

See, but not Seen:
Field Research Uncovering the Bunker

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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. Some clothes and bicycles had been hidden here; the object no longer made the same sense, though there was still protection here.

Paul Virilio

I turned the numbers of the dial, 5... 2... 5... 9...

The padlock opened and the heavy chain rattled through the ringers of the blast door and fell to the ground with a heavy clatter. I pushed on the reinforced steel, and slowly the door came open, revealing nothing but darkness. I had been permitted to explore the big bunker, a former radio control central at Bungenäs. It had been abandoned by the military, but not before the soldiers had removed all equipment and smashed the interior, leaving it an empty, cold maze of concrete corridors. Some parts were recognizable as bathrooms, but the faucets, showers and toilets were gone; other rooms had pipes leading nowhere. I had heard from my friend Kees, an artist working with nuclear bunkers, that in every bunker he ever visited, it was always the same: the soldiers had left nothing but the last chair for the last man to sit on.

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Introduction

In 2014 I visited the bunkers at Bungenäs for the first time, and I felt a lot came together for me in that place. I didn't quite grasp anything other than the aesthetics of the bunkers and trenches at that first visit, but it kept me inspired for over a year, and I knew I had to go back. In order to find out what was the depth of my hunger I decided to create a project, a workshop. Without having more than a notion of what I wanted to discover, I invited fellow artists to join me, with even less fully formed questions.

In October of 2015 I organized the workshop 'See, but not Seen' on the topic of bunker conversion on Northern Gotland, Sweden. The format of the workshop was 5 artists, currently or previously studying at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie who would be undertaking a 2,5 week workshop/residency around the subject, attending lectures, visiting museums and exploring to build a context, all the while working on the ground at Bungenäs, the peninsula where the conversions are taking place.

What we ended up doing was *field research*, a type of research that demands that the researcher leaves his or her everyday working environment, in our case our studios, and provides results that can only be gained by researching in a different *field*, in our case an actual physical place. Field research, or *fieldwork*, is an often used method within many disciplines, although the approach of the researcher may vary to some extent, depending on the type of field being researched.

The exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice. This stands in contradistinction to 'research into art', such as art history and cultural studies.¹



Where does artistic field research start, how do you set the parameters of asking questions, what is the advantage of the liberty of the artistic context versus for example a scientific or anthropological set up? In this essay I will explain how I deemed it an impossibility to make my interest and fascination of the bunkers constructive from a distance, and how I found the model of the workshop to be the only constructive option.

Inspiration came when reading the book *Bunker Archeology* by Paul Virilio (which was recommended me by one of the bunker residents at Bungenäs), where he describes his first encounters with the World War II bunkers in France, and how his first-hand experience was so profound, it opened many avenues of questions and laid the ground for a 30 year long study - historical, architectural, and philosophical.² I see this essay as my first attempt to understand, through unveiling the workshop as a case study and referencing writers on artistic research as well as understanding field research, what an artist working in the field can bring to the artistic process. I hope to continue working in this way in the future.



Field Research

To research in the field is to collect data in a qualitative way, away from your regular workplace.³ In ethnographical research, conducted famously by Pierre Bourdieu during the Algerian War (1958-1962) it is used to observe and interact with people in their natural setting, the goal being to understand another culture. Bourdieu viewed "any historical, non-homogeneous social-spatial arena in which people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources" as a field.⁴

Out in the field there are two ends of interaction: the researcher can either choose to be a *participant* or an *observer*, the first is fully participating in the culture and the latter chooses not to be immersed but observe from a distance. However, it may not have to be either or, but it can also be seen as a spectrum of possibility, where both roles can play a part.⁵

Field research is used in several other disciplines, for our purposes archeology was of interest for instance, where archeological surveys and site survey play a big role in mapping the terrain and uncovering sites that can give clues to understand ancient cultures, where not people but artifacts and ruins lets the archeologist draw conclusions.

Field notes is a way of documenting what you see in the field. During my time on Bungenäs I made small short hand notes, legible only to me, as well as small sketches - as I found it the most useful way for remembering my experience, which can otherwise be harder than you think when it's time to analyze what you've found out.

