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THE SPACE OF ABLEISM



LEROS: ISLAND OF EXILE

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(left) Aviators dormitories (caserma avieri) in Lepida. (right) Abandoned psychiatric ward in Lepida. / Photographs by Yannis Drakoulidis (2014).

On January 20, 2014, Fadi Mohamed, a teacher and displaced individual from Afghanistan stood still on the concrete pier of an island he didn't know: Leros, Greece. In a video issued by Greek NGOs, he seems lost and stays silent the entire time coast guard officers wearing surgical masks and gloves, deliver protein cans and water bottles to those on the pier. Fadi had just lost his wife and three children, when Gönzuru, 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, 12 nautical miles northeast of Leros. 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 realizing that the vessel was sinking, cut the rope and left them 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 in the air and pushed and kicked people away from the rescue boat.

Smaller than 4 square kilometers, with a population of 10 people (2011 survey), Farmakonisi belongs to the municipality of Leros. Nicknamed the "biscuit island" due to the unsavoury practice of Greek military illegally selling refugees biscuits, Farmakonisi is the point where smugglers

abandon refugees — it is close enough to Leros to be collected and processed, but safe from the risk of prosecution and imprisonment. The municipality has a total population of 7,900 and, like all of the Dodecanese archipelago and the adjacent Turkish coast, it is heavily militarized. The small isolated Farmakonisi army unit, stationed on a 10-day rotation, belongs to the notorious special forces regiment in Partheni in northern Leros, a ground marked by postwar political conflicts — a space of displacement, incarceration and torture.

During the 1967-1974 dictatorship, left-wing political prisoners were exiled in Leros. Detained in the distinctive white rationalist architecture dispersed across the island, these men and women experienced extreme institutional violence. The most prominent of installations is the exotic township of Lakki: private dwellings carefully organized amongst public infrastructure that included a market, a generous theater, a church, two schools and a clock tower. Large military barracks were scattered opposite the town and the camp of Partheni, with their facades covered by characteristically large letters, their interiors full of nationalist propaganda. Before arriving to Leros, the exiled would have heard of the Royal Technical School that operated in Lakki between 1949 and 1964. Moreover, they were likely to know of another equally notorious facility, the psychiatric hospital, its distributed facilities unmissable when entering the Lakki bay by boat. All were designed and built during Mussolini's Fascist regime, when the Dodecanese islands were part of the

Italian sovereign territory. Between 1912 and 1943, Leros was one of its most precious military stations in the Eastern Mediterranean, with its heavy artillery and well-protected, hidden port of Lakki, or Portolago as Italians called it. Famously, Leros was an obsession of Winston Churchill in his attempt to intensify and expand British colonial rule in the East Mediterranean, the natural port of Lakki/Portolago essential for the Royal Navy to destabilise post-WWII Turkey and control from the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles to the port of Haifa and the Suez Canal.

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 travelling across Turkey and 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, organized in a series 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 captor, 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 citizen charities dedicated to supporting refugees 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 to the 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 agenda's

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 critiqued. 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 rationalist 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 psychotherapist, philosopher, and activist 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 disgraced institution.

Leros testifies that the logistics and the logics 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 institutions. The inaugural moment of the Italian military town, 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 role of the Lirian, has become one of the guard, the discipliner, 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.