

The work of Voula Papaioannou (Lamia, 1898 – Athens, 1990) has been classed within the so-called “humanitarian photography” that abounded in Europe in the 1940s, around the time of the Second World War. However, the collections in her archive give grounds to talk of an articulated documentary project, with criteria that transcend more nostalgic or dramatic representations.

VOULA PAPAIOANNOU CABINET

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Voula Papaioannou Cabinet, organised by La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in collaboration with the Benaki Museum of Athens and the Luis Seoane Foundation in A Coruña, is the first exhibition to be held in Spain on Voula Papaioannou.

It seeks to shed light on the photographer's work criteria, her iconography and storylines and the persistence of certain methodologies which reveal some of her thematic cycles. Hence the exhibition presentation, which invokes the contact prints preserved in her photographic archives.

*VOULA PAPAIOANNOU,
A GREEK WOMAN PHOTOGRAPHER*

Fani Konstantinou

Voula Papaioannou (1898-1990) is one of the few representatives of Greek photography who, thanks to the variety of subject matter, the consistency and quality of her work, can stand alongside the most internationally renowned photographers of her time. She worked in her country, discreetly but with an approach of her own when it came to the choice and the aesthetics of her photographic subjects. Throughout her career she portrayed the Greek landscape and antiquities in harmony with the inhabitants. However, the outbreak of war and the resulting overthrow it caused on the lives of her fellow citizens, acted as a powerful motive and brought out a humanitarian approach to her work. The common man in his obstinate everyday struggle to carry on living, became her primary subject in the difficult times of the German Occupation and the post-war years.

Born in Lamia, a city in the central region of continental Greece, Voula Papaioannou was brought up according to the principles of a bourgeois Greek provincial family. She was a kind, discreet, grateful, consistent and hardworking person, with a very broad education and culture, but at the same time, with a keen sense of dedication to others and to her country. She was nearly ten years old when her family moved to Athens. Her acute interest in painting brought her to study at the School of Fine Arts. As she herself said, she loved the plastic arts, archaeology, music, literature and travelling. In 1926, she married the scholar Ioannis Zervos. Although their life together lasted barely 11 years, she always spoke with admiration for her husband's personality and intellectual prestige.

Voula Papaioannou's artistic concerns were expressed through the art of photography around the year 1935. By that time photography was established in Athens on both a professional and an amateur level. In the photographic studios of the capital, the bourgeoisie had its artistic portraits taken by

masters of the genre; photographic exhibitions were held in the city's central venues; articles in the press commented positively on the "New Art" or doubted it, while the printing of photographs in illustrated magazines had started to become increasingly popular. Regarding photographers' choices of subjects, antiquities were always of foremost interest, with an unflagging market demand. At the same time, the Greek landscape was photographically depicted in academic compositions with a tendency to idealisation. Images of the archaeological monuments, the landscape and its inhabitants were used by the Vice-Ministry of Press and Tourism to project Greece abroad, as a small yet dynamic country, worthy of its ancient legacy.

It was Alexandros Filadelfeas, a prominent archaeologist, who offered an outlet to Voula Papaioannou's desire to become seriously involved in photography. He commissioned her to illustrate the objects held in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens and the Acropolis Museum with the intention of having them printed as quality postcards. With the guidance and collaboration of Panos Yeralis—a well-known Athenian photographer who had introduced her into the art of photography—Voula Papaioannou started photographing the museum exhibits with a medium-format Speed Graphic camera. Her shots were academic and sought to highlight the plasticity of the statues. At the same time, she attempted for the first time to depict the Greek landscape. In 1935, she visited Santorini and Mykonos in the company of her teacher Panos Yeralis. Her works from these two Cycladic islands, with gentle gradations of tones, stand out for their harmonious composition but fail to portray the intensity of the space and the dramatic nature of the Aegean sunlight. Concerning Athens' urban landscape, she depicted the antiquities, central locations of the city, neoclassical-style public buildings and Byzantine churches, with a confident view and in command with the principal rules of composition.

In general, we could say that Voula Papaioannou's early photographic studies feature among the good examples of the period though they do not foreshadow the powerful vision as

it was to be revealed in her photographs on social themes in the following decade.

