

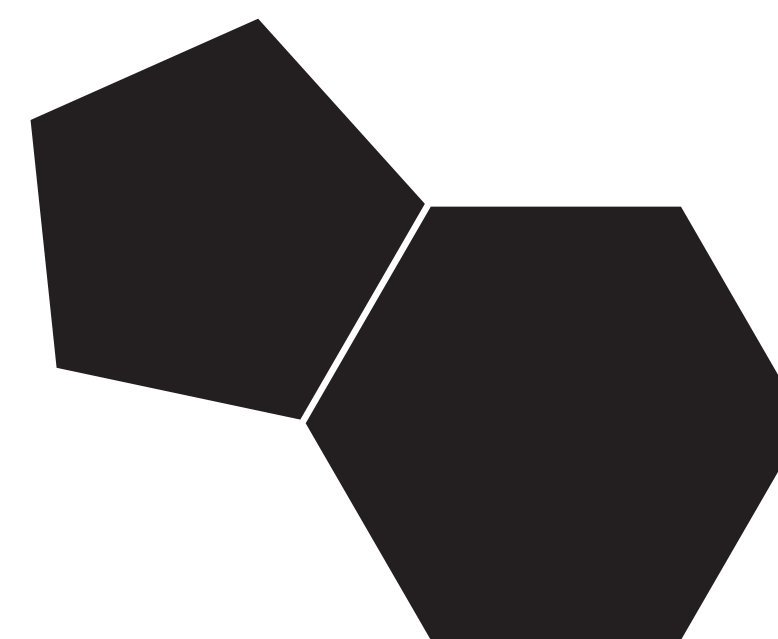
SKULL

SESSIONS

No.
02

The Skull Sessions is an ongoing collaboration between Andrea Galvani and Tim Hyde – a series of conversations recorded and reshaped into experimental publications, objects, images, and installations. Skull Sessions No. 02 is a conversation with Brazilian artist Alice Miceli.

THE SKULL SESSIONS



ANDREA GALVANI was born in Italy and lives and works in New York City. Galvani's work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Whitney Museum, New York, NY; 4th Moscow Biennale for Contemporary Art; the Mediations Biennale, Poznan, Poland; Aperture Foundation, New York, NY; The Calder Foundation, New York, NY; Mart Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Trento, Italy; Macro Museum, Rome, Italy; GAMeC, Bergamo, Italy; De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam; Oslo Plads, Copenhagen, Denmark, among others. In 2011, he received the New York Exposure Prize and was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize. Galvani earned a BFA in Sculpture from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna in 1999, and his MFA in Visual Art from Bilbao University in 2002. He has been a visiting artist at NYU and has completed several artist residencies in New York City, including Location One International Artist Residency Program, the LMCC Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and the MIA Artist Space Program/Columbia University School of the Arts.

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TIM HYDE was born in Boston and lives and works in New York City. His work has been exhibited in institutions internationally, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Ar/ge Kunst Galerie Museum, Bolzano, Italy; the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York; Sculpture Center, Long Island City, New York; the DeYoung Museum and Pier 24 Photography in San Francisco, among others. Hyde studied History at Vassar College, and received his MFA from the Columbia University School of the Arts in 2005. He has been in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, and the MIA Artist Space Program/Columbia University School of the Arts. He received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award in 2007. He has been a visiting artist at Columbia University, American University, and the Rhode Island School of Design, among others.

timhyde.info

ALICE MICELI lives and works between Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, and New York City. Her work has been featured in the Sao Paulo Biennial, Sao Paulo, Brazil; the Sydney Film Festival, Sydney, Australia; and the Mediations Biennial in Poznan, Poland. She has received fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH; and the Djerassi Program, Woodside, CA. Her first solo publication - Chernobyl Project - was published by Several Pursuits, Berlin. Miceli studied film at the Ecole Supérieure d'Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris, and history of art and architecture at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro.

