

# A DEEP PLACE DIGITAL EXPLORATION

Trevor Borg

We are surface tenants and we are more likely to feel closer to the stars in the sky, light-years away, than to the underground world concealed a few metres beneath our feet. As the saying goes, ‘out of sight, out of mind’. But there are exceptions. The urge to breach the earth’s crust remains alluring and many have dared to venture into the underland, to unearth stories and push them eagerly, or reluctantly, to the surface. It seems that humanity is gripped by a persistent fascination to investigate what might be lurking beneath the surface of the earth, underground, ensconced and forgotten deep down in the dark abysses. It is perhaps the unknown that attracts us to the hidden layers of the earth as we keep digging and lunging, in search of resources, history, mythology, and obscure stories from the deep. Robert Macfarlane (2019 p.11) claims that information about the worlds beneath the ground is very scant and similarly, Will Hunt (2019 p.12) notes that according to geologists more than half of the existing caves are still undiscovered.

Land art pioneer Robert Smithson (1996 p.110) likened the strata of the earth to a jumbled museum where the layers of information are loaded with information awaiting to be unraveled. *TAHT | FUQ* emerges from the deep; it enters the world’s insides endoscopically, to bring us images of the tissue aligning the suppressed passageways underneath the visible skin. The work is incisive, it cuts into the earth’s membrane to give a view of its internal parts, and we can literally

analyse what is going on inside by looking at the images on a screen. *TAHT | FUQ* is a thoroughly-researched artistic work in the form of a video and sound installation, wherein ancient spaces can be traversed through the use of 3D scanning technology, and actual footage arising from below.

Malta's bedrock is relatively young and maybe as a result of that the island lacks a mining history, however, locals have always been inclined to explore vertically for different reasons. *TAHT | FUQ* explores two important underground sites in Malta, namely Valletta's dense underground network and the Wignacourt subterranean complex in Rabat. The two sites are loaded with history yet their existence is obscured by the layers of rock that have carefully sheltered them throughout the ages. To use Mark Augé's terminology, these unique spaces seem to fit somewhere in between a place and a non-place, but they cannot be squarely attributed to any of these terms. Augé (1995 p.63) argues that place "is never completely erased", while a non-place is "never totally completed". While underground Valletta and Rabat are very well concealed, only accessible through narrow shafts, the two sites have withstood the test of time. Dating back to Roman times up to the Knights of St. John and into the Second World War, these places have neither been erased nor forgotten. In point of fact, time has imbued the subterranean complexes with more layers of meaning, visible only to the explorative eye that dares to venture beneath the surface. Accumulating more layers, like a secret palimpsest carefully shrouded and stowed away from public reach, the intricate networks of hidden passageways are immersed in history, however, they lack the unmistakable identity associated with the corresponding places located right above. People throng the streets of Valletta and Rabat every day, alienated and scurried, but only a few are aware of the dark cryptic shafts secreted a few metres beneath their feet.

## Imaging and Imagining

In the process of making the installation we were able to engage with the ancient spaces through time-based media and hybrid emerging technologies. The installation merges the two underground sites in Malta, placing them side by side, allowing the viewers to trail diverse paths into the unknown contemporaneously. The unorthodox

exploration is complicated by the presence of mind-numbing, whirring sounds, that work in counterpoint with the (dis-)connected images. The immersive video piece entwines separate unrelated spaces within a single place, in turn creating an *other* place that can be experienced through the opening up of the work itself. Furthermore, as Augé (1995 p. 56) notes, reference to the past complicates our notion of the present, and this temporal phenomenon becomes palpable when viewing the video installation. The work is designed to engage with the site, wherever that may be, to question and to reconfigure, to converse and to relate with the aesthetic, historical and spatial constitution of the host location.

*TAHT | FUQ* encourages the viewers to seamlessly wander the underground passages virtually and physically to heighten their sense of place. The work unfolds through an immersive experience across time and space, where actual footage, computer generated animation and sound, intermingle with the unique spatial characteristics of the site. The piece juxtaposes multiple places that open up further subterranean chambers which can be explored, redefined and co-occupied by the maker and the viewer. It allows for multiple modes of engaging with less familiar places; it bridges the distance between the real and the virtual by drawing on the phenomenological, echoing the words of Merleau-Ponty, “[t]he world is what I perceive, but as soon as we examine and express its absolute proximity, it also becomes, inexplicably, irremediable distance” (1964 p. 8). What we cannot instantly grasp or perceive appears much more distant than it really is and because of that, the time and space distancing appears more profound when we attempt to glance through the earth’s surface. The distance that separates us from the underland is amplified because we cannot clearly perceive what lies in wait down there, and very often access is restricted or outright risky. Nonetheless, the arduous task of reaching the claustrophobic covert tunnels might be one of the reasons that impels us to go deeper and deeper into the earth’s crust.

Homo Sapiens has barely understood the consequences of the wounds it has inflicted on the world’s outer casing, let alone how that impinges on the relatively unknown worlds that rest beneath. We are still obtuse in regard to how our topmost actions seep and reverberate downwards. Lippard (2014 p. 164) warns that if we ignore the fact that

*TAHT | FUQ*  
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everything is connected we would be doing so at our own risk. The movement on top makes its way through cracks and crevices, reaching further into the depths of the planet, where it gathers and grows into a mythological creature that at some point might come back to haunt us. In Maltese, *TAHT | FUQ* means ‘upside down’, which may refer to the act of reversal of positions, or it could also be used to describe a ‘topsy-turvy’ situation, driven by confusion and chaos. Art thrives on chaos; it regulates and organizes matter into forms that generate and intensify sensations (Grosz, 2008 p.4). The labyrinthine structure of passages and rooms, ducts and channels, hewn by our ancestors, have presented us with an intricate, ambiguous space where art could develop and evolve in various directions, including upwards. *TAHT | FUQ* opens up a hole through which we may glimpse the underground, to re-discover and re-make places concealed by the topmost visible strata covering the earth’s outside. The video installation digs into history; it presents itself as an ar(t)chaology of resistance, a poetic encounter where awe and anxiety entwine and exchange sides. It unlocks a mythical shaft into the unknown, embracing uncertainty as it traverses the chambers that lead to places still unexplored. Trigg (2012 p.119) explains that “place marks time, as time marks place, with each passage carried out through the lived-body”, and through our bodies, in true phenomenological approach, we delve deep belowground, darting the superficial skin to face the humid lining of the world’s innards.

