The Human Footprint:

Narrative Events in the Photography of Manolis Baboussis

Manolis Baboussis has often pointed out the value of written semeiosis. His photographs write to demarcate difference and create visibility out of subjects conventionally treated as banal, mundane or trivial. Trained as an architect in Florence at the time of the radicalism of the Superstudio group, Baboussis thinks of photographs as actions turned into images: from patients in Italian psychiatric asylums playing makeshift musical instruments in the early 1970s to recent images of empty parliament seats, these are narrative events that point to action rather than stasis. His work can be classified as modernist; concerned with humans in a world marked by constant industrial development, aware of the singularity – and the autonomy – of the photographic code within the continuum of the visual arts, self-referential in many respects and faithful to film rather than digital photography. Most importantly, Baboussis's work does not legitimise itself outside the viewer's presence. The act of seeing as contribution to the work's implementation is poignantly thematised in the last section of this exhibition, which is thematically organised to address these concerns: the remaining four sections feature deserted construction sites, games of space, ornaments, and institutions in crisis respectively.

Baboussis conjures images as riddles to prompt narratives, as open questions that do not impose or manipulate a single answer, but invite the viewer to respond individually. Their emphasis lies in the asking, during which the viewer transforms into an inquiring subject that structures the act of seeing into a process of making meaning. The naked man's image in the sea who turns his back to the viewer to look at an X-ray (circa 2005) mobilises a narrative that would rarely occur in front of an empty landscape. The questions this image promulgates, the problematic intentionality of the subject, the open potentiality in the evolution of the scene (what is the man going to do next?) unravels time within the frame – otherwise thought of as frozen – propelling it into the future. The image is striking for its self-referential quality: the X-ray too is a photograph restricted to one subject only; the interior of the human body. Vivid colour is contrasted to black and white; nude flesh is contrasted to bones as the underlying *memento mori*. A similar contrast, this time between dead and living flesh, is evident in this exhibition in the photograph of Jannis Kounellis reclining on the floor, posing in front of chunks of meat hanging from the wall, an installation in his individual art exhibition in Attis Theatre in December 2005.[1] Exhibited on the walls of an art gallery these chunks substitute for the art exhibit, a playful take on the concept of the art exhibition altogether, which also infers the sweeping effect of a capitalist art market in the process of making art. Baboussis likes to play with conventions regarding space: in a series of black and white images he makes office workers pose standing on top of their desks. He often avoids titles that would tamper with the work's openness. In a series of urban images he produced in the mid 1980s he used irrelevant titles, such as street names for themes shot on top of a terrace deck.

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[1] Bambousis closely collaborates with Kounellis by photographing his exhibitions and art installations.

Humans are not the focus of Baboussis's work, yet, paradoxically, it is deeply anthropocentric. The rows of empty beds prepared for patients in a psychiatric hospital displayed here on video (1973) metonymically recall human presence. Again, they single out ambiguous moments to suggest an open narrative: have the beds already been used and remade? Or are they waiting to be occupied? One cannot help but think of the indentation bodies will leave or have left on the impeccable whiteness of these sheets. Human presence is also suggested in the images of chairs lining the walls in power institutions, such as the Academy, the Holy Congregation and the Parliament, which belong to his recent output. Photographed in a state of empty tidiness, the neatly laid table of his 'Last Supper' reverses the humbleness of the religious scene as an archetype: it is a table laid for powerful humans; spirituality gives way to institutions and decision-making. Or, in its enigmatic narrative openness the photograph may well be pointing out that in church history the Last Supper was the first conference of the founding agents of a mighty institution.

Metonymy is seminal in Baboussis's work; pieces of furniture for him are metonymical, not metaphorical of human presence; they do not suggest substitution of bodies, they suggestively evoke them, as in the shape of empty chairs which recalls that of a reclining figure. Automatism implies human touch in the pressing of a button, a repository of human footprints that prompt a series of narrative transactions. He still thinks of machines as a modern vice, as the cancellation of human intimacy, but it is a cancellation that mobilises stories.

Baboussis's photographic metonymies turn common urban features into concise heterotopias. A much featured section within his oeuvre is a series of ATM 'busts' which he started photographing in the mid 1990s, around the time they first appeared in the streets of Athens. In this exhibition Baboussis develops the theme of (monetary) transaction into images of safe deposit boxes, which hide their content from the public eye. Timeless and uneventful, if not indifferent, they nevertheless record actions with substantial narrative potential, the locking away of private possessions individuals feel are too precious to keep in their home and which they do not really use. The vault in which the safe deposit boxes are kept is a liminal space between the private and the public. Baboussis points out the uncanny, those visual mythologies which he deconstructs with a flair similar to that of Barthes. The deserted construction sites featured here are a violation against the landscape unique to Greece. He does not take viewers by the hand to reveal gruesome fits of horror, but the banal mysteries of their everyday lives.

Following Flaubert, Baboussis thinks of architecture as human presence. He treats the swift and arbitrary modernisation of cities like Athens with suspicion, for sweeping away previous layers of human existence. Athens for him is a problem, not an ideal, a city of profound unreason. Photographed from above it imposes a catching uniformity; it is the same grid of blocks that keeps being repeated filling out the entire frame. Baboussis's Athens does not emerge by means of digitisation, which he treats with scepticism; its reality is offered in analogical means that preclude fictionalisation. It is not Charisiadis's aesthetically compelling rows of tables photographed from above either, but a problematic urban texture in which the eye asphyxiates; the only escape is outside the frame. 'The same landscape, copied out, resumes to the horizon, to the setting sky' writes Seferis of island imagery in 1935, thinking of the viewer's eye moving freely in space. Transferred into an urban context Seferis's line can only point to a dystopia. On the printed photograph, Athens has turned

into an urban wallpaper. He develops the theme of the crammed frame in a series of variations: the sea of crosses in a graveyard, photographed from exactly the same angle as Athens, used machine parts filling a warehouse to the brim, a flower shop smothered in colour or the front of a shop selling bags.

The emphasis this exhibition lays on the act of seeing points to the seminal role Baboussis attributes to the viewer as an agent included in his pictures. He records viewers of artworks or, more interestingly, of empty walls, a scene of nativity where shepherds tend to the new-born baby, a crowd milling on top of a construction site to watch a football match or the backs of five men in suits standing on a railway bridge looking at the track. These images witness the act of seeing as curiosity, as forming the question that will turn visual signs into a code, into a text to be deciphered and understood individually, as a mythical text.

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