

The Zone

A conversation between
Raúl Ortega Ayala and Gabriela Salgado

TeTuhi

If a thousand suns were to blaze forth together
in the sky, they would not match the splendour
of that great form.

Bhagavad Gita¹

¹'Bhagavad Gita, The Song of God' (website): <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/11/verse/12>, accessed 28 February 2020.

Gabriela Salgado: The work *The Zone*, currently presented at Te Tuhi, is the result of a longterm research engagement with the exclusion zone around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant that notoriously exploded on 26 April 1986. I understand that you have taken several trips to the area, the first in 2013. Can you recall your first impressions and talk about what you found there, thirty years after the tragic accident?

Raúl Ortega Ayala: When I started the project there wasn't as much interest in the exclusion zone as there is now; since the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. video game and the HBO series *Chernobyl* were released more people have shown interest. It wasn't as easy to enter the area back then; more recently some parts of the zone have been officially declared a 'tourist site' by the Ukrainian government.² This meant that there wasn't as much visual material available when I embarked on my research as there is now, so I had only a vague idea of what I would find. But to be honest, the visual material available does not compare with the experience of being physically there. In 2013 there were no tours or tourists, so you were alone in a city designed to host fifty thousand or more people, which is quite a shocking experience. Visiting Chernobyl in those circumstances really connected me with the scale of the problem, with how many lives were affected and with the vast territory that has been contaminated with radiation. I saw an area ravaged by human actions, but where nature thrived, showing how well animals, plants, insects and birds do when we are not around – similar to what has occurred during the recent lockdowns all over the world.

GS: Given that your practice is research-based and conceptually grounded, *The Zone* is testament to your approach to developing long-term conversations with people in the respective locations. I imagine that these engagements inevitably influence the narratives that you chose to embed in the work. Can you tell me about the methodology you employed when looking for interlocutors in Ukraine, and what memories and experiences you ended up privileging in the project? Did you often find resistance on the part of the victims to recall the accident?

ROA: It's worth mentioning here that when I make a film I don't do it in a 'traditional' way: I don't arrive at a location with a preconceived idea of what I'll do, or with a specific script and

² Katie Mettler, 'Ukraine wants Chernobyl to be a tourist trap. But scientists warn: Don't kick up dust', *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2019.

timetable of shots. The projects evolve organically, and the outcome is always a surprise of some sort. If I'm working with people, I slowly build relationships with them and never force anyone to reveal anything they don't want to. Time also gives you the opportunity to get to know people better and often this time spent with people builds mutual trust and generates an atmosphere of openness, as they understand what you are doing and why. During my multiple visits to the zone I interviewed a dissimilar group of people that had lived in different areas surrounding the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. I was interested in hearing different perspectives, so I spoke to the vice mayor of Pripyat, a gym coach who had hundreds of kids in his care when the accident happened, a man who was a child at the time of the accident, a woman who had a nine-month-old baby and an old couple that had recently returned to live inside the exclusion zone despite the health risks. I didn't want the movie to focus on what had happened on the 26th of April as there are great books and films that cover that already. I wanted to focus on the victims, their stories, and on the repercussions of this nuclear disaster, as during the interviews I noticed that what was most traumatic for most people wasn't the accident itself but the consequences that it had for them, their family and friends, their fellow citizens, the city they loved, the political system they believed in, the environment and their land.

GS: When we discussed the ideas underlying *The Zone*, you mentioned that you are interested in the concept of ignominy, a term that is commonly used to refer to an unspeakable disgrace, but whose etymology points more accurately to the 'loss of name'. Can you explain the relation between the Chernobyl accident and the collapse of the URSS, as a consequence of the loss of credibility of the power that had historically sustained imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in equal measure?

