

# REMAINS OF THE FRAY

## Celeste Olalquiaga on Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archaeology*

**PAUL VIRILIO WAS BORED** on the beach one summer afternoon in 1958. Leaning against a concrete block, the young man made a 360-degree scan of his surroundings—sand, rocky cliffs, ocean. This panoramic appraisal took him all the way back to the block behind him, a “worthless object” from World War II. His vacation in Brittany was over and his career as an “archaeologist of the future” (to quote his early collaborator, the architect Claude Parent) was about to begin. For the next seven years, Virilio would travel France’s northwestern coast, photographing the abandoned bunkers of the defunct Nazi fortification system known as the *Atlantikwall* and formulating his ideas about what he initially called “cryptic architecture.” This inaugural survey was made famous in his classic *Bunker Archaeology* (published in French in 1975 and in English in 1994). The French philosopher died this past September at the age of eighty-six: By reexamining this book we may appreciate Virilio’s remarkable foresight and his powerful vision of an after-modern future.

If Walter Benjamin saw the rapid obsolescence of industrial modernity prefigured in the late-nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, Virilio predicted late modernity

through the structures built by the Third Reich on European beaches from the Franco-Spanish border to Norway. In *Bunker Archaeology*, he describes the drastic cultural shift that took place after World War II, a change that he views as a “dematerialization” of the classic war apparatus. With the aerial attacks of World War I, combat escalated from localized ground and naval conflicts into a mode of full-blown spatial control; during World War II, the technology that enabled this colonization of space would be developed exponentially. “These concrete blocks were in fact the final throw-offs of the history of frontiers,” Virilio wrote,

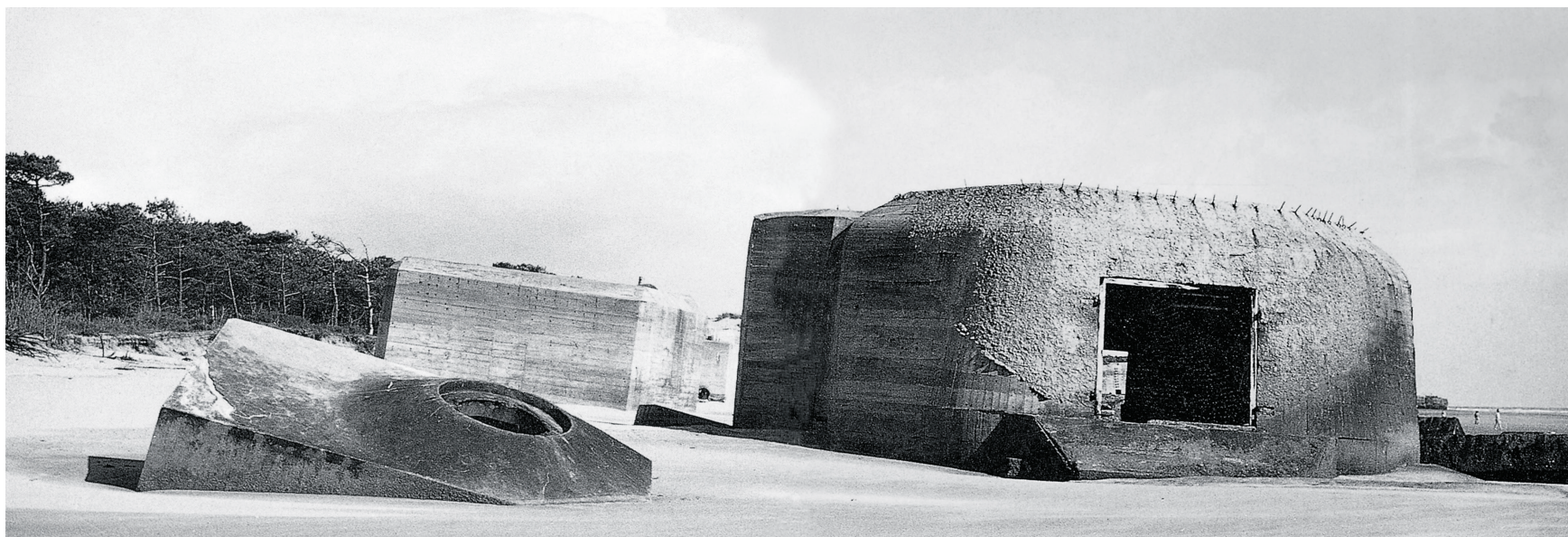
from the Roman *limes* to the Great Wall of China; the bunkers, as ultimate military surface architecture, had shipwrecked at lands’ limits, at the precise moment of the sky’s arrival in war. . . . From then on, there was no more protective expanse or distance, all territory was totally accessible, everything was immediately exposed to the gaze and to destruction.

