

Bunker Research Group

Brief description

An interdisciplinary research project producing documentary material (photographs, paintings, videos, etc.) about Albanian military bunkers. The initiative stems from discussions on mobility and peripheral geographies between local artists and artists in transit at a non-profit space run by artists in Istanbul; the Sea Elephant Travel Agency.

Significant features

Nomadic artistic work contemplating temporal geographies and presentations in alternative spaces.

Context & scenario

Contemplating Geographies, Building Networks

The Bunker Research Group visited hundreds of defensive military bunkers scattered across Albania. The Group considered how these objects might be re-invented and have their significance transformed. Hundreds of thousands of these bunkers were built during the rule of Enver Hoxha in anticipation of attacks from outsiders. They still manage to create a surreal atmosphere of insecurity in the landscape. By transforming and relocating these bunkers, the Bunker Research Group is re-appropriating dysfunctional social objects and transferring their meaning to non-functional contexts.

The Group connects reality and paranoia, derelict structures and contemporary art. The project took place within the framework of an initiative founded by Huseyin Alptekin, called B-Fact (Black Sea/ Baltic Sea/ Barents Sea: Mutual Realities/ Artistic Exchanges/ Inter-Regional Solidarity). The themes of this initiative were mobility and displacement. It linked different topographies and proposed alternative mappings. B-Fact's work embraced a counter discourse that opposed grand travel narratives and media that was oriented towards government and war. It consciously ignored current "centres", creating alternative venues for remote areas to be reconnected.

Every man and woman takes their destiny by their hands and moves, changes the land, until "heimat" becomes where they are. All moves and movements re-shape the map, like a kind of punch-bag. You cannot draw it; you cannot simply explain how borders work. (Huseyin Alptekin)

Connecting Individual Action

For "Small Brother", an exhibition on the role of contemporary artists, Huseyin Alptekin transported a bunker into the National Gallery in Tirana in December 2002 as a "proposal for decontextualised re-illustrations" of real objects. Another bunker was later transported to the courtyard of Kunsthalle Fredericainum in Kassel, Germany, for the exhibition In den Schluchten des Balkan (in the Gorges of the Balkans). As part of his campaign "An Albanian Bunker for Each Contemporary Art Museum", Alptekin sought to transfer Albanian bunkers into art institutions and other cultural contexts all over the world. As a curator of part of the Tirana Biennial in 2003, Alptekin invited Staffan Joffell and Minna Henriksson to work with him on B-Fact and later to collaborate on the Bunker Research Group.

Besides the prospect of being able to do some research in Albania for a period, Henriksson's motivation for involvement in the project was the thought of a longer-term collaboration with two artists whose work she respected. Her participation also involved a residency in the Sea Elephant Travel Agency where she met artists who were also working on B-Fact.

Joffell met Alptekin in Thessaloniki at a meeting on artists' exchanges in South East Europe. A shared interest in geographies, mutual realities and displacement became apparent, and the two artists maintained an email correspondence for years. Having been introduced to the activities of the Sea Elephant Travel Agency, Joffell joined the Bunker Research Group in Albania.

The original concept behind the Bunker Research Group soon developed as a result of Alptekin's collaboration with Henriksson and Joffell. The artists engaged in distinct activities, Henriksson making aquarelles and drawings, Alptekin taking photographs, and Joffell making videos. They travelled through Albania for three days, making an installation of video works, paintings and photographs. Their journey was documented on video as both a road trip and a scientific study. Harsh black-and-white video and photography suggest an oddly romantic view of these useless crumbling structures.

The Bunker Research Group connects reality and paranoia, dysfunctional military structures and contemporary art, change and stasis.

Tapping Alternative Spaces

The collaboration benefited from the availability of alternative spaces. As Alptekin comments in the transcript *Mutual Realities, Re-mapping Destinies*: "A biennale is not the only structure and platform of expressions and exchanges in the region of contemporary art. I believe there are different networks, different ontologies and specific productions. I'm very optimistic for the possibilities and potential of other communities and constellations which produce different resonances with solidarity and real exchange". After taking part in the Tirana Biennial, the Bunker Research Group showed its project in Istanbul, in a parallel event of the Istanbul Biennial, at the Bilgir University Gallery. Financial constraints prevented them from going on to Georgia to show it at the "Caravan Serail&".

These initiatives, which can be characterised as nomadic artistic works, have encountered bureaucratic obstacles. For instance, one of the bunkers shown in the National Gallery in Tirana was demolished and was only replaced after a long application process.

For his part, Joffjell applied unsuccessfully for funds from the Swedish Institute for International Projects and from IASPIS (International Artist Studio Program) in Stockholm. He then personally financed his project. The movie he made, "Road to Tirana", was subsequently shown in Havana, Helsinki and Bologna, and broadcast on the SEE-Channel across southern and eastern Europe.

Alptekin hosts a space and programme of residency and seminars on contemporary art entitled Sea Elephant Travel Agency (SETA), a non-profit artists' collective in Istanbul. Here, seminars and events are organised around contemporary art issues, focusing on regional studies, especially on the Black Sea and the Balkans. This space, which depends on Alptekin's personal financial commitment, hosts various events and collaborations with individual artists and artists' collectives. Collaboration between participants starts from "local and regional energies and events in close relationship with universal networks, within the frame of individual initiatives and reciprocal solidarities"

(Alptekin, *Mutual Realities, Re-mapping Destinies*).