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BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2012

TIM
HYDE

We would like to begin by talking about your Chernobyl Project. You spent five years developing two bodies of photographs that explored the idea of radiation as an idea and as a mechanism for making pictures. Let me summarize quickly for the recording. You made two separate bodies of work that revolve around each other but are never exhibited together at the same time, is that right? The first group is a series of seemingly abstract pictures – they are radiographic abstractions, you could say. From what I understand you buried sheets of film in the radioactive Zone around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine for months at a time, allowing the radiation to slowly expose the images. And the second group of pictures are traditional 35mm photographs you shot with a camera that you carried with you as you worked at the location. This second group of images made me think of the cinematography of post-apocalyptic movies like *The Road*, or the most iconic film of that genre – Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*.

ANDREA
GALVANI

Both of us thought it was really interesting that you used two methods of documentation running in parallel, simultaneous but independent from each other. Can you explain your two-part response to the site? Did the idea of a radioactive landscape shape the project before you had actually seen it? Or did the experience of the place itself push you to use photography in a certain way?

ALICE
MICELI

Ever since my university days I have been interested in the way images and sound work together in films. In 2006 I read a story in a magazine in which a scientist mentions how quiet it is in the Exclusion Zone in Chernobyl, and I realized that the Zone could be a powerful place to explore the idea of silence. I looked at hundreds of photo-journalistic images of the site and I realized they were all incomplete somehow, they were just photographs of ruins. They are deceitful in the way they leave out the central narrative of the story. They just show a place in decay, but it could be any place in decay. The photographs say nothing about the fact that the landscape has been changed forever at the atomic level. This interested me as a challenge and a question.



Alice Miceli
Woods, snowy afternoon
Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Belarus, 2009
Photograph, 35mm black and white

The way we formulate questions about nature very much shapes the answer that we get. So how do we engage this invisibility directly? What kind of tools would I have to bring, or make, to make this energy visible? Because it is interesting that radiation has shape. It has physicality. It operates at a specific frequency that can be recorded, if we could place ourselves in a position to see it.

TIM Can you help me understand what you mean by silence? Is it acoustical silence or a kind of relative silence? Maybe we think of ruins as silent because we're unconsciously listening for the sound of people?

ALICE Silence was more of an entry point to the idea, and it led me to choose Chernobyl as a place to investigate. It is not absolute silence, of course, but as you say, it is relative. It is like the negative space in a drawing, the white untouched paper that activates the drawing. The Exclusion Zone is abandoned, a space empty of people, but thinking about it, I realized it was not empty but actually full of this invisible energy. I started thinking about radiation as the negative space in the countryside surrounding Chernobyl, because even though it is invisible, it is pervasive, it defines that entire site. I believe that traditional photographs of Chernobyl leave out the most critical part of the story, because radiation cannot be photographed with daylight-balanced film. So my ambition was to find a way to make a landscape image that uses this energy instead of ignoring it.

ANDREA How did you begin the research?

ALICE I received a project grant and began making test exposures at the Institute of Radiological Sciences (Instituto de Radio-Proteção e Dosimetria) in Rio de Janeiro. The Institute has a workshop where they build tools to conduct experiments to measure radioactivity. They actually have radioactive sources in their labs, and they were willing to give me access to them. The radioactive element most present in the Chernobyl evacuation zone is Cesium 137, which happens to be widely known in Brazil because there was a nuclear accident there in the 1980s. Cesium 137 creates a specific frequency that I learned how to record on film.

