

## Markus Oberndorfer

### Disappearance – The Atlantic Wall around Cap Ferret

Quotation out of Hartmut Böhme's book „Fetishism and Culture“:

*"The melancholic saves himself out of his silent heaviness and the dull mush of things through a metaphysic that elevates to a worldcondition, what his frame of mind is. He knows that life flows on a wave of death into a future, that simply enlarges the 'Skull Hill' of history. The ruin even shows the most powerful will on its transition to ultimate decay [...]"*

*"Yet you can still detect the construction-plan of a house or town, find the arches, archways, mural skeletons. But eventually you catch the water eroding the stone, the plants clawing themselves into the fractures of the wall, the wind playing in the empty window case, the sinister animals of the night scurrying through the rooms, that still bear trace of the former life of human beings. Nature restores what man forced from it. As powerful, proud or victorious the constructions might arise – there is a more powerful force, the quiet and subtle decay. To know this is the melancholic's pride."<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Hartmut Böhme: Fetischismus und Kultur, Rowohlt, 2.Auflage, 2006, p.125.

All things are condemned to disappear.

-----

My photographic work "Disappearance – The Atlantic Wall around Cap Ferret" examines Nazi-Germany's concrete fortification on the Atlantic Coast around Cap Ferret. The Atlantic Wall was basically built to hold the Allies off from entering the heartland of the "Third Reich" in case of an attack. All together there have been around 8100 fortifications on the Channel Islands and in France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and The Netherlands that formed a 2685 kilometer long wall – the longest fortification ever built in such a short time (1942-1944) under one ruler (Adolf Hitler).

The Allies' landing in the Normandy had some influence on the meaning and handling of the bunkers along specific parts of the Atlantic Wall. In Normandy where the Allies landed it was partly declared a historic monument; several bunkers have been converted into museums, others have become monuments or memorials for the fallen soldiers, prisoners of war, deported Jews, and civilians. In Cap Ferret and on other parts of the Atlantic Wall that have not directly been involved in the hostilities around the "D-Day"<sup>2</sup>, the Atlantic Wall, in contrast, is disposed of its elemental history. It decays or is re-designated. One is not trying to restrain it as something it was 60 years ago, one tries to "live with it" and "let it live".

<sup>2</sup> Marks the beginning of the Allied Invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

#### Declining Lines of Force and Glory:

The fortifications have changed a lot over the last 60 years. Even in the period in which I have been involved with them I can recognize those changes. When we were sitting on a bunker, a friend of mine brought to my attention that one of the bunkers had not been visible just some years ago. Not until then had I realized that I took a photo of exactly that blockhouse in 2005, and that it was now one of the biggest and most present on the beach. During the same time, the position of others changed. One has broken into three parts; further North toward Lège, one of them is sliding down the dune. The three parts (on the dune, the slope, and on the beach) literally reveal the downward movement that most of the bunkers have already gone through. The coastal landscape is currently changing and humans and nature are contributing to this process.

One reason for the disappearance of the bunkers, which by now play a new role in shore protection as jetties, is the currents of the sea. During certain periods of the year, the sea and its waves are

constantly eroding the dunes and thereby the sand fundament of the bunkers, which in succession slowly (for the human eye imperceptible) move down towards sea level — “*moving, yet motionless*”. Once there, the process continues. Previously supported by wind, tide and the rising sea level, the current that eroded the beach, now in reverse brings sand from the North and deposits it at the Cap.

“Sand washing up, eroding, washing up, eroding ...” as they affect the bunkers would approximately mean: “covering, uncovering, sinking, covering, uncovering, sinking ...”

<sup>3</sup> Direction: Stanley Kubrick;  
Screenplay: Stanley Kubrick  
Arthur C. Clarke, 1968.  
<sup>4</sup> Direction: Franklin J. Schaffner,  
Screenplay: Michael Wilson, Rod  
Sterling, 1968.

