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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*From Bunker Experience to Bunker Mentality*

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## **From Bunker Experience to Bunker Mentality**

Years ago, I stumbled across a quote from Adolf Loos, which came to my mind again while preparing this lecture. It comes from an essay of his from 1910, programmatically titled "Architektur":

If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a somber mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say, "There is someone buried here. That is architecture."<sup>1</sup>

I've always found this short, somehow epic anecdote quite stunning because it talks about several aspects supposedly communicated by architecture. Firstly, a simple piece of information: this is what a provisional grave looks like. Secondly, a mood that comes with the information: one is faced with another person's death. Finally, and maybe most interestingly, there is something abstract in between those two aspects, hidden in the words "a voice inside us." It might be a certain kind of logic like: "of all the things people would probably bury, the shape of this mound most resembles the size of a man" – or, a kind of shared knowledge like: "from what I learned as a child, men bury their peers' bodies for a number of ritual and hygienic reasons" – or, something drawn from personal experience like: "when my grandmother died, she was buried in a similarly shaped grave."

Early on when I had started to photograph and research German postwar architecture – taking a certain pleasure and interest in those buildings that seemed to be condemned by almost all of society as ugly, inhospitable and inhuman – I realized that one of the most frequent and probably most serious ways of verbally insulting a building was to call it a "bunker." At first, I took this as one of many ways people expressed how much they despised this type of architecture, which so offensively broke with what people considered a house ought to look like – be it through the rawness of the material, the conscious disregard of a given urban scale, or the abstract caginess of its shape.

And then, there was a third component that finally led to the body of work presented here: reading W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* translated as *Air War And Literature*.<sup>2</sup> I had already been sympathetic to Sebald's novels, but, this book greatly surpassed my expectations. Compiled from a number of lectures he had given at the University of Zurich in 1997, it was probably the most relentless and radical rant on Nazi and postwar Germany I had ever encountered. I remember that while reading it, every now and then I had to laugh out loud – out of a mixture of surprise, pleasure and sympathy about how someone could speak in such a relentless yet precise way about the German state of mind in the infamous period “after 45.” Without trying to recapitulate his argument, I would like to try and point out some of his central claims, which can serve as a guideline to my own photographic work.

In short, Sebald argues that the Allied bombings of Germany's major cities were both a starting point and a vehicle for German postwar society: through their traumatic character, the bombings helped to erect an inner wall that blocked any critical look back into the past and into the role the German people had played in the Nazi regime, including the Shoah as the most horrifying of all crimes. Instead, they gave the German people the compensation of being able to consider themselves victims, too – victims of an encompassing and inexplicable wave of destruction, which was hardly ever felt to be a result of Germany's political and military action.

At the same time, this wall was used to “bounce” people's minds into the future, gaining the energy to constantly look forward, and finally increasing speed on the way to the *Wirtschaftswunder* – the term that so tellingly calls *a miracle* what was actually the result of immense repression, strategic denial and a characteristic thirst for power and prestige. Sebald quotes German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger's amazingly astute observation: “[We cannot grasp] this mysterious energy of the Germans... if we refuse to realize that they have made a virtue of their deficiencies. Insensibility was the condition of their success.”<sup>3</sup>

Although with a certain distance, Sebald complements Enzensberger's insight in an equally sharp manner:

[The catalyst of the economic miracle was] the stream of psychic energy that has not dried up to this day, and which has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state. A secret that bound all Germans together in the postwar years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goal such as the realization of democracy ever could.<sup>4</sup>

This idea found symbolic expression in a recent architectural constellation in Berlin.



The late 19<sup>th</sup> century Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church was severely damaged by aerial bombs on the night of November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1943, and its ruin dwelt in the cityscape well into the 1950s, the allied forces being reluctant to reconstruct this item of ancient Wilhelmine German national pride. Eventually, in 1957, modernist architect Egon Eiermann won the competition for designing a new version of the church. The population, however, was not willing to accept the loss of this iconic building. Thus, a compromise was found: Eiermann designed an annex of cubic geometric shapes – covered all over with an even, detailed grid – as a kind of abstract bystander to the ruin of the original church's main tower. In this condition, it served as a memorial, not only to the trauma of aerial bombing, but also to the unreconciled strife between a widespread nostalgia for a lost yesterday and the

blind belief in progressing into a better tomorrow. This paradox characterized postwar West Germany better than anything else.

