon as you enter the first, immense room of the School of Fine Arts, the artist, known as a photographer, begins by deconstructing his own legend: no photography here, but drawings revealing gestures and screams, drawings like mosaic (2019-2022) no less immense than the space, specifically made for this exhibition, for this space of the School. Even when squared by the size of the sheets used – economy of means is always integrated by the artist as a component of the work – these drawings reflect the powerful gesture, both free and structured, of the man who draws, with his sticks (oil sticks), mysterious and obviously uninhabitable structures.

These are the hard-hitting works of an architect who, although desperate, is saved from despair by his imaginary journey and his irony. No suffering here: the artist not complaining, but making a statement. His charcoal lines evoke the daily clashes between the artist's thoughts and the real, they are both structures and ideas, vanishing lines and limits, the cave and its exit, war machines and cemeteries. About these recent drawings, the artist says: "These drawings are the sketches of a Paleolithic architect, nuclei of ideas, flows of energy, a scream. They represent places of coexistence, freedom and confinement." But in reality, these drawings are not sketches at all. They are monumental works in their own right, which engage the bodies of those who look at them as well as the artist's body. They engage the body without overwhelming it, because of the fragmentation of the papers which, like the fragmentation of bricks, makes the

size perfectly accessible, controllable, familiar, both to the body of the viewers and to their gaze.

There is air passing here, through the emptiness of spaces

Baboussis' large drawings are reminiscent of the exhibition "XXL - Le dessin en grand"¹ presented in 2021 at the Jenish Museum in Switzerland: an exhibition which underlined the fact that drawing has not remained on the sidelines of the trend towards large-format in contemporary art. By leaving the territory of the intimate, drawing becomes a vector of experience and often approaches, as in the case of Baboussis' drawings, painting. And the scream, once again: the artist's drawings shout. So does the poet. Or rather, he chants.

Manolis Baboussis, poet

Manolis Baboussis is indeed a prolific, if little-known, poet: *Beyond Planning*²³ brings together poems (in Greek and English) and other texts; three other recent collections reveal a free, singing, political, rhythmic poetics⁴. Chanted by the very voice of the writer, Baboussis' poems are eminently "poetic". Sometimes, as in *L'Art arrive* (2020), they are punctuated by the music of Joachim Latarjet⁵, a composer and trombonist who also accompanies the slide show of photographs devoted to the work of Baboussis's students, presented on the mezzanine along with a whole range of documentation on this work.

Baboussis' poetry is very much present in his life, in his works – a visual poetry in that context – and in the exhibition, where it seeps in everywhere. His visual poetry is wonderfully presented in the video *Flying* (2011): a boat seems to float in the sky, slowly, crossing a space of mist and clouds in a loop, opening the way to the permanent reverie of those who, like the artist, live above all in the silence of themselves – a silence which, with *Flying*, contrasts with the scansion of the

¹ https://museejenisch.ch/api/site/assets/files/1209/2021_09_dossier_de_presse_xxl_fr_vf_comprese.pdf

² Manolis Baboussis, *Beyond Planning*, Ileana Tounta Contemporary art center, ISBN

³ -618-8114-1-7, 2014; translation of poems from Greek to English: Konstantinos Matsoukas & Sofia Hester Seiradaki

⁴ Manolis Baboussis, Το αλφα βητο της κρισης, Ed. futura, 2016, ISBN 978-9609489-64-5
Manolis Baboussis, εκτος, Ed. futura, 2016, ISBN 978-960-9489-65-2

Manolis Baboussis, Βρεθηκε το μελλον, Σμιλη, 2019, ISBN 978-618-5399-18-4

⁵ <https://www.cie-dca.com/fr/les-collaborateurs/joachim-latarjet>

spoken or written words. Written on the floor, too: at the threshold of the passage between this first large room and the second, a poem is initiated that guides our steps. The first line gives it its name: *I want* (2022). An unfinished poem:

the artist wants obviously more...

Another (published) poem⁵ reads:

*"We found the future,
the past, the present*

*Without me
they don't exist*

*Bodies united, landscapes hollowed
out in the mist
they exchanged their sweat*

*I have carefully gathered
hours of pleasure and agony*

The future is uncertain".

