

Secrets, skeletons, and a celebration of truth

If one spans forty years of incessant and significant artistic production, the heart of the matter is that one should be able to handle the scale of the experience and of the information that constantly grows, to avoid the traps experience has in store and to invent a way of reevaluating in toto what one has achieved up to date, beyond the work of archiving or an archaeology of one's self. One should be conscious about one's work, in order to be able to doubt it. By mentioning doubt I do not mean insecurity, but the space one eventually leaves to the work allowing it to bloom, change and be analyzed, and as a rule evolve without its course being necessarily synonymous with progress, but rather with continuity.

Manolis Baboussis is such a case: since the mid-70's he continually produces works in a recognizable, articulate manner, regularly presenting them to the public through a method that allows for their dynamic reinterpretation without betraying the artist's intentions at the moment of the work's realization.

Notably, in 2003, thirty years after his first works and for his first retrospective in a museum (which also happens to be the first photography exhibition to be hosted in the –then newly founded– National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens) Manolis Baboussis chose to deal with the retrospective as a new perspective for the work, and to propose it as such to the audience. In that perspective, the photographs' placing was not chronological, or according to typology, or formally narrative in the traditional sense of the term. Yet, the exhibition's conception allowed semantic associations between the works, bringing the spectator, as much as the artist himself, closer to the understanding of each image's selection processes. In such a condition for example, a bank's locked safe deposit boxes, shot in 2001 could be interpreted through the rigidly made beds of a psychiatric ward, shot in 1973, bringing face to face the concepts of enclosure and confinement, as much as the absence/presence of

man and his activity.

The 1973 shots are the first complete photographic oeuvre Manolis Baboussis will present, which emerges not merely out of an interest in photography but is combined with his studies under the avantgarde architect Adolfo Natalini, the study of music he carries out during the same period, as well as his interest in Franco Basaglia's antipsychiatry. This work in installation form, presents through a slide show views of the psychiatric clinic's empty architectural spaces and portraits of the patients holding musical instruments, used in the context of an improvisational musical act in the aforementioned spaces; the slides were accompanied by music along with a series of architectural plans where the walls of the institution were gradually abstracted up to its definitive dematerialization and its elevation to a monument – or, better, an anti-monument of human confinement. In this series of photographs shot in Volterra, our fascination is not restricted to the subject matter itself; the architectural spaces are presented in color shots, frontally, in a detached manner, and with the lack of the human subject underlining the trace of its presence: in these images, the open windows, the made beds, the tables and the chairs do not allow spaces to be neither unoccupied nor abandoned, neither depersonalized nor personal. On the contrary, they reflect the doubleness of their residents, the psychically ill who are under the auspices of a social institution which nevertheless keeps them apart from society.

It is significant at this point to mention some facts highlighting the radicalism of this first work by Manolis Baboussis. The 70's are quite possibly one of the most defining periods for art history in the postwar era. It is the decade during which many of the avant-gardes will appear or establish themselves and will give new impetus to the art of photography: conceptual artists like John Baldessari, Bas Jan Ader, Edward Ruscha, Ger Van Elk and others already use photography as a means for realizing concept-works; performance art which relies on photography and video for its documentation traverses a very dynamic phase; photography itself starts conquering internationally

a place that will bring it closer to the fine arts and will make it diverge from its function as a reproductive medium converting it to a creative one. In these circumstances, Baboussis seems to understand the possibilities as well as the dynamics of this new medium.

It also bears mentioning that none of the aforementioned conceptual artists had realized through photography an approach to architecture that will not take place before the so-called "Düsseldorf school" that will form around Bernd and Hilla Becher, who, nevertheless, start teaching at the School of Fine Arts in 1976, while their students begin showing their first works in the early 80's.

In contrast to the confined, colored architectural spaces of the Volterra psychiatric clinics, we have the black and white photos of Athens, spanning the decade from 1985 to 1995. In these pictures Baboussis presents the city of Athens on the brink of huge changes. The first big immigrant wave reaches the city; big new infrastructure works change its aspect and keep the city in turmoil for a long time before redefining its structure. It is this city of Athens that the artist considers as a monument to itself and its inhabitants as critical spectators of this museum on the move. In his photos, Baboussis does not outline typical historic spots of the city, nothing that could promote its identity on first sight. All elements employed for the usual representation of the capital are foreclosed by Baboussis' lens and replaced by banal images of the more casual spots and neighborhoods, from the rooftops of Athena str., to the Galatsi and Kerameikos districts, Aioulou str. and the Kavala Highway. The shots' protagonists, wherever they appear, are presented in pause, as if they have stopped all activity in order to pose, or as if occupied only with the attentive observation of their whereabouts, as if adopting immobility in order to monitor the movement around them. The human subjects in these images do not seem participants in any given system, whose record could be some kind of genre art. They seem to find their upright standing position due to the weight of their own presence in the midst of a city and a society that quite possibly marginalize them.

At about the same time, Baboussis starts a new series of portraits that defines a different approach, portraits of employees with their picture taken during work and at their desks. In these works, space and the human subject merge into a cohesive whole and the employees appear trapped behind their desks without any possibility of escape. Yet, they pose for the eye of the camera, and the camera imprints a psychological profile that does not belong to the subjects but to the space they occupy.