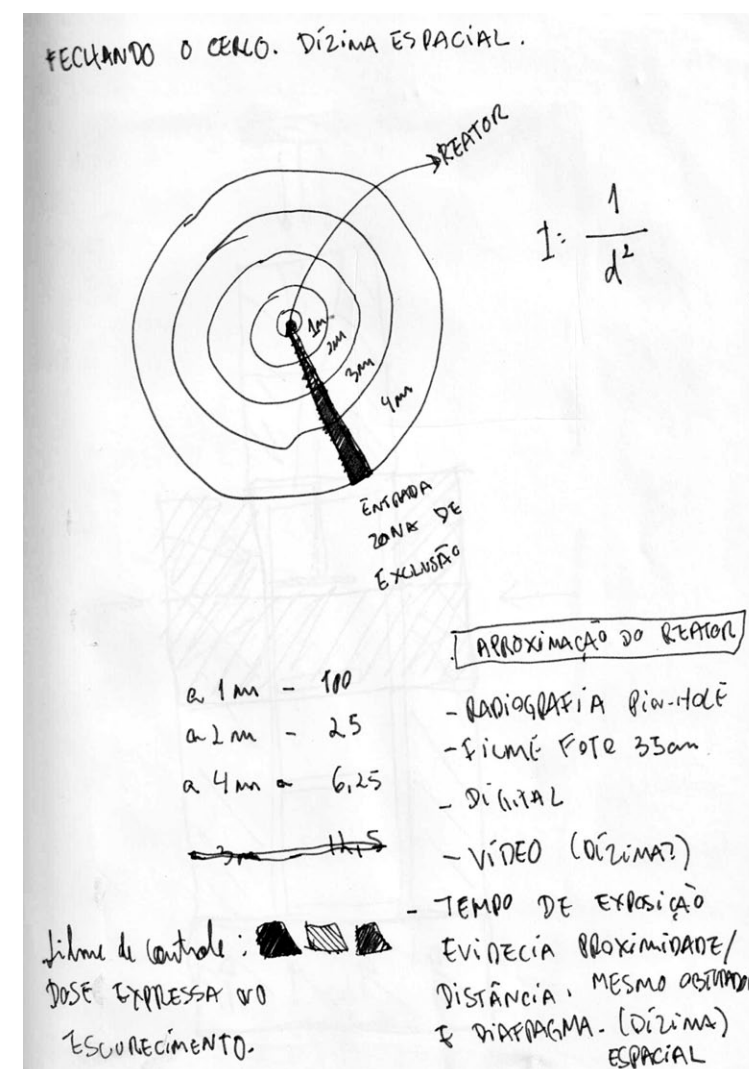
TIM Why did you have to invent your own methods for exposing film by radiation? Radiographic film is used all the time in hospitals to make x-rays. And engineers use radiographic film to test the structural stability of bridges.

ALICE Yes, but the radiation at Chernobyl is embedded in the ground and resting on surfaces. There is no film designed to record it. So in the lab I was trying to find ways to ask a question that could be answered visually with the specific type of radiation that exists on the site. I built models—miniature landscapes—contaminated them with radiation, and started conducting tests. I wrapped film in layers of industrial plastic and buried or placed it in radioactive soil. I also made some small pin-hole cameras out of lead.

ANDREA It is like you were making drawings in the dark.



Alice Miceli
Dosimeters
Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Belarus, 2009
Photograph, 35mm black and white



Alice Miceli
Work Journal for the Chernobyl Project
2009–2010
Journal

ALICE Yes, that's right. I was working with a small team of scientists, and we had no consistent results for months. Just messy and barely visible imprints on the negatives that didn't seem to obey any underlying pattern. So we kept changing the variables until the film started to record images more consistently. After almost a year of tests, I finally established a basic parameter for exposure. It was incredible to see these life size images of radiation emerging from the black.

ANDREA By "life size", you mean that the image on the film is precisely the size of the radiographic signal, right? It's not a magnification. So you must have been using large sheets of film.

ALICE Yes, each sheet of film is 11×15 inches. The level of detail is extremely high.

ANDREA So you were thinking about this site and working on this project for almost a year before you saw it. What happened when you saw the site for yourself? Did the experience of being there in person change your idea of the project? How close was the mental image you had in your head to the physical experience of the place?