On the 28th of October 1940 war broke out officially in Greece, when Mussolini's ultimatum demanding the surrender of the country was denied by the Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas with a resounding "NO". This act of resistance was followed by the invasion of the Italian army across the Albanian border. Voula Papaioannou realised that through her camera she had the ability to witness historic events. While many of her colleagues left for the front, she stayed with the civilian population of Athens and decided to dedicate herself to photo journalism by focusing on the changes that were taking place in the physiognomy and the life of the city. Among the subjects she depicted, are the sandbags in windows and the trenches created to protect people from the bombings, war posters placed to raise morale and posters announcing theatre revues that ridiculed the supposed invader of the country. At the same time, through a series of images, she narrated the recruitment of men who had to dress up as soldiers from one day to the other. She approached them discreetly, and without heroic outbursts captured the emotional tension on their own faces and those of their relatives. She also recounted the effort made by women to gather and send off clothes to the front, and the reception, care and distraction of the first wounded soldiers in the hospitals of the Hellenic Red Cross. In her pictures, the young people with frost-bites and amputated legs emerge as the central figures, while nurses and volunteers show the spirit of solidarity not only of the humanitarian organisations but of that time period as a whole. These series heralded the prominent position Voula Papaioannou will acquire in the field of social photography.

The German army invaded Greece on the 6th of April 1941 and a few days later Athens surrendered to the invader. Life in the city changed dramatically. The lack of food became noticeable as of the summer of 1941 due to the blockade of German-occupied territories by the British fleet. The situation worsened when the conqueror in order to secure the supply of his troops resorted to the requisitions of



Group 11



Group 18



Group 1



Group 20

means of transport, the blockades and confiscations of agricultural products. In the collective memory the German Occupation of Athens is synonymous with hunger, which in the hard winter of 1941-1942 turned into a famine. The victims were the elderly and children of the weaker classes. Mortality, and especially that of infants, increased while several diseases spread. Through her photographs, Voula Papaioannou participated in a secret mission to denounce the crime that was being committed in the Greek capital. Contravening the prohibitions set by the Germans, with the guidance of her good friend Amalia Lykourezou, head of the Near East Foundation (NEF) and under the protection of the Swiss chargé d'affaires, Franco Brenni, she penetrated into the hospitals and photographed children and adults that hunger had brought on the verge of death. These pictures found their way abroad through humanitarian organisations and voiced the pressing need for the dispatch of urgent aid. "Those who held the keys of isolation," wrote Marcel Junod, representative of the International Red Cross in Greece, "didn't hesitate to act generously. They've seen the photos of the children of Athens." When the first food aid arrived, Voula Papaioannou followed with her camera the complex mission of distributing the parcels. She photographed canteens set up in spaces organised for this purpose and systematically documented the operation of Dairy Centres in Athens and Piraeus.

In 1943, when the photos had already achieved their purpose, she asked the engraver Yannis Kefalinos to make an album with the dramatic and powerful material she had in her possession, convinced that she should bestow it on her country as part of its history. The *Black Album*, as its creators called it, contained 83 photos attached to 56 pages of black card, without captions or any text, other than two verses of Hecuba's lament in Euripides' tragedy *The Trojan Women*, "What woe must I suppress, or what declare? What plaintive dirge shall I awake?" vv 110-111.

On Liberation Day (12 October 1944), Voula Papaioannou went out into the streets to depict the outbursts of joy and the

celebrations of the Athenians. But she soon withdrew from the festivities and headed for the Gestapo jail on Merlin Street, based nearby the Parliament, to capture the messages written on the walls by the prisoners sentenced to death. However, her camera did not illustrate the bloody clashes of the civil war that broke out in Athens in December 1944, between the state military forces, backed by the British, and the Greek People's Liberation Army (known in Greek by the initials ELAS). Its catastrophic consequences are evident in her views of a mutilated cityscape, the macabre identification of bodies exhumed from mass graves and the return of hostages taken by the ELAS.

