

Leros Humanism Seminars Report

The Leros Humanism Seminars project (<https://leros-humanism-seminars.com/>), organized and curated by Neni Panourgiá and Stathis Gourgouris, involves an annual series of seminars and workshops that take place on the Greek island of Leros, which is the site of a unique century-long history of institutions of confinement (military, psychiatric, political exile and imprisonment, refugee camps) at the crossroads of empires in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This year's seminar (July 2-6, 2023) was the inaugural event under the auspices of the new Columbia Global Center in Athens (<https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/athens>), and it aspires to remain central to the Center's activities going forward. This year's events were primarily supported by a Joint Projects grant under the auspices of the Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life (IRCPL), administered by Stathis Gourgouris on behalf of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society (ICLS). Additional funds were granted from Columbia's Program in Hellenic Studies, the Modern Greek Studies Association in the United States, and the Prefecture of Southern Aegean in Greece.

The seminars would not have been possible without the continuous hands-on involvement of the Center for Culture, Education, and Development of Leros "Artemis", which provided essential logistical support, help with graphic design and advertising on the island, guided visits to the historical sites, and, most importantly, hospitality and active involvement in the concluding workshop (see below). Additional local support was provided by the General State Archives, Local Historical Archive of Leros; and the National Tourist Organization of Greece.

This year's events (<https://leros-humanism-seminars.com/program>) brought together scholars, visual and musical artists, architects, psychiatrists, former political exiles to the island, legal activists, education specialists, from Columbia (ICLS, Hellenic Studies, Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, Law School, Heyman Center, Justice in Education Initiative/*Justice Forum*), UCLA, Rhode Island School of Design, Florida Atlantic University, University of Thessaly, and Panteion University in Greece, as well as graduate students from Columbia, Florida Atlantic University, and UCLA. Graduate students from universities in Athens, Volos, and Thessaloniki, along with Greek colleagues from a number of institutions in Greece and abroad, as well as interested parties from the local population in Leros, attended the events throughout and participated in the discussions.

The first two days of round table discussions addressed the following topics: Legalities and Illegalities; Confinement and the Commons; Sexualities and Boundaries; Borders and Crossings; Catastrophic Environments; and Infrastructures, Textures, and Architectures. The third day was dedicated entirely to practical and educational workshops addressing the topics: Confined Education; Confined Arts; and Anti-Catastrophic Environments. The

day concluded with a musical evening workshop on the innovative capacities of tradition, which was conducted by the celebrated Greek-Cypriot artist Alkinoos Ioannidis, along with the local musicians of “Artemis”—many of them young apprentices.

We flanked the seminars with guided visits to spaces of particular importance and dense history that contextualize the thematics of the seminars. Guided by Prof. Nota Pantzou (Dept. of Cultural Preservation, University of the Peloponnese), we conducted a visit to the Exile Museum “Ai Stratis” the day before we all departed Athens for Leros (June 31). The museum houses materials from the period of political imprisonment and exile 1947-1953, along with unique artworks by many of the famous poets and artists exiled during that period. While on Leros, we reserved two separate days at the beginning and after the end of the events to visit the island’s unique historical sites. All the speakers participated in extensive guided tours of: the Museum of the Battle of Leros; the infamous Leros psychiatric hospital (1957-1995); the youth rehabilitation camp “Royal Vocational Schools” (1947-1963); the camps of exiled political prisoners at Lakki and Partheni (1967-74); and the church of Agia Kioura, in Partheni, a famous site of modernist hagiography painted by exiled political prisoner artists.

The seminars and workshops are structured explicitly so as to foster conversation and collaborative questioning of established beliefs around a number of topics that are urgent in today’s world: problems of democracy; crossing of borders; environmental catastrophe; institutions of confinement; migration and refugee conditions; neglected architectural legacies; problems in mental health and therapy. Essential in our discussions is the task of entwining worldwide problems of the human with local and regional concerns. A key term that emerged from our discussions, especially from the standpoint of our international visitors, was the identification and exploration of “Leros modes of knowledge”—what the histories and present-day realities of the island foreground in the midst of broader transcultural and indeed planetary concerns.

At the same time, an essential understanding that was built into the seminar structure was the intersection of scholarly methods and research practices with artistic-performative and practical-pedagogical methods and modes of knowledge. This intersection yielded exhilarating possibilities that surpassed our expectations and will continue to remain the intellectual ground of the seminar structure.