The contrasting association of images in the video installation instils a sense of ambiguity. It creates a place that Rebecca Solnit (2005 p.89) describes as “full of the promise of the unknown with all its epiphanies and dangers”. If walls could talk we might not be anywhere closer to understanding what these dark passageways have witnessed. The closer we get and the deeper we go the stranger the place comes to be. As more levels are revealed the more it turns out that we have barely started to peel the layers of time. A process of un-knowing the place, researching what has been, to unveil what might become. The underlying networks stem like a subterranean rhizome as often an opening leads to multiple others (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Our presence in the underground complex becomes an act of transgression; it allows access to sacred places where people from the past used to gather the remains of the dead or sought refuge in the midst

of World War II. There are also secret passages, carefully planned by the Knights in case of imminent danger, walkways for troops, cisterns and tracks that direct water to the four corners of the capital city, and channels that discreetly push organic waste far away from the nobility. A lot has taken place in these buried places, we cannot hold them still, Massey (2005 p. 125) argues, and they go on with or without us (p. 124). Trespassing becomes imbricated with the existing narratives of the place, unlocking further paths and clocking more time on top of that already accumulated. Our presence contributes to the covert tunnels and to their existence in time and space. They are turned into a memorial commemorating lost time, and time found. The air is loaded, suffocating, claustrophobic and weighed down by gravity. Nothing is what it seems deep down. Pale lights make outworldy creatures appear along the walls; they can be seen climbing the ceiling and wriggling along the damp floor, their traces mysteriously preserved. But these are not real, literal images. These are images that crossed our minds as we explored the underground complexes in the process of making the installation. Simulation is effective not the real (Baudrillard, 1994 p.56).

The underground harbours the collective memories which we can no longer recall but still we are aware of their existence. The tool marks, graffiti, reliefs and symbols carved in rock, attest to the stories of people who have trailed these underground passages in life and in death. Contemporary existence is shaped by the tales oozing uninterruptedly from rock hewn pits and shafts. As we delve deeper, vertically, a sense of uncanny familiarity awaits us. Our presence in these ancient places, physically and virtually, interposes further anecdotes to the open narrative(s) with which they are already imbued.

“Places can, for instance, become singular in the library of our memories through their very *unfamiliarity*. Indeed, precisely through their strangeness, places become memorable by disturbing patterns or regularity and habit. In doing so, a given narrative is broken while another one begins” [original italics] (Trigg, 2012 p. 9).

*TAHT* | *FUQ* disrupts and complicates the ‘geologic time’, as Smithson (1996 p. 105) would argue, and through a process of ‘de-architecturing’ the space below extends to the surface and continues

to accumulate time indefinitely (p.104). We delve into unfamiliar historical narratives to create our own in collaboration with the audience. The artistic work is aimed to elicit place stories, to recall and to recompose vague trajectories and to push them outwardly. The descent into the shafts beyond the familiar is unnerving, abstruse, and to stimulate the unknown further it unfolds gradually at each juncture. This is part of the storytelling process whereby new signs and cyphers are discovered with every retelling. Massey (2005 p. 119) explains that when we reach a new place we are joining up with the interwoven stories that make up that place.

The world below is not detached from the world that we perceive; it is the same one. Similarly, the worlds that the work of art opens up are connected with the world of origin. Jean-Luc Nancy (1997 p. 155) declares that '[t]he world is always the plurality of worlds: a constellation whose compossibility is identical with its fragmentation'. *TAHT | FUQ* invites the viewers to descend and to explore, to discover and to collect fragments of places concealed and forgotten. A request to ponder on our worldly existence and on what it means to live in a world brimming with unknowns, notwithstanding the incessant quest for knowledge.

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Trevor Borg is a multi-disciplinary artist, curator and researcher based in Malta. His practice traverses place and space, delves into ambiguous territory, and oscillates between the poetic and the political.

Borg's work spans a wide range of media from drawing, painting and sculpture to film and installations. His work has been shown in a number of prestigious venues worldwide including the Venice Biennale, 2019; the Beijing International Art Biennale, 2022; the London Design Biennale, 2023; the European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium; the Oil Mill, Kalavassos, Cyprus; the University of Leeds, UK; the Sheffield Institute of Arts, Sheffield, UK; the NRW-Forum Dusseldorf, Germany; the Stadsschouwburg De Harmonie Leeuwarden, The Netherlands; the Villa Claudia Feldkirch, Austria, Vienna; the Tetley Gallery Leeds, UK; the Museu Arxiu de Montblanc, Spain; the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Oostende, Belgium; the Kunsthalle, Mannheim, Germany; the MKM Museum Küppersmühle, Duisburg, Germany; the Künstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria; Spazju Kreattiv, the Manoel Theatre, the Malta Chamber of Commerce and the National Library, Valletta, Malta. His work can be found in various public and private collections around the world and it has been published by prestigious international art magazines including *Christies*, *Design Boom*, *Creative Boom*, *Icon Magazine*, *Culture Whisper*, *Aesthetica Magazine* and *Wallpaper*.

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