



Südwall, Marseille, 2017–2018

Margret Hoppe

During World War II Germany established its southern front or *Südwall*, running from the Spanish to the Italian borders and following the Marseille coastline, as a defensive line against an Allied invasion. The defences served the Wehrmacht, who occupied the area from 1943, and to this day remnants of the military bunkers and forts can be seen in Marseille, on the white rocky coast of the Calanques and on surrounding islands, such as the Îles du Frioul. Unlike the Atlantic bunkers in Brittany and Normandy, the history of the *Südwall* is not well known.

My series of photographs seeks to unearth these fortifications, which, because they are built of concrete, are virtually integrated into the rocky landscape of the coast. Were it not for the colourful graffiti and images that adorn them, they would vanish into the landscape, like camouflaged soldiers. When Paul Virilio photographed the blockhouses of the North Atlantic coast for his Bunker Archaeology project, he was interested in developing a forensic-like typology of these fortifications. ‘These buildings are no longer just receptacles but binnacles, which is what distinguishes them from ordinary architecture and what gives them this anthropomorphic character. There is here a close relationship between the function of the arm and that of the eye.’¹ In contrast to Virilio, I am not interested in a study of anthropomorphic forms, but in the form of the landscape itself as an environment for the bunkers, which through their stonelike character have become the landscape.

In addition to the bunkers, I have taken photographs of the plants and the Calanques coast, itself a wall – a last line of defence that separates land from sea. The word *Südwall* stands also for the very stones of the Mediterranean coast. Edging the streets and along former military paths, *Agave* plants grow in the dry earth. *Agave* in its Greek origin means ‘sublime’ or ‘noble’, and the plant is popularly known also as the century plant because it flowers only once in its lifetime, an event that can take decades. The *Agave* is a migrant from South America, and in Mexico it is used in the production of tequila and mezcal. It reminds me

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¹ Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*, Princeton Architectural Press, second edition, 2009, p 43













of a weapon because its leaves are tipped with protective thorns, fiercely resisting the harshness of the wind and sun, like the migrants confronting the Mediterranean.

The Südwall has changed over the decades from a fortress to ruins and architectural relics. Nature and man-made construction have become woven together into a unified matrix. Some bunkers were later transformed into homes in which people now live. In one of my images there is a stone memorial that reminds us of the victims of war – three resistance fighters who died young and are now present only by name: Jean Odelin, seventeen years old, Serge Loiseau, nineteen years old and Jaques Baby, twenty-three years old.

The Südwall is a memorial to the conflicted history of Germany and France and the catastrophe of two world wars. This former line of defence – part of Hitler's Fortress Europe – reminds us that the Europe of today, a peaceful union of different countries, can not be taken for granted. It is fragile.

Margret Hoppe (born Greiz, Thüringen; lives in Leipzig) studied photography at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig, graduating from Professor Christopher Muller's *Meisterklasse*, and is currently completing a doctorate at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach. She is presently exploring the relationship between architecture and photography based on the example of French photographer Lucien Hervé. Whereas Hoppe's work initially concentrated on the interiors of abandoned and disused buildings, her focus now is on the buildings of Swiss Modernist architect and urban planner Le Corbusier. In addition to being presented in regular solo and group exhibitions, her work has won numerous prizes including the gute aussichten – junge deutsche fotografie, (the Good Prospects young German photography award); the Marion Ermer Award, and the 2014 Kunstpreis der Sachsen Bank, and is included in the collections of an impressive roster of international museums. Hoppe's work came to prominence in the 2013 International Marianne Brandt Contest, where her 'Après une architecture' series was nominated. The project was supported by the Goethe Institut Marseille and Le Garage Photographie Marseille.

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