INVISIBLE BUNKERS

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Regelbau 501

Bunker converted into a planter

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“You could walk day after day along the seaside and never once lose sight of these concrete altars built to face the void of the oceanic horizon..” 1 [p. 12, Virilio]

On March 23, 1942 after the Germans swept across Europe, capturing the mainland, reaching the beaches of the Atlantic, the Führer Directive Number 40 decreed a plan of fortification called the Atlantic Wall, a line of bunkers that stretched from the coast of northern Norway, down the western coast of Denmark all the way through the western French coast. This plan meant to secure mainland Europe from the inevitable, ensuing attacks. Even today this stretch of beaches is littered with left over German bunkers, which remain marooned in the dunes, alien to the picturesque landscapes. Intended to lie hidden from air photography, from the front line, the outside of bunkers are often dressed with fake facades and encasements. Posing as a church or a house, they reside like an invisible dweller, like a barricaded soul. Some are dug into the landscape, beneath the earth, like cavities in the fabric of the real, an untouchable dead absence. Indisposed, they now stand awkwardly, converted into museums, refuges, even gigantic flower pots, decades after a war’s end. With their insides out, rebar protruding from their bowels, and worn off paint, they intrude, their secret location unveiled.

The German bunkers from World War II, such as the Regelbau 501, were well constructed, with a sound design and heavy reinforcement. The clarity of design entailed a process in which “... [a]n outer mould was built around the reinforcements and the concrete poured in. This was done in a single, continuous operation that went on day and night, so as to create a bunker consisting of a single block of concrete, without any seams or similar weak points.” 2 These bunkers were created like a single-shot film, in one take, with no room for error. As though time itself was reduced to a consistent singularity, completely intertwined with this construction process. Rounded corners strengthened the structure, and so it is difficult to mark clear definitions and edges, or entry points. In their coarse yet refined physicality, with their powerful, univocal walls, these bunkers are absolutely singular, unwavering, uncompromising, self-reliant, and self-determined, more like forms than physical objects.

Leon Golub – Mercenaries III

In 2001 I visited the Brooklyn Museum for a retrospective exhibition of Leon Golub's work entitled: Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000. His paintings contain harsh imagery, and present figures in difficult and often violent situations. In Mercenaries III (1980), two men stand on opposite sides of the painting on a warm, piercing sienna red background. The atmosphere is tense, this painting catches a moment of conflict, just before violence erupts. Jessica Lack writes: "[His] aim as a painter was to implicate his audience and to take them to places they didn't want to go, whether straight into the middle of a street brawl or down a dark alleyway where gangsters stuff bodies into the boots of cars." 3 [Jessica Lack, guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 7 January 2009] Such work demands a response, as this was evidenced by the litany of long comments and (deep, appreciative) letters filling the visitors book by the exit of the museum. After reading a few of these notes I looked back at the work and marveled at the scale of the paintings, at the presence of the figures occupying the draped, rugged canvases. It was at this moment, from the far back corner of the museum that I noticed that even from a great distance Mercenaries III was difficult to read as a single unity. Although the work was unambiguous, like the clear statement of a written text, it was still almost impossible to perceive the figures simultaneously; the eye caught in the middle, moved from one side to the other, as beneath the empty, sienna red stared right through. This space, this absence, disintegrated what seemed obvious. I was left to witness what a text apparently cannot provide, because here the spatialization of absence took place, here where everything had been a one-to-one relation, now became a triad, a flickering triad.

Much of Golub's work presents an irresolvable conflict, an encounter with the unpredictable, hostile other, whose thoughts and motivations are inaccessible and incomprehensible. In general, the other is complete (and total) on its own, it is foreign and hence it is at first unrecognizable. We may perceive a familiar colour, shape or smell, but together these qualities combine into something that is until this moment completely new, answering to no previous neural encoding, no previous memories. And so, it is as if the (original) encounter never happens, as if we were not aware of it within our understanding, where the encounter itself only acts as an opening in the very fabric of what can be thought or said or written. I often have such an experience when viewing artwork which presents itself without an easily perceivable agenda, seeming veiled and unreadable. Then as I wander to the front of the gallery and read the artist statement, all of a sudden the exhibition changes completely, (as if the whole experience is reset) to the point where my original thoughts from the first encounter with the exhibition seem distant, blurry, abstract and scattered, as if I was attempting to recall a dream. And now as I view it again, it is as if I am viewing it for the first time.

