

Deep Time of the Military Ruin

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As a photographic and theoretical study of Nazi bunkers from the Atlantikwall, Paul Virilio's seminal book *Bunker Archaeology* (1975),¹ is surely the *Ur-text* for current artistic and speculative engagements with defensive architecture from across the twentieth century.² Charles Stankievecch's current collection of works and artifacts, *Monument as Ruin* (2015), commissioned for the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, is no exception, clearly aligning itself with Virilio's conceptions of the military ruin as a cryptic marker for the evolution of martial space.

Monument as Ruin completes a trilogy of work relating to the expanding, decentered and dematerializing sphere of military influence. *The Dew Project* (2009), for example, draws on the geodesic dome as a means to studying Cold War early warning systems and the emergence of Network Centric Warfare (NCW), and *The Soniferous Æther of The Land Beyond The Land Beyond* (2014), stunningly describes the architecture and technologies of a remote Signals Intelligence station in extreme northern Canada.

While both these works interpret the manipulation of the electromagnetic spectrum for early warning and eavesdropping purposes, *Monument as Ruin* steps back to re-engage with the materiality of warfare, with concrete as a medium of frontier defense and surveillance. Indeed, Stankievecch's commitment to understanding the material properties of concrete is confirmed by the presence within the exhibition of three scaled reproductions of Atlantikwall bunkers, *L'Aigle (Fragment 649, 636, 606)*. These 'fragments' are accompanied in the same room by three smaller objects of extraterrestrial origin, meteorites which allude to a cosmic or, perhaps, an eschatological violence infinitely greater than our own limited attempts. Here we also find a unfolded copy of A. E Van Vogt's 1939 novella, *Black Destroyer*. The title alone is enough to suggest a reckoning with a cosmic intelligence, an architect of cataclysmic destruction. Two large photographs by Stankievecch, *Monument as Ruin (Wreck)*, a giant casemate pitched improbably on a beach, and *Monument as Ruin (Earth)*, an immense parabolic sound reflector seen from behind, also alludes to the military

¹ Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*, Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 1994.

² See for example Allora & Calzadilla's sculpture/performance, *Clamor* (2006), which fuses bunker architecture, rock formations and musical instruments accompanied by a cacophonous soundtrack of militaristic music. See also Jane and Louise Wilson's film *Sealander* (2006) and their photographs of Atlantic Wall bunkers.

other, whose 'aesthetic features are *sui generis*',³ utterly alien (at their time of conception) to architectural convention or social function. However, the presence nearby of an etching by Piranesi, *Hadrian's Villa: Apse of the so-called Hall of the Philosophers* (1774) – which bears a striking resemblance to the sound capturing architecture of the 'Earth' photograph – is clearly an attempt by Stankieveh to position military architecture within a deeper, ancient heritage.⁴

A scaled down, concrete reproduction of the British WW1 sound reflector dominates the adjacent space. Originally built to collect and amplify the otherwise inaudible sounds of distant aircraft across the English Channel, Stankieveh's version receives the sounds of multireedist composer Colin Stetson. This is military technology designed in the cold panic of an emerging aerial, vertical warfare, but repurposed by Stankieveh to enhance its sonic, collaborative potential – a receiver and reflector of cultural research and production.

As a collection of curated works in situ, *Monument as Ruin* operates as an observatory, a platform of stasis from which we might assess the material and immaterial dimensions of human militarism. However, with Stankieveh, we are also adrift in the abyss of deep time, witnessing the redeployment of ancient minerals in the service of warfare, their subsequent obsolescence and degradation, and also the transmissions of invisible emissions that will echo through space into a distant, non-human future.

³ Paul Hirst, *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture*, Politi: Cambridge, 2005, p. 215.

⁴ Stankieveh is correct, military architecture has a lost or 'secret' history which is evident in the Organisation Todt's Nazi bunkers but stretches back via the great crystalline *trace italienne* fortifications of the 17th and 18th centuries, the great castles of Europe, the middle east and Asia, to the work of Vitruvius himself in the Roman era.