After the end of the war, Greece, in order to get back on its feet, received foreign aid from the UN and financial support from the USA. Voula Papaioannou was appointed head of the photographic section of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). During this period she worked intensely and creatively, travelling all over the country and producing a significant part of her work. She consistently followed the guidelines set by her employer, which aimed both to document living conditions in the countryside and to provide proof of the aid given (distribution of clothes, temporary medical practices, delivery of farm machinery). At the same time, like so many other great photographers who worked under similar conditions, she overcame the visual constraints and turned her camera towards barefoot children, stone-faced women in mourning, ruined villages, barren land thus creating the image of post-war Greece.

Subsequently, in 1947-1948, together with other Greek photographers, she collaborated with the American Mission for Aid in Greece (AMAG), the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) and other government agencies, while civil war spread throughout the country. From 1950 to 1965, in the spirit of optimism that prevailed throughout the world after the end of the war, Voula Papaioannou turned again to the depiction of the Greek landscape, and more specifically, that of the Aegean islands, which were then presented as an ideal holiday destination.

Her work, as a whole, is valued as an important historical document even though it does not immortalise crucial events, personalities from the public sphere, or war conflicts. With discretion, respect and restrained emotional involvement, she focused on the common man who, in silence and with great strength of spirit, bears the burden of circumstances. She successfully captures glances, expressions, gestures, which insinuate rather than record, move rather than recount. Thanks to her photographic virtues, such as her austerity of expression and descriptive detail, her subjects often acquire timelessness and reflect faith in human power as well as the optimism stemming from subversive situations.

After donating her archive to the Benaki Museum in Athens in 1976, her forgotten work has been retrieved and re-evaluated, in the context of a more general effort to study the course of Greek photography. Voula Papaioannou occupies a prominent place among the representatives of humanitarian photography in Greece. At the same time she stands on a footing with the internationally famous practitioners of her time who focused on the people in the belief that their work would make the world a better place.

THE BLUE DOSSIERS

Jorge Blasco Gallardo

The meaning of photographic practice must be sought in that practice itself before being looked for in the images it produces and in the social uses it fuels. This meaning is first structured by the successive processes that photography brings into play: holding a camera in front of the face or against the chest, framing the image in the viewfinder, pressing the shutter release, are forms of encounter with the self as much as with the world; just like, in another way, the choices of developing—or having a photo developed—of looking at it, commenting on it, or on the contrary hiding or even destroying it.

—Serge Tisseron

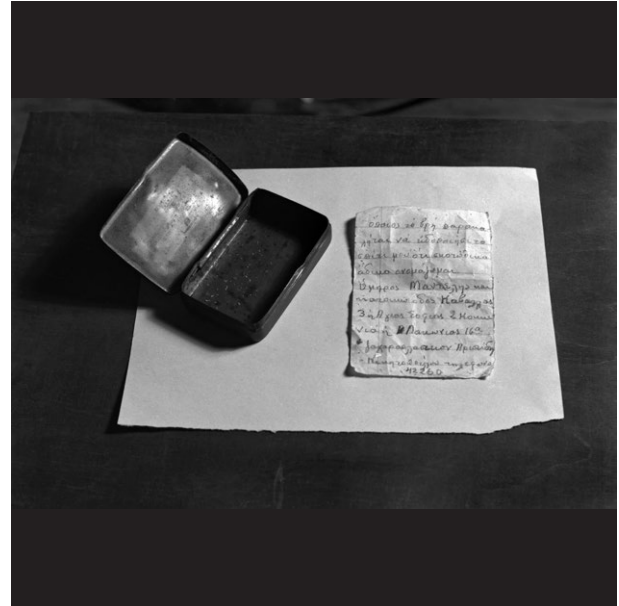
Voula was the sort of photographer who stayed behind, never a war front photographer. Perhaps that is why she creates such an impact: she photographed not heroes in battle but everyday life in wartime.

The origin of this activation of Voula Papaioannou's archive does not lie in the photographer's original contact prints, which incidentally are beautiful: sheets of paper, yellowed with age, on which she would stick her trimmed contact prints and then number and annotate them.