From horizontal to vertical massacres, from continental to global warfare, from the mechanical carnage of preatomic weaponry to the unthinkable disintegration

of nuclear destruction, Virilio outlines the rise of the modern war machine and shows how the incursion of this apparatus into the stratosphere changed the rules of the game: “The reduction of warring objects and the exponential increase in their performance bring to the military establishment the *omniscience* and that *omnipresence* it has from the beginning wished to acquire.” Time became quicker and shorter; space invisible and inapprehensible, no longer a surface to map but a matrix to surf or navigate by instruments only. In short, Virilio treats the Nazi bunkers as dialectical images whose ruined condition exposes the twentieth century’s paradoxical spatiality, in which matter was reconfigured by the speed of technology. Today, Virilio’s best-known books include *Speed and Politics* (1977/1986), *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980/1991), *Lost Dimension* (1984/1991), and a conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War* (1983). Most, if not all, of the concerns addressed in these works are announced in *Bunker Archaeology*, whose first, shorter version appeared in 1966 in *Architecture Principe*, a journal founded by Virilio and Parent.

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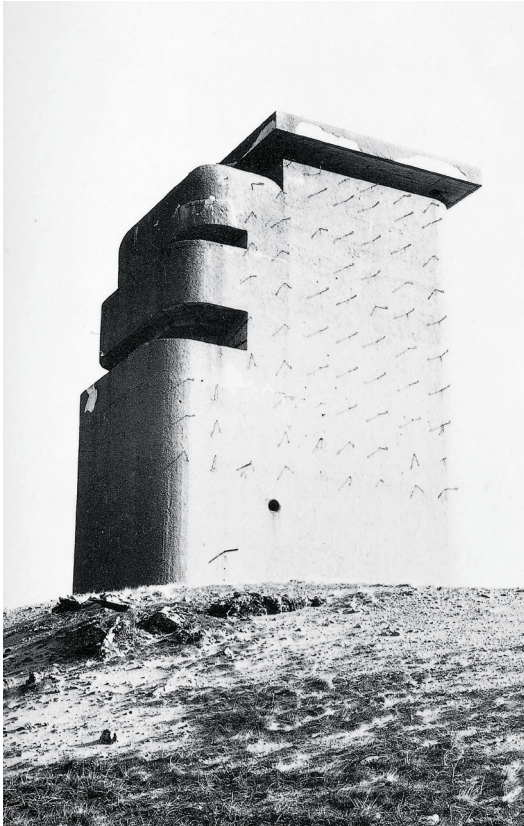
Bunker, France, ca. 1958–65. Photo: Paul Virilio.

1938 by Fritz Todt, the *Atlantikwall* consisted of fifteen thousand bunkers that housed artillery batteries, oil-storage units, submarine pens, and radar stations. This wall was devised to protect the Third Reich from an attack by Allied forces. Initially in charge of road construction, the OT eventually oversaw all the Reich's war construction, including that of urban shelters for civilians and concentration camps. The company, which had more than 1.3 million workers, primarily used forced labor from the occupied countries. Todt died in an airplane crash in 1942 and was replaced by the architect Albert Speer, who aspired to become "vice-dictator," and to whom Virilio dedicates a section of *Bunker Archaeology*.

Speer's eagerness to please his supreme commander is evinced by his 1938 "theory of ruin value," concocted around the time Hitler, courtesy of the Mussolini regime, took a night tour of Rome's historic center lit by a nocturnal extravaganza of floodlights, gas canisters, and even candles between the arches of the Colosseum. Fascinated with the Roman ruins, Hitler desired similarly enduring monuments to the Reich's imperial power, structures that would continue to project strength and dominance into the next century and beyond. Accordingly, Speer proposed an urban architecture guaranteed to produce spectacular remains. He decided not to use modern materials such as concrete and steel, which age swiftly and badly, and prepared a drawing of Zeppelin Field (a Nazi Party rallying arena that seated two hundred thousand) in shambles. "That I could even conceive of a period of decline for the newly founded Reich destined to last a thousand years seemed outrageous to many of Hitler's closest followers," Speer said. "But he himself accepted my ideas as logical and illuminating. He gave orders that in the future the important buildings of his Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principle of this 'law of ruins.'"

The führer may have fantasized about the majestic decrepitude of the Reich, yet he certainly did not wish to consider such a scenario in the present and refused to visit the *Atlantikwall*, as if somehow intuiting that the bunkers would become the tombstones of his reign. The military bunkers did turn out to be what Virilio calls the "funerary monuments of the German dream," stelae attesting to an imperial drive that, after the occupation of a great chunk of Western and Northern Europe, changed gears and began walling itself into a huge fortress: "*Festung Europa*." He quotes Mao Tse-tung, who in 1942 declared with his usual acuity that "if Hitler is obliged to resort to strategic defense, fascism is over and done with; indeed, a state like the Third Reich has from its inception founded its military and political life on the offensive. Put a stop to the offensive, and its existence ends."

