

BUNKER VALENTIN

Photographs by
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I am writing to bring your attention to a photography project of historical value, which, I hope, will interest you.

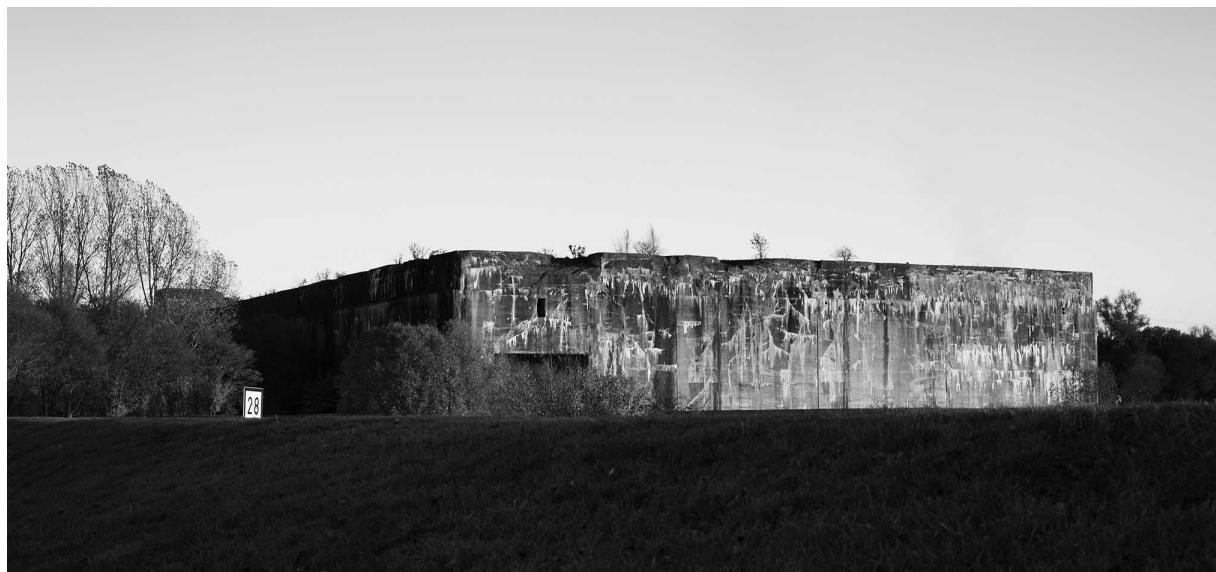
Since October 2018 I have been working on the Valentin bunker situated on the banks of the river Weser at Rekum in the suburb of Bremen in Germany.

The purpose of this project is to discover people living or working near a historical tragedy and to fight against forgetfulness and ignorance. In the Rekum area, 1,200 people died building a submarine shipyard that was never used.

I will produce an exhibition and a catalogue that will present this trace of the Second World war.

Inspired by the exhibition “Persécutés-Persécuteurs” at the French Shoah Memorial in 2018, my work will not give any judgement, it hopes to fight against ignorance.

I have divided this photographic project into four chapters: the first two chapters “Physical remains of history” and “Spectral remains” are about ignorance during war time; the two last chapters “How to live with 500 000m³ of concrete” and “Ignorance” are about ignorance in present times.



The Valentin bunker, a concrete shelter, was intended for the manufacturing of German U-Boat submarines during the second world war with the aim to produce a minimum of fourteen submarines type XXI per month or one submarine every two days.

The factory was built from 1943 to March 1945 by forced labour. It was damaged by Allied bombing and remained unfinished at the end of the war. The Valentin bunker was the greatest fortified factory for the construction of submarines in Germany and the second biggest one in Europe one after the shipyard in Brest, France. About 12,000 people worked there: civilian forced laborers from Eastern and Western Europe; Soviet prisoners of war; Italian military internees; concentration camp prisoners and inmates of the labour re-education camps of the Bremen Gestapo. All of them worked under extreme pressure day and night. 2,000 forced laborers died during construction of this massive concrete shed.

The Bunker was bombed on March 27, 1945; it was not ready yet, so no submarines were ever built there.

My first visit to the Valentin bunker was in 2016. The place has become a memorial.

The Hanse Wissenschaftskolleg (Hanse Institute for Advanced Study) in Delmenhorst (Germany) gave me a ten month fellowship to work on this topic, between October 2018 to November 2019.

Since October, I have been there several times and every visit moved me.

I have two weapons to defend myself, humility and compassion.

I keep my anger as energy to develop my photography.

Why did I choose this topic ?

When I visited the bunker in 2016, the guide talked about the horrible life of the forced laborers and about German technology; I was shocked to imagine that the place can be seen as a technical achievement in 2016. I grew up in France, and the second world war was present in my grandparent's unknown history.

I use the words "present" and "unknown" to explain that my first steps to this part of history were more with my heart than with my brain.

After one year, the rise of nationalism and extreme right parties in Europe definitely made me decide to work on this topic.

In my approach to photography I try to translate our war culture in peace culture. When it works, like in the "ABC of war" by Bertolt Brecht, I can understand that humans are peaceful too. This project is an important experience in the development of my work.

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My first approach, when I applied, was to reflect upon the value of work.