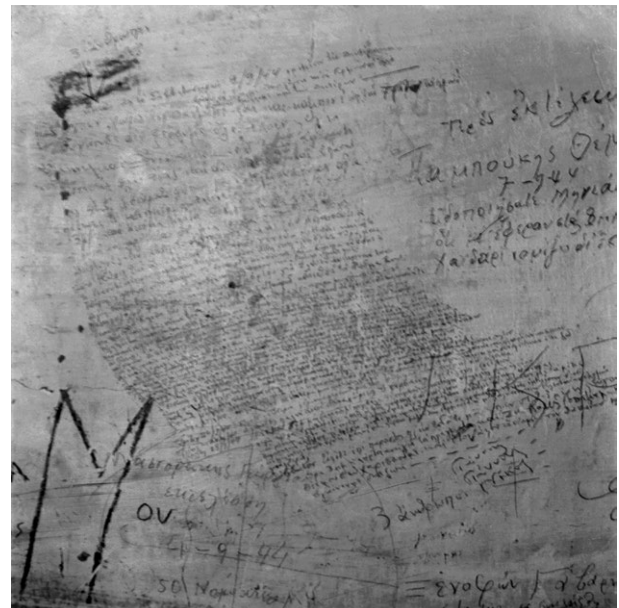
The script is a different one. It comes from the contact prints made by the workers at the photographic archive of the Benaki Museum. So we are dealing with two quite different "corpora": the material heritage—the originals—and the working copy—the blue dossiers. These dossiers are not an exact copy of Voula's, and actually contain a larger number of pictures. *Voula Papaioannou Cabinet* has arisen out of these, out of the contact prints stuck on pages with borders that enable the mini-photographs to be numbered and attached correctly in the dossiers.

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Voula Papaioannou's photographs are usually divided into the work she did before the Second World War, during the



Group 4



Group 4



Group 10

occupation, liberation, the events of December 1944 (*Ta Dekemvriana*), the post-war years, children and famine, reconstruction, and finally her landscapes. However, if we browse through the dossiers we notice changes of pace, gaps. For example, the photographs she took of prisoners' objects, documents and graffiti in the Gestapo prison in Merlin Street, in Athens, or the identification of corpses in mass graves that she photographed in full detail. Voula Papaioannou's photographic practice was rich and more complex than one imagines at first glance. One instance of this: in the series dedicated to mass graves, our attention is drawn to the picture of a woman holding a portrait photo and trying to identify a loved one among the rotting corpses. Yet she is holding the photo not in the direction of her own eyes but towards Voula's camera. Perhaps this is a clue to the way Voula Papaioannou moved her "actors", and also to the interest this *Cabinet* attaches to her scenes and how they make us into contemporary characters of Voula's photographic practice.

Voula Papaioannou Cabinet employs exhibition codes that link the photographer's work to the blue dossiers like just another layer, focusing on its different rhythms without resorting to photographic enlargement, and at the same time without neglecting the way the photographer constructed reality.

Ultimately, it is a matter of using the tools offered by exhibiting to test on the wall those narratives that all archives keep silently stored away.

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Her pictures create an image of Greece that is far removed from romanticisms or neo-romanticisms and rediscoveries of all sorts. If you approach Greece through romantic paintings or the mindset of tourism from its early days and you compare that with Voula's contact prints, the fascination for Greece is re-edited, it becomes more complex. This rediscovery of Greece is powered by a very particular and sophisticated gaze: Voula photographed a large amount of sculpture and classical architecture. But also mass graves with human

remains and hospitals: compositions for hardly visible content of an always slightly traumatised modern Greece.

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The road to Voula in the case of this project starts at number 4, Korai Street, in Athens, where in 1938 the Greek National Bank built a modern building equipped with air raid shelters, the doors of which were made in Germany. When Greece was occupied in the Second World War the German army converted the building into its headquarters and the shelters into a prison. This prison still exists and can be visited. It is covered in graffiti written by the prisoners who were held there. However, this was not the Gestapo prison, which was a few streets away, in Merlin Street. Nothing remains of it, or at least nothing of the building; just a cell door which was later used to make a hapless memorial. Today it is an office building.

