POST-MUSEOLOGICAL BERLIN:

TAG DES OFFENEN DENKMAL/DAY OF OPEN MONUMENTS  
AS MATERIAL HISTORY

I’m interested for the most part in what’s not happening, that area between events which could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed. The emptiness could be defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them.  
 —Robert Smithson, “What Is a Museum?” (1967; 44)

There is bad concrete all over Europe. —Anon.

This paper reads the annual Tag des offenen Denkmals (Day of Open Monuments), a program of open museums and sites of memory staged in Berlin, with the twin tasks of German exhibition history since 1945: Coming to Terms with the Past and, since Okwui Enwezor’s documenta 12 (2002), Global Comprehension. I argue that site-specific and institutional critiques of museums, along with exhibition strategies that enact a historical recovery of denied and culpable histories, have led to a “post-museological” discourse of the historical present through a proliferation of sites of memory and new exhibition strategies, in turn redefining present public space in Berlin. Both documenta and the Berlin Biennale follow strategies first advanced by Robert Smithson’s critique of the museum and his site/nonsite dialectic; these intersect with the historical task of identifying sites of memory and opening archives. What I see as the “post-museological” expands the form and history of museums and exhibitions, and importantly their radical critique or even negation, toward new uses of public space, disclosing a “geographical unconscious” of buried histories in a continuing praxis. After Smithson on the museum and the dialectic of site and nonsite; Michel Foucault on the archive and heterotopia, and finally Heidegger on the work of art, materialism, and form I will survey the dialectics of urban landscape in the evolving history of Berlin through a sampling of representative sites and strategies in the Day of Open Monuments.

Materialism

There is no more unsettling question than that posed by materialism: the philosophical precedence of concrete existence over perception, feeling, thought, or agency. Strictly defined, *materialism* is “a form of philosophical monism which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all phenomena, including mental phenomena and consciousness, are the result of material interactions” (*Wikipedia*). If *matter* per se is the substrate on which all phenomena depend, what are the implications for *materiality* as a concept; *materialism* as a philosophy; *historical materialism* as a method of explanation; and for our purposes *material culture* as an object of study? In its philosophical consequences, materialism is both extreme and pluralizing—offering diverging implications for each of its senses; as a consistent doctrine, materialism either becomes dogmatic and restrictive or unstable and pluralizing. Materialism in its radical forms, whether philosophical, historical, or aesthetic, creates challenges and opportunities that quickly overwhelm it, qualifying its emergence as a matter of intellectual and cultural history. Materialism is the occasion for a crisis of belief in the adequacy of consciousness to account for reality per se; it provokes such a crisis of belief, offering but refusing to install another. The turn to matter per se shocks consciousness, and its phenomenological apperception, into an awareness of its limits. As a historical phenomenon, it bears a relation of the reduction of consciousness to destruction in war; as a philosophical doctrine, it converts the plurality and differentiation of concepts to instances of “the same”; as a historical explanation, it subsumes complex processes to underlying determinations “in the last instance”; as an aesthetic practice, it ungrounds convention and declares the New, if only for an unstable moment before it is absorbed back into the normalizing flow of experience. Materialism can only hurt us; what should we fear more than a materialism? As lived experience, materialism cannot be lived without our fundamental undoing; yet it compels us to attend to its radical potential through its very status as negating. Materialism thus becomes a necessary basis for a radical inquiry that calls us to consciousness and questions our purposes. Materialism is an opening to method, an entailment of the abstract notion that a negative turn to things is the necessary first step to any kind of understanding.

Materialism as *via negativa* is, in turn, an entailment or consequence of crises of belief, wars, destruction, and thus the avant-garde. In this presentation, I will pursue a “thought experiment” that attempts to bring together these four distinct entailments or consequences of materialism through a radical turn to matter in the work of the post–1945 avant-garde—thus framing cultural history as an entailment or consequence of a theoretical “moment” of destruction retrospectively identified with Zero Hour or *Stunde Null*. My inquiry needs to have the character of an experiment, as the phenomena it draws together will be as much ludic as consistent, as much speculative as positive—implying that, for humanities research, our experimental methods can only be pursued as ungrounded, heuristic, self-critical, and precedent to the turn to *matter* that we posit as the object of our reflexive focus. My turn to matter begins, then, with a moment from my travels to the former Soviet Union in 1989, in the vast concrete plaza in front of the Hotel Pribaltiskaya—a site of socialist modernism whose affect can only be described as “enormous.” That concrete, associated with material history and historical materialism in my ludic understanding, seemed to be melting away under my feet—as acid rain had leached out the binding agents that held its aggregate mass together, resulting in manifold cracks and gaps that spread out in all directions, stained red by corroded rebar that emerged from the gaps in concrete, and a rusted manhole cover that gave its date of construction a mere ten years earlier. A photograph, to be retrieved, associates the date of this perception with our conference of avant-garde poets and scholars and the epochal date of August 1989—and all else follows. My explorations of bad concrete in Europe continued, through successive trips to Germany in 2002 (Documenta in the rebuilt ruins of Kassel) and 2005 (on tour of German universities on a Fulbright). At the University of Bochum, I encountered a second plaza, comparable to the first, that framed the poured concrete of the main university buildings, whence the remark: “There is bad concrete all over Europe”—a phenomenon of East and West, collapsing them to a common history. In what follows, I will assemble a series of works that access that common history and seek to comprehend and interact with it in the subsequent development of the post–1945 avant-garde.

