

UNCERTAIN REGARD

Paper delivered at *Borderlands: photography and cultural contest* – 2nd annual photography symposium, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 31 March 2012

IMAGE 1: *Playground*, from the *Plant Life (Chernobyl)* series, Marilyn Fairskye 2011 pigment print



I. INTRODUCTION

Chernobyl today is full of contradictions: it is a landscape populated by paradox. It is located approximately 100 km north of the Ukrainian capital Kiev, near the border with Belarus. You enter today through a security checkpoint staffed by armed guards. An Exclusion Zone with a 30-kilometre radius surrounds the power plant. 8000 people work there in various capacities around remediation, containment, and re-enclosure of the reactor site. It is illegal to enter the Zone without permission and no one under 18 years of age is allowed in.

Ukraine has been the site of volatile political, social and cultural change over hundreds of years. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident exceeds everything that has gone before. This paper draws on two field trips I made to Ukraine and the new work I created to consider what it is an artist can represent in the aftermath of such a catastrophe.

My methodology is artistic research not historical research. I will first address the place of Chernobyl – as an incredible icon of tragedy, an apparently uninhabitable landscape devastated by human error and the failure of technology, and a natural and social history museum. Crumbling, decrepit, dangerous, and teeming with life, present-day Chernobyl is a flashpoint for high environmental, economic, and political stakes beyond the Exclusion Zone.

I will consider the relationship between the event, its geography and architecture, and how I recorded it in order to make art. In doing so, I will consider how with something as concretely real and dangerous as a nuclear accident an artwork whose expression is a feature-length film, might enter an imaginary territory rather than a didactic documentary space, as a way of evoking the complexity of this accident for people, the landscape and history.

Like the film *Precarious*, this is not easily resolved.

IMAGE 2: *Pripyat town*, from the *Plant Life (Chernobyl)* series, Marilyn Fairskye 2011

Pigment print



II. PLACE

The Chernobyl region has a rich cultural legacy. In 2003 11th and 12th Century ruins were found in Chernobyl and a Neolith site dating back to the 6th Century BC was found on the banks of the Pripjat River. Chernobyl had one of the oldest Jewish settlements in the Ukraine, dating back to the 17th Century.

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant is located in Pripjat, some 20ks from the town of Chernobyl. Pripjat, on the banks of the Pripjat River, and on the border with Belarus, was created in 1970. An atomgrad - one of nine model Soviet towns built near nuclear power plants, it housed power plant workers and their families. The average age of the 50,000 residents was 26. Today, no one lives there.

Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film, *Stalker*, prefigured the metaphorical and actual landscape of post-accident Chernobyl. In this film, the Stalker is a mysterious guide who takes two people on a journey to the centre of a desolate, post-apocalyptic landscape, called the Zone, to a secret room where their innermost desires might be granted.

I think of Pripjat as the secret chamber of the Exclusion Zone. It is in the 10km Exclusion Zone, also known as the Dead Zone - a crumbling museum of life in Soviet times, the streets, apartment blocks and public facilities, the harbour with its rusting ships, the playground with its Ferris wheel, relics of the Soviet ideals of happiness through work and ideological connection and fellowship.

Pripjat adjoins the Red Forest – once green but turned red overnight by radiation – a nature reserve where animals, birds and rare plant species flourish in the absence of humans. It has been called an “involuntary park”, a term coined by science fiction author and environmentalist Bruce Sterling to describe previously inhabited areas that for environmental, economic or political reasons have “lost their value for technological instrumentalism” and been allowed to return to an overgrown, feral state.

Scientists, journalists and nuclear experts have been visiting Chernobyl for 25 years. In a burst of publicity, in early 2011 the Ukraine Emergencies Ministry lifted restrictions on tourism around the power plant, streamlined procedures and formally opened the place to visitors. Official guides took paying busloads around the Zone. *Forbes Magazine* named Chernobyl as one of the top ten most exotic tourist destinations. In a nod to Tarkovsky, Chernobyl tourism became known as Chernobyl Stalking. However, legal action was taken

against the Emergencies Ministry by the Prosecutor-General over misappropriation of funds generated by the tours, and in December 2011 the Kiev District Court upheld a ban on tourism to the Exclusion Zone.