If the encounter opens thought, then at first, thought can only respond to the opening itself. Hence, there is no appropriate response (especially when there is no artist statement or directions to guide your way), one's response will stray, fall amiss. After all, it is impossible to fixate onto something that one does not know. Perhaps one should only listen, but one cannot hear, one's speech seems insufficient. But one responds, one must respond. This response opens another space, which may be the projected space of the self onto the other, or that sienna red in Golub's painting, it may be the absence of the other, it may be (the space of) a boundary, vibrating between the self and other.

Still of St. Helena Olive Tree, Extinct 1884-1977, 2003-

The space of the flickering boundary can be configured in infinitely many ways, in part because things change with time, but also because with every reencounter one touches this boundary differently, brushes against a different part, touches a different feature. But as these features change, appear and disappear, they cloud the presence of the other in doubt, the other's very being becomes unstable and not fully acknowledgeable, the other's very being becomes a strange entanglement of absence and presence. Stop-motion animation engages this mode of being. It relies on a reanimation of reality, on a constant switching from one captured moment to the next, each moment cut out, pasted in, the video itself an alternating sequence of absence and presence. This strange intertwinement reconfigures what is a singularity, what is an object, what is unity, and so the other almost becomes anything, an object, a bunker, a person, an artwork, a plant or even an entire species of a plant, consider for example, the St. Helena Olive Tree. This tree (native to the Island of St. Helena) became extinct in the late 19th century, then was rediscovered eighty years later, only to disappear once more in 1994. It was the only species in its genus – having been separated from Africa in the island's tectonic journey to the south Pacific – and so during its brief revival countless attempts were made to propagate the tree. Cuttings and seedlings were shipped around the world to greenhouses, but to no avail - since 2003 there remains no living tissue in any botanical collection.

It is difficult to establish when this plant died, when it no longer had being. It seems that the Olive Tree's boundary, the boundary of what it was, what it is changes even now. A white paper replica of the tree appears in the stop-motion animation St. Helena Olive Tree, Extinct 1884-1977, 2003-(2010). In the video this plant stands motionless, nakedly in its paleness, as grid-like shadows of a greenhouse move slowly across its surface, and the disjointed sound of its leaves fluttering in the wind is heard through the speakers. The plant appears like a ghost, an in-between-being, a shadow, or an imprint created by light. This video is an attempt to investigate not only how the plant's history demonstrates the expanding and contracting of its being, but the impossibility of establishing the boundary of being - that it slips into superstitions, suppositions, into indeterminable, hypothetical realms. Consequently, sometimes St. Helena is just a papier-mâché replica, sometimes it is its sound, sometimes it is even the bounding, invisible greenhouse, but it could also be the viewer's impression, the memory of the viewing experience, it could be a text about this work. I would like to explore this option, this essay, this account of the vibrating self, of the impenetrable bunkers and all the talk about being and non-being could be another remapping, rearticulation, re-recital of this video. To include into this work the written, what may initially seem to be a mere framework, elucidation, foot note for the text, perhaps could be thought of as a mute response, as the turning into language of the visual, as the echoing of its absence, as the exhale that follows a deep inhale.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini - Ecstasy of Saint Teresa

Writing is often reduced to a response, a kind of a limited practice, which does not fully present the writer's voice, but its echo. Perhaps for this reason writers are often dissatisfied with their own work or even suspicious of the value of writing, Some (such as Kafka or Augustus) destine their work for destruction, while many others have claimed to write out of a perceived obligation, as in the case of Saint Teresa of Ávila. She begins: "... I was begging our Lord to-day to speak for me, since I knew not what to say nor how to commence this work which obedience has laid upon me [Saint Teresa, p. 17]." For Teresa of Ávila writing only fulfills a commitment, her writing is an expression of her submission to God, it is the response that is required of her. Michel de Certeau argues that for Saint Teresa even the soul itself functions as a response to God. De Certeau writes: "In itself, the soul is silent, in that it is formed by being a response to that (God) which it does not know, in that it is the response to Unknowness: born of an Other and yet separated from that Other that would give it language, it is essentially believing and mute [De Certeau p. 189]." He continues: "the soul ... is itself but the inarticulable echo of an unknown Subject. ... Therefore, the image that offers the soul a space in which to speak can only be a fiction ... [De Certeau p. 189]." Writing especially, seems to embody this fiction, an entanglement of truth and false, of presence and absence. In this volatile, improbable state, everything has the potential to flip on its head. And if even a momentary loss of being is thinkable, it must also be possible to imagine the fusion of one's being with the other, as with the submission of one's self into the other.