Open Monuments

About September, on an every-other-year basis, I would be traveling to Berlin to further investigate the “Tag des offenen Denkmals”—the Day of Open Monuments (2024 program [*here*](https://www.berlin.de/landesdenkmalamt/veranstaltungen/tag-des-offenen-denkmals/2021/)). I approach this event as a “[*global archive*](https://bit.ly/3u7Etcv)“—one of many I am engaged with, beginning the *documenta* exhibitions in Germany since 1955. From an essay on documenta as “global archive”:

[The term refers], first of all, to the historical development of exhibitions in Germany that address a global horizon, a distinct cultural project since at least the Enlightenment. After 1945, modern art, which had been removed from public view by the Nazi state, was reintroduced as a project of reeducation as much as aesthetics. Documenta, beginning in 1955, exhibited modern and later artists in the destroyed buildings of the city of Kassel, and expanded its formal and cultural address to a global scale over its fifty-year history. Documenta itself became a kind of continuous archive of its own exhibition history, a mode of formal presentation that increasingly relied on the works it presented.

The Day of Open Monuments started somewhat later (1993), with support from the European Union, various nation states, and specific locales. Berlin itself counts as a global archive, and the Day becomes an unfolding narrative of how to understand what that means. In Berlin, the Day opens and documents hundreds of sites, from sites of memory that can only be accessed on that Day; to Berlin’s capacious architectural history and its preservation projects; to studios of living and past artists (such as Hannah Höch’s garden); to cultural institutions, sampling from vast array of museums of Berlin—so many that it may be termed a “museum city,” where the long history of museological culture, interrupted and refunctioned after the historical destruction of the war, makes Berlin itself a permanent museum of its own history. The Day of Open Monu­ments is a key moment in comprehending this progressive museo-fication of Berlin, as it extends his­tor­­ical questions identified by the Topography of Terror and Berlin Wall Memorial with lesser known, more horrifying or ambiguous but also playful and aesthetically pleasing ones. In so doing, the Day of Open Monuments complements the turn to site-specificity in German museum culture that dates back at least to the use of the Fridericianum in Kassel for the first documenta in 1955, showing modern painting and sculpture in the partly renovated ruins of the museum.

What makes The Day of Open Monuments a supplement to museums per se is its dedication to real time and space: creating ephemeral and ambulatory public access to sites of history and memory. As a state-sponsored and coordinated program, it intersects with numerous public institutions and private individuals, from museums to preservationists, to document and provide access to sites that cannot normally be accessed by the general public due to their obscurity, fragility, inaccessibility, private ownership, difficult maintenance, and their lack of documentation and recognition. As such, the effort takes part in the decades-long, historically specific politics of “coming to terms with the past” or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that has developed as a cultural discourse after 1945, with particular intensity following reunification and the *Historikerstreit* of the 1990s. Documenting and publicizing what French historian Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (*Errin­erungs­orte* in German), the Day of Open Monuments contributes both to an expanded understanding of the layers of construction and destruction that underlie everyday life, and to the development of new urbanist strategies for inhabiting destroyed cities that could well be adapted from Berlin to Detroit. This historical re-spatializing of German cities has, in turn, benefited from the *Stolperstein* (“stumbling block”) campaign, which since 1992 has laid over 30,000 small, cobblestone-sized memorials for an individual victim of Nazism through­out Europe. What is of interest here is the connection with bare materiality (a copper marker on an otherwise regular pavement that one could stumble over) with an inscription documenting the persons who are missing, the moment of their deportation or disappearance: a moment of negativity (loss and unawareness) that correlates with the material object itself. A similar logic of subtraction, encounter, and “coming to terms” is at the basis of many of the sites of the Day of Open Monuments, which creates a time and space for rethinking the meaning of unmarked sites and historical loss as a dedicated urban practice. Through the copious documentation, both printed and online, provided by the program, and then visits to selected sites, I have been investigating the Open Monuments of Berlin since at least 2013, seeing them alongside a series of urban exhibition strategies (from the Berlin Biennale to the Palast der Republik) that combine aesthetic experience with historical inquiry and spatial exploration into the post–1945 city. An exemplary site from the 2013 program will be useful for developing the implications of concrete as a material in terms of the historical negativity that extends from war and destruction to the avant-garde.

