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Drawn in the field

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Slowly the ferry backed away.

From here, the harbor of Mytilini seemed as quiet as the day I had arrived.
I leaned on the rail of the ship and watched my house disappear. My balcony, the curve in the road, the street dogs, the 'statue of Liberty' beneath the castle, the wooden cross and small shrines carved in the rocks.
I remembered my morning walks.
The ice-cold water was wild and rough, sometimes calm and clear.
Turkish mountains seemed only a stone's throw away.
The clear blood of fish was left on the pier.
Lonesome figures stared at their phones.
Of course, there had been signs. By now, twenty thousand people lived in Moria camp. Cramped together with little prospects.

Everyday the pressure on the island grew.
One night, a roaring crowd had gathered in the harbor, right under my balcony. Fiercely, they awaited the arrival of a ship carrying bulldozers and troops. Another camp would be constructed.

Garbage cans were burned and fences torn down.

I watched a game of cat and mouse between locals and riot police unfold.
The next morning thousands of people marched through Mytilini. Of all ages, on the Left and Right. Their cardboard signs read: 'Closed camps are prisons', and 'We want our island back'.
Soon the procession went north, to the new camp's construction site. Troops in blue uniforms and white helmets chased the locals through the fields. Clouds of chemical gasses stole their breath away.
The night fell but the protest continued. Burning fires created thick smoke. Masked men with metal sticks rhythmically smashed the entrance gate of the army base. The rest of the crowd chanted 'Lesvos, Lesvos, Lesvos...'. More teargas. People panicked in dead end alleys.
I ran with them.

Shocked, curious and stirred
by their cry for help.

But it soon became clear
that amidst them there were
very different motives to revolt.
The island went on a strike.

More oil was added to the fire: Turkey opened its borders. The next morning a group of people washed ashore, right beneath the ‘Statue of Liberty’.
entanglements: Drawn in the field
They were caught and kept in the parking lot of the harbor. We talked through fences, until security showed me away.

Days went by and the terrain filled with more and more people. Still, everyday it became quieter.
from that moment on,
I could no longer keep track:
more boats arrived.

Images were shared of violent clashes
at the border on the mainland.

A dinghy floated in a small harbor,
the people it carried were not let onto shore
for hours, yelled at and insulted.

Blocked roads to Moria camp.

Coastguard vessels purposefully
made waves close to small boats
and fired shots into the water.

A mother and child drowned.

Fascists and Neo-nazis
hijacked the protest.

Attacks on journalists and
volunteers, trapped
inside when their cars
were smashed with
sticks and chains.

The camp for new
arrivals in the north
was burned to the ground.

Our school, burned down.

My neighbor panicked and
shouted: 'Stay inside!'

And eventually, the advice to leave.
With mixed feelings I packed my bags and walked
one last time through the harbor.

A walk of shame, as together with me hundreds of people
tried to board the ferry and finally leave this island.

But the police chased them away,
up the hill, back to the camp.
In twilight, I stood on the deck
and saw their tired faces, watching every move.

Bulldozers and cars with broken windows were brought on board.
Followed by defeated volunteers.

Next to me stood a young Greek soldier. He was ordered to
shoot on families, on children. He pushes back tears.

The island disappeared into the night
We watched restless waves strike the side of the ship.
I sat in the dark
and tried to grasp
my thoughts in
drawings.

What seemed world
news to everyone
captured up in the
middle of it had
barely reached the
rest of Europe.

I wondered how
much more proof
of suffering it
would take?

I asked it out
loud, but the empty
chairs kept silent.
As a visual artist, I am used to drawing ‘in the field’, although I never called it that before studying anthropology. Before anthropology, it meant leaving my studio carrying a sketchbook and pencils, to wander through and participate in the world outside, in search of inspiration. Whenever colors, lines and shadows, but also encounters and interactions grasped my attention I would draw them on paper. After getting acquainted with ethnographic fieldwork my drawing practice gained a new twist and more systematic attention and reflection. I started using it as an innocent but powerful tool for connection and reciprocity, leaving behind portraits as gifts in return for people’s time and stories. But as I witnessed how the precarious situation on Lesvos reached a new level in terms of protests and violence mid-February 2020, drawing ‘in the field’ took on a new form and meaning.