Field notes should be done as straightforward as possible: describe what you see. It is a chance to be messy and open to everything that presents itself. The researcher should use the medium that fits them and the environment. In some cases, if one chooses participation, writing in your notebook might seem unnatural, and the researcher might have to find another way.⁶ The



participants of the workshop used sound recordings, photography and video, as well as copying textures and marking out sites of interest on a map.

The intimacy to the subject is the key benefit of field research and the documentation gains a lot more depth than for instance if you analyze statistics. The main drawback is the lack of breadth and scope as the research is more qualitative than quantitative, and may make the research seem narrow.⁷ During the workshop I tried to combat this by sharing my research with the other participants.⁸

There's a wide variety of examples of artists and field research. Sometimes in collaboration with a scientific expedition, as depicted in the Danish documentary *Expedition to the End of the World*, where artists Daniel Richter and Tal R join the crew of a ship headed for parts of Greenland where the glacier has melted and revealed new land. Lotte Geeven helped a team of geoscientists record sounds from a hole drilled between the two great tectonic plates in Southern Germany that once connected and created the supercontinent Pangea.⁹ In an article for Rhizome Rachel Wetzler writes on young artists doing fieldwork:

[...] if art can be anything, then the artist can also be anyone. Though their work is strikingly different in process and final form, [...] the artists working in this vein, explore the possibilities offered by different disciplines, choosing to be as rigorous—or as lax—as they see fit. Yet, rather than resulting in watered-down versions of social science, in which the methods of a more supposedly “serious” field are employed to confer a veneer of relevance or gravity on an artistic project, the work of these artists is enlivened by the marrying of the subjective and idiosyncratic with the academic and research-intensive.¹⁰

To do field research or be in a place you don't know, but feel you need to know, seems to be a recurring theme for these artists. To go and see a thing for yourself is the benefit of the field research as well as the quality of the findings. To be in the here and now, be it in a bunker or in the far reaches of Greenland or in the worlds deepest hole, and react to the senses, is a crucial way to inform yourself about the world.

Slowed down in his physical activity but attentive, anxious over the catastrophic probabilities of his environment, the visitor in this perilous place is beset with a singular heaviness; in fact he is already in the grips of that cadaveric rigidity from which the shelter was designed to protect him.¹¹

Paul Virilio

Our Field

Between 1906 and 1963 Bungenäs was one of Gotland's largest limestone quarries, until 1964 when it was acquired by the Swedish military. They needed to fortify the island of Gotland, which geographical position was of great military strategic value against Soviet, and proceeded to build a large number of bunkers all around the island, especially at Bungenäs.¹² After World War II, Sweden remained neutral but in secret supported the United States against the USSR. When the Cold War ended, Sweden cut down its military presence on the Gotland and the military decided to sell Bungenäs in the year 2000.¹³ It was a rundown, shot to pieces peninsula that had seemingly lost all practical value. None of the bigger housing developers were interested; the director of one company, seeking to build a resort on the popular northern Gotland, stepped out of his helicopter on a cold and rainy day, took one look, deemed it inhospitable and left.¹⁴

Eventually it was bought by private entrepreneur Joachim Kuylenstierna, who swam around the military's fences as a child and played among the bunkers. Kuylenstierna, together with a team of architects, presented an ambitious plan to preserve all the historical remains and build a community that preserved and utilized the unique landscape. They saw the giant quarry, the half-buried bunkers and the old military obstacle courses as exciting features in the picturesque Gotland landscape and started to convert bunkers to holiday houses and the old limestone barn to a restaurant and hotel.¹⁵

Based on Bourdieu's definition Bungenäs is indeed a field, consisting of different historical layers, where economic interests, access and use have changed over time, beginning with the limestone industry that sparked Gotland's first big export, the military take-over during the cold war, that effectively closed the area to the public and other economic ventures, leading up to the present day entrepreneurs and developers that are turning the leftover bunkers into homes.



It should be made clear that while our workshop in hindsight employed methods connected to field research, it was at the time born more out of intuition than a conscious choice, and it was actually when we came back that I first realized what we had done. I don't see this as a problem as it gave me an opportunity to get to know field research and investigate how I can employ it in favor of my own practice.