This tourism push has its origins in the economic impact of Chernobyl and high levels of domestic poverty. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, management of Chernobyl reverted to Ukraine and Belarus. The ongoing activities undertaken by both countries in response to the accident— remediation of the environment, evacuation and resettlement, development of uncontaminated food sources and food distribution channels, and public health measures — take up over 6 % of their national budgets, according to a 2005 report from the Chernobyl Forum.

There is a thriving salvage economy around Chernobyl. Heating radiators stripped from Pripyat buildings by scavengers fetch \$10US a piece on the black market. Cottages that weren't buried under clay after the accident have been stripped of all recyclable items that find their way to city markets. Poachers cross the porous borders between Belarus and Ukraine, to hunt wild game and fish the Pripyat River and the cooling ponds, to feed their families or to sell to upmarket restaurants in Kiev.

The territory of the zone is polluted unevenly. There are 800 known burial sites, unlined porous trenches, intended to be temporary, for various waste materials and decontamination equipment. As many burial sites remain unmapped. Many of these have been flattened with time and cannot be located. Scrap hunters routinely raid the hundreds of vehicle graveyards to supply spare mechanical parts to neighbouring towns and villages. The coniferous pine forests are dry in summer and prone to wildfires. When a fire breaks out, the ash and smoke go up into the atmosphere and depending on the wind direction, radioactive particles are widely dispersed. There aren't enough funds to put adequate preventative measures in place or properly contain them when they burn.

The structures of the power plant itself are terminally damaged, incomplete, or obsolete. Under the auspices of the Chernobyl Shelter Fund, work has commenced on a billion-euro New Safe Confinement replacement, designed to enclose the existing sarcophagus covering Reactor No. 4 for 100 years, to confine the solid radioactive waste inside and allow for the future decommissioning of the damaged reactor. The second stage of the project is to safely and securely store the spent fuel from Reactors Nos 1, 2 and 3. So far approximately E700m, half the required funds, have been raised from 30 international donors.

This is Chernobyl today.

III. METHOD

IMAGE 3: 4 screen shots from Precarious



I had the opportunity in early 2009 to visit Chernobyl. I had no prior agenda, no prior expectation. During that first visit, I gathered material in Crimea, in Kiev and Chernobyl. At first my decisions about where to point the camera were intuitive rather than reasoned. There is a remarkable array of often-contradictory versions of anything and everything to do with Chernobyl, because so much is at stake, in terms of public policy and political and economic agendas. It's easy to see why outsiders come to trust unofficial rather than official accounts. My interest lay in the resonances of its post-Soviet after-life, and in the physical place of Chernobyl itself.

I made two series of still photographs, and two video installations. Then, over a period of a year, I made *Precarious*, a 66-minute film that I will talk about today. None of these works provide a historically accurate or linear account of what happened in 1986.

Many photographers and filmmakers have found considerable and powerful materials to engage with around Chernobyl. Like the phenomena of the Holocaust, terrorism and environment industries, a mini industry has grown up around Chernobyl that includes contemporary artists, musicians and games designers. It is possible to describe these assorted entrepreneurs as "catastrophe junkies". I am uncertain where *Precarious* fits in the Chernobyl economy. It's not a conventional documentary, it's not a drama, and it's not an art installation. Whilst being the artist/author of the work, I have chosen to remain invisible and silent apart from my critical (and subjective) role in the construction of the imagery, sound, and sequential narrative of the film.

Precarious is a road movie. It has a prologue and five Acts, marked not by plot points, for there is no plot, but by changes of location. The journey starts, 1,000 kilometres away from Chernobyl, in Crimea. The narrative is topographical - around space and distance – a telescopic view of a larger, more comprehensive documentary someone else might make.

The image you see is a group of four frames from the beginning of the film. A minimal framework of what follows is established up front: the accident and the numbers of people involved in mopping up then and containment today; the title, which flags that this may be about a sense of things rather than a factual account of something; the people whose stories will accompany us are introduced; and then, the journey starts, and we know where it will end because the distances from Chernobyl are signposted at each new place we arrive at. Place is the central character.

IMAGE 4: 4 screen shots from *Precarious*



These four frames are from the prologue, which introduces the unseen people whose stories will accompany us. The imagery, seen through the window of a moving car, is of a bleak, winter landscape, littered with deserted villages engulfed by trees. A long row of ghostly, abandoned houses stands on snow-covered ground. Further along the road other houses are buried under a thick layer of clay. You learn later on where this place is.