Emphasizing the almost ritualistic character of these "semi-religious . . . beach altars," which remind one of the mysterious *moai* of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Virilio employs a poetic language that recalls the Romantic infatuation with architectural remnants, except that he never loses sight of the final mission of the bunkers as

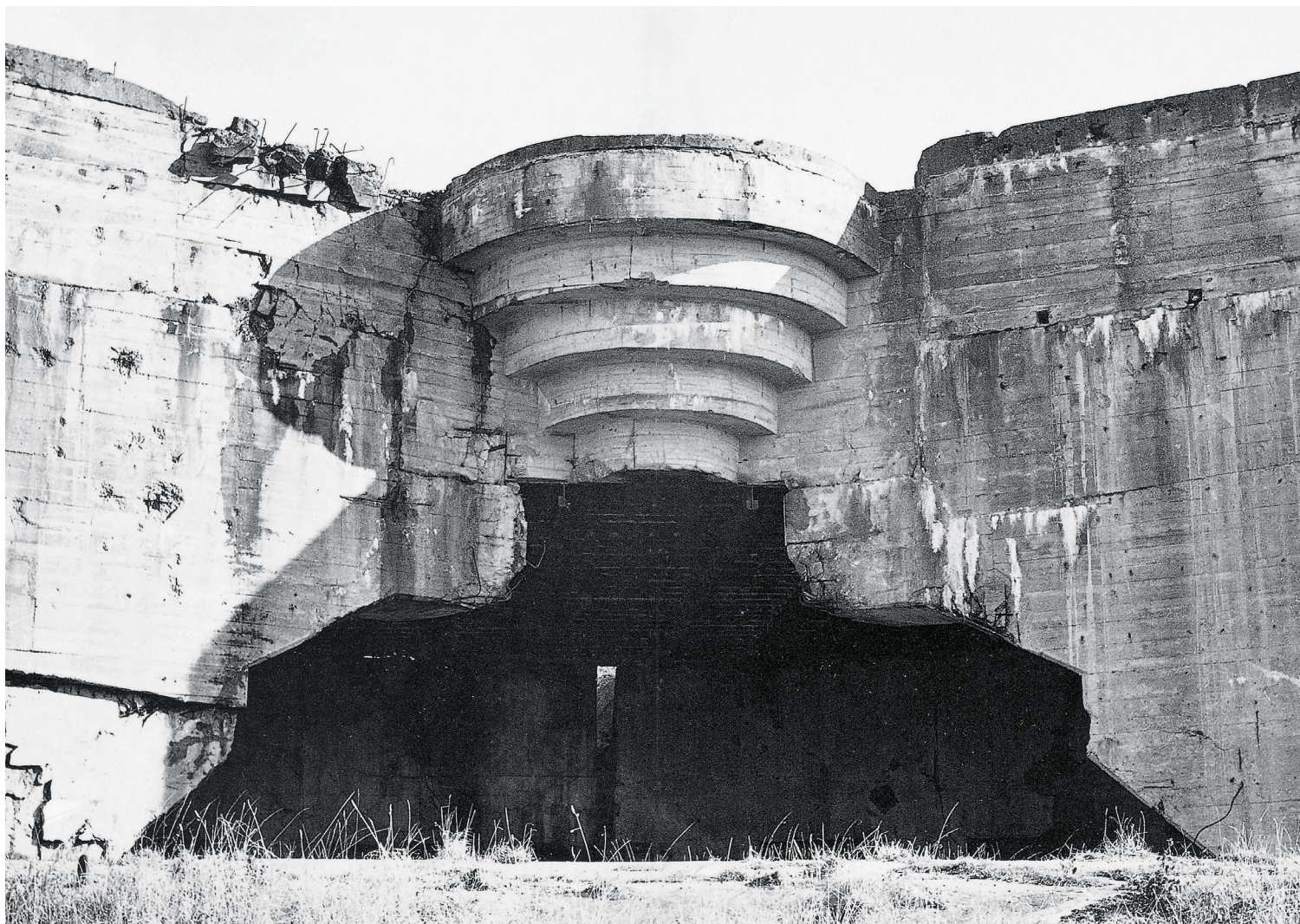


From top: Firing control tower, Landes, France, ca. 1958–65. Observation post, France, ca. 1958–65. Photos: Paul Virilio.

machines of ruination: "Facing the ocean, facing its void, the mythic character of this watchman's wake before the immensity of the oceanic horizon were not distinct from the anguished waiting of populations for the arrival of bomber squadrons in the darkness of the sky at night." This was a situation he had experienced personally. World War II, which Virilio called his "mother," "father," and "university," determined his life and work. He was born in 1932 and grew up in the French port city of Nantes, which was occupied by the Nazis in 1940 and destroyed by Allied bombs two years later. Rather than take underground refuge in basements, where many people died, his family would escape to the fields and lie on the ground until the air raids were over. It was then that the ten-year-old Virilio started writing about "war and the city" in a notebook.