The clues led to the War Museum, near Merlin Street. The mural dedicated to the Second World War featured anonymous photos of the prison, this time the Gestapo one, and the graffiti on the walls. One in particular is striking: in the photo a hand points to something in the graffiti, it is not clear what. The next step, thanks to the clues supplied by the employees at the War Museum, was to go to the photographic archive at the Benaki Museum in search of the pictures taken by a certain Voula Papaioannou whose archive was deposited there. This marked the beginning of the wanderings through the blue dossiers and the dissolution of the search into a browse. It was at this point that the script changed: the graffiti and the Gestapo no longer mattered; the work in the blue dossiers leapt to the forefront. The scene, the structure of the information and the grid took charge. The style of numbering, a certain occasional “disarray” which caused images to appear “out of place”, became the way forward. Any hint of ghoulishness in Voula’s more controversial pictures took a step back, following a script that also showed interest in the rest of her work in more everyday fields for the time she was living in. The document in

its context, among its peers, takes on the right importance and constructs a gaze on the photographer’s chosen subject.

What is the first thing we do when we visit an archive? Probably try to get our bearings in an attempt to find what we are looking for, with the tools the archive offers us. But some people prefer not to work with/on the archive but on the bonds and attachments the human being establishes with it, whether the outcome is a narration that might be meaningless, or brilliant and complex, or closer to the photographer’s initial intention... Sometimes, as in this case, the outcomes are compositions interpreted by the person consulting the archive, who feels the need to say something, fails to find the words, and is obliged to move on to the exhibition space.

The series or groups in *Voula Papaioannou Cabinet* speak for themselves, but even so they merit many conversations. After all, discussing, debating and talking are not far from the photographic practice Tisseron was referring to, and Voula’s practice undoubtedly gives plenty to talk about.

LIST OF IMAGES IN THE EXHIBITION

- Group 1
Statues and reliefs from the classical period in Greek museums, 1935-1939.
- Group 2
Monuments from the classical period in Athens. The Acropolis and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, 1935-1939.
- Group 3
Archaeological Museum of Olympia. Statues from the pediments of the Temple of Zeus, 1935-1950.
- Group 4
German detention centre in Merlin Street. Graffiti on the walls, personal objects and letters belonging to those sentenced to death, Athens, 1944.
- Group 5
Compositions with flowers, 1935-1940.
- Group 6
The mortal remains of the sculptor Konstantinos Dimitriadis, in his workshop. Athens, 28 October 1943.
- Group 7
The mortal remains of the great poet Kostis Palamas, on his studio in his house. Athens, 27 February 1943.
- Group 8
Everyday life in the devastated countryside after the end of the war, 1945-1949.
- Group 9
Distomo. In the village cemetery, 1945. In June 1944, the village was burnt down and most of its inhabitants, especially women and children, were murdered by a regiment of the Waffen-SS, in reprisal for guerrilla action in the area.
- Group 10
Thermal water treatment rooms in spas and hospital wards, 1925-1950.
- Group 11
Patients being treated in a Hellenic Red Cross hospital, 1940-1944.
- Group 12
Medical examinations of children and adults. Athens, 1945-1946.
- Group 13
Municipal orphanage for babies in Athens, 1945-1946.
- Group 14
Distributing clothes. Athens, 1945-1946.
- Group 15
Without information.
- Group 16
X-ray workshops in Athens hospitals, c. 1945.
- Group 17
Without information.
- Group 18
Wounded on the Albanian front, in the Hellenic Red Cross hospital. Athens, 1941.
- Group 19
Portraits of the photographer's family and friends.
- Group 20
Exhumation and identification of bodies in Athens, January 1945. After the liberation of Athens (October 1944), due to the incapacity to form a government of national unity, civil armed conflict broke out between the forces of the National Liberation Front on the one hand and the official Greek government, backed by the British, on the other. The so-called "Battle of Athens" lasted 33 days, causing victims on both sides, but also civilians, who were buried in mass graves. Later on the bodies were exhumed, in a desperate attempt to identify the victims.

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**Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
and public holidays, 11 am to 8 pm
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