Comparing the positions of the bunkers on satellite pictures of consecutive years, beginning with 1944, one can thus assert, that it is the dune that moves and becomes smaller. The bunkers themselves do not move on their horizontal level, rather, they sink along their x-axis. They stand in space like the Monolith in “*2001: A Space Odyssey*”<sup>3</sup> or the Statue of Liberty at the end of “*The Planet of the Apes*”<sup>4</sup>. And we, the audience, are the spectators in the “present of the image”, and performers at the same time.

Parts of the Atlantic Wall can be seen. Historical material that is slowly disappearing — the bunkers become invisible, and will eventually probably emerge again, without the unobservant spectator comprehending the cause for this rhythm over all those years.

The disappearance of the bunkers and what is written on them can be seen as an analogy to our mind, our ability to deal with history and our comprehension of space and time. This is an approach, which I personally think of as poetic and beautiful — the bunker that is symbolically fading like a part of our memory — a part that disappears, to be replaced by another history/story, and in the truest sense of the word is constantly being re-written on the “Walls of the Atlantic”. The history of the Second World War will never be deleted from our history books nor from our memories. It stands in front of us as a permanently changing memorial and monument from another time; history in “real life” never stands still. It is constantly re-writing itself and will possibly disappear from visual perception at some time. Possibly in this generation, maybe the next or in the one after — the bunkers definitely, and maybe the cap, as well. This is one of the characteristics about the bunkers in Cap Ferret. They are embedded into a surrounding that is constantly changing — physically and emotionally — a landscape that is representing a world of water and sand which is continuously presenting itself from a new perspective.

Transience of nature and vanitas of human’s creation assume a particular symbiosis. Everything flows and nothing stays the same, because everything is condemned to disappear some day. Over and over again Cap Ferret shows me the crumbling nature of its structures and our creations.

### Is it appropriate for me to take photos of Bunkers?

The question that arises is whether it borders on blasphemy to place nature and bunkers into one topic of transience. May the beauty of the elements be seen in coexistence with the bulky functional buildings resulting from a war? I move into a quite neutral position as spectator, as an analyst of incidents over a period of several years. The bunkers have been built under Hitler by forced laborers and prisoners of war, and lots of them died. Due to my photography, one could charge me for determining a historical situation by over estheticizing the bunkers, and in consequence reinterpreting their historical meaning.

From my point of view, those remnants have become “objects” that not only point to Hitler, war or death. In fact I joined the story of the bunkers at a distance of time of 60 years after the end of the war — a time in which people use these objects as walls, surfaces, diving boards, sources of shade, obstacles, party locations, museums, domiciles, and much more.

That is how these constructions have gained new importance over the years, and that’s also the reason why their primary meaning is stepping back continuously. The surface of the bunkers is changing, whether they are being painted on or covered by moss. It is the history of World War II that is disappearing from

this surface. Exactly like the bunkers themselves that are slowly sinking in the sand and sea, or the fading stories that are written on their walls (graffiti, tags, and other signs of time).

<sup>5</sup> Hartmut Böhme: *Fetischismus und Kultur*, Rowohlt, 2. Auflage, 2006, p.142.

Musil, 1908: *"There is no such thing, that cannot be changed; the thing is an abstraction, a symbol for a relatively stable complex, from whose existing mutability it is abstracted. Liquidation of the reality of things."*<sup>5</sup>

Disappearance thus, apart from the bunkers physically sinking into the sand and sea, also takes place at another level. In fact the one at which humans (the sprayer, the tourist, fisherman, photographer ...) rededicate the bunkers. That's how their character-mask constantly changes. A new generation of people that have not been involved in the war uses them and gives them a new function. The fact that people, as stated above, use the bunkers for sports, surfing, escaping the sun by using their shade, or deal with the bunkers like I do, shows that the constructional remnants of the "Third Reich" cannot any longer just be seen as a reference to the horror of the Second World War.

For me, the bunkers in Cap Ferret are the connection between a history with an "upper case H" and one with a "lower case h". It is the history of the bunkers, and the history of the people that live with them, sit or paint on them. They are the object, that connect "old" and "young". Every human being that is visiting this place or lives here has to look into the subject of the bunkers: more or less consciously, and each in his or her own way. The bunkers are a diving board, a source of shade, and a free wall to express yourself. The bunkers are a place where you can look into the infinite Atlantic Ocean, and the bunkers are also a memorial for the Third Reich and what happened. Everyone has to and will find his own access.