In Bernini's sculpture Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, God is manifested into light which overcomes her body. She is shown in a state of spiritual ecstasy, an experience that is usually accompanied by visions and religious euphoria. These visions are completely private and subjective, and because of their immateriality one might argue they are like hallucinations, not real, a fiction. This experience is caught in a hyper-sensitive, hyper-aware moment, something outside of time and the real, which convincingly enthralls. By entering its space completely (by suspending one's own being), one truly experiences otherness. This kind of transcendence may occur in art or music, a sort of transference of being, of being completely caught up in a piece, in something other. But just as it happens in moments of contemplation, or meditation, I would argue that it can also happen in mundane moments, such as looking at a spot of light on a curtain.

Sarah Jane Gorlitz - Bordet är Dukat
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Sarah Jane Gorlitz - Visions at the Bayswater Hotel

Sarah Jane Gorlitz's Visions at the Bayswater Hotel (2010) series is inspired by Bernini's sculpture, but it is also inspired by her own quasi-mystical experience. Upon waking one morning she noticed unusual spots of light shining through a window curtain. These spots were intense and seemed aligned with the flower motif on the curtain. Oddly, the edges of these spots were completely sharp, as if the light and the curtain were contained on the same flat plane. Only a few moments later did she realize that there was nothing extraordinary about this strange effect, that a second plastic curtain full of holes behind the first focused the light into these crisp shapes. In her dazed state, she had been lost for an explanation (lost for words) for the unnaturally glowing light did not make sense. In essence Sarah Jane experienced the otherness of light, that aspect of light that falls beyond codification and understanding. Eventually, such experiences can be explained, their fiction exposed, but the experience is still real, and it is an experience that alters one's perception, that expands the potentiality for what is possible.

Such experiences may only last a moment (a seemingly immeasurable moment); one must return, and so absence returns, as the other's otherness is reinstated. In Ingmar Bergman's film Winterlight this otherness becomes unbearable for the protagonist, a pastor who is internally tortured by God's absence, "by God's silence," he laments. The film is set in a remote, northern village, which hardly receives any light during winter. This community is small and few attend Sunday mass. In the final scene, the pastor conducts mass to an empty church, and this empty space functions as an empty response to an absent presence, further exaggerating God's silence. In the absence of God, the pastor can only maintain a relationship with His absence. Even if God doesn't exist, within God's non-existence this idea of his existence lingers, vibrates, just slightly, and never closes off completely.

Both Bernini and Bergman present the other as the absolute other, and both utilize light to embody this absoluteness. For Bernini light takes the form of ornate, golden figuration, for Bergman it is the anonymous, dying, cold, northern twilight. For Bernini, light becomes a tangible force, a presence, which engulfs Saint Teresa, enabling an impossible communion of self and (absolute) other. For Bergman, light is like a horizon, unapproachable, an unbearable emptiness. Light can function as an illumination or transcendence as much as it can be a glare, a hallucination, a moment of fiction, a lie. For as much as light presents, clarifies and stages it also obstructs and hides. In Sarah Jane Gorlitz's paintings and collages, light comes in from the back, it fragments, and divides. In her Visions at the Bayswater Hotel "light seeps through wood as if it were a heavy curtain, and circles of woodgrain become flares of light. Elsewhere light slices through cracks in a collage suspended between glass, splintering the image." In my own work light reflects off the surface, obstructing the imagery, and as a result, as with Golub's paintings, one never sees the full work at once. One has to move around the work, and block out reflections of the gallery space, even of one's own reflection.