I discovered that forced laborers did all they could to stop the production since a few witnesses are still alive and can bear witness. I wondered about legitimacy: how photography can help? Is an anthropologist or a historian more relevant? And so, I decided to meet people who were working on the bunker, and other people who work on the city's history. They explained to me that this history was not digested yet. I also met the neighbours using my camera, a 4x5 inch, as a tool to build a relationship with people.

Chapter 1 “Physical remains of history”

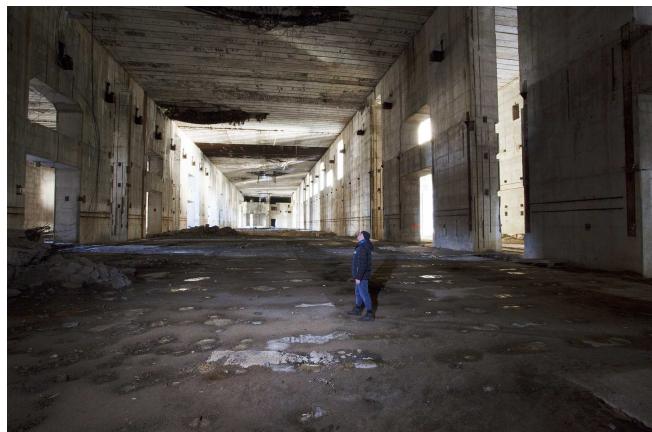
It is architectural photography.

The bunker measures approximately 426 meters x 97 meters, with walls 4,5 meter thick. The height varies between 22,5 meters and 27 meters.



I started shooting inside the bunker on April 1st. The area is not safe, concrete pieces may fall. I decided to take pictures of myself in the space, to establish the scale of the place. My body became a technical reference.

This chapter is composed of self-portraits.



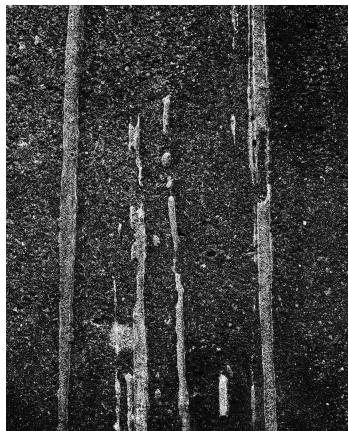
I photograph the interior and exterior of the Bunker to convey the huge size, what I call inhuman size; like a big city, a big mall. I cannot project myself in these places, it's beyond my imagination, outside of my perimeter - it's foreign and I feel stuck.

Chapter 2 “Spectral remains”

Here abstract photography portrays close-up views of the walls as witnesses of the forced laborers.

The walls are made of concrete: cement colour grey; yellow sand colour; white, brown grey and black pebble colour; rusty iron colour (from yellow to red); pollution black; and certainly fungus.

The shape of the wall is basic but the colours and contrast speak of the past and are traces of time.



Chapter 3

“How to live with 500 000m3 of concrete”

Portraits and interviews of the neighbours and people who work in Denkort. This part is the most pleasant, it allows me to meet and photograph the inhabitants of Rekum. This part of my work is inspired by the work of August Sander: I wish to portray a part of humanity. I going to meet people I do not know, my fellow man. I am interested in their daily life, their present.

In April, I photographed Mr Werner Stitz, a famous man of the city. 19 years ago, he bought a bar 50 meters from the bunker. After taking the picture, I saw a neighbour in the garden next door; I asked Werner if he could introduce me to him. He said that he did not know him, they were not so friendly; and it would be better if I did it by myself. And that's what I did.

While I was shooting, Werner came and start to talk with his neighbour. Finally, he invited him for coffee while looking at the photos that I had taken. Photography not only helped to me meet the neighbours, it allowed them to get to know each other.





Chapter 4 “Ignorance”

The bunker was built at the edge of the Weiser. It seems like the sand for the construction was transported by boat, so there is some sand left. When the sun shines, people come to swim, picnic and have good time there.

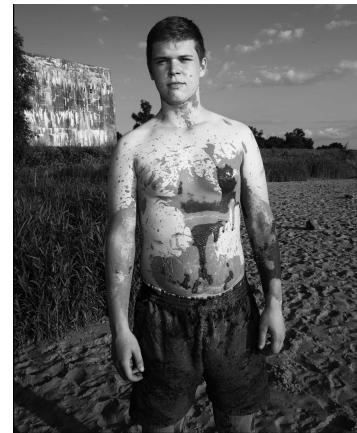
While talking with Dr. Christel Trouvé, director of the Denkort Valentin bunker, I learnt of an unbelievable encounter, a shock between history, pain, shame; ignorance, happiness and pride.

“Last summer a woman in a bikini came into the bunker, she was looking for the toilet”.

I understand that people cannot always think of horrors, but I also believe that you cannot be ignorant of these horrors neither.

I wish to work on the idea of the supposed ignorance of the leisure makers and on our ignorance about their choice of destination.





The Hanse Wissenschaftskolleg (HWK) gives me the opportunity to finish this work in November 2019. I am looking for partners to realize an exhibition and a catalogue, if you are interested or if you know people likely to be, please contact me.

Best regards,

Christophe Delory.



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