One of the beauties of *Bunker Archaeology* is how Virilio's artistic sensibility (he was a painter of stained glass before taking courses in philosophy, architecture, and psychology, and later directed the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris for almost twenty-five years) prevails in this early work. He expresses mixed feelings for the structures that so fascinate him. "The poetry of the bunker is in its still being a shield for its users, in the end as outdated as an infant's rebuilt armor, an empty shell, an emotionally moving phantom of an old-fashioned duel where the adversaries could still look each other in the eye through the narrow slits of their helmets." Yet on one occasion, he fears death while visiting the interior of one of these chambers, whose narrowness crushes the explorer almost to the point of immobility: "Like a slightly undersized piece of clothing that hampers as much as it enclothes, the reinforced concrete and steel envelope is too tight under the arms and sets you in a semi-paralysis fairly close to that of illness . . . [a] cadaveric rigidity from which the shelter was designed to protect."

In his explorations, photos, and writing, Virilio seems to perform the "function of the oblique" that he developed with Parent. In the 1966 version of *Bunker Archaeology*, he writes: "Geometry is no longer affirmative but eroded, wasted. The angle is not straight but depressed to avoid any grasp, the mass is no longer embedded on the ground but centered on itself, independent, able to move and connect. This architecture floats on the surface of an earth that has lost its materiality." Prompted by the sloping floors inside tumbled bunkers, Virilio and Parent promoted an architecture that rejected the horizontal and the vertical in favor of a design that produced a sense of instability, privileging an active physical engagement with the built environment. Consistently, Virilio zoomorphizes the bunkers, where "mineral and animal come together in a strange fashion, as if the last fortress symbolized all of the armor types of the carapace, from the turtle to the tank, as if the surface bastion, before disappearing, exposed one last time its means and its methods in the domain of the animate as well as the inanimate."



Lindemann battery, Strait of Dover, Sangatte, France, ca. 1958–65. Photo: Paul Virilio.

This creative liberty is apparent in the organization of the book, which, as its title indicates, studies and classifies the objects it unearths, producing a multifaceted archive-panorama. *Bunker Archaeology* provides “hard” documentation, such as typologies, a cartography of the *Atlantikwall*, and a chronology of the Third Reich that includes some of Hitler’s war directives. It’s loosely organized into two parts, the first a series of brief essays that alternate with quotations, the second Virilio’s own black-and-white photos. The latter are not mere illustrations; they’re essential to the text. “I cannot write a book if I don’t have images,” Virilio once declared. *Bunker Archaeology*’s core affective impact lies in these melancholic yet detached views of abandoned and forgotten war machines half-buried in the sand, emerging like rocks from the ocean, tilted, eroded, graffitied, debased. No longer threatening, they are the remains of a lost war, collapsed transformers whose geometric shapes both contrast with and replicate the coast’s stony

surface: “The bunker, for camouflage, tends to coalesce with the geological forms whose geometry results from the forces and exterior conditions that for centuries have modeled them. The bunker’s form anticipates this erosion by suppressing all superfluous forms; [it] is prematurely worn and smoothed to avoid all impact.”

If recent scholarship on ruins—whether the term designates the newly unearthed buildings of an ancient civilization or the moribund infrastructure of the century just past—tends to treat architecture as the material support of history, Virilio was able to understand and value modern ruins for their ability to convey a physical dimension that is constantly receding, always threatening to evanesce. “Empty shells,” the bunkers provide a material, tactile experience that bespeaks a world whose physical parameters have been radically transformed, expanded, even elided. Emblems of a predigital era left behind by a technological takeover we could scarcely imagine twenty years ago, the bunkers are displaced topoi, like

so much of the modernist architecture that sought to pave the way for an illuminated future that never happened. In their degraded condition, the bunkers condense the contradictions of industrial modernity, whose preferred material, concrete, could be adapted to any form only to then harden into a human-made fossil, an instant relic. They are the entropic precursors of the energy-based war that has since prevailed: “The energy crisis develops in crisis energy, which means the split between reality—the materialness of the human habitat—and unreality—the immaterialness of a power that is founded only on the violence of energy and on the ever-expanding extension of its field. From now on the military establishment will defend not so much the ‘national’ territory as that of energy, the *area of violence*.” □

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