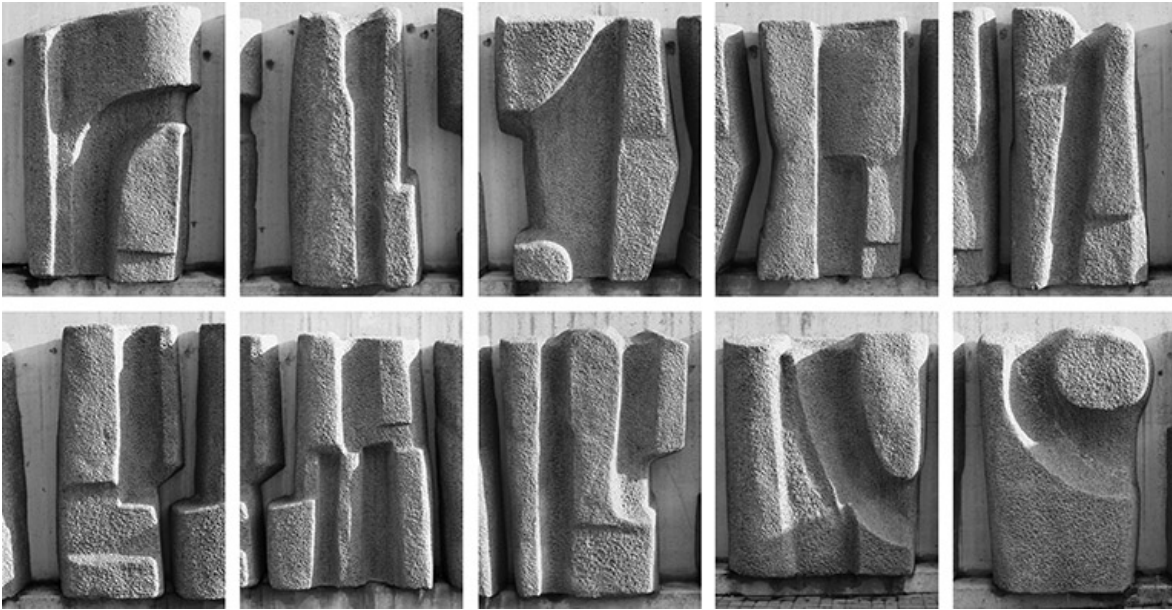
It was in 2011 that I encountered the church in an unfamiliar condition – unfamiliar only at second sight, though. Covered in scaffolding, the old tower was camouflaged in a way that was not alien to the eye of the passer-by in a West German city centre. Using a very simple effect, the white scaffolding with grey squares made it look like a classic 1960s office tower: not as pure as Mies van der Rohe's curtain walls, yet without any ornament, and of largely pragmatic elegance. A façade that spoke volumes about the face of West German success: so slick that nothing could stick to it – no questioning gaze, and no attempt at recollection.

One should try to imagine the construction work being openly visible, hinting at the fact that trying to preserve a ruin is one of the hardest ways of not letting go.

Back to Sebald: Not only was he hit by harsh criticism for speaking of a period he had not lived through himself (he had been born in 1944 in a remote village in the German Alps), he was also scorned for having left behind his fatherland by emigrating to England in 1966, and for fouling his own nest by turning against his own kind, the German writers of the postwar period.

Indeed, he was relentless in his judgment of the few literary attempts at dealing with the bunker experience. His main criticism aims at the tendency to tarnish the harsh reality of aerial bombing by transferring it into the realm of myth, generalizing it through comparisons to hell, inferno, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.