Uncertain, unfinished and absurd

Unfinished, like the constructions that hang in the second room: large photographs of one of Greece's most open wounds. Concrete wounds. More precisely, concrete columns, future unfinished walls erected in the countryside, on the islands, everywhere. The goal is to be able to affirm that one has built, even if it is to never complete the construction nor to live in it. Once the roof is on, the building is indestructible and its existence is validated by the State.

The aesthetic is impeccable. The reality is implacable: these constructions are skeletons before the flesh even exists (*Squelettes*, 2000/2010). Alone remains Baboussis' *Vitruvian Woman* – a naked woman, body inverted, practicing yoga, in search of a meaning that is expected to

⁵ Manolis Baboussis, Βρεθηκε το μελλον, Σμίλη, 2019, Op.Cit.

come from elsewhere but which, in reality, will never come because absurdity is the queen here.

Which absurdity? The absurdity of swimming pools, which proliferate in this country, while it bathes in the most beautiful of seas. Look up and you'll see an inverted pool (a projection towards the ceiling) that taunts you from the top of the room like a ridiculous substitute for paradise – as if this useless and harmful luxury of the seaside pools had any chance of competing with the ancestral blue of the Aegean Sea. But these unfinished buildings are now looming over the sea, and perhaps even the Aegean will soon be degraded, discolored and disfigured, while it already is, more often than not, deadly.

Absurd again, but also utopian, "Baboucity" (Baboussity...), alias Monumentapolis⁶, with all its possible and imaginary museums, from the Museum of Destruction to the Museum of Ambition, from the Museum of Mediocrity to the Museum of Stereotypes, from the Museum of Desertification to the Greek National Museum of Antiquities stolen in Europe and even to the Museum of Museums. May be soon a Museum of Skeletons, too?

And as an uncertain echo to his *Skeletons*, Manolis Baboussis the architect presents some twenty sculpture-architectures (2021-2022), of stone and metal, wood and books, like a Lego game with infinite possibilities, a game of conflicts between architecture and nature: another type of "Baboucity". The materials used, all familiar to the artist, represent both nature and culture: Baboussis stages here the permanent conflict that continues to go on between concrete and wood, representing the struggle between the concrete bricks and the branches, symbols of the tree which, although imprisoned in concrete, is still and always the strongest.

But beyond the powerful symbolic content of these sculptures, they also and perhaps above all witness the knowledge and intimate relationship the architect Baboussis has with space: everything is perfectly "right", in place, the balances are playful, the imbalances well controlled and there emanates from these forms a musicality similar to that of Baboussis' poetry.

"I continue to play, like a child," says the artist. "Architects who build for real cannot remain children..." Pushing the game to the point of self-mockery, in

⁶ <https://vimeo.com/170430094>

which he excels as much as in the criticism of the world, Baboussis uses his own catalogues to support some of his sculptures. The paper of his catalogues, as well as that of a series of "beautiful books" of classical architecture, dance and anatomy, all this paper which comes from trees, gets thus, in a symbolic way, given back to them.

Photographing space, thinking the void

Manolis Baboussis, from the very beginning, has been a photographer of space and of action. A photography conceived as a tool for the documentation of any action, and a photography that transmits presence – or the idea of presence – through the presentation of empty spaces.

Thinking the void is one of the artist's great ambitions: to think it and to give it to the spectators to think.

In any case, the few humans in his photographs generally stand in space like statues, or like judges. They represent gravity – inverted gravity for "Vitruvian Woman". They are looking. One can almost hear them thinking in the silence, as in the large series of black and white photographs entitled *Athens* (1985-1996). These analogue photographs of Athens reflect both an extraordinary technical work on light and a merciless political analysis of the city's dereliction – of what the critic Apostolis Artinos calls "the autistic stagnation of the Greek authorities and institutions with regard to the evolution of the City". Once again, this perfect marriage between form and symbolic content is typical of Baboussis' work, with each one giving precedence to the other, depending on whether the viewer focuses on the beauty of the form or on the strength of the "message".

Baboussis' photographs illustrate the permanent crisis situation in which Greece has found itself for decades, the loss of urban landmarks, and the mourning of an ignored past and the beauty of its remains. In doing so, they also highlight the functioning of the country's institutions. "Being Greek," for Baboussis, means "living in a country of great beauty and inaccuracy. Athens is a living museum of irrational constructions, of restorations indefinitely postponed, of wounds indefinitely repeated." And of unfinished walls.