The Great Load-Bearing Body

My primary example is the *Groß-[Schwer]belastungskörper* (“large or heavy load-bearing body”; GBK) made accessible during the 2013 Day of Open Monuments in Berlin. Located on General-Pape-Straße, near the Südkreuz train and S-Bahn hub in Schöneberg, the GBK condenses in its monumental size and weight the folly of NS pseudo-science and imperial fantasy, offering “a memorial relict of the monstrous city planning under the direction of [*Generalbauinspektor*] Albert Speer. In conjunction with the planned destruction/transformation [*Umgestaltung*] of Berlin into the capital city ‘Germania,’ engineers investigated the load-bearing capacity of Berlin’s building foundations” (*TD* site). Asking the question of why the NS engineers would want to do this leads to an elaborate historical narrative of the development of Speer’s utopian city planning, the establishment of two axial boulevards through Berlin that would entail destruction of numerous buildings, anchored by the Etienne-Boulé-inspired Great Hall and a triumphal arch dedicated to the Great War that would dwarf the Arc de Triomphe. That fantasy is so heavy that it becomes a theoretical object in its own right, but that is not the point here: what is of interest is the need to determine whether Berlin’s sandy soil would support the enormous weight of the planned monuments (a material consideration without question): hence the origin of the second-order fantasy of the GBK to test the effect of “heavy load-bearing”—suggesting the historical repression of the NS state—on the soil underneath. The test failed; the soil compressed in excess of tolerable limits; the project continued in the postwar period and was then abandoned, only to remain as an inassimilable monstrosity due to the impossibility of blowing it up next to nearby apartments. After decades of disuse, the GBK was recovered as a public information site to educate the public on the NS period’s fantastic goals and the material violence it employed while failing to achieve them. But it is at this moment of narrative failure that the site’s interest as a material object begins, just as the fantasmatic excess of Speer’s vision evaporates, leaving the bare weight of thousands of tons of concrete. Further documentation of this and similar sites discloses that it was constructed with forced labor; hence, the defunct narrative exposes not simply the object itself but its conditions of material labor. A nested series of interpretive frames congeals around the object’s excessive weight: imperial fantasy; the potential destruction of Berlin to accomplish the project; the folly of heavy load-bearing tests themselves; the use of forced labor; and finally the composition and suspended purpose of what remains: a monument of dead material.

The GBK could be considered an enormous *Stolperstein*, over which the subject stumbles in order to be reminded of history; it is not the specific history or overturned narrative that matters as much as becoming aware of it. What then is one’s “posthistorical” experience of this site, either actually or potentially? A first set of responses involves its function as a *lieu de mémoire* in the recovery of historical narrative that had been placed under erasure in the decades since *Stunde Null*. The discrepancy between the phony grandeur and historical impossibility of Germania and the reductively mechanical material goals of the GBK (a kind of grandiose science fair project) underscores the absurdity and perniciousness of the social fantasy. A linkage between material negativity and social fantasy, hallmark of Slavoj Žižek’s deployment of Lacan for ideology critique, cannot be denied—this is a prime example. But what remains after the social fantasy itself has been dismantled, and only tons of concrete remain? Does the remainder itself enter into an alternative domain, the atemporal present of the work of art, and how does it accomplish this? The defamiliarizing shift from false or negated purposiveness (itself exposed as fantasy) to the inutile (its material inertness) suggests that the GBK does enter the aesthetic in some way. If that is so, what makes it possibly aesthetic is the stripping of narrative or interpretive frames to the bare materiality of concrete. But what is it about bare concrete that can evoke or demand a suspension of narrative or interpretation such that materiality itself precedes our cognition of it? Does the effect of bare concrete accomplish a reversal of the subject-object relation, changing priorities so that the concrete itself is subjectivized? Is our aesthetic experience of the monument beautiful or sublime, pleased by its binding together of form or jolted into awareness by its massive weight, making world of primordial earth? How does the aesthetic—as sensed perception or disclosure of the material *as* material—extend the materiality of concrete’s inaccessible opacity? Further, if this aesthetic moment depends on the historical undoing of narrative and interpretation, due to irrelevance or excess, is the turn to matter thus a historically specific procedure that, like the *Stolperstein*, interrupts our consciousness so we might better discover the present? It is this historicism of the turn to matter that I will develop in the next set of examples.