Also, Sebald doubts the authenticity of the majority of documentary reports and eyewitness accounts of those nights. What raises his doubts is the recurrence of the same verbal imagery and figures of speech, which seem rather to cover up, or even push aside any real detailed memory. As he puts it: "The apparently unimpaired ability – shown in most of the eyewitness reports – of everyday language to go on functioning as usual raises doubts of the authenticity of the experiences they record."<sup>5</sup>



In reference to this, I named the prologue to my work – a series of photographs of a decontextualized public sculpture I had run across, purely by chance, somewhere behind the main station of Hannover – *Das Versagen der Normalsprache* [the failure of everyday language]. The sculpture seemed like an alternative visual alphabet, suggestive of a concrete language, fit to deal with the subject at hand.

Despite the sharpness of his criticism, Sebald does not forget to distinguish and to put things into perspective at the proper time. Thus, he criticizes writers, publishers and political institutions for not living up to their responsibility in the process of facing the collective trauma of the Air War. But, on the other hand, he protects and defends the individual's inability to face all this on his or her own – a disproportionate mental overload for only one man or woman. "The accounts of individual eyewitnesses, therefore, are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals."<sup>6</sup>

That is what my work *Bunker-Erfahrung* [bunker experience] attempts to do: it suggests that there were moments in the process of rebuilding those cities destroyed by bombing when the collective unconscious produced shapes that recall this bunker experience – their present massiveness and stability mirroring memories of the fragile skeletons of a ruined city.

Raising no claim to completeness, it suggests 5 modes of recurrence:

### The Impenetrable



### The Multilayered



### The Entrapped/Exposed

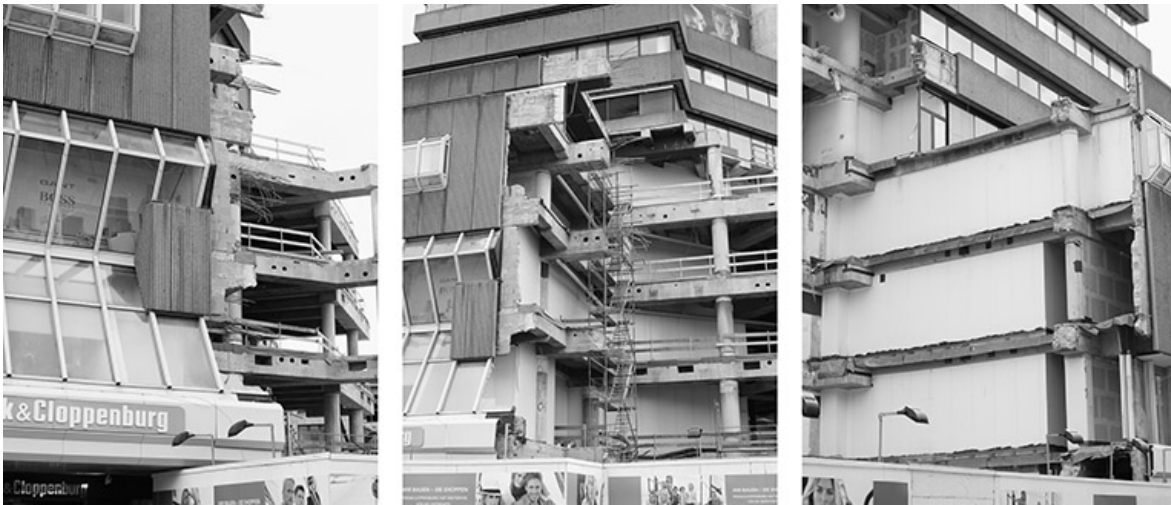


### The Resurrected





## The Revenged



The image of a deconstruction site is like a double-edged sword: it brings back the primal image of trauma and promises salvation from it at the same time. Also, the image of a deconstruction site intermingles three historical conditions: building – destructing – rebuilding. All three taken together form one ruinous equation.

## Footnotes

1 Adolf Loos, "Architecture", in *On architecture*, ed. A. and D. Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007), 84. First published in the magazine "Der Sturm", December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1910

2 W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999). All following quotes from the English translation: Sebald, "Air War and Literature", in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2004).

3 Sebald, "Air War", 12.

4 Ibid., 13.

5 *Ibid.*, 25.

6 *Ibid.*, 25-26.