Baboussis' work is far from the classic documentary photography of Frédéric Chaubin or Iwan Baan, presented for example by Elias Redstone in the exhibition

"Concrete Islands"⁷, while Baboussis is an eminent representative of what we have named and defined as "emotional architecture"⁸.

Of walls and chairs

A cinderblock wall – this wall dear to the artist, (*Untitled*, first presented in 2014 in Ileana Tunta's gallery⁹) – seems to close (*wall in*) the rest of the exhibition. This wall, as destabilizing as it is solid, forces the viewer to stop, before continuing: looking towards the cinderblock wall, a series of chairs are aligned. The chairs are recurrent in Manolis Baboussis' universe, objects that in the artist's hands become both parodic and iconic, These chairs on which one sits to work, to exchange, to eat, to drink, to admire the show – but why sit in front of a wall? But in reality, aren't we always sitting in front of a wall? And isn't dialogue always primarily an inner monologue?

On another wall close to that wall, a kind of sketchbook unfolds, a logbook that is intended to present neither the confinement in silence nor the very finitude of one's own gaze, of one's own thought, but on the contrary the extraordinary creative richness of the artist, over the years past and to come. Sketches, drawings, photographs, architectures, obsessions, references, texts: an unprecedented abundance of works of all kinds and from all periods.

Then, the last meal. A *mise en abyme*: in front of a large photograph – an already famous work by the artist, representing a table still set, under a representation of the last meal (*Untitled*, 2003) – another table, therefore. But to make it clear that this time "it's really the end", the parodic objects known as "chairs" are placed *on* the table. The meal can no longer take place. The possibility of eating together is definitely gone.

In parallel to this last meal of Baboussis, a large video projection tells of another world where food and conviviality are essential: this world called "the world of art", whose obsolescence the artist criticizes with derision yet tenderness. This

⁷ <https://www.e-architect.com/exhibitions/concrete-islands>

⁸ Paul Ardenne and Barbara Polla, *Emotional architecture, matter to think*, Ed La Mulette, 2011.

⁹ Manolis Baboussis, *Beyond Planning*, Ileana Tounta Contemporary art center, Op.cit.

video projection, like most of the photographer's videos, is in fact a fluid slide show of 180 photographs presenting, in chapters, the meetings around the works and the spaces dedicated to art, but also what art generates in the way of travel, of sometimes fertile, sometimes perverted encounters, receptions, buffets, white tablecloths, disguises, servants... All these extravagant human and material means that make art and its beauties circulate around the world.

Other videos of the "slide show" type present still other aspects of the artist's creative universe. Baboussis accumulates images, he accumulates works, while criticizing this accumulation in which he himself participates. Creating, building and deconstructing, representing, again and again. Baboussis is not done with creating and the two of us are already talking about his next retrospective exhibition, in about ten years from now...

The garden is back

Manolis Baboussis, shows us the car park he has *deconstructed*. The atmosphere is nocturnal, nightmarish: the car park attendant seems to be installed in an underground panopticon. Baboussis' car – the car he used twenty years ago and parked there when he taught at the Athens School of Fine Arts, a Citroën Picasso Xsara from the year 2000 – sits abandoned, with its lights on. Baboussis' Xsara is reminiscent of Thomas Lindvig's BMW, presented in Geneva in the exhibition "Cars & Bikes" (2010¹⁰). This Xsara reminds us that it is not alone and that if Baboussis has indeed replaced the car park and its attendant with a lush garden, the global threat of car parks continues to grow and this threat could well affect even the very sites of art and culture. Unless one day the trend is reversed: one may always dream. In the meantime, Baboussis smiles as he creates, especially when he presents *Forest Delivery* (2006-2012), a drawing in which dozens of bikers each bring a tree, as pizza delivery men would deliver pizzas... Isn't Baboussis a biker himself? Perhaps he will arrive at the opening of his own exhibition on his yellow BMW motorbike with a cypress tree in his arms, at his side for life and death?