The questions when setting out were not clear cut, and actually my initial question about whether or not the bunkers were being appropriated by architects in a similar way artist's are using readymades, lost importance during the workshop. Instead the participants saw things I would never have thought of which informed the workshop as a whole.

The choice to venture outside the studio presented opportunities: firstly, to be able to go to the site in question to see the activity for myself and interview the people responsible, as well as finding clues to what kind of status the bunkers had. Secondly, I wanted to go together with my colleagues and peers to get additional views and reflections on the topic. I also longed for a critical discussion with people who received the same experience and input as myself, but without my biases.



Case Study: The Workshop

My objective was solely archeological. I would hunt these gray forms until they would transmit to me a part of their mystery, a part of the secret a few phrases could sum up: why would these extraordinary constructions, compared to seaside villas, not be perceived or even recognized? Why the analogy between the funeral archetype and military architecture? Why this insane situation looking out over the ocean? This waiting before the infinite oceanic expanse?¹⁶

Paul Virilio

After having experienced the physicality of the concrete bunkers and trenches the previous year, and reading Virilio's description of his shifting and troubled interest of an object that no longer made sense in our world, yet remained, I felt I had to experience it again first hand. So I set up a workshop, called 'See, but not Seen',¹⁷ that would take place in October 2015.

Together with my fellow graduate Nicola Godman, I made an initial reconnaissance in the area in the month of August, where we made contact with an artist couple, Nina Rave and Robin Watkins, who lives in one of the very first bunkers that was converted. At first they were apprehensive, they thought we were their regular kind of visitors that had pestered them all summer. As there are no fences or visible markers surrounding their home, people feel free to ask them general questions about their living situation, which I can imagine becoming quite taxing in the long run. When we quickly told them about our project and that we came from an art academy, they became at ease and opened up their home to us.

I had worried that people would find our field research intrusive, but the people we met and talked with didn't mind our questions nor question what we were doing. To further set up the workshop and make it something more than a trip or a chance to work on site, I recalled my experience with

residencies I've done in the past. For instance, in Dordrecht our class' research residency was more about working outside of school and using the facilities of DordtYart to further our process, but the time there was quite unfocused in terms of teamwork. To me it felt important that the participants of the workshop had a clear topic and context, that was relevant within their own individual practices, leading to reflections that eventually could be presented publicly.

The participants were myself, and I had lived on Gotland during many summers; Nicola Godman, who was born on Gotland, close to Bungenäs; Carolin Hansson, who was born in the south of Sweden but had never been to the island; Andy Woortman, from Amsterdam, who only visited Stockholm and his fellow dutch native Rick van de Dood, rounding up the group, having never been to Sweden in his life.

After our first meeting on the pier of Bungenäs, from where once a flotilla of ships had transported limestone over the sea, the group went our separate ways, for a short initial survey of the area. When planning the workshop I had made contact with one of the architects busy with converting the bunkers, and we would later have a tour with him as well as a talk. In hindsight, I think it was key to get a first uncolored experience of Bungenäs before hearing the architects' intent.

The first thing one notices when approaching the remains of a limestone industry is the quarry: a giant chalk-white hole in the ground, deep, on Bungenäs about 20 meters. When descending into the man made crater, the previous landscape resides and gives way to a new kind of biotope, almost exclusively of stone and dust. Standing on the bottom, the trees peer out over the cliff above and hints at the surrounding landscape. It is rather reminiscent of some areas along the coast of Gotland, wide stone beaches with sparse vegetation. Some newly constructed houses stand on the bottom, while others balance on the precipice. In the forest and by the shore, I stumbled over several bunkers ranging from ruined to abandoned, under

construction or finished conversions. My notebook was filled with drawings of the manmade landscape, bunkers and overgrown obstacle courses.

When we met up, the others presented their findings and they all related to their own interests - which is important in the sense that there were now five different viewpoints as opposed to the one I had begun with.