The GBK, it turns out, was the site of historical recovery through the Day of Open Monuments that would become one of its best-known trophies: the rock star or crown jewel of the program. At its first opening, it was barricaded from the street and nearby Schrebergärten (working class allotments that survive from socialism and the DDR) by a chain-link fence; gradually the site was developed to include signage and access to the interior, including a ladder down to the interface between concrete and soil where measurements were taken; then an observation tower that permitted a view of the existing North-South Axis, the rail lines that Speer’s plan built upon in the triumphal approach to the post-Reichstag Great Hall; and finally a small bookstore where documentation can be purchased at open hours throughout the year. One can accurately measure the distance between the defunct fantasy of the NS state and the real time and space of ever-being-reborn Berlin, a “gap” in Robert Smithson’s usage that correlates with the bare materiality of the GBK. The site is thus a triumph of Coming to Terms with the Past as activating both fantasy of an alternate history and the loss that resulted from it. Much as Smithson’s site-specific works, from the Monuments of the Passaic to the Spiral Jetty, become sites of comprehension that exceed their location or temporality, so the GBK is a window on totality—but one that is only knowable through historical destruction. Hence the correlation of thousands of tons of concrete as inert materiality to the fantasy of the defunct totalitarian state. Extending this logic outward, the GBK populates Berlin with its own history as present-tense experience.

The Smithsonian Moment

In post-museological Berlin, the Day of Open Monuments connects the critique of the museum in several key texts by Robert Smithson—“Some Void Thoughts on Museums”; “What Is a Museum”; and “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art”—to his dialectic of site and nonsite. As the historical contexts of the objects housed in museums explodes—most recently, through their postcolonial critique and demand for reparation—so too the museum itself becomes a site of destruction as much as a warehouse of pilfered goods of high value and dubious provenance. Smithson’s early understanding of the “deathwardness” of museums is given an ironic twist in his critique: if museums are full of dead objects, so much the better. What is interesting is precisely their deadness or inertness or voidness, not their capacity to elevate, educate, or entertain (in Germany, this would correlate to the “long nights of the museum” format, where one can meet, greet, and sample wine and art). This deadness or inertness, however, inspires Smithson to his move beyond the gallery or museum—to the bare materiality of coal mines or slate quarries, and finally to the Great Salt Lake itself. What Smithson is seeing here is twofold as an aesthetic strategy: first, expanding “what counts as art” from its institutional frame; second, identifying the aesthetic with the nonaesthetic in bare materiality. If we transport this logic to Berlin and Open Monuments, the GBK becomes a paradigm of a nonaesthetic site that, when opened in the post-museum, redefines the aesthetic as deadness, inertness, materiality, absence. To continue the aesthetic possibilities of the GBK and Open Monuments toward the totality of post-museological Berlin, however, requires an additional move. We need to comprehend how bare materiality becomes the aesthetic (or sublime) in the space of public awareness; how it compels the fantasy of a larger history than the present that can be lived *as* the present. If the GBK is the paradigm of such a site, each articulation of Berlin’s evolving spatial self-awareness may be interpreted by it.

One such site of interpretation and *refunctioning*, in Walter Benjamin’s sense, would be the Park am Gleisdreieck, now the best-known and most popular urban retrofitting development of the past decade—occupying a triangular area of disused rail corridor that was part of Speer’s North-South axis but to entirely different, democratic ends. Seeing the Park am Gleisdreieck as the logical development of the GBK’s contribution to Open Monuments would begin with an account of how its remaining defunct historical, and thus material, elements such as train tracks, void spaces between them, and untended urban forests intersect with skate parks, bicycle trails, beer gardens, art galleries, and so on. Post-museological Berlin’s horizon of lived experience in this way extends from the void critique of museums to the material sites of everyday life.

Bunker Materialism

A second example from the 2014 Day of Open Monuments invokes a more extensive typology of post–1945 concrete, along with a rich and paradoxical history: the Wilhelmine König­liche Augusta-Schule next to the NS-era Pallasstraße Command Bunker, currently in use as a secondary school. “The command bunker, whose shell was completed by Soviet forced laborers in 1943–45, served as a protection for technical equipment; it was converted to a police station in 1986–89. The school building of the Königliche Augusta-Schule, [built] 1912–14, was repurposed [*umfunktioniert*] as a forced labor camp in 1943. The school is today a secondary school with advanced classes and bears the name Sophie Scholl” (*TD* site). These layers of historical irony are clearly what interested the curators of Day of Open Monuments; of equal interest is the relation of narrative framing to the concrete shell of the bunker itself. While the narrative is a composite of historical dates and technical terms (*Fachsprachen*), the bunker itself condenses concrete construction, forced labor, technology, and public education. As synecdoches for *Stunde Null*, bunkers are narrative frames of what took place within them (e.g. *Der Untergang*, dir. Oliver Hirsch­biegl, 2004) as well as opaque sites for what cannot be narrated; they present an incomplete and opaque history that I want to read in terms of their material concreteness. Thousands of abandoned bunkers can be found everywhere in Europe, as well as around the Pacific Rim and the West Coast of the United States; they are recovered, or not, for a variety of illegitimate purposes (e.g., this Hamburg party bunker, built in a former flak tower). The bunker, as concrete shell congealed around a hidden space that must be protected, interpellates the war as *memento mori*, eliciting *carpe diem* as a response.