¹⁰ <https://www.we-find-wildness.com/2010/06/galerie-analix-forever-geneva-26-june2010/>

On the other side of the parking lot, a recent photographic series (2022), shown in part in the exhibition 100 YEARS FOREVER in Geneva¹¹: trees growing and blooming on the island of Kea, many of which the artist planted himself. These photographs represent the "green current" of Baboussis' life and art, the real and represented garden, exterior and interior. The "green", a "Baboussian" obsession takes more and more place in his world as in ours. But beyond the political message, eminently "green", the eye touches, devours, aspires and is inspired by the beauty of the forms and colors, the shape of the very old trees whose branches twist against the sky, the tender colors of the newborn leaves in the spring light. The impressionistic beauty of these photographs becomes haptic: the viewer literally walks on the island of Kea, the sea breeze on his skin, he walks in the footsteps of Baboussis, enjoys nature and plants with him, in the hope of making the future a little less uncertain. These photographs seem to crown the artist's abundant plastic, political and poetic universe with the power of the tree. The tree, in all its forms and in all its states, which crosses time well beyond our own existence. The tree-king.

In one of the large projection rooms of the Athens School of Fine Arts, Baboussis shows yet another video, a series of photographs of the School's garden, with a text, subtitled in English and Greek, read in voice-over – the artist's own voice. The text ends with this:

The death of the artist means that he no longer defines his own work. But an artist is also everything that is not his work.

The artist may die, of course, but "The Garden" will continue to live, in another temporality, before it too will die – and then rebirth from its ashes, a vegetal Phoenix that not even the Greek forest fires may completely destroy.

The invisibility of the other, a Baboussian palimpsest

The most moving part of the exhibition is the end – the end in the exhibition space, the beginning in the artist's life. We are in Volterra and Manolis Baboussis, who is barely twenty years old, discovers the psychiatric asylum that will change the way he and we – so he hopes – will look at others in the future: our view of those who are called mad.

¹¹ <https://www.sharingperama.com/news/categories/news>

Baboussis' first steps in his artistic creation? To make work with those who were then considered as "human waste". As Daniela Palazzoli writes in *Manolis Baboussis Photographic Works 1973-2003*¹², it was a matter of "perceiving - and making perceived – the invisible in a dematerialized world." As the architect of the void that he is, Baboussis photographs the spaces of the asylum, these witnesses of ordinary madness. The empty spaces, the empty beds, as well as the faces, the gazes and the bodies. But if the spaces are empty, all the elements of this series are also powerfully incarnated. Baboussis photographs both reality and thought, the very existence of the photographed subject. He welcomes these thoughts, these existences, in the center of his images.

"A traumatic experience," says Baboussis. "But by seeking the right distance I was able to offer a space to a form of beauty. And since then, I remain anchored in the void, anchored in absence, wear and tear, abandonment; I still cling to obstacles: walls, loss, institutions, barricades, injustice. And my "madmen" today are all the *others*, the different, the hypersensitive, the sick, the dreamers, the honest, the undocumented, the unemployed – they are always the same and they are always there, them and their traces, behind my images, in my obsessions, in the confinement and in nature. They are the ones who give voice to the trees in my works, they are the ones who look at us, from behind the horizons."

Shown for the first time, a large photograph (*Untitled*, 2018) floats at the very end of "The Garden", at the end of the poem written on the floor, closing "The Garden". A door to somewhere else. The door of a hospital: the "Sotiria" Hospital in Athens (literally, Sotiria means "rescue") where the artist's mother was treated, in April 2018. The door itself is damaged, repaired, its handle held in place by transparent plastic pipes, those pipes used for infusions. A door that seems as if covered in bandages. This is how things get repaired. This is how humans get repaired, too.

Manolis Baboussis, with his images and his poetry, has always tried to repair the world, not without shedding light – a raw light – on the willful wounds that we inflict on it. Repairing the world? In "The Garden", the artist-teacher tries once again to have his students "repair" it, as they are in the process of (de)constructing the future for us all. The other, for Baboussis, is the future, too. He watches it coming.

¹² *Manolis Baboussis Photographic Works 1973-2003*, exhibition catalogue, ΕΜΣΤ 2003, ISBN 960-87329-7-2

Barbara Polla Athens and Geneva, February
- July 2022.