INTERVIEW (HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/)

Uncanny Landscapes: Alice Miceli Interviewed

Photographing radiation at Chernobyl.

JANUARY 9, 2020

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Alice-Miceli1.jpg)

Alice Miceli, *Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, PTT-8 Sign, Highly Contaminated Ground, Belarus*, 2008, archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler.

The lightboxes installed at eye level on black, temporary walls emit the only glow in an otherwise hushed, darkened gallery. Each lightbox illuminates an oversized photographic negative whose sooty contents evoke blurry, zoomed-in microscope slides. Yet these abstract-seeming images are in fact representational, the product of unique photographic processes that Brazilian artist Alice Miceli devised to capture traces of the invisible gamma radiation that will linger for millennia near the site of the 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster. Through extensive, collaborative experimentation, Miceli discovered that gamma radiation—whose wavelengths are too short to be captured by traditional photographic processes—leaves behind marks on film when allowed months-long exposure times. At the Chernobyl site, she embedded human chest x-ray film throughout the landscape—sometimes literally burying it in the ground—then left it there for periods of between two to eight months to produce the core images of *Projeto Chernobyl* (2006–10).

On view at the Americas Society (https://www.as-coa.org/alice-miceli-projeto-chernobyl), the results offer an uncanny aesthetic record of a deadly, undetectable substance. The images also constitute a novel, strangely intimate approach to landscape photography, in which the landscape has been depicted from an ordinarily inaccessible interior vantage, rather than from a remote, external one. This approach pointed the way forward for Miceli's *In Depth (Minefields)* (2014–18), in which she photographed active minefields from within the fields. Miceli's interest in what she calls "impenetrable" landscapes raises questions not only about photography's literal and figurative stakes but also its technical and philosophical capacities. With disconcerting immediacy, Miceli's unconventional landscapes take the viewer right up to—and then a little bit beyond—vision's limits.

—Louis Bury

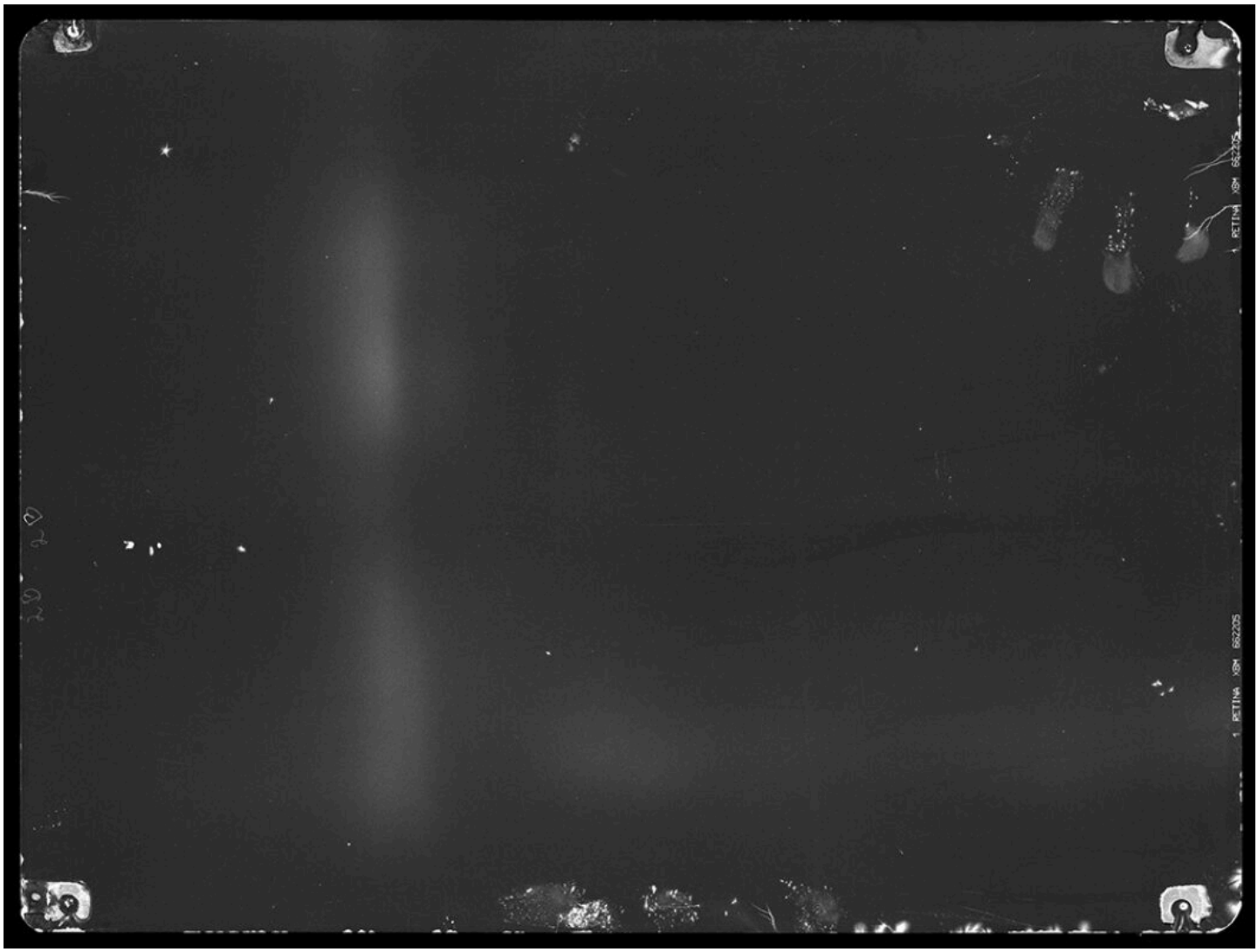
Louis Bury
Where did the idea for *Projeto Chernobyl* come from?