I was interested in the historical layers of the site and where, if possible, an artist could position himself. Andy was concerned with the borders of the peninsula in relation to national borders, and what it meant crossing those borders. Nicola saw the possibilities in using the bunkers as the base for a sculpture, but was also in the investigating the architects' choices. Rick saw sculpture in the leftover trash and flotsam on the shores, and immediately appropriated a bunker as his studio. Carolin also viewed the site in terms of historical layers, but from a microscopic angle, with fascination for fossils, limestone and it's relation to concrete and in the last stages bunkers and houses.

To hold a detailed "replica" (in your hand) of a creature that lived millions of years ago is/gives a thrilling and mysterious thing/feeling. A tangible meeting with the past. With this (historical) perspective you can get a sense/feeling of your own location in time. (A clear now and then.) The process of fossilization works like..... and the stone remains pretty much the same /intact for millions of years.

From the notes of Carolin Hansson

During the week we spent every other day out in the field and the other days building a context by museums, lectures and visits to another site similar to Bungenäs. We met regularly for group discussions and often ended up criticizing on the work, as well as assisting each other. We spread the word of our workshop, and we ended up in the local news. The conversion of the bunkers became our common denominator but our individual works took their own paths.



I think the relation of the bunker to the landscape, and it's use as a defensive shelter while still projecting power outwards became important, as Carolin, Andy and Nicola drew connections to camouflage, borders and architecture; and how that it remains in the hopes of the architects to keep Bungenäs open to the public but still retain the anonymity of the private. Cars are not allowed on the premises only pedestrians, and the converted bunkers are still semi-covered and hidden in the landscape.¹⁸

In the end we made the work public in the form of two exhibitions with works based on the research we made, one in Stockholm directly following the workshop and one in Amsterdam a month later.



Reflections

The awareness of the activity of thinking and the simultaneous awareness of this activity while we are thinking. Reason is therefore not merely reflexive but also self-reflexive. The awareness of the activity of thinking itself creates, according to Arendt, a sensation of vitality, of being alive. Reason is the unending quest for meaning, a quest that never ends because of constant doubt, and because such thinking is ultimately founded on doubt it possesses what Arendt calls a self-destructive tendency with regards to its own results.¹⁹

The difference between a scientific research and an artist researching is not clear-cut. While the field of art is expanding into academia, the reason for doing so can seem counterproductive. The need to regulate artistic research in methodology, for instance, when art usually works without: "In short, the method is the hallmark of true science, while its absence or avoidance, or indeed its subversion, is the hallmark of true art".²⁰

A possible answer and a paradox presents themselves to me as I go into the field of Bungenäs, into a site layered with history: The outcome of my field notes, interviews and lectures are partly gaining new knowledge, but I do not think of formalizing this knowledge. My old self, studying for a bachelor of history at Stockholm University would have stopped to verify the facts, but here I am learning about limestone kilns or bunkers and what I'm planning is how I can turn this into an artwork. The need to know the truth or the statistics are not for the sake of presentation, but it inspires me to new reflection. Do we need the context to make art? Perhaps not, yet I'm thinking about it and working this knowledge into my process. The endless reasoning of a continuous artistic process.

The work of art is not the end product of the artist's thinking, or just for a moment at best; it is an intermediate stage, a temporary halting of a never-ending though process.²¹

The exceptional thing about research in and through art is that practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice. This stands in contradistinction to 'research into art', such as art history and cultural studies.²²

The paradox is that I'm currently presenting my field research in an academic essay, how do I relate to the methodology of field research. Scholars use established methods to gain recognition for their findings, while in art it is traditionally absent. I think it works on multiple levels: when an artist use methodology, it is done for different reasons. Either to move closer to the established or to comment on it or simply using it because it works in their favor.

While interviewing a (unnamed) scientist, artist Barbara Visser, remembers a moment when she had to put together a traditional dutch costume from Middelburg for a short film she was working on in Athens, and she was suddenly confronted with not knowing which parts belonged where. She says: "You always have to leave room for chance, a sort of controlled coincidence; you have to be able to recognize what you don't know yet."²³ The scientist reacts:

That's a great example, because in this case the material - all those components - also embodied a distinctive narrative - in this case an ambiguous narrative, because the separate components suddenly suggested many more possibilities. That has something to do with what I definitely think is the most interesting interface between art and science, namely the process, the research. The process is in fact already in dialogue with the material - something which can be very tangible in the visual arts and sometimes rather less so in science - but in both instances it is people who are conducting the discourse. I'm intrigued by the tussle that this entails.²⁴

Conclusion

Field research may be an act of rediscovering the world that we've only ever seen in pictures. In the workshop I set out to make the participants react to a new place they never seen and by getting their unfiltered input my idea was to reach new insights, but now it seems as though my intentions hardly matter as the actions that took place didn't confine themselves to my intent.