Paul Virilio’s *Bunker Archeology* is a magisterial account of the history, structure, function, and theory of bunkers built by NS architects, using forced labor, along the Atlantic Wall in anticipation of an Allied invasion. From 1958–65, Virilio (b. 1932) traveled extensively along the North Atlantic coast to track the construction and disintegration of a massive network of concrete ruins; the results were exhibited in Paris in 1975 and published in 2008. This historical delay distinguishes it from the genre of documentary photography of ruined cities from the post–1945 period; that body of work has little stake in the aesthetics of ruins, often functioning to mark the state of the city at the outset reconstruction and completed by maps and statistics. Nor does Virilio’s study overlap with the later recovery of the civilian casualties of the destruction of European cities, a debate represented by W.G. Sebald’s *Natural History of Destruction* (1999). On the one hand, the bunkers were generally not destroyed but tended to erode gradually by natural processes; on the other, they represent a psychic reality of war by virtue of their concrete presence, recovered history, and theoretical unfolding. It is the intact concrete of the bunkers, rather than its destruction as rubble (which formed sites such as the Teufelsberg in Berlin), and their architectural specificity in relation to the destruction that did not occur, that makes them privileged sites for aesthetics and theory. In aesthetic terms, the bunkers are a primary instance of the uncanny; removed from their original purpose and history, their congealed potential of what did not but might have occurred becomes productive of visual pleasure, a compulsion to repeat the click of the camera resulting in a ludic series of variations. The inner series of these variations discloses a narcissism of minor differences between members of different classes of bunker, marking the tension between functional imperative and destructive fantasy; the outer series begins with the imposition of the bunker’s concrete inertness and territorial domination over a nonmilitarized environment, but continues through its architectural response to external deadly force: the basic function of a bunker is to enable outgoing and protect from incoming in the decisive event. Virilio’s discussion of the aesthetics of concrete, then, reflects its structural necessity:

By its implementation, concrete—liquid material—played its part in the new characteristics of these works. [. . .] In brick or stone constructions, in assemblages of discontinuous elements, the balance of the buildings is a function of the summit-to-base relationship. In the construction of single-form concrete, it is the coherence of the material itself that must assume this role: the center of gravity replaces the foundation.   
 In concrete casting, there are no more intervals, joints—everything is compact; the uninterrupted pouring avoids to the utmost the repairs that would weaken the general cohesion of the work.   
 The bunker is not really founded; it floats on ground that is not a socle for its balance, but a moving and random expanse that belongs to the oceanic expanse and extends it. It is this relative autonomy that balances the floating bunker, guaranteeing its stability in the middle of probably modifications to the surrounding terrain. (45)

The fluidity and inertness of concrete as a material for the construction of bunkers thus reflects two specific determinants, from the air and toward the sea. On the one hand, destruction by air is countered by the thickness of concrete, its rigid continuity and lack of intervals or joints. On the other, the smoothness of concrete, its being formed after pouring, reflects the vast, oceanic prospects that the bunker overlooks, seeming to float in place. As aesthetic, concrete contributes its specific material properties and formal capacities to the architectural design, unrealized uses, and subsequent inutility of the bunker to a distinct visual pleasure.

The theoretical implications of the concrete bunker are even more profound for Virilio, figured at the intersection of aesthetics and the development of post–1945 materialisms:

Anachronistic in normal periods, in peacetime the bunker appears as a survival machine, as a shipwrecked submarine on a beach. It speaks to us of other elements, of terrific atmospheric pressure, of an unusual world in which science and technology have developed the possibility of final disintegration. If the bunker can be compared to a milestone, to a stela, it is not so much for its system of inscriptions as it is for its position, its configuration of materials and accessories: periscopes, screens, filters, etc. The monolith does not aim to survive down through the centuries; the thickness of its walls translates only the probable power of impact in the instant of assault. The cohesion of the material corresponds to the immateriality of the new war environment; in fact, matter only survives with difficulty in a world of continuous upheaval. The landscape of contemporary war is that of a hurricane projecting and dispersing, dissipating and disintegrating through fusion and fission as it goes along. With the passage from molecular arms to nuclear arms, what happened in the test tubes at the microscopic level of chemical and biological reactions is happening now on in the macroscopic universe of human territory. A world of moving particles—that is the inscription of these concrete stelae. (39)