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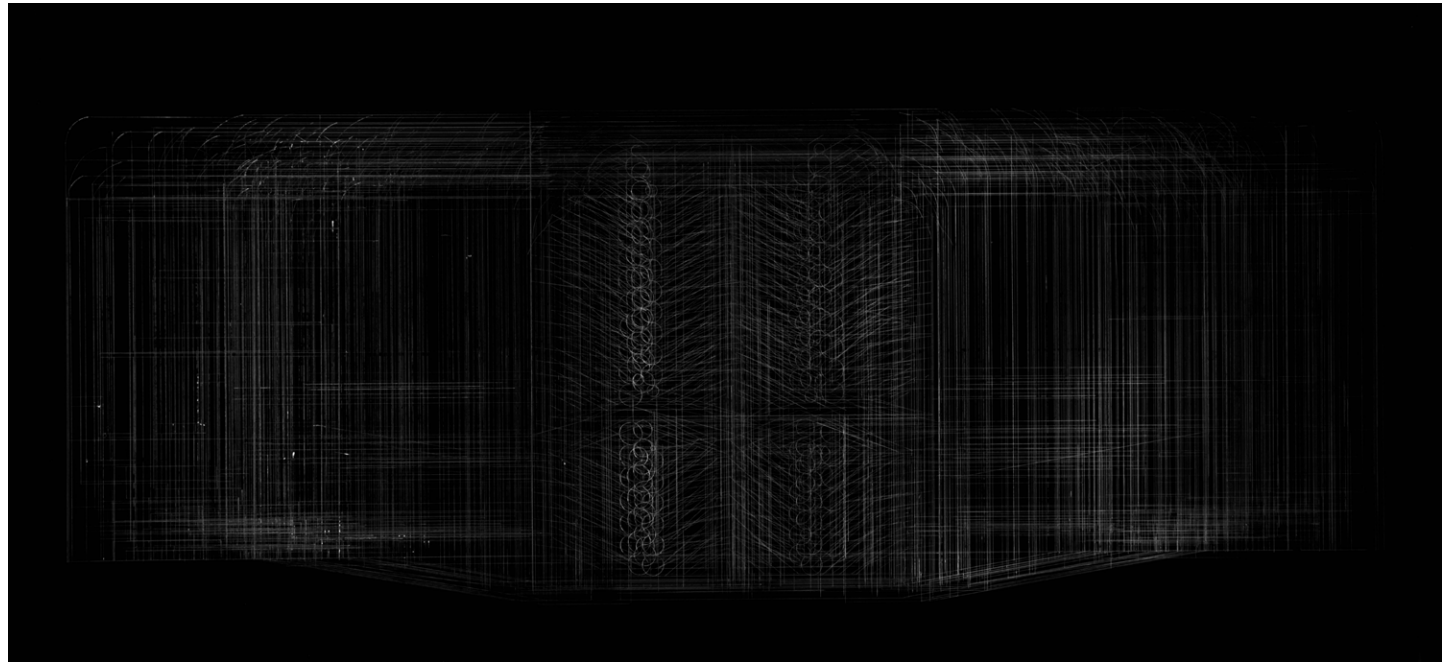
Wojciech Olejnik - Invisible Bunker

A reflection is a response, often appearing out of nowhere, like the moon's face it seems to be the light source itself. And, of course, a reflection is light itself. To see light reflected is in a sense to witness light in time, to see it here, there; simultaneously here and there. One needs to slow down time, to slow down light, to see it vibrate and change in order to see its presence and absence, to see it as a continuum of both. This is how writing can function. As writing is a reframing, an other space, or a response, it already contains absence. It contains it physically in the empty spaces that separate words, but also, like a reflection, writing conveys a presence which expresses a seemingly singular thought into a sequence of signs; it becomes its own thought. For example, when one is immersed in a deep thought, and then attempts to write it down, the written words always seem to stray. Somewhere along the way they take on new meanings, seeming to convey something a little different than what was originally intended, what was originally thought.

