

# The Blue Files

Jorge Blasco

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

The photographer Spiros Meletzis, the painter Giannis Moralis, the art critic Angelo G. Procopiou and the painter Dimitris Giannoukakis appear as members of a jury judging photographs. Fellow jurors include Voula Papaioannou; the year is 1956. Distimo, Kaisariani, milk centres, orphanages, the hospitals for those wounded at the front, graves, cemeteries, starving children, and the black album have seemingly been consigned to the past, although not quite.

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Coming across Voula Papaioannou for the first time in the blue files prompts a change in the way we understand her images, as they are part of photographic “statements” that define new meanings and subtleties in the individual pictures. In short, the aim is to uncover the silences that all archives potentially contain and give them a voice, construct a discourse on the practice of photography and the Voula Papaioannou Collection, following a unique, often affective, research script to choose contacts within the files.

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Commissioning, setting and document are three terms that underpin the groups of images selected here. These pictures rarely follow a chronological order, but instead a conceptual arrangement that leads to a better understanding of the narratives present in the Voula Papaioannou Collection's contacts; they are a "lab sample" of the whole that is the archive.

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A highlight in Group 20 is the image of a woman bearing a tiny portrait, seeking a loved one among the festering corpses. The woman is not looking at the photo, however, as it is turned towards Voula's lens. This detail may be a clue as to how Voula Papaioannou positioned her "actors". The interest in these scenes is that as onlookers, we become contemporary accomplices of her photographic practice.

The first groups feature sculptures and reliefs from several archaeological museums. Over the passage of time, many of these works have lost bits and pieces, so there are numerous stumps of limbs and broken bodies, often arranged in groups. The last group depicts the broken bodies photographed with the same precision as that sculpture she used to perfect her technique. With impeccable sobriety despite the disturbing nature of the images, devoid of any drama or sorrow whatsoever, with an integrity of staging that she applies to all her photographs, whether these involve floral subjects, sanatoriums, scenes of everyday life far from the front, hospitals, cemeteries, prison cells, wakes, orphanages, or simply portraits of people she knew. All of them presented in series in the blue files vaguely suggest a cinema montage, probably due both to the composition of their scenes and to her unusual way of framing reality in the viewfinder, a constant and methodical approach that provides a glimpse of Voula's documentary project, as someone who did not visit the front, who did not photograph heroes in action, but instead remained in the rear-guard, portraying those that stayed behind to construct reality far behind the lines. This may be why her photographs are so alluring.

It should be noted that Voula Papaioannou tended to work for agencies. This may explain her particular way of practising photography: a blend of the instructions she was given

on what to photograph and a "how" defined by her own documentary discourse, her eye, and her outlook. This is corroborated by Fani Konstantinou, quoted by Aristoula Beti,<sup>1</sup> who tells us how at that time she worked for humanitarian missions, covering the activities of several organisations and following guidelines on what to photograph and how, which did not stop her from merging sentiment and professionalism—in the event that they can even be separated in the first place—.

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As far as this project is concerned, the path leading to Voula Papaioannou begins at number 4 Korai Street in Athens, where in 1938 the Greek National Bank built a modern building equipped with anti-aircraft shelters whose doors were made in Germany. Following Greece's occupation in the Second World War, the German army turned the building into its headquarters, and the shelters became prison cells. These cells still exist today and are open to the public. Their walls are covered with the graffiti of the prisoners held in them. They were not, however, run by the Gestapo, as their own facilities were a few streets away in Merlin Street. Nothing remains of these, or to be more precise, nothing of the building, only one of the cell doors, which was used in its day to make a clumsy memorial. It is now an office-block.

The path continues to the War Museum, not far from Merlin Street. The mural dedicated to WWII features anonymous photos of the cells, on this occasion the Gestapo's, and of the graffiti on their walls. One in particular draws our attention: it shows a hand pointing to something in the graffiti, yet we do not know what. The next step taken, prompted by staff at the War Museum, was to visit the Photography Archive at the Benaki Museum, in search of the images taken by someone called Voula Papaioannou, whose collection had been deposited there.

And that signalled the beginning of the relationship with the blue files. This is when the search became an actual exploration, with no clear objective, as we trawled through

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1 Aristoula Beti, M. A., in *Political Science and Sociology*, Department of Primary Education, University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece.

the archive's Voula Papaioannou Collection. The setting, the structure of the information and the eye of the beholder took over. The route was marked out by the method used for numbering, somewhat disorderly at times, whereby the images sometimes appear "out of place". Each photo in its context, flanked by its companions and through its positioning, acquired just the right individual significance, while blending in with all the other documents.