If one studies carefully Baboussis' work, one will observe that despite the most frequent lack of human subjects, his images are typically deeply anthropocentric and that objects and spaces function either metaphorically or metonymically in relation to the human body as much as in relation to man as social expressivity; the Busts series, realized in the last years of the 90's, is a telling example: Busts are the fronts of ATM cash dispensers which the artist systematically shoots not only in Athens but around the world. With Busts one could say that Baboussis realizes his most strictly typological approach to a theme; yet, we quickly understand that what interests him is not the typology of outward characteristics as much as the signaling of common functions; what fascinates him is how this metallic torso we encounter everywhere may unite everybody's economic potential with the world and with the complex mechanics of a bank; how these busts come together and are unified in a vast network capable of coordinating every kind of economic exchange. The busts are but apparent hardware mechanisms of distribution behind which usually lie invisible the different mechanisms and systems of accumulation.

The concept of accumulation is going to preoccupy Baboussis in all his subsequent work – exemplified in a diversity of manners and through various perspectives; accumulation will become for the artist the sign of the times, the absolute expression of a capitalist society for which mass has more to do with the concentration of (all kinds of) power than its distribution. From archives abandoned in full disarray and the absolute order of bank safe deposits which he calls

Secrets, to the packed cemeteries and empty entertainment venues or the motorcycle spare parts warehouses he terms Possessions, these photographs constitute a topology of vanity that lies closer to paradox and existentialism than to abstract extravagance. Manolis Baboussis will occupy himself intensely –and not by accident– with shooting spaces that designate borderlines of socializing or meeting points, points of waiting, stasis and movement. He takes pictures of waiting rooms, reception lobbies and ports where ships are ready to receive passengers, pictures of dining areas and offices, to arrive at pictures of empty Judgment spaces. In this series of judgment spaces, Baboussis photographs various empty conference rooms – from courtrooms to academic senates, ecclesiastical councils and the Parliament. These images form a record of institutional deliberation centers, a kind of neuronal mapping out which in its turn forms the basis of a value system relying on the binaries right/wrong, good/evil, beautiful/ugly. It is the image of a space where ethics is officially formulated, democracy is expressed, liberty is safeguarded and where human presence is not suggested as in the case of the Volterra psychiatric clinics, but is denoted by seats, witness boxes and microphones in accord with the austerity of the photographs which completely dedramatises those spaces and severs them from any potential of narrative continuity.

Continuity and its impossibility is the theme Manolis Baboussis deals with in his next projects, as in the video *Promise*, made of movie production logos. In contrast to the case of the Judgment images, where the spectator's identification with space rarely happens through experience and is almost impossible through an image, this video has a way of creating an intimate connection with the majority of spectators who recognize instantly the logo and identify it with the anticipation of the movie, the expectancy for the spectacle. Yet in Baboussis' work, which is presented in a loop, the movie never starts and expectation proves fruitless though not disappointing: the logo's pomp satisfies the thirst for spectacle and for escapade. His last photographic project, presented in the Benaki Museum in 2010, bearing the title *Skeletons*, works in a similarly paradoxical

manner: with *Skeletons* Baboussis returns to landscape; this time not the urban Athenian one, but that of an island, recording a series of construction sites that remain unfinished, since there are no walls. Those constructions, lingering between the half-begun and the half-finished, stand like contemporary relics suggesting the austerity and grace of ancient temples. Still, they remain unsolicited interventions in a natural environment whose idiosyncrasies are those of the Greek island's austere scenery: the sparse undergrowth, the dry-stone walls, the ragged beaches and rocks. These Doric skeletons hit the plate as monuments of an unfulfilled attempt at completion and at the same time as demands to legitimize environmental intervention, human arbitrariness and violence against the natural landscape, and the trespassing against its organic state. Baboussis' camera records, in the name of the spectator, the success of human failure appearing on a balance structured midway between the initial aspiration and the final leftover .

Through *Skeletons*, Baboussis restores his appeal for a new architecture; this appeal is also the basis of his current exhibition. During his career, that spans almost forty years, Manolis Baboussis has never stopped reflecting on, designing and making architecture. It is a fact that in Greece there is the famous dictum "You are what you declare yourself to be", whose worst expression turns into "You have to declare yourself as something, if you want to be anything at all". Baboussis is registered as a photographer in the artistic world of Greece, as professor and vice-Rector of the Athens School of Fine Arts (resigning from both positions in 2013), and as a close collaborator of Jannis Kounellis, with a vast body of work, heterogeneous and complete, which has yet to be exhibited. At this point, all those drawings and sketches retain an analogy with Fernando Pessoa's trunk: though the heteronymous creators are replaced by anonymous artists. Manolis Baboussis' anonymous artists are liberated from constrictions of expression that consist in declaring an identity, as much as in denying another one; if not the caustic critics of a disappointing reality, then the architects of utopia, they negotiate the terms of cohabitation within a society apathetically observing its discontents.

The anonymous ones suggest new monuments and institutions: the National Museum of Contemporary Robbery, offering theft an official position in history, the Tourist Bus for a tour into corruption, the Nothing Shop, the architectural monument that is simultaneously a crane and gallows, fountains with microphones instead of water sprouting. Anonymous artists today present Baboussis' artistic practice –drawing, architecture, discourse, and sculptural installation– as a field that allows the world's reconstruction and the articulation of his work as a whole.

All those drafts define the preparatory sketches and models of an imaginary city as much as of a real society, on whose account Manolis Babousis defines communication as a cement wall rising upon the fragile legs of a wooden chair: an anti-monument of lack and weakness, of inactivity and inadequacy; a monument of interrupted communication which in Baboussis' city will be celebrated – as he mentions in one of his poems appearing for the first time in public:

"On the second of April the truth will be celebrated
on the model of April's fool
a truth will be spoken by everyone,
the press and the politician
we will search to find it
in our city
in our beloved Babou-city"

Alexios Papazacharias, art historian