We were observants in a field of constant physical change that could be seen and felt, and reacted on the things that caught our interest, and could hold in our hands for a fleeting moment. The physicality of the bunker that undergoes change, the fossils, the limestone and the concrete and the fleeting borders are all concepts of transformation, they could be felt in the there and then, but will have another impact in the here and now. It may be that using the methodology of field research, or rather abusing it, is taunting the scientists. It may be so, but we have seen it can be appreciated as well, and that a collaboration between science and the art is as natural as leaving your studio and uncover the the bunker.



Endnotes

1 Wesseling, Janneke. (2011). See it Again, Say it Again. Hogeschool der Kunsten, Den Haag, Mondriaan Stichting, Den Haag pp.10

2 Virilio, Paul. (2008). Bunker Archeology. Princeton Architectural Press, New York pp. 218

3 Blackstone, Amy. (2012). Sociological Inquiry Principles: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods, <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/sociological-inquiry-principles-qualitative-and-quantitative-methods/s13-01-field-research-what-is-it-and-.html> Creative Commons (visited on 15th January 2016)

4 Wikipedia, Pierre Bourdieu, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu#Field (visited on 14th January 2016)

5 Blackstone. Sociological Inquiry Principles: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods, <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/sociological-inquiry-principles-qualitative-and-quantitative-methods/s13-01-field-research-what-is-it-and-.html>

6 Blackstone. <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/sociological-inquiry-principles-qualitative-and-quantitative-methods/s13-04-field-notes.html>

The analysis of the notes starts the moment the researcher leaves the field and usually gets typed up and expanded upon.

7 Blackstone. <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/sociological-inquiry-principles-qualitative-and-quantitative-methods/s13-02-pros-and-cons-of-field-research.html>

8 In sum, the major benefits of field research are the following:
It yields very detailed data.
It emphasizes the role and relevance of social context.
It can uncover social facts that may not be immediately obvious or of which research participants may be unaware.
Field research typically involves a combination of participant observation, interviewing, and document or artifact analysis.

9 Campbell-Dollaghan, Kelsey, <http://gizmodo.com/listening-for-the-earths->

heartbeat-inside-the-worlds-1493928170

10 Wetzler, Rachel, The Art of Fieldwork, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/feb/2/artist-ethnographer/>

11 Virilio, pp. 16

12 Kuylenstierna, Joachim. (2014). Bungenäs Designmanual. iVisby Tryckeri, Visby. pp.13

13 Since 1993, when the US Airforce starting using ground-penetrating missiles on Saddam Husseins bunkers in Iraq, the function and usefulness of bunkers came into question, and were in fact abandoned as a defense strategy. In modern warfare there is no one place to hide, so mobility was seen as the answer. (Bengt Hammarhjem, in conversation (23rd October 2015 Tape: 00:44:13)

14 Gardell, Erik, (In conversation 19th October 2015, 00:10:13)

15 Kuylenstierna, pp. 8

16 Virilio, pp. 11

17 The workshop was funded by two Swedish grants that I applied for in December 2014 and January 2015: Anna Whitlocks Stiftelse and Helge A:xon Jonssons Stiftelse, and received in May.

18 Gardell, Erik. (In conversation 19th October 2015, 00:30:24)

19 Wesseling, pp.10

20 Boomgaard, Jeroen. See it again say it again pp. 58

21 Wesseling, pp 12

22 Wesseling, pp 12

23 Visser, Barbara. See it again say it again pp. 263

24 Visser, Barbara. See it again say it again pp. 263

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Wikipedia, Pierre Bourdieu, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Bourdieu#Field (visited on 14th January 2016)

Conversations:

Bengt Hammarhjelm, military historian

Erik Gardell, architect at Skälsö, Bungenäs