Your gaze is focussed on the landscape as you hear the voices of people –including a photographer, an Intourist worker; a scientist; a doctor; a helicopter pilot, and a current employee of the Emergencies Ministry who works in the Exclusion Zone. They speak in subtitled Russian or Ukrainian. Their voices, and their stories, provide glimpses of the personal and social consequences in amongst the larger story of the accident. Through listening to their words and the various tonalities of their voices, the events of the past and the trials of the present are brought into life.

We listen, read and watch. This slows down easy identification or empathy, and you have to take in the place as much as the people who are no longer there. The volume of the subtitles asks a lot of the viewer – they literally translate the spoken words, but also add a layer between the flow of the voices and the imagery. This layering, or the effort involved in engaging with it, might suggest something of the complexity of the accident and its aftermath. Or it could just be alienating. This was just one of many challenges I had in making this work – the language, the genre, the weather and my cameras were others. In the end I took a leap

of faith and accepted the possible contradictions, the camera mishaps, and my own uncertainty.

IMAGE 5: 4 screen shots from *Precarious*



My decisions around framing, working with the geography of the place, interviews, the intersection of certain images - are a direct result of what I learnt through the research I undertook, and also through the things I understand from other works I have made in the past, such as *Connected*, which engaged with the landscape around Pine Gap, the secretive US military installation in Central Australia.

I frequently use panning shots. The pan takes in everything. I often use an establishing shot, and a medium shot is about as close as I get. There is only one close-up. In this sequence, shot in Alushta on the Black Sea, you can see a typical set-up – a fixed wide shot, people pass by in front of the camera, which is on a tripod, then a slow pan around, then cut to a medium wide shot. I rarely use dissolves, except on the intertitles that indicate a change of location. If possible, I scout a location first, then set up the camera and wait for something to happen. I may not always know what the camera is seeing until afterwards.

Because I never quite knew in advance what would take place, I captured everything I could – as still and moving imagery. Then, back in the studio, I distilled the subject - from the mass of material accumulated from research and visual/audio material gathered in the field – in this case over two years. The process involves rigorous and extensive looking, listening, building, and assembling.

I was observing and producing material that wasn't built around a coherent structured narrative before or after the actual shoots, that was less information-based, and had more of a sense of engagement with, and an understanding of experiences of people and place.

IMAGE 6: 4 screen shots from Precarious



Images of water run right through the film, in inverse direction to the flow of contaminated water from the Pripjat River down to the Black Sea. The ebb and flow of water echoes the dispersal of radiation into the air and the waterways – silent, invisible, all-encompassing, volatile.

When the nuclear power plant was being built some scientists warned that it was not an ideal site because of the underground rivers that connect to the Dnieper River. Following severe winters, spring flooding occurs and contaminated water and silt run from the Pripjat River which flows into the Kiev Reservoir to the Dnieper River, the main waterway of Ukraine, through to the Black Sea.

IMAGE 7: screen shot from Precarious



In February 1945 Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met at Livadia Palace in Yalta, on the Black Sea, to determine who would get what in the post-war reorganization of Europe. The Yalta Conference resulted in decisions that directly led to the Cold War, and to the construction of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and many others with the same flawed design, across the Soviet Union.

IMAGE 8: 4 screen shots from Precarious



In 1986 Igor Shchepotin was a young doctor at the Cancer Institute in Kiev, treating the firemen who were brought into the clinic in the first days after the accident. His recollections place the human cost of this event against the backdrop of larger events. For me, this Act, set in Yalta, provides an emotional heart to the film.

IMAGE 9: 4 screen shots from Precarious



The first frame here is a satellite image from NASA. It shows the Pripjat River meeting the Kiev Reservoir that connects to the Dnieper River. This Reservoir occupies an important place in people's memories of the weeks and months immediately after the accident, as it trapped a lot of sediment which slowed down the migration of contaminants. The other frames show people stopping to look at the Dnieper River from a lookout in Kreshchety Park in Kiev. In this sequence the random passers-by who stopped at the railing, and gazed out across Kiev to the river, were edited to provide moments of connection with the Voice Overs.

IMAGE 10: 4 screen shots from Precarious



The park scenes evoke everyday life in Kiev that was so compromised by the accident. If you stayed there long enough, it seemed like half of Kiev passed by, and the noise of the city swirled around. The Voice Overs here address the rumours, the official secrecy surrounding the accident in the first days and weeks, and the threat to the water supply. The arch is the Monument to Soviet and Ukraine Friendship.