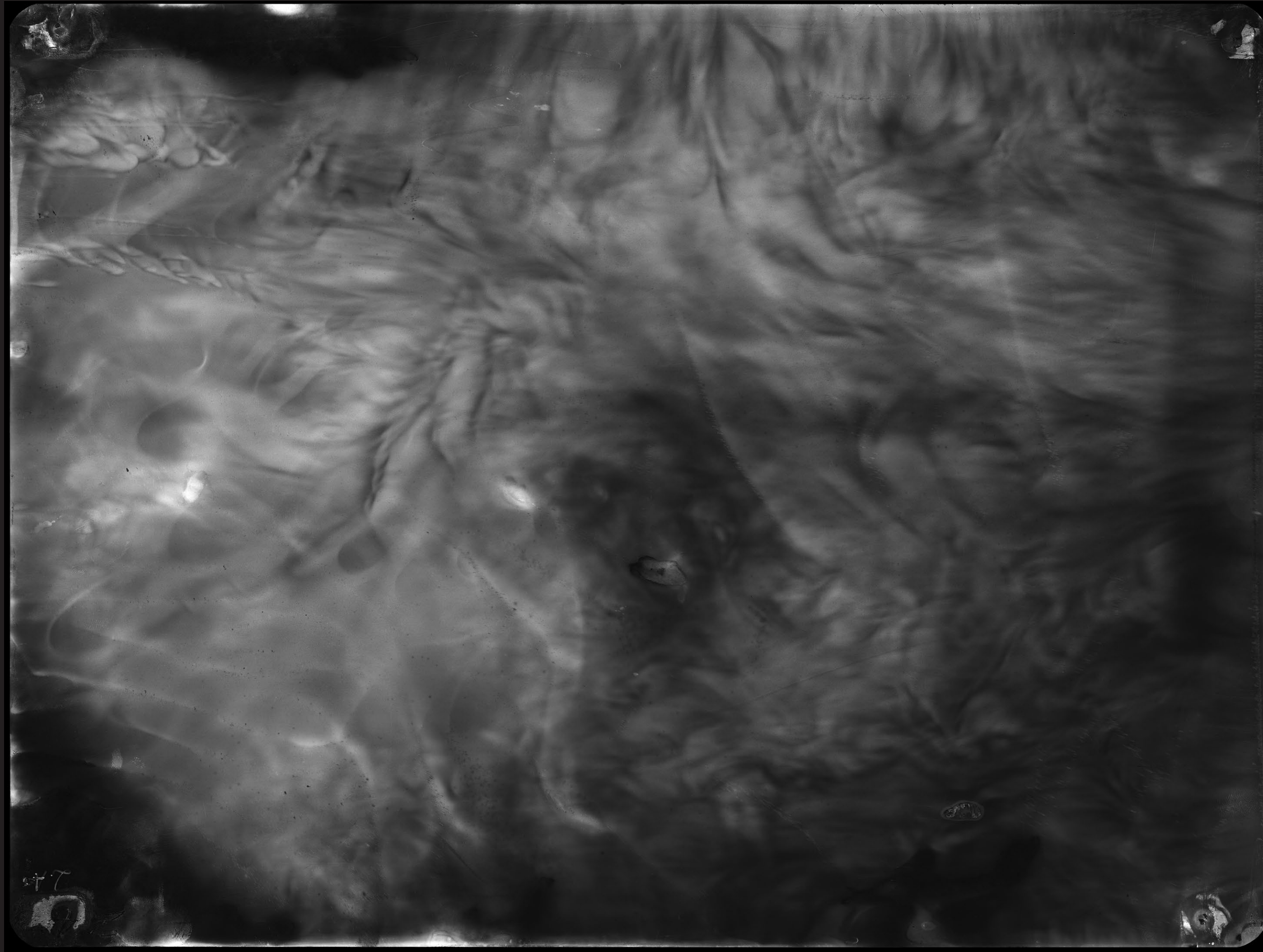
ALICE I looked at many photos online, but you know how journalistic pictures can generalize and flatten things. I didn't know what the place would feel like, and I didn't have any idea what kind of images I would be able to make. Images exposed by this band of the spectrum don't obey the shapes of things as we know them when reflected by light. How would I know what I was seeing?

TIM I visualize the difference between sunlight and gamma radiation as the difference between a club and a knife. Sunlight is a club in that it is made of longer wavelengths, it is a blunt form of energy that bounces against the surface of objects, which is why photographs describe surfaces. Radiation is a knife in that it is made from small wavelengths that allow it to penetrate surfaces and pass right through.

ALICE That's right. And small wavelengths can show us images from the inside of our bodies, and any other material like vegetation, wood, rock, dirt or glass.

ANDREA So you were still in Brazil, and you had just learned how to record images from embedded radiation. So what happened when you arrived at the location in Europe? How did you start working?

ALICE I went through a long process to get permits and get help from scientists from South America and Europe who knew the site. Once I arrived I began looking for the most contaminated spots, because the emission was strongest and the image was exposed more clearly. I am accustomed to carrying a light meter with me when I take photographs, so it felt quite natural to carry a dosimeter, which measures the levels of radiation embedded into objects. So I spent days walking around the zone and mapping out areas with signals strong enough to make an exposure, but not so strong that it would be dangerous for me to be there for a few weeks. So the result was a map that showed me the places to put my film.



