COMING OUT AS A DEAF CYBORG
KENGNÉ TÉGUIA

SPATIAL IMAGINARIES & DISABLED BODIES
NO ANGER
HISTORICAL VIOLENCE OF EUGENIC POLITICS
NATALIE SPAGNUOLO

NON-NORMATIVE DESIGN IN ARCHITECTURE EDUCATION
SARAH GUNAWAN

DANCE & ANTI-ABLEISM
FARAH SALEH & ADRIENNE HART

THE DISORDINARY ARCHITECTURE PROJECT
JOS BOYS

MONUMENTS, WAR, & DISABILITIES
DAVID GISSEN

STUDENT PROJECTS BY LUCY SATZEWICH & BRIAN LEE

NEWS FROM THE FRONTS ABOUT OKINAWA (AYANO GINOZA)
GRENFELL TOWER (COLIN PRESCOD), LEROS ISLAND (BETH HUGHES & PLATON ISSAIAS)
KANAKY-NEW CALEDONIA (NATHALIE MUCHAMAD)

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THE SPACE OF ABLEISM
**Leros: Island of Exile**

**Beth Hughes & Platon Issaias**

Architect, Head of Architecture at the Royal College of Art. Architect, researcher and teacher at the Architectural Association and the Royal College of Art.

On January 20, 2014, Fadi Mohamed, a teacher and displaced individual from Afghanistan stood still on the concrete peer of an island he didn’t know: Leros, Greece. In a video issued by Greek NGOs, he seems lost and silent the entire time coast guard officers wearing surgical masks and gloves, deliver protein cans and water bottles to those on the peer. Fadi had just lost his wife and three children, when Günter, the small fishing boat that was carrying them from the Turkish shore to Greek territory and the “safety” of European soil, capsized near the island of Farmakonisi. In total 11 Afghan civilians died that day, 8 of them children under the age of 12.

In the following press conference on January 25 in Athens, the 16 survivors blamed the Greek maritime security force. Amnesty International together with multiple Greek and European NGOs, argued that there was sufficient evidence to bring this case to court, at minimum to further investigate serious human rights violations that took place in the cold, wintry waters of the Aegean Sea. The migrants claimed that the coast guard not only failed to help but caused their already sinking boat to capsize when attempting to tow them back to Turkish waters at high speed. They testified that the coast guard, when realising that the vessel was sinking, cut the rope and let them down to drown. Only when the stronger migrants fought back and started climbing onto the coast guard boat, did they rescue survivors and reportedly the officers fired the stronger migrants fought back and started climbing onto the coast.

Back in the early hours of January 20, 2014, the coast guard departed from Aghia Marina, Leros’ main port. This was the first European soil the 16 devastated refugees stepped on: refugees on an island of exiles. More than four years later over 1,000 people are kept in the so-called “Leros Hotspot,” or “hospitality center” as the Greek government calls temporary refugee camps. In an effort to demonstrate the government’s commitment to the European Union migration policies, Leros is one of five reception centers that are intended to be dedicated to the processing of asylum seekers, the majority traveling across the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Schengen Area destinations through Greece.

Established in February 2016, this so-called “reception camp” was built quickly, installing containers with basic lighting, water and facilities on the large marshalling ground in front of the notorious former psychiatric facility. Two different prefabricated unit types of streets on a regular grid system and confined within a perimeter of a barbed-wire fence, were placed in the empty forecourt defined by two large 1930s abandoned buildings. The camp is enclosed by the coastal road of Lakki and the southwest limit of one of the three sites of the Psychiatric Department of Leros Hospital, known as “the villas.”

Prior to the island’s official role as a hotspot, over 34,000 refugees had already processed through Leros; there were already three established camps on the island prior to the arrival of this formal center. The considerable numbers for the diminutive island, had intensified the activity of a number of local humanitarian organizations such as the Solidarity Network for Leros who work alongside the UN High Commission for Refugees, along with international charities already providing accommodation and services for refugee families.

Current reports of conditions in the processing centers vary, but there are clear limitations to the state’s capacity to manage the responsibility without proper or adequate preparation or provision. This work falls upon local charities and community — the “soft” support, providing food, cleaning and clothing, baby food etc. The majority of the day-to-day is managed by volunteers from multiple charitable organizations at a time, each with autonomous agendas and support bases, the effort is often uncoordinated and ad-hoc but galvanized by the dedication of the people and the solidarity of the refugees themselves. This well established network in Leros has been a key factor in the island’s role in this humanitarian crisis.

The hot spots remain controversial and highly criticized. At the regional scale it is the tenacious efforts of organizations such as Amnesty International in cases such as the plight of the 16 survivors on Farmakonisi, that there is continued vigilance for the rights of refugees and advocacy for their dignity. Persistent activism, lobbying and campaigning of governments, and active use of legal systems and media networks, supports shifts in policy to improve processing times, conditions in the centers and the rights of refugees.

Our ongoing research project, in collaboration with photographer Yannis Drakoulidis, addresses a series of questions that frame the research project, investigating the role and agency of architecture in processes of institutionalization, de-institutionalization and subjectification in Leros, especially in the nationalist town of Lakki/Portolago. What kind of architecture accommodates military, security and mental healthcare institutions? What kinds of relations exist between these institutions and their architectures? Most importantly, how does the particular military set up of the town, the masterplan, and singular buildings organise social relations, employment and an entire ecology of detention, confinement and care? What is the role of mental healthcare protocols in the development of cities and towns? The presence and influence of French psychiatry as well as the work of psychoanalyst Félix Guattari makes an extremely interesting case study for how radical psychiatry confronted what he called a “real psychiatric prison, a concentration camp” when he visited the island in 1991 during the first attempts to reform the globally disgrace institution.

Leros testifies that the logistics and the logistics of warfare as well as the project of displacement and conception of “undesirables” and the “displaced” produce first and foremost two things: the legal and social apparatuses that produce these subjects, and the spaces in which this violence is exercised. It is always within the asymmetric relations of labor that both the subject of the confined and the one of the guard is produced.

Tens of thousands of people were exiled, detained, isolated and surveyed in Leros and the town of Lakki/Portolago, occupying, living, but most importantly being serviced, policed and confined by a series of formal institutions. The inaugural moment of the Italian invasion set up these relationships permanently: class, labor, gender segregation, multiple zones of controlled and restricted access. Military and civilian infrastructures interwoven with a multiplicity of scales; the Mediterranean, the archipelago, the island, the town, the village, the building object itself. Ultimately the Italian invasion became one of the guard, the discipline, the cook, the cleaner, an extremely precarious service provider, advocate, humanitarian and supporter, her and himself in exile and completely dependent on these institutional forms.