ROA: Indeed, while working on the project the term ignominy kept popping into my head precisely because of its two meanings. At the time of the accident the cold war (between the USSR and the USA) was in full swing and both sides did everything in their power to project an image of infallibility. The nuclear energy program was something that the Russians took pride in. And when it failed on that fateful night in April, they did everything they could to conceal what had happened, including not informing

their own citizens. It was thanks to the Forsmark nuclear power plant, which is sixty-five kilometres southeast of Gävle in Sweden,³ that the world learnt about this accident because the USSR didn't want to tarnish the image they projected to their citizens and to the world of their technological advances and their apparently flawless political system. In my opinion, and in that of other experts in the field,⁴ Chernobyl was a contributing factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union because it affected its finances greatly, its belief in their 'high-end' technology and most importantly, the faith of its citizens in the political system. Chernobyl also triggered a wave of 'eco-nationalisms' in the Soviet provinces and fuelled independence movements in countries under the USSR like Lithuania and the Ukraine.⁵ Many citizens who had previously sworn allegiance to the USSR now took to the streets condemning the central government in Moscow for its secrecy surrounding the accident and for the consequences this had on them and/or their loved ones, and demanded to know the truth.

GS: You often refer to social amnesia as a pivotal notion in this work. Did you come across that impulse to forget in your engagement with Chernobyl inhabitants? How would you describe the social mechanism of remembering and forgetting in relation to historical trauma in present day Ukraine?

ROA: The work I was developing at that time was exploring, through different examples of historical detritus, the concepts of collective memory and social amnesia, which in a nutshell can be defined as the collective remembering and the collective forgetting triggered by different factors. For me, these two social phenomena were at play in this tragic event because of the way in which the central government tried to control and manipulate the information, and because of how the general public broke away from a long-established inertia of believing what the institutions said and how they took control of the narrative.

In my film, Vladimar Tarasov, one of the former residents of the exclusion zone, narrates how 'too much time has passed to feel the same pain again' when he visits his former home. Yet he recognises, together with others, that it is important not to let this event and its consequences be forgotten. But let's say for argument's sake that humans manage to erase it from our

³Adam Higginbotham, *Midnight in Chernobyl* (London: Bantam Press, 2019), 170.

⁴Serhi Plokyh, *Chernobyl* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 316; Dmitri Efremenko, 'Eco-Nationalism and the Crisis of the Soviet Empire (1986-1991)', *Irish Slavonic studies* 24 (2012): 17-20; Adam Higginbotham, *Midnight in Chernobyl* (London: Bantam Press, 2019), 331, 364.

⁵Plokyh (2018), 305, 313; Efremenko (2012): 17-20; Jane I. Dawson, *Econationalism: Anti-nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), chapters 2 and 3.

history, still the isotopes that went into the atmosphere and spread across this land and beyond, like iodine 131, neptunium 239, caesium 137, strontium 90 and especially Plutonium 239⁶, have a half-life of 24,110 years.⁷ This means that the land will be contaminated and not fit for human habitation for a really long time. The longevity of this material is evidenced even in a fascinating document titled the Sandia Report,⁸ commissioned by the American government from a group of experts (material scientists, architects, anthropologists, linguists, astronomers, semiologists and others) who were tasked with finding a way to communicate with people for the next ten thousand years, to warn them not to enter an underground nuclear waste isolation pilot plant in Nevada where nuclear waste was stored. They came up with a wide range of ideas, from an 'atomic priesthood' – a religious caste that would preserve and transmit the knowledge of nuclear waste – to 'menacing earthworks', that would serve as markers to deter people from entering. In Finland they have gone even further with the building of a 'spent nuclear fuel disposal facility' called Onkalo, which is to last one hundred thousand years.⁹ Sadly, this could be applied to some areas of the exclusion zone, where for now there is barbed wire and some signs that we recognise today as saying 'stay out, radioactivity in the area.' But what will happen in the future? How will we let people know in thousands of years that this or that place is uninhabitable and dangerous? Will this toxicity be our long-lasting legacy?