When setting foot on Lesvos there was no way of escaping the complexity of the situation. The precarious living conditions of over 21,000 people in camps had put the entire island under growing pressure and has led to tense dynamics between different groups of locals, humanitarian aid workers, volunteers, refugees and migrants, (local) government, police and army. At the beginning of February, protests by women and children to address their struggles to survive in the Moria camp were met with police violence and teargas. Not much later, the requisition of properties and the arrival of materials for the construction of a new reception center in Karavas led to a series of increasingly violent protests and strikes in which local groups first clashed with riot police and army forces, and later with NGO workers and refugees. As the situation rapidly escalated, I struggled to position myself. And with what suddenly felt like a frontline all around me, I found myself reporting as if I were a journalist, making sketches as an artist while wondering: how should an anthropologist make sense of all this?

Soon I realized that drawing could be much more than a tool to gather inspiration or build connections. First of all, as stories about attacks on journalists with cameras were going around, drawing became a way to stay fairly unnoticed while still taking note of what was happening. The first days of the protests I tagged along with a group of older Greeks who participated in a choir with refugees. Although I hardly knew them they quickly became the point of reference in the crowds, telling me when and where to hide, how to cover my face with a mix of Maalox and water to protect me from the teargas chemicals and offering me cheese sandwiches in between runs. Whenever I could, I stopped to draw quick outlines in a small sketchbook. In these chaotic circumstances and in the days that followed when violence turned against NGO personnel and I had to lay low, drawing gave me something to do when my role was unclear and a sense of purpose when there was no way yet to oversee and fully understand what was going on around me. The openness of the quick sketches bought me time as it allowed me to grasp moments, gestures, compositions or details without pinning anything down. As Taussig (2011) describes so accurately, I too felt that my textual fieldnotes often fell short. Especially when things were moving fast, it was as if words only decreased the totality of the experience instead of doing it justice. In retrospect, these (sometimes quite abstract) drawings I made in the field managed to contain an embodied experience that could later be unpacked.

The idea to pour my observations into a series of drawings emerged as I was standing on the back of the ferry when being evacuated from the island. From that viewpoint, everything that had happened was forced into a single frame far beyond my imagination: stranded arrivals on the parking lot, police chasing people up the hill in the background, bulldozers driving into the belly of the boat beneath me, volunteers with their backpacks taking notes in their diaries and young soldiers leaning over the rail next to me. We all stood there quietly and observed this unlikely scene. Everything felt tangled, interlaced
and compressed. I had to find a way to unpack this moment, but without losing its sense of urgency. Of showing a crisis reaching a climax, but continuing nonetheless. Of showing a catastrophic landscape that, not too long ago, had felt relatively calm and peaceful during my morning walks. But should I do it as an anthropologist or as an artist? Or could there be a way to do both?

Upon arrival back home, in the Netherlands, my sketchbooks quickly covered the table and floor. I felt crushed and calm at once as I relived the events day by day and worked my way through them, redrawing and rearranging scenes, caught up in a creative flow. I started to stitch my drawings together with words to explain in detail what had taken place. However, at some point the drawings seemed to be reduced to mere illustrations of this text. Both drawings and words had to be cut back in order to find a balance where they would intersect instead of compete. It wasn't until someone suggested that I pull images and words apart completely, that I began to realize the power of blank spaces and how emptiness on a page allows the reader to digest and breath. Intuitively I mixed thoughts, feelings, facts, observations and senses and let go of what I thought both art or ethnography should look like. There was no rigid, preset method for this. There were no rules to follow, only my own intuition. In my art practice I had always relied on this intuition and now I wondered how to put it to work in my newly acquired ethnographic practice. Could ethnography embrace the embodied and tacit ways of doing and knowing, the emotional and spontaneous, that I experienced both in the field and afterwards? Or would methodological and theoretical concerns break the power of this intuition?

The visual ethnography that I present here is a rhythm of drawings, words and blank spaces, fragmented and articulated. As with the drawings made ‘in the field’, I have sought to produce a similar openness in the final story, hoping that it allows the reader to unpack it further and makes the urgency of the situation tangible. Drawing us in.

References


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