Alice Miceli
Fragment of a field III. 9,120 μ Sv
07.05.09-21.07.09
Radiographic negative
11 x 15 in.

ANDREA How did you install the film? How did you protect it? What did you put it in?

ALICE We wrapped the film in black plastic, and hid it in groves of trees, under logs. We also buried some of it underground. It turned out that each good image needed to be exposed for at least two months. Some were there for almost 8 months. We marked the trees and made detailed notes of landmarks to make sure we could find the film again.

TIM Did you keep those maps?

ALICE I have a few pages of notes in this journal.

TIM So the patterns you recorded in Chernobyl that appear to be abstract are actually a language that is possible to learn how to read. You know that you are looking at images made from energy passing through the ground, so the image becomes landscape seen from the inside.

ANDREA Do you think it is possible to learn how to read them? There are so many variables like humidity, time, physical contact with the ground. The images contain more information than is possible to anticipate, and I think that is interesting. I personally like the feeling of being deflected by these images, of not being able to predict what appears on the negative. You know, I am fascinated by this idea of burying film in the landscape. I like to imagine it there for months while the seasons change, snow covers it, then plants grow around it. When I was about ten years old I would dig holes in a field near my parents' house to bury small objects and notes to myself. I left them there over the winter, imagining that they were buried treasure. I liked the sense of risk that I might lose them forever if I didn't draw maps correctly. But at the same time I think I was most curious about the boxes I was never able to find, because then someone else could find them in the future. Thinking about it now, it seems that photographic film itself is like a little box. A dark box in which images can be pulled into visibility days or years later in the development of the negative. What is so different about the radiographic images is that there's no camera, the images are being exposed by the energy that surrounds them. So they are three-dimensional recordings, they are sculptural.

ALICE That's a beautiful idea.

TIM So Alice, it is interesting to think that while you were burying this film in the ground you were also making another separate body of work—the 35mm landscape pictures you made with your camera. I know that the radiation exposures are the conceptual heart of the project, and the more traditional photographs are in orbit around them. I think that the 35mm pictures are important as visual and emotional counterweights to the radiographic prints. They carry us into this landscape with you, and they help us understand how you reacted to this place. The word “Chernobyl” is synonymous with disaster. Your project never addresses this directly, but it seems to absorb and respect