The “mobile army of metaphors” Nietzsche summoned to deliver truth are at work in this passage, with consequences beyond the archaeology of bunkers. First, Virilio moves from the concreteness of the bunkers, their land-based protectiveness, which he identifies with the rigidity of the NS regime and its military failure on more capacious fronts: on the sea and in the air, provoking the turn to the East and its fantasy of *Lebensraum* and inner colonization. More important, however, is the way the concrete bunker functions as dematerialization—first, in relation to the air and sea as sources of potential, not actual, threat to which it concreteness responds, but then in the nuclear age, shortly to begin, as a vestige of a conventional technology of war that predicts the impossibility of the atomic age as mutually assured destruction. “Matter only survives with difficulty in a world of continuous upheaval” condenses the literal experience of war, in the rigidity of the bunker, with the deterritorialization of air and sea—from concrete as a building material to a new materialism that undoes the fixity of structure through a temporality of intensities and flows. Parallel to the material turn of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Virilio creates a specific historical register for the nomadology of war that is developed as a basic structural metaphor in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Thus locating a new materialism at the intersection between an aesthetics of matter as concrete and a theorization of warfare as allegory, Virilio contributes to a material cultural studies of the world after 1945, one that is primarily concerned with dematerialization as the fundamental effect of the total destruction of the war, and whose consequences develop with the avant-garde.

Technical Note

In this section, I work through a series of questions to connect the radical foregrounding of material, in this case concrete, to strategies of the post–1945 avant-garde. To begin, I need to indicate the limits of my knowledge of concrete as a material, partly to forestall any illusion of endless fascination with its nature and history. I claim no expertise in the history of concrete or its use as a material; I only ask: *what kind of matter is concrete*? According to one source, concrete “is a composite material composed mainly of water, aggregate, and cement. Often, additives and reinforcements (such as rebar) are included in the mixture to achieve the desired physical properties of the finished material. When these ingredients are mixed together, they form a fluid mass that is easily molded into shape. Over time, the cement forms a hard matrix which binds the rest of the ingredients together into a durable stone-like material with many uses” (*Wikipedia*). From this rudimentary but suggestive definition, several interpretive frames emerge: concrete is a composite material made of at least three parts: water, aggregate, and cement; it is fluid and amorphous as it is made up but hardens into the form required for its purpose as it sets; it appears to be dense and rigid but is variously compacted and flexible; its malleability and utility connect directly to its nature as material. Here, concrete as matter is associated with a series of “attributes,” qualities of mass and extension that in turn can be perceived by the senses: concrete elicits sensuous perception. Finally, concrete as a composite must be strictly distinguished from cement: all objects made of concrete result from the binding together of aggregate material through a chemical reaction of the binding agent and water, a process that has a temporality and physics of its own that determines its material form.

Concrete is thus a prime example of matter as indistinguishable from form, while its capacity to be set in form is what gives it its utility and purpose. This relation between matter and form is unfolded as the crucial link in Heidegger’s “Origins of the Work of Art” (1934) between the formal properties of matter as a thing and the formal nature of the work of art. In his derivation, Heidegger first finds two common ways of understanding “the thingness of the thing” (or “the concreteness of the concrete”) inadequate: the substance/attribute relation, reflected in grammatical predication, and the unity of sensed perception. “We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things . . . rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen” (91); in each case, the thing is irreducible either to its attributes or sensory presentation. Heidegger is equally dismissive of a third route to the “thing” through the relation of form and content: “Form and content are the most hackneyed concepts under which anything and everything may be subsumed” (91). But, however, that the form/content relation is equally used for the “thingness of the thing” and the nature of the work of art, which are not identical, leads Heidegger to look further:

The self-contained block of granite is something material in a definite if unshapely form. Form means here the distribution and arrangement of the material parts in spatial location, resulting in a particular shape, namely, that of a block. But a jug, an ax, a shoe are also matter occurring in a form. The form, on the contrary, determines the arrangement of the matter. Even more, it prescribes in each case the kind and selection of the matter—impermeable for a jug, sufficiently hard for an ax, firm yet flexible for shoes. The interfusion of form and matter prevailing here is, moreover, controlled beforehand by the purposes served by a jug, ax, shoes. Such usefulness is never assigned or added on afterward to a being of the type of a jug, ax, or pair of shoes. But neither is it something that floats somewhere above it as an end. (92)