GS: Neuroscience research shows that personal and collective trauma remain stored at a cellular level, inducing long-term behavioural patterns. Drawing from your interaction with members of the community, how would you define the repercussions of the trauma caused by the nuclear disaster in Ukraine?

ROA: The tricky thing about this whole event is that it didn't affect people equally; nor was there a main 'event' that killed thousands and then it was 'resolved'. This was an event surrounded by secrecy and only out of sheer luck some people weren't affected by radiation, while others were. For others the trauma was the evacuation, or the loss of their community, or even the process of disenchantment with the political system and the technology that had promised a prosperous future for all. However, there is an interesting study by The World Health Organisation in which they

⁶ Higginbotham (2019), 88.

⁷ Areva, 'Learning more about Plutonium' (PDF):

https://inis.iaea.org/collection/NCLCollectionStore/_Public/36/069/36069474.pdf, 4; Plokhly (2018), Preface xii.

⁸ K.M. Trauth, S.C. Hora and R.V. Guzowski, 'Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant', *Report SAND92-1382* (Albuquerque, NM and Livermore, CA: Sandia National Laboratories 1993), 27.

⁹ Andrew Moisey, 'Considering the Desire to Mark Our Buried Nuclear Waste: Into Eternity and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant', *Qui Parle* (Duke University Press), Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring / Summer 2012): 101-102; Posiva (Construction company of Onkalo) (website): http://www.posiva.fi/en/final_disposal/onkalo#.Xrvj5S2B1TY.

thoroughly analyse data collected over twenty years to calculate the amount of people that were exposed to radiation and the consequences that this has had on their health, or if it has caused death. They review cases of thyroid cancer, leukaemia, mortality rates, cataracts, cardiovascular disease and mental health issues. Unsurprisingly, a spike in some of these cancers is evident, but what is also interesting in this report is how the accident has had a serious impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the general population. Most people that were directly affected by this disaster have experienced high levels of stress and anxiety. Also, as the affected population has been designated as 'victims' and not 'survivors' this has led to feelings of 'helplessness and lack of control over their future.'¹⁰

GS: Considering the irreversibility of history, I find the reaction of scientists behind the development of nuclear energy very compelling.

Upon observing the intense luminosity of the first nuclear test performed in 1945, the so-called father of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer, is said to have quoted the sacred verses of the Bhagavad Gita: 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' A well-versed reader of Hindu religion, the scientist thus expressed his mea-culpa in relation to the irreversibility of his discovery becoming a threat to the future of humanity. Oppenheimer also quoted another verse of the sacred text, describing a pivotal revelation during the battlefield meditations of lord Krishna and his disciple, the warrior prince Arjuna. He described the explosion by citing the powerful image of spiritual revelation in the epigraph. However, his regret appears in stark contrast with the nuclear weapon policies of the cold war period that followed, spearheading the construction of nuclear plants around the world. From your research, was there any change on the part of the USSR in relation to their technological development impulse after the catastrophe?

¹⁰ 'Health effects of the Chernobyl accident: an overview', World Health Organization, April 2006 (PDF): https://www.who.int/ionizing_radiation/chernobyl/backgrounder/en/.

ROA: The first two shots of my film *The Zone* are very important. The opening shot shows a monumental structure called the 'Duga', located inside the exclusion zone, a secret radar built as part of the Soviet early warning missile defence system. It stands there as a staunch testimony of the nuclear arms race of that time, but it also contrasts greatly with the second shot, which shows the tallest building in Pripyat that was 'crowned' with the USSR symbol of the hammer and the sickle. Soon after that, we see a phrase in large letters on top of an adjacent building that reads: 'хай буде атом робітником, а не солдатом' which can be translated as 'Let the Atom be [a] worker, not a soldier'. These two shots show the contrasting ways in which the USSR approached nuclear technology, but paradoxically, regardless of the intentions they had for the atom (war or peace), the consequences ended up being the same: devastation and long-lasting repercussions.¹⁰



Field note 26-03-14 - Ephemera (Postcard of the Duga acquired in Chernobyl), 2014
From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera*
101 x 152mm
courtesy of Raúl Ortega Ayala

GS: You mentioned the idea of the invention of the future, as well as an ongoing interest in ruins and historical detritus. Coming from Mexico, a country where monuments of the imperial, pre-colonial past are ubiquitous, I wonder if you perceived the nuclear energy agenda and its problematic symbols of development as cenotaphs of power?