Alice Miceli
It emerged from a study group in Rio with Charles Watson, a professor who was an influential mentor and a powerful critical thinker. We were tasked with contemplating how to represent silence visually. Chernobyl crossed my mind because I first imagined it to be an empty and silent place, on account of being abandoned. As a photographer, I became interested in the attempt to look at a place that doesn't fully reveal itself in the visual. Chernobyl is thought to be empty but is in actuality filled with invisible gamma radiation, which is imperceptible to human senses, except for the destructive traces it leaves behind. It is an ontological question.

LB
How to represent aesthetically that which isn't visible to the human eye?

AM

Yes, precisely. It's a question about the nature of vision. Gamma radiation has an extremely short wavelength, which makes it small enough to pass through almost every material, even a very dense one with tight molecules. Whereas light, which is electromagnetic radiation from the sun, has a much larger wavelength, causing it to bump into things and reflect off of them.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Alice-Miceli2.jpg)

Alice Miceli, *fragment of a window II—2.494 µSv (21.01.09–07.04.09),* backlight, radiographic negative. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler.

LB

You had to study a lot of science to prepare for this project. How did that study manifest in the photographic processes you devised?

AM

Before I went to Chernobyl, I conducted eight months of experiments in a radiation institute in Brazil with the help of a physicist named Luis Tauhata. The lab had actual radioactive sources, including Cesium-137, which is the element most present in the Chernobyl contamination. Using these sources, I built miniature environments that approximated conditions in Chernobyl. Those

experiments revealed that it was possible to imprint images from gamma rays. In the lab, I used dental film because of its small size. In Chernobyl, we switched to human chest x-ray film for its larger format.

LB

Are the negatives themselves contaminated with radiation?

AM

No. There's a difference between being contaminated with radiation, which occurred to the first responders to the Chernobyl explosion, and being irradiated or exposed to radioactivity, which occurs when a cancer patient undergoes radiotherapy. The negatives in the exhibition were all irradiated.

LB

How does this manifest in the negatives' visual appearance?

AM

The results might appear like abstract images but in fact are not because the shapes they contain are mimetic in relation to the source that imprinted them. It's just that this source doesn't necessarily conform to the shape of things as we know them; it has its own shape, that of the invisible contamination.

LB

Which parts of the images reveal the radiation's traces?

AM

The darker segments in the images are the marks of the radiation, because in this version of the work we are looking at the actual negatives that were exposed in Chernobyl. The very dark specks were caused by hot particles embedded in the landscape's surface, while the swirls and splotches were caused by contamination emitted from those particles.