The mere relationship of matter and form, as determining a thing, does not adequately account for the purposefulness of an object (and, as Kant would develop, the purposiveness of a work of art). In order to discuss the relation of matter and form more precisely, we need to know what the thing is used for. Imagine the concrete mass of the GBK as matter and form; its use is to press down on the earth to measure its compression. Compare that to the matter and form of an Atlantic bunker; its purpose is to protect troops and equipment; to fire projectiles and observe the sea. Form here is irreducible to the mere shape of these things as such; rather, it constitutes the nature of the object as a piece of “equipment” identical to its purposes. We are on the way to connecting the composition of a thing to the purposefulness of a work of art, but are caught half way at the level of equipment: “Thus the piece of equipment [like the GBK or Atlantic bunker] is half thing, because characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more; at the same time it is half artwork and yet something less, because lacking the self-sufficiency of the artwork. Equipment has a peculiar position intermediate between thing and work, assuming that such a calculated ordering of them is permissible” (92). This qualifies the thingness of things: “The mere thing is a sort of equipment, albeit equipment denuded of its equipmental being” (93), thus distinguishing further between thing and work of art as irreducible to equipment. Therefore, if I were to ask: *what kind of form is a bunker?* I would neither reduce it to the matter it is composed of nor see it as necessarily a work of art. But pushing forward from the utility of equipment toward what is not reducible to it use exposes qualities of a thing or matter that connect to its nature as a work, if we are to frame it thus. Heidegger thus moves quickly from matter to equipment to work in his famous example of the pair of peasant shoes, which he imagines Van Gogh to have painted. His description of the shoes themselves has the quality of a work of art, irreducible to its use:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly hugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform fields of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the sole stretches the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal of the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. (94–95)

The stylistic break of Heidegger’s poetic prose is important: it associates the shoes as work of art with physical attributes or sensed perceptions that evoke symbolist poetry or expressionist painting; there is something excessive in the thing as equipment as art that evokes an entirely different relationship between matter and form. This is the crux of Heidegger’s derivation of the work of art, seen as a tension or “strife” in the making of *world* as something present and available to us out of a resistant and inaccessible *earth*. While for Heidegger the result is the *aletheia* or disclosure of the work of art as the truth of being in making world out of earth, a residual entailment is a specification of *matter* as dark, concealed, inaccessible, and earthly as a result. Thus, through Heidegger’s derivation, it is possible to bypass the thingness of things and the equipmentality of equipment in order to arrive at a productive relationship between two final questions: *what kind of thing is a work of art?* and *what is the nature of matter?* Seeing the GBK or Atlantic bunker as works of art—as the Day of Open Monuments or *Bunker Archeology* encourage us to do—reveals concrete as matter whose purposiveness exceeds its form. At this point, we could develop our own poetic associations for GBK and Atlantic bunker and approach their importance for method—of urban archaeology, in the first case, and of deterritorialization (extending earth and world to sea and sky) in the second. We would begin by replacing the attributes and senses derived with Van Gogh with the collective melancholia of the GBK’s weight, its negation of purposiveness pressing into the earth, or the anthropological paranoia of the bunker, anticipating destruction from the sea or sky.

Post–1945 Matter

My thought experiment, so far, has been to show that the turn to matter follows from a specific logic of the work of art. Concrete, as I am using it, becomes aesthetic when we negate the utility, equipmentality, purposiveness of its material forms by framing them as works of art—as the Day of Open Monuments and *Bunker Archeology* encourage us to do. It seems that Heidegger has negotiated and transformed Kant’s account of art’s formal unity through its purposeless purposiveness (*Zweck ohne Zweckmässigkeit*) into a relationship that is centered in the object (thing, equipment, work) itself as a form of being. It would be interesting to continue this account of concrete as a specific material, as a combination of aggregate, cement, and water, through Kant’s account of their nonaesthetic purposiveness, as nature. But reversing this discussion, we could also re-deploy concrete as matter itself into the aesthetic. This is precisely the strategy that avant-garde artists pursued after 1945, through a radical questioning of the nature of art as material, informed by a specific history of Total War, the destruction of European cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Holocaust that I associate with Zero Hour. The turn to matter in the avant-garde occurred in various national contexts and historical series, through different movements and individual artists, while the materials employed are not necessarily concrete but may include cement, asphalt, glue, dirt, sand, rock, minerals, iron, liquids, paint, canvas, felt, fabric, thread, rope, fat, soap, chocolate, and so on. Each of these materials was used as either primary and irreducible or shaped and formed in some way by a post–1945 artist, in connection with a specific aesthetic goal. In addition, the radical questioning of matter these works occasion connects with the dematerialization of the work of art, a turn to concept and language that is directly associated with the turn to matter. And finally, there are specific associations—like the poetic language Heidegger brought to the peasant’s shoes—that extend these uses to historical referents and affects associated with Zero Hour. Here, the turn to bare life becomes multiply interpretable as bare materiality.