ROA: In 1986 Mikhail Gorbachev was the general secretary of the Soviet Union and was pushing strong reforms under the so-called 'Perestroika' (or restructuring) but the key message was 'uskorenienie', which translates as acceleration.¹¹ There was a push to grow industrial production and thus the economy, but in order to do so, they needed to produce more electricity and therefore build more nuclear power plants. They ended up cutting corners to erect more reactors (like the RBMK in Chernobyl) which proved catastrophic. The USSR was dictating a re-invention of its future, which was to be fuelled by the 'peaceful atom' and their 'infallible' nuclear energy technology.

In 1991 Ukraine declared independence from the USSR and twenty-four years later (in 2015) when the Revolution of Dignity was taking place, the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove all the monuments of Lenin and other communist leaders from the streets and squares.¹² The exclusion zone was somewhat spared and you can still find symbols of the communist era there, including a statue of Lenin that was destroyed during the period I was visiting Pripyat and of course the now entombed Vladimir Ilyich Lenin Nuclear Power Plant,¹³ which stands as a symbol of this imposed policy from the centres of power to the provinces.

GS: Your intention for this exhibition is to bring the nuclear energy debate back to the fore, given that vast numbers of nuclear power plants are still operational around the world today.

ROA: I wouldn't want to dictate a specific intention for the exhibition as I think there are a lot of issues that are laterally connected to this event, like forced human migration, our approach to technology, government accountability, global interconnectedness, the effects of our way of life on the environment and on others (the Anthropocene) and eco-activism/ econationalism amongst others. But nuclear energy is definitely

¹¹ Ploky (2018), 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 345.

¹³ This was the official name of the power plant; Higginbotham (2019), 73; Ploky (2018), 345.



Raúl Ortega Ayala
Field note 24-03-14-446 (Mural, Pripyat, Chernobyl), 2014
From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera*
digital photograph, dimensions variable
courtesy of the artist

one of the key topics of this research project. The conversation around it needs to continue because it is an unresolved technology that has the potential to devastate entire areas and affect thousands of lives. It's a technology that makes us omnipotent and impotent at the same time.¹⁴ An example of that can be seen in Fukushima, where a 'very secure' nuclear reactor was damaged by the 2011 tsunami. There was a belief that all possible problems had been foreseen and pre-empted when that reactor was designed until something that hadn't been anticipated happened. There are 442 nuclear reactors in operation worldwide, with 52 currently being built¹⁵ including a new one built by Russia in Belarus (one of the countries most affected by the Chernobyl accident).¹⁶

¹⁴ Günther Anders, 'Theses for the Atomic Age', *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 1962): 493.

¹⁵ 'International Atomic Energy Agency Power Reactor Information System' (website): <https://pris.iaea.org/pris/>, accessed 2020.

¹⁶ Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew Higgins, 'Coming to a Country near you: A Russian Nuclear Power Plant', *New York Times*, 21 March 2020 (online): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/europe/belarus-russia-nuclear.html>.

Until we resolve the security issues with this technology, or how to avoid it falling into the wrong hands, and perhaps even more significantly, what to do with nuclear waste, we are somehow repeating the equation of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. I recently heard a quote that I haven't been able to place but I think it's appropriate here: 'if you think technology can solve your problems, then you don't understand technology and you don't understand the problems'.

GS: You relocated to New Zealand from Mexico in recent years; has your perception of the subject changed since living here? In particular, I am thinking of how the history of New Zealand's antinuclear movement, leading to the passing of the 1987 New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act¹⁷, has influenced your work in the zone.