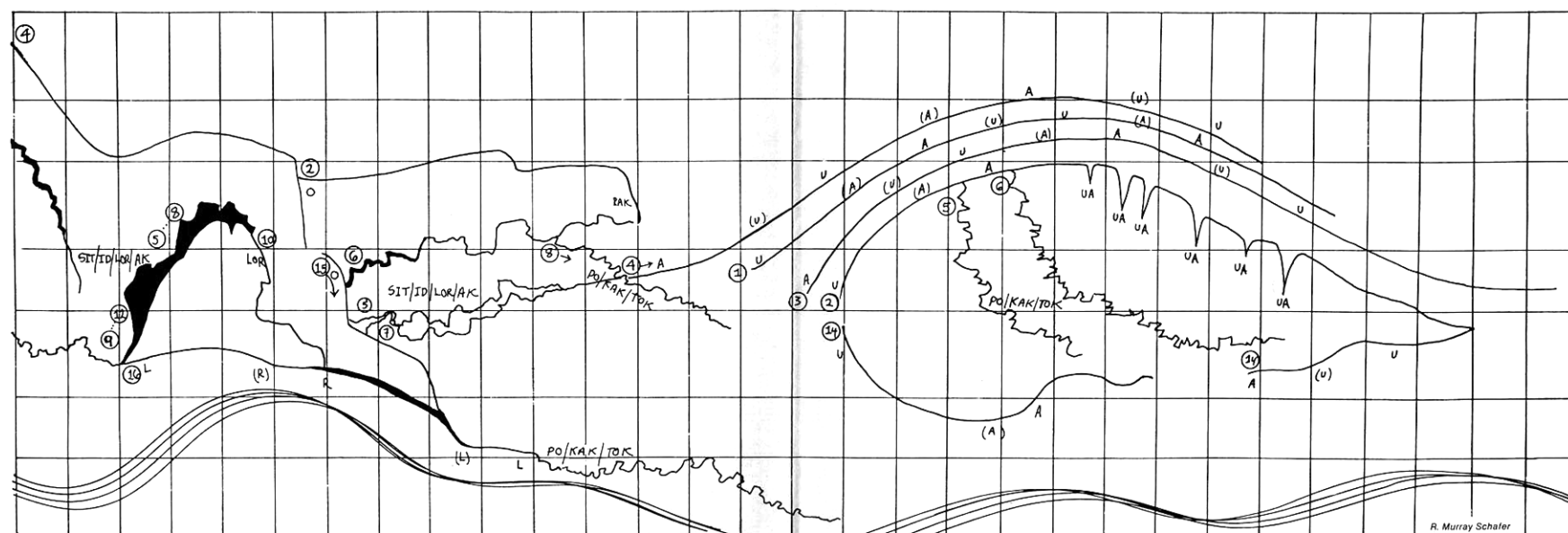


Alice Miceli
Hotspot
Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Belarus, 2008
Photograph, 35mm black and white

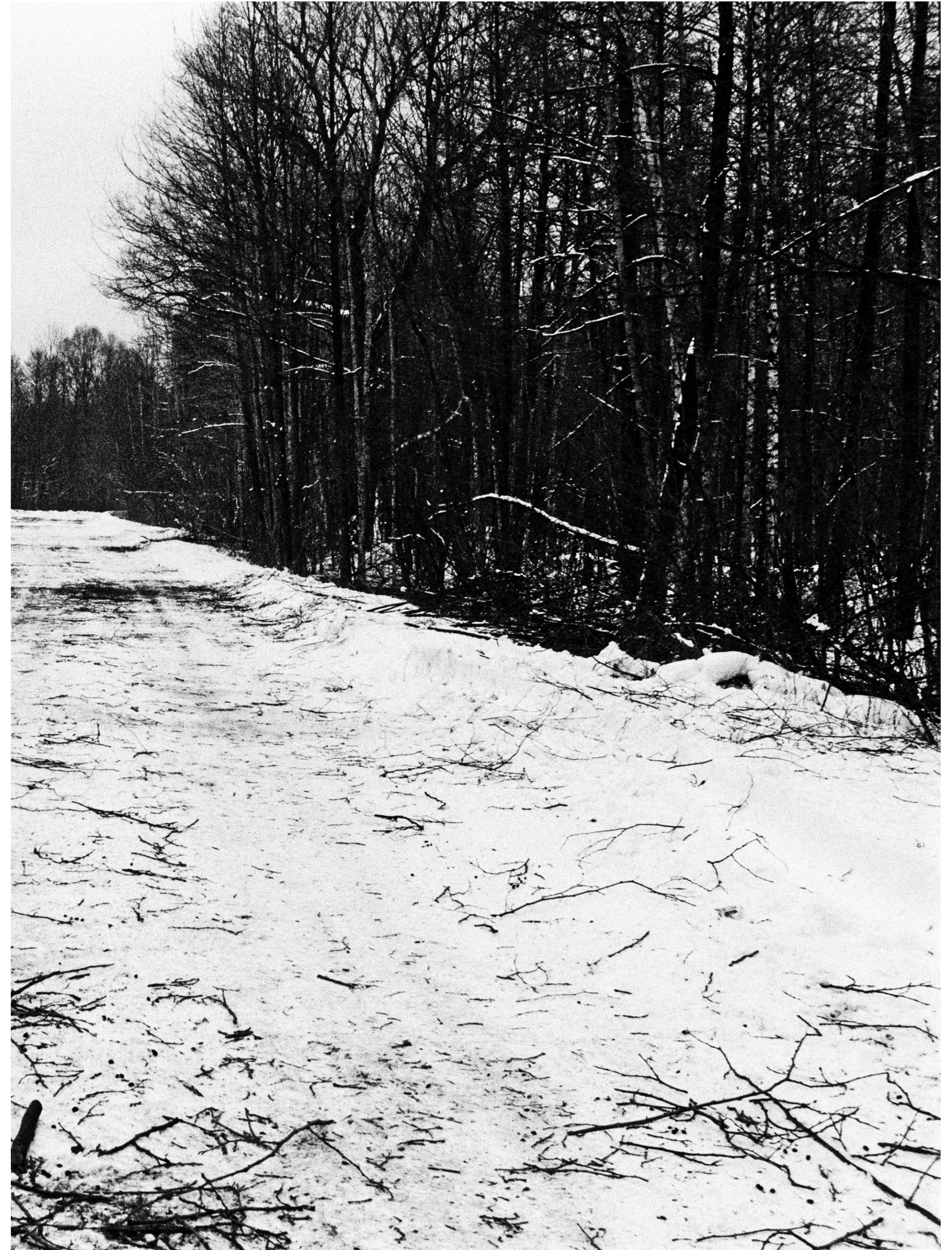
what happened there. Perhaps this is partly because you committed five years of your life to this project. But I think another reason is that you didn't try to force a resolution between these two parallel bodies of work. The Zone is a problem that won't be solved for the next nine hundred years, and many generations of lives have been interrupted. It's as if your project fragmented on impact with the site. It's a response that's consistent with something that can't be neatly contained or resolved.