While art that turns to matter has been produced consistently over the past seventy years, it is not a teleological or progressive series; rather, there are wide discontinuities, eruptions and stoppages of all sorts, that unlink and separate various instances from each other. An art historical account of the turn to matter may thus suffer from a radical refusal of periodization, and may encourage an association of each instance with an irreducible presentism. It is precisely the historical character of such a radical present that is conveyed by the turn to matter, insofar as matter is only determined through its aesthetic uses and these convey the expressive needs of their specific historical contexts, either collective or individual. We may begin, therefore, with a pile of rocks—an installation by an anonymous artist that redefines the foundation of one of the bunkers at Buchenwald by digging out the space of its floor plan and laying down a slope of medium-sized stones, tilting from both ends toward the middle. The partial declaration of a volume that extends down from the presumed level of the foundation, coupled with the partial filling of that space with stones, defamiliarizes the relation of foundation to negative space and thus to the absence of the barracks built upon it, and the unrepresented human history it contained. When visiting this and similar sites, I saw an association between values of bare life and the turn to matter that could constitute a post–1945 period style, except that the refusal of the Holocaust to be periodized neutralizes any date. The turn to matter is also central to the Italian art movement Arte Povera, which decenters or dismantles the matter/form relation in order to create alternative spaces for the work of art; the origins of installation art as an emergent global genre stems partly from this work. The work of Yves Klein, in the late 50s, was also crucial for associating the turn to matter with a negation of tradition form; in his development of International Klein Blue and the making of monochrome paintings as material objects, Klein created an aesthetic relation between restricted, pre-given materials and expansive, even cosmic meanings. A radical temporality and even spirituality emerged in his work—for instance in the use of living bodies to create material traces, or the use of propane torches to create ephemeral effects on burned canvas—so that materialism, contingency, and intensely subjective romanticism were linked. In Germany, Joseph Beuys’s personal mythology of wounding and healing, connected to his narrative of surviving World War II, led to his fetishistic investment into fat and felt, while the landscape of rubble from destroyed cities was reinterpreted in the use of stone fragments. The American contribution to this series begins with minimalism and the work of Robert Smithson, particularly his use of materials such as sand, limestone, glass, and minerals in his “nonsite” works—which depend, for their meaning, on a dialectical relationship to a site where the material may be obtained. Developing the genre of site-specific sculpture, in turn, Smithson employed materials such as glue (*Glue Pour*), asphalt (*Asphalt Rundown*), and earth itself in massively engineered projects such as *Spiral Hill*, *Amarillo Ramp*, and *Spiral Jetty*. In pursuing the site/nonsite dialectic, Smithson undid conventional relations between matter and form, opening the work to language, image, and other forms of documentation. This development of material art coincides with the dematerialization of the art object and the rise of conceptual, nonmaterial art that is catalogued by Lucy Lippard’s *Six Years*, from 1967–73. The turn to matter and the turn to language are thus joined at the hip; the move toward radical materiality coincides with dematerialization as its necessary entailment.

Concrete and Bunker

In the final section of my exposition, I want to assemble a range of artists working, in some way, with concrete or bunkers as medium or sites. For concrete, I might choose the photography of Raphaël Zarka, a younger French artist whose interest in inutile concrete objects stems from his skateboard practice; he explicitly links the aesthetic interest and strangeness of these concrete forms to the challenges a skateboard artist would meet in negotiating uneven or unusual surfaces. For bunkers, I would point to the political aesthetics of expatriate Chinese artist Cai Guo-qiang, whose Bunker Museum of Contemporary Art, on the Cold War-traumatized island of Kinmen, invited artists from Mainland China, Taiwan, and in emigration to use the abandoned spaces of bunkers to create art. While Cai did not present work for this exhibition other than to organize it, his turn to matter signifies in many other areas of his art. Particularly important is his use of fireworks as a medium of painting and site-specific installation, on the one hand redefining the tradition of large-format Chinese brush painting, and on the other producing evocative spectacles that link art exhibition to public displays. It is crucial for Cai’s use of fireworks and his interest in bunkers that his childhood was spent in the area of Fukien Province opposite Kinmen, whose every-other-day bombardment through the period of the Taiwan Straits crisis (1958–70) indelibly influenced their aesthetic values.