IMAGE 11: 4 screen shots from Precarious



This sequence is from the approach to Chernobyl security checkpoint. The words belong to Tatiana Myciova, a resident of a village on the edge of the Exclusion Zone. This is a composite character based on several different people living around the Zone, not a real person, although her story echoes the stories of many real people. None of her words were invented, but they came from different written testimonies that I came across during my research. Reading many first hand accounts helped me to shift my focus from the facts of the accident to the lived experiences of people in Chernobyl's shadow.

IMAGE 12: 4 screen shots from Precarious



Both visits were undertaken in the depth of harsh winters that drained the colour out of everything. This monochromatic bleakness infused all the images I captured. Anchored to this particular place, but also loosened from it. The grey, bleak, winter landscapes were paradoxically, reassuring, and became the visual motif of the film. In Chernobyl, a heavy winter is good protection against radiation, because radioactive dust is trapped under the ice and snow.

IMAGE 13: screen shot from Precarious



The built structures, designed to variously process, store or cool nuclear elements and waste, are terminally damaged, were never completed, or have reached their use-by date. I show all of them, sometimes more than once, in long, slow pans. The buildings, the vegetation and the earth around them are still contaminated. The two reactors were under construction at the time of the accident. Reactor #5 was almost completed. Construction cranes still remain in place. Water pumps are used to keep water out of the roofless structure so that the walls do not collapse and release large amounts of radioactive dust into the atmosphere.

IMAGE 14: screen shot from Precarious – Reactor #4



At first sight, the ruined Reactor #4 looks like some type of large agricultural shed. It still contains radioactive fuel and contaminated waste. Down in the basement there is a 200-ton lump of volatile, solidified waste known as the Elephant's Foot.

I worked closely with sound designer Robert Hindley on the audio. I gathered raw audio in the field, and we worked together in the studio to make it all work. As well as location sound and the interviews, we recorded new material, and Bob created an original sound score. I had come across a sound work, *4 Rooms*, by the Belgian sound artist Jacob Kirkegaard where sonic time layering evokes the sound of each of four rooms in Pripjat. This made me think about the sound of Chernobyl - not the literal sound, the atmos, so much, as what I imagined the sound inside Reactor #4 to be.

IMAGE 15: screen shot from Precarious



So I asked Bob to put us inside the reactor, in the basement where the Elephant's Foot resides. He did this, and also, tracked the sound through the above ground pipes that carried all the utility cabling, so as we pass by the pipes on our way into the Reactor area, the sound is pulling us closer and closer.

IMAGE 16: 4 screen shots from Precarious



Dilapidated, deserted, uninhabitable, the city of Pripyat is a Soviet time capsule. Images of the interiors of the weather damaged buildings, the swimming pool, the hospital with babies' cots, the schoolroom floor covered with gas masks, battered schoolbooks strewn about, posters of Lenin on the walls, have been reproduced many times in books and websites. I was interested in the sweep of the city – the devastated exteriors of the Soviet style buildings, the well-laid out streets now overtaken by trees and bushes, and the people who were no longer there. I confined myself to exterior, panoramic views, 360-degree pans. In the low winter light, and the absence of shadows, everything was very still and quiet, and it seemed like after the end of the world.

IMAGE 17: 4 screen shots from Precarious



I have strong convictions about the subject matter of this work. Nuclear power is an inherently centralized technology that requires centralized political-industrial-institutions. The key nuclear industry body, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has 137 member states.

Uncertain Regard, Marilyn Fairskye 31 March 2012

Uranium mining and nuclear power plants are big business. When things go wrong, the outcomes are enormous. Who can say there is a safe, secure long-term solution to the problem of nuclear waste disposal?

Precarious is not a vehicle for conveying these convictions. Instead, it reflects on what remains unresolved and unfinished about Chernobyl - and on the capacity of people to endure the social, economic and environmental consequences of mega technologies. It is an aesthetic, imagined construct driven by the powerful events of real life.

To mistranslate Dziga Vertov's comment on his 1929 silent film, *Man with a Movie Camera*:

“ This film is an experiment of real events with the help of a never-ending story...”

Marilyn Fairskye

Sydney, March 2012