LB

In your Americas Society exhibition, why did you decide to display the original negatives rather than positive reproductions of them?

AM

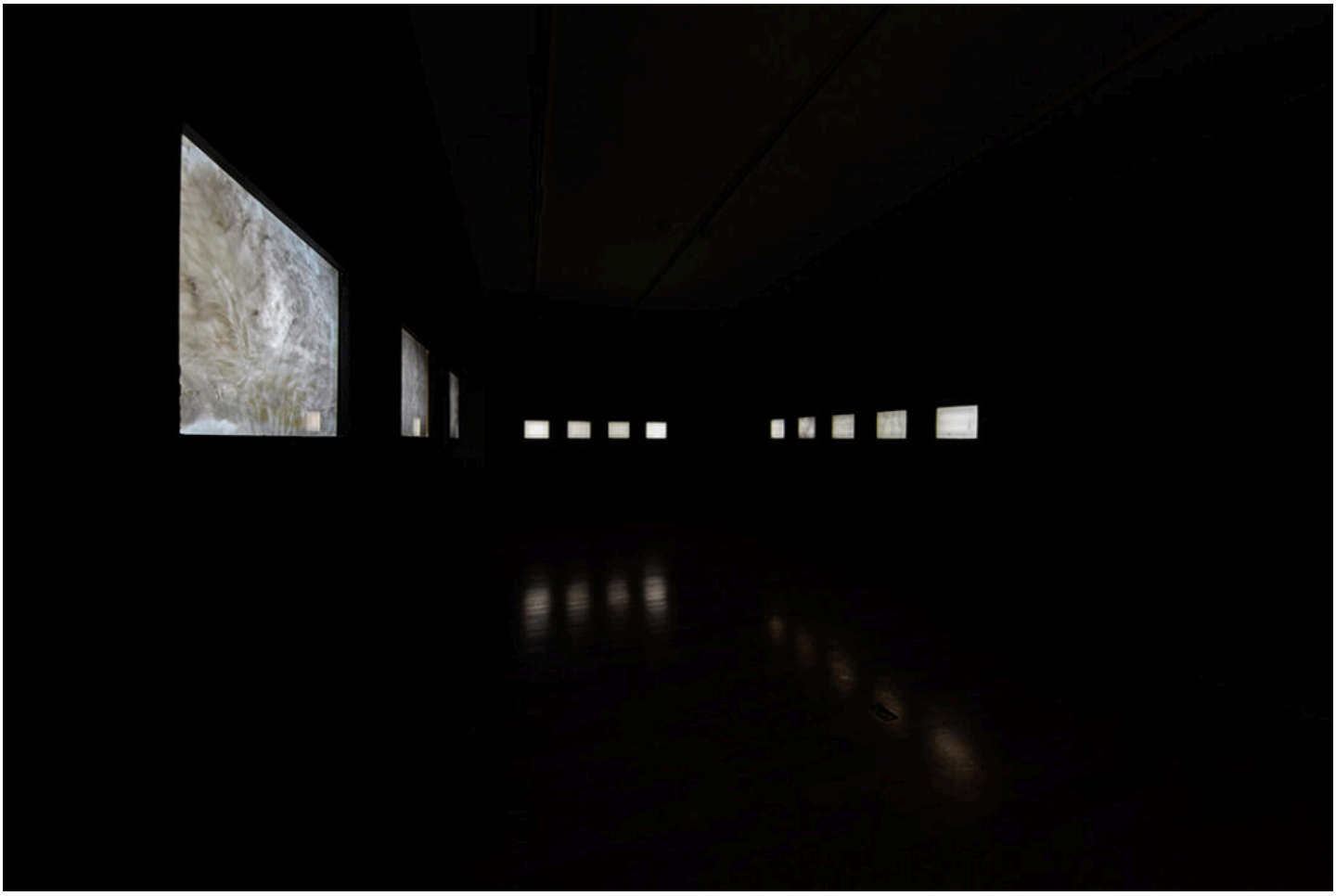
This work has two versions, a negative and a positive one. The positives allow us to see the contamination differently, which is crucial given the project's questions about the nature of vision. Both versions are life-size accounts of the invisible contamination in Chernobyl.