ROA: While doing research for this project, I came across the front page of the *The New York Times* for 29 April 1986, where on the left-hand side the first news of the accident in Chernobyl was published in this paper, and right next to it was an article describing how the president of the United States (Ronald Reagan) was threatening to leave the ANZUS Treaty if New Zealand didn't change its stance barring nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships into its territory.

Both situations played out differently, however, in my opinion, links can be identified in the subsequent eco-activist and eco-nationalist movements: in New Zealand, with the events that preceded and followed the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior by the French government in 1985 (which laid the foundations for the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act in 1987), and in the Baltic provinces and the Ukraine, with the movements triggered by the Chernobyl nuclear accident, which also paved the way towards their independence from the USSR. In both cases, activists stood up to superpowers that were implementing its nuclear energy agenda elsewhere (away from their centres of power), gravely affecting other people and regions. In both situations, citizens were galvanised by nuclear energy and we intend to invite reflection on this matter. Documents and archive material will also illustrate these parallels in one of the rooms in the exhibition.

¹⁷ *New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987*.
<http://www.legislation.govt.nz/ac/t/public/1987/0086/latest/DLM115116.html>, accessed 2020.

GS: Aside from the film, could you expand on the other works that you produced for this series?

ROA: For this project I also produced a set of large-scale photographs that are adhered to the wall in the manner of wallpaper. Some of the images capture real wallpapers from inside of buildings in Pripjat, the city built for the workers of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and others are of large spaces in Pripjat.

My interest in the wallpapers on the one hand came about because most of the furniture and personal belongings from the buildings were taken by the former inhabitants after they were allowed re-entry, once the evacuation was declared indefinite. They were only able to take things that were not heavily contaminated by radiation and after that, the 'liquidators' went into each building and threw the contaminated furniture out into the streets to be collected and buried in multiple ditches around the exclusion zone. With time, looters took most of what remained and left most spaces 'empty'. All you can find today in most apartments are the wallpapers, which slowly peel off the walls, revealing a layer made of newspapers of the time that were stuck to the walls, perhaps as a form of undercover insulation. In a way, the wallpapers exhibit a process of active concealment and revelation through time, and in most cases are the last trace of the people who lived there. In many buildings where there are no more wallpapers all that remains is a generic concrete structure, that says nothing about the former inhabitants, their tastes, or the individual characteristics of each space.

The other photographs of interiors (some of them produced at 1:1 scale) offer a window into a variety of elements within the exclusion zone, including decaying buildings and monumental structures depicted in great detail, objects that survived the extensive clean-up, paraphernalia of the expired political system and the inevitable takeover of entire areas by decay and other natural processes.

GS: We are currently traversing a complex historical moment, witnessing with perplexity a global pandemic that is affecting all humans regardless of political, religious, gender or ethnic divisions. This seems to signal a certain equalising capacity of catastrophes: to be turned in their head and teach us how to live together better. Do you think that despite the sombre anecdotal side of your project's subject matter there is potential for audiences to gain clarity and purpose in relation to our common challenges and the future of all the world's species?

ROA: Yes, I do think so. This project not only shows the long-lasting impact that we as humans have had already in one part of the world but also how a catastrophic event like this one suddenly transformed for all citizens the things we take for granted in everyday life: the food chain, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the communities we live in, human interaction, etc. This part of the world was (like now) upended by an invisible force that wreaked havoc regardless of borders, nationality or age. Yet despite that incredibly adverse situation and countries having opposing political views, nations found a way to cooperate. People showed incredible resilience, a capacity to adapt, change their ways, and galvanise to effect change, including upending an entire political system that had seemed infallible at the time.

Events like these are also humbling, and perhaps teach us to be less arrogant towards nature.

Raúl Ortega Ayala
Field note 27-03-14-1 (Wallpaper in Pripyat, Chernobyl), 2016
From the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera*
c-print, 600 x 800mm
courtesy of the artist



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