What is left of the ultra-individual objects lying on the Atlantic coast? Most of them are left intact yet afloat in the sand, as though thrown into a deep, turbulent sea, without anchor, left to the capricious, but slow forces of seismic activity, which finally intrude into their spaces. Virilio writes: "I was most impressed by a feeling, internal and external, of being immediately crushed. The battered walls sunk into the ground gave this small blockhouse a solid base; a dune had invaded the interior space and the thick layer of sand over the wooden floor made the place ever narrower [Virilio, p. 10]." The sand flips the bunkers like beetles and polishes them like stones on the beach, minutely altering them over the seasons. Their presence lingers as photographs, stories, books, but also as blueprints, explanations, 3-d models, that are easily found on blogs, and written about in many different languages, always garnering interested enthusiasts. Perhaps, what is most interesting about them is how they represent a purely functionalist architecture, an essentialist, engineered space. Perhaps they can even represent a whole architectural period, a period that is simultaneously obsessed with its own destruction and preservation. During World War II "the u.s. Army Corps of Engineers began construction at Dugway on a series of "enemy villages," detailed reproductions of the typical housing found in the industrial districts of cities in Germany and Japan [Vanderbilt, p.70]." This approach was implemented to find weaknesses and exploitable architectural flaws. They found for instance, that "[w]hile the Achilles' heel of German architecture was the attic, in Japanese structures it was the floor [Vanderbilt, p.72]." And while the Americans were attempting to find weaknesses in the enemy's architectural structures and city planning, they began considering how to build and plan their own cities which would resist these very short-comings. They began considering the suburban sprawl, for example, as a development that resists an enemy attack. Since suburban sprawl is characterized by decentralized city planning, by spreading buildings out across a large field, the enemy does not have a clear, identifiable target. In effect, their technology and research was simultaneously attempting to find weaknesses and the solutions to these weaknesses. The bunker (more than any other architectural structure) from its conception, structural design and building techniques, to its very placement and positioning, consistently addresses the destruction and survival of its own space. This entails a consideration of how it can repel an attack, as if it is doomed for failure and destruction before it is even built. In the Regelbau 501's design for example, every room had a specific function, and the dweller's movement and routine was to a large extent prescribed by the architecture. For example, "[i]n case of a chemical weapon attack, soldiers would decontaminate themselves in ... the corridor before entering the gas lock ... In case the gas lock's outer door was completely blocked by debris, an escape tunnel was provided in the type 501's right side wall." Here every move, is a calculated, or a pre-calculated move; one must obey the architecture of the space not only to succeed in one's task, but to ensure one's survival.



Much of modernist (and especially brutalist) architecture deals with the possibility of nuclear annihilation, and many of these buildings are the result of functionalist ideology, ingraining in their very being a justification for their existence. However, once function becomes obsolete, these structures are left purposeless and out of fashion. As many of them no longer exist, I tried to draw them, to lock them in the familiar orthogonal space of a technical drawing, as if to resurrect their original purpose and function. Relying on old photographs, and newer ones of ruins, I attempted to present drawings of what no longer existed. Maybe I was trying to rewind back to some original encounter with these objects, before they were articulated in rebar and concrete. But the space I entered was already a reencounter, a modular space between the real and the imagined, the drawn and the written. In these drawings I sought, in a sense, to salvage these buildings, to reanimate some essential part of their being. I drew each line, over and over again, reencountering each corner, window, post, and as I worked, each line moved farther away, like the “blue shift” of the previous one. In reanimating a presence that seemed to be annihilated, overshadowed by absence, these drawings demonstrate, for me, the impossibility of the full destruction of being.

In the tradition of damnatio memoraie - the practice of destroying the memory of a past ruler - an attempt is made to erase the existence of a certain being from the present, from history, but also from the future. There is evidence of this practice in many different civilizations of Antiquity. Sometimes, the erasure of a damned figure is easily traceable, but often the identity is carefully hidden. Even now an occasional figure is recovered, from the bottom of the Tiber river, or some corner of an ancient warehouse, or in other circumstances: hidden beneath the resculpted face of Domitian, the face of Nero is uncovered. In my view, being is more complex and elastic than a pure singularity, it changes, it morphs. For me the goal is not to attempt to salvage some relic, some modernist living space, or righting a wrong, or reconstructing a truth, rather it is to point out that some part of being almost always seems to be left over, and cannot easily be swept aside. Perhaps this is because absence and presence seem to function in such close proximity to each other, where one cannot be fully extracted from the other, that when one is in focus the other is already there too.

Damnatio Memoraie