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The "onlooker syndrome" implies that any author's contacts are well received, probably because of the new semantic value they give the image through a classification coordinate.<sup>2</sup> For a view defined by artistic practice, these contacts automatically mutate in form to something far removed from their original purpose as a reference. If one accepts the premise that the contacts are not a secondary or peripheral part of the work, somewhat akin to curiosities, but instead are actually part of it together with the photographs and all other present, past and future practices, we shall ensure that this automatism or habit of aesthetic intellection changes so they can be understood in another way. One in which, as managers of information, they take part in the operation of providing documentary context to the images published or enlarged as fully part of photographic practice. The verb *expose* needs to be reconsidered in an archival context such as this one.

Voula Papaioannou's photographs have usually been grouped into those taken before the war, those taken during the occupation, the liberation, the December events (*Ta Dekemvriana*), the post-war years, children and hunger, the rebuilding, and landscapes. Nevertheless, a perusal of her files reveals changes of pace, gaps. The photographs of objects, documents and the prisoners' graffiti that she took in the Gestapo's cells on Merlin Street, or the identification of the mass graves of those killed in the battle for Athens, propose other categories, other ways of classifying her work, without being burdened by dates, although they do sometimes coincide.

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2 Barthes, Roland, *La aventura semiológica [Semiological Adventure]*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1983.

The series of photos in the Collection create an imaginary of Greece that is far removed from romanticisms or neo-romanticisms and sundry rediscoveries. Anyone who is familiar with the country through romantic snapshots or the mirage of tourism from its earliest days and compares it to Voula's contacts will see how the fascination for Greece is reinvented, becoming more complex, with a barely visible reflection of modern Greece, as a country that is always somewhat traumatised.

Before the war, and with a view to promoting tourism in Greece, Voula took photographs to be used as postcards, which clearly have little in common with traditional ones. She also photographed classical ruins, landscapes and people for her publications after the war. They are genuinely stunning pictures, although they always transmit a feeling of disquiet through their chiaroscuro, their focus; in short, through that special handling of the technique that is her hallmark.

Following the hardships of two wars — WWII and the bloody civil war —, and their no-less devastating aftermath, Voula returned to shots of the landscape, a decision that is easy to understand. This led to books such as *Îles grecques* and *La Grèce à Ciel Ouvert*, published by Guilde de Livre. These have nothing to do with the *Black Album* made in 1943, for which she selected and included 83 raw photos without any kind of framing and no more text than a quotation from Euripides, as noted by Fani Konstantinou: "In 1943, when the photos had already fulfilled their purpose, she asked the engraver Yannis Kefalinós to compile an album with the heart-rendering material she held, convinced that she should thus contribute to her country's history. The Black Album, as its creators used to call it".

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Both in childhood and adulthood, Voula lived through some of the most turbulent times in Greece's 20th century history. It is not a question of analysing a mindset, but instead of stating the facts. She grew up during the complex process of the birth of modern Greece and its identity, while being surrounded by its much-vaunted beauty. These are the contacts that are missing from this book. They reveal the

other Voula, the Voula that does not focus on the war, but instead on Greece, giving rise to series of photos of landscapes, peasants, fishermen, and popular architecture, for example, which leave such a pleasant taste after looking at her other output at that time. Also absent are a series on the children of the war and its aftermath, which besides being the best known has helped to forge a specific view of Voula Papaioannou, concealing that other side that is shown here in fragments.

As already stated, over the course of her career as a photographer Voula often worked on commissions, with precise instructions on what she had to photograph. In a word, a style of propaganda that was very much in vogue at the time, and one that we also find in film documentaries on both sides in the global conflict. That way of constructing the scene is not Voula's domain alone, but its forcefulness and discipline most certainly are.

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Yet let no-one be deceived. This book is not about the Greek photographer Voula Papaioannou. A large part of her output, the best known, is not featured here. The excellent publication *La fotógrafa Voula Papaioannou*, edited by Fani Konstantinou, provides a compilation of images and articles with a more comprehensive view of the artist. The books in which Voula delights in the landscape are also a recommended read to ensure that the vision presented here is not a biased view of the artist, which although true, is incomplete here.

