## Encounters through art, Ethnography and Pedagogy: pandemic tryouts

Care First Square:

A multimodal ethnographic exploration of May First Square in Athens, during the pandemic

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### Short description

*This contribution is part of the project Encounters between Art, Ethnography and Pedagogy. Focusing on a square of central Athens during the covid-19 pandemic, we attempt to grasp the public manifestations of coming together and of care for oneself and for each other. The different mediums employed in the contribution attempt to approach the issue at hand in ways that bring forward the sociopolitical, but also the sensorial everyday practices of the people who used the square en masse, during these difficult, but also revealing times of, yet another, crisis.*

<< INSERT IMAGE 01.[***The entrance to the tunnel***] >>

Our contribution focuses on a specific cityscape of central Athens to explore the relation between care and encounter. In what kind of situations can everyday encounters in public space become acts of care? During the covid-19 pandemic, and especially during the lockdowns, public spaces of central Athens transformed into vital and necessary everyday spaces for different groups of people. This *coming together* in the open public space created a cityscape, where everyday public encounter(s) between each other acquired personal, but also social and political significance, as practices of caring for oneself as well as for each other.

Following the main themes emerged through the resident’s tryouts of the *Encounters between art, ethnography and pedagogy* project, this contribution attempts to understand human interactions, and sociopolitical activity in public space, as ways in which people try to cope with the confinement of the curfews and the lockdowns. We also found ourselves struggling between working (from home or not) and being able to come together with our friends and loved ones. During the pandemic we experienced a different city, not only because universities, libraries, shops, bars and theaters were closed, but also because the city was socially constructed in different, and even exceptional ways.

Our contribution touches upon different issues that the pandemic brought forward. First and foremost, the pandemic highlighted the need for open spaces in densely populated urban areas, like Athens. Second, it showed that practices of care are necessary for people, especially in times of crisis. Third, it created an exceptional situation, in which people were deprived of their regular hanging out spaces, so being in the public space was expressed as a “cry for sociality”.

Employing different mediums, namely a short film, text and images with extended captions, we attempt to grasp the sensorial, but also the sociopolitical everydayness of a public space in times of, yet another, crisis for Athens.

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### May First Square

Αt the edge of *Pedio tou Areos*, the largest park in central Athens (named by the *Champ de Mars*, a large open space next to Eiffel Tower in Paris), you can find *Protomagias* (May first) square. Protomagias square was constructed during the 1980s as part of a master plan aimed at transforming the Military Academy of ‘Evelpidon’ to the main courthouse of Athens. The masterplan included the relocation of Moustoxydi street underground, the building of an underground parking lot for the needs of the courthouse, and the connection of Pedion tou Areos with the other spaces of the former Evelpidon Military Academy complex. Protomagias square creates a border between Kypseli and Gkyzi (two of the most densely populated areas of Athens), and Exarheia (renowned for being Athens' historical core of radical political and intellectual activism). In this way, it acts as an in-between space, attracting people from all the different groups that live in these areas.

The underground road, or the tunnel, creates dizziness and discomfort to anyone who does not cross it with a motor vehicle, both because of the high speed that the vehicles have the ability to develop, but also for the deafening noise they created and the smells exuded by the tunnel both because of the frequent urination stops, and the exhaust fumes that get entrapped in it. On the contrary, the feeling of the square creates an idyllic landscape as soon as one moves away from the edges where it leans into the traffic. The square looks like a clearing when you approach it either from Pedio tou Areos or from the densely populated fabric of the city. Due to its openness, Protomagias square offers a view of most of the hills of Athens, Lycabettus, Tourkovounia, Strefi Hill and the Acropolis.

The square functioned for many years mainly as a passage, but only during daylight, since the lack of lighting exuded a sense of fear. That's the reason people used the underground tunnel as a passage to go from one side to the other, even if that was also not really safe since there are no sidewalks. So Protomagias Sq. can be viewed as a bridge with its belly as a tunnel for motor vehicles, and it's back as a concrete square (about 25 acres is its total area), where crowds could gather to hang out, play, exercise, and hold events. However, despite the fact that Protomagias square is located in the center of Athens, it’s use was quite limited, and it was neglected by both the inhabitants of the area, and the management of the regional government of Attica (Athens) for years. Apart from a few DIY concerts, some open markets, either institutionally organised or self-organised by various groups and communities, Protomagias was a space mainly used by specific groups, like the people who go out for their daily walks with their dogs or by marginalised migrant groups, the younger of them playing cricket and more rarely football, and the older dominoes.

All this changed when, during the last month of the first lockdown in Athens, people of all ages went out in Protomagias square. Protomagias suddenly gained a crowd that took advantage of the large open public space and found their decompression valve and diodes of care through daily encounters. During the months that followed, the square became a place for socialising: children played games; groups jammed with musical instruments; different people from all ages were hanging out; and, also, became a space where political events, in the form of discussions, assemblies, and self-organised concerts took place. Children learned to ride their bicycles, their skateboards and their rollerblades on the small ramps of the square, and neighbourhood teams created self-organised soccer championships, danced and did boxing training. For the first time Protomagias was becoming an open social space in the centre of Athens, where everyone could meet and use in any way possible.

<< INSERT IMAGE 02. [***Hugs & kisses***] >>

<< INSERT IMAGE 03. [***The growing of the square****]* >>

Our involvement with Protomagias square in a more systematic way, as part of the tryouts of the *Encounters* project, exposed a spatial system that understands the square not only as a homogeneous space, but a place with different sides and levels of use. This revelation offers insights on how different communities create a relation between their use of space and themselves. Protomagias sq. can offer the user a sense of togetherness through common activities, while keeping the separateness of the group when desired. Encounters in Protomagias sq. come not incidentally. The 2020 pandemic brought everyone upon a new reality and a new realisation of the openness of public spaces was fostered. Protomagias square was in the center of these changes, as it managed not only to hold the dynamic of multicultural and multiethnic gatherings in its grounds, but to bring more people, and especially the Greek local population who were neglecting the square. People of different ages and ethnoc groups, as well as of different social status were met with the possibility to engage with each other in numerous situations. This could be either a cricket ball flying across the sky, a bicycle riding through the square, or bodies dancing and glances meet. However, encounters in this square are inevitable not only because of the cricket or the football ball that transgress the boundaries, or the bicycles that cross through the different sides of the square, but also because people gather in Protomagias square to leave their (restricted during lockdowns) personal space of their houses, choosing to be out in the open space, and with each other.

<< INSERT IMAGE 04. [***Power to the people***] >>

<< INSERT IMAGE 05. [**Common Struggles**] >>

<< INSERT IMAGE 06. [**Non-Encounters**] >>

<< INSERT IMAGE 07. [**Imaginary fields**]>>

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