### History and Graffiti:

Another question I have to face is, whether the graffiti and tags on the bunkers reflect the history of the objects themselves, and/or whether they thematically refer to them. Graffiti, part of the "4 creative elements" of Hip Hop, has — often and a lot — to do with history, story-telling, setting, defining and exceeding borders.

Setting out borders is situated in the origin of graffiti — tagging. It is the prototype of graffiti. The tag was and amongst others is an indication of someone who either claims the area his own or simply wants to say that he was there.

How far the tags and pieces on the bunkers really have something to do with the history of the objects, cannot clearly be detected. Although there are visual elements and statements (as tags) that definitely refer to warfare and pain in France or elsewhere in the world ("*Banlieux Rouge, Vietnam Libre, Perils Jaune, ETA, Corsica Nation*"<sup>6</sup>, "*Bagdad*" or "*Raider*"<sup>7</sup>) are some examples. Besides that, there is certainly graffiti with no socio-critical or political issues/aspects, without meaning or wanting to be pretentious. So-called "pieces", in which it is simply about the artistic merit of developing an individual style and making it visible to stand out from the crowd.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fig.: "*Banlieux Rouge*", p.51.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fig.: "*Raider*", p.14.

To find out first-hand what the motivation of painting on war architecture could be, I contacted some of the artists I could track down through their pseudonyms. I for example asked them if the history of those remnants influenced them while working on the bunkers, or if they still in a way embody and represent the force and power they had during the war.

Les Copaintres, 2009: *"We started painting on blockhaus a few years ago. It is a really great surface to paint on, as it can be seen in a natural environment. On a day at the beach, we can have lunch with friends, get naked, go swimming, and paint all the afternoon without being disturbed. Besides, we can have really cool photos when our work is done. We started to paint a lot on these surfaces, as we were tired of working in the city environment, with all the noise and the negative energies, damn cops and people who wanted to talk to us for hours."*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Fig.: "Les Copaintres", p.76 and e-mail (30.11.2009).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Fig.: "Usine", 2005, TT Crew (Usine, Virassamy, Grems), p.23 and e-mail (16.11.2009). Headlines: Audimat (Jack Usine; Typography).

*We don't think too much about the origins of these buildings, as we weren't here at that time. For us they are just cool walls to paint on. The bunkers have lost their primary function, they are just „vestiges“ of an ancient war we haven't known. As the time passes, they are sinking in the sand, until the day they will disappear entirely. But before they do, we still have the time to write something stupid on it, to tell the world something funny before we all die.”<sup>8</sup>*

Jack Usine, 2009: *“We didn't have any conceptual exigences about the blockhaus. For us it's a good way to go to the beach and paint at the same time. We are fully conscious of their history, but we didn't pay attention while we painted. You know, we saw these bunkers since we were kids – when we went the beach. So they became a really common thing for us.”<sup>9</sup>*

### Last Things:

Objects contain/hold history, which starts to unlock as soon as one starts to fathom an object and follow its traces. The discovered objects have, from a political point of view, been a demonstration of power. According to Hartmut Böhme, they have been part of a ritual and their meaning, therefore, is scenic:

*“Scenic symbols are not perceived, undeciphered, interpreted and identified from a distance. They fascinate, they impress... charm... The execution is the realisation of significance and meaning. Present is, what has been clear from the beginning: the unquestioned authority, the holiness, the force, the leader!”<sup>10</sup>*

In this case it is not the unquestioned authority, the force, or the leader which is primarily linked to the bunkers. They are, observed from a distance, foremost just lumps of rocks on a beach. The only irritating thing is that all around them there are no rocks. The "only" things that exist are sand, water and plants. *“One has to stumble upon things, in order to be able to ask about them at all.”<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Hartmut Böhme: Fetischismus und Kultur, Rowohlt, 2.Auflage, 2006, p.257.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.68.

### Markus Oberndorfer

(2008) Born in Gmunden, 1980, living and working in Vienna.