ALICE You know, at first I didn't think of these photographs as a project. I just thought of them as notes or sketches to help to remind myself where I placed the film. But as we have been discussing, energy is present in two forms at Chernobyl, the energy of the sun, and gamma radiation. So once I had established the system of making radiographic exposures, it made sense to also make photographic exposures. Of course, once I got the pictures back from the lab, I started to get excited by them. I became obsessed with the signs posted at all the official checkpoints you pass through as you move deeper into the Zone. By paying attention to the signs, I became aware of the intrinsic sense of limits at the site. All of the boundaries, borders, lines. It is called the Exclusion Zone, so by definition it is a place that excludes everybody else. Every sign we saw was telling us to go back. The signs accounted for this invisible force that I was trying to learn how to see. Each checkpoint had increasingly scary signs, telling us that the area was officially closed and dangerous, telling us to turn around immediately, so it felt strange to keep moving forward. It felt like going backwards. I began to think of the graphic design of the signs as another visualization of an attempt to address this invisible energy.

ANDREA What is this drawing? Is this one of the maps you made on location?



Raymond Murray Schafer
Snowforms
1981
Graphic score



ALICE No, actually, it's in my journal, but it is part of a project I've just started to develop. It is a photocopy of a drawing made by a Canadian composer, Raymond Schafer. I taped it into my notebook so I could carry it with me. I read that Schafer made the drawing while watching a snowstorm out his window where he lived in Canada. Then he turned the drawing into a musical score. I was so curious about it, because you see he made something visual into the structure of something musical. It's a beautiful idea, no?

ANDREA I love it. It is a graphic that contains mathematical information and emotional information at the same time.

ALICE What I see in the drawing is a belief in the translation of ideas between mediums. This is the territory I work in as well. But my automatic response to being excited by a snowstorm would be to ask how does snow work? By which scientific principles? What are the atmospheric criteria that have to be met for snow to be possible? I would have wanted each stage in the process to lead coherently to the next stage. I'm more... uptight maybe. That's why I need to remind myself to interrupt the chain of logic. That's what Schafer's drawing does for me. It reminds me that all kinds of noises and accidents can create unexpected meaning.

TIM Then the drawing is important to you because it reminds you to be free?

ALICE Yes, exactly! It's like in the common proverb, "if all you have is a hammer, you treat everything as a nail." Whenever you pick up a device for recording images, you know that thousands of people have worked together to make this object. There are many layers of convention already built into this shape. I grew up wanting to be a film director. Cinema was my whole life for a while. I went to a local cinema in Rio several times a week, and I got my first camera at age twelve. When I was fourteen I saw an Ingmar Bergman film for the first time—it was *The Seventh Seal*—and with a sudden shock I realized that it was possible to combine images and sound in so many different ways. It was the first time I realized that I could make up my own rules. I never saw films the same way after that. The classic narrative convention in filmmaking is beautiful, but it is just one form, and there are infinite forms that can be used to explore the world with a camera.





Alice Miceli
Belarusian-Ukrainian border, view from observation tower
Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Belarus, 2009
Photograph, 35mm black and white



THE S SESSIONS