LB

I like that you don't fetishize process for its own sake. You're interested in a particular aesthetic or philosophic question and then adopt or invent photographic methods to address that question.

AM

Yes, it depends on what's at stake in a specific work's problem. It's not that I always want to create my own tools. *Projeto Chernobyl* presented problems that required specialized learning and methods, but *In Depth (Minefields)*, which depicts minefields from within mined areas, used traditional cameras. And my earlier work in Cambodia, *88 from 14,000* (2011), was based on an archive of already produced images: mugshots of people who were killed in the Security Prison 21 in Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge regime.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Alice-Miceli3.jpg)

Installation view of *Alice Miceli: Projeto Chernobyl* at Americas Society. Photo by OnWhiteWall.com.

LB

Can you talk more about your work's stakes? Both *Projeto Chernobyl* and *In Depth* posed risks to your own well-being.

AM

I'm moved by limit situations because they confront you with stimulating questions that you might not have otherwise encountered. There's sometimes a lot of risk, yes, but it's controlled, as in extreme sports. For example, I only go to minefields that are in the process of being demined and whose remaining active explosives have been mapped. Safety precautions are never one hundred-percent certain, but having chosen to put myself in these situations, it's as safe as it can be. Both *Projeto Chernobyl* and *In Depth* deal with landscapes that have been rendered impenetrable by the actions of humans, so the larger question in both works is how to negotiate an access that counters these occupations.

LB

One of your supplemental *Projeto Chernobyl* images is titled *Chernobyl Exclusion Zone Access Map*. The idea of an "access map" for an "exclusion zone" is an interesting paradox.

AM

Yes. This situation is full of contradictions. One of the signs inside the zone reads: "Chernobyl: No entry. No exit."

LB

That's perfect.

AM

The impenetrability in Chernobyl is not only spatial but also visual: you can't see the danger there, whereas landmines are visible.

LB

You can see them in the minefield?

AM

Sometimes yes, sometimes no; it depends on the type of explosive, its placement in the ground, and the topography and vegetation of the mined area. What I mean is that they're not invisible matter. What's impenetrable in a minefield is the depth of space that you can no longer access.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Alice-Miceli4.jpg)

Alice Miceli, *fragment of a field V—9.120 µSv (07.05.09–21.07.09),* backlight, radiographic negative. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler.

LB

Many of *In Depth*'s landscapes contain warning markers and signs, which recall the markers—train station information, radiation warning signs—you include in the supplementary images for *Projeto Chernobyl*.

AM

The visual design of the Chernobyl radiation signage is interesting, at once alarming and pragmatic. I could see a documentary record of them as a project in itself.

LB

You've essentially already done it! Though your supplemental images don't so much document the landscape as document your visit to the landscape and the performance of that visit. The train and train station images—as you progress through Germany, Poland, Belarus—make this clear.

AM

Precisely. It's a diary. Of the work, not of my life.

LB

To me it suggests a dialectic between penetrability and impenetrability, rather than a situation of pure exclusion.

AM

Of course. I entered the site, so there is a strained relation between exclusion and access, of how far one can go, or of how distant one stays. This problematic is the basis of both projects, systematically explored.

LB

What does that unique interior vantage make possible?

AM

It offers a counter alignment from within land that has been taken in the course of territorial war and left filled with explosives for generations to come. It's an act of resistance, even if a symbolic one, and in that is not only a poetic action but also a political one.

LB

How so?

AM

To look at Chernobyl by means of radiation itself; to offer a vantage point from within minefields. We tend to look at disasters as a marked date in the past. But in the case of both Chernobyl and the minefields, the disasters remain literally contemporary: the mines and the radiation stay in the present tense. Radioactive contamination, in particular, presents a further paradox: a problem that stays urgent on a timescale that to humans is effectively eternal.

Alice Miceli: Projeto Chernobyl (https://www.as-coa.org/alice-miceli-projeto-chernobyl) *is on view at the Americas Society in New York City until January 25.*

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive) and Assistant Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He writes regularly about visual art for *Hyperallergic*, and his creative and critical work has been published in *Bookforum*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Boston Review*, and *The Believer.*