

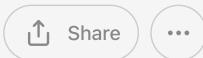
INTERVIEWS & ARTICLES (FILM, PHOTO, ART, BOOKS AND THE WEIRD LANDSCAPES)

# EXCLUDED LANDSCAPES: MINEFIELDS IN POST-CONFLICT ZONES

This conversation was originally published in Portuguese at ZUM Magazine (Instituto Moreira Salles Photo Magazine) in 2019.



ALICE MICELI  
MAY 29, 2023



The exhibition *In Depth (minefields)* by Rio de Janeiro artist Alice Miceli presents for the first time the complete series of photographs from her project, taken in minefields in Cambodia, Angola, Bosnia and Colombia, countries that have recently suffered from wars and armed conflicts and still contain mine-infested areas. According to Miceli, it is "an interesting challenge to think about the means of photography to look precisely at what cannot be seen, how our vision is given, how it is made and how it is mediated.

An important part of Miceli's work, photographing "what can't be seen," was once the theme of *Projeto Chernobyl*, her previous body of work, in which she traveled to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Belarus/Ukraine to document the invisible contamination caused by gamma radiation. "In the case of my work across the minefields, and even before that in Chernobyl, I encountered problems about the limits of representation, how to try to look at what cannot be seen and does not reveal itself. How to look at it, and through what?" asks Miceli.

In this interview, Alice Miceli describes the methodology, concepts and challenges of a project that led her into risky situations in the middle of a minefield.

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Selection from the Cambodian Series

***How did the idea for In Depth (minefields) come about? And why did you choose these four countries to photograph?***

**Alice Miceli:** I was on an artist residency when I had the idea of crossing minefields as a project. Having just completed my work in Chernobyl, I was reflecting on the issues raised by that experience. I was particularly intrigued by the challenges of capturing and representing landscapes in images, especially those altered by human intervention. This curiosity led me to explore the potential of photography to reveal the unseen, and to think about how we perceive things, how our vision is created, and how it's communicated.

The four countries in the project were selected based on the severity of contamination from landmines and other explosives left over from wars and conflicts that continue to plague their territories. The first series of images depicts a minefield in the Battambang province, in Cambodia. This sequence consists of eleven consecutive photographs that progressively walk across the minefield, in eleven steps. For this phase, I worked with the Cambodian Mine

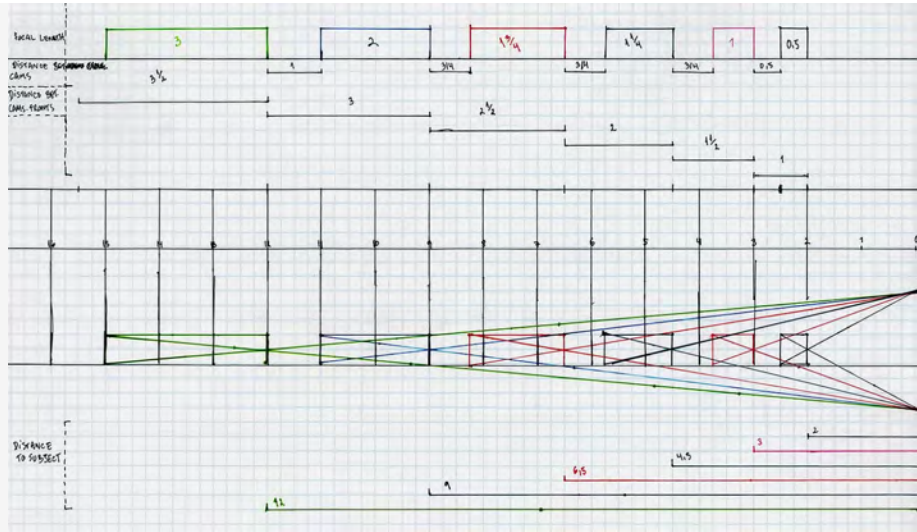
Action Center and the Victim Assistance Authority, the Cambodian government agency responsible for the national mine action program.

The second series explores the issue of landmine contamination in Colombia, where the affected areas around Medellín in Antioquia were once FARC strongholds. As a defense mechanism against the army, the guerrilla group planted landmines in several regions, resulting in numerous casualties. This series of seven images travels through a mined area in the jungle. I worked with the HALO Trust demining program in Colombia.

The third series explores mined areas in highly affected regions of Europe, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, where armed conflict during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s caused severe mine contamination. This series was shot in nine stages/images in the municipality of Obudovac, Samac, in cooperation with the NGO Norwegian People's Aid, Humanitarian Disarmament Campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the final phase, I set out to address the critical issue of landmine contamination in Angola. This country continues to bear the brunt of the use and scattering of mines throughout its territory by numerous factions, having suffered the effects of more than four decades of conflict and civil unrest. The unfortunate consequences have made Angola one of the most mined countries in the world. During this phase, we again worked closely with the NGO Norwegian People's Aid through their Humanitarian Disarmament Campaign in Angola.





This is a draft diagram for achieving the Vertigo Effect, which relies on adjusting the focal length and vantage point while maintaining a consistent magnification size of the subject on the camera's sensor or film strip. It demonstrates how multiple sequential vantage points aligned on the same axis, combined with different focal lengths, work together to create this desired effect in the resulting image.

***The artistic approach of your work refers us to elements of land art and performance, and brings these practices to photography in an original way. There is also a rigor in conceptualizing the project, in the definition of a methodology for recording images. How does this happen in your creative process?***

**AM:** Human vision is a complex construct that combines physical, physiological, neurological, and cultural elements. Yet this process becomes even more complex when a human-made tool intervenes in the creation of an image. The tool itself already possesses someone's intention, attention, and assumption of how it should be used, so it is already moving in a predetermined direction and predicting a certain type of image. So such images already carry a history of layers in the way they were conceived.

When I was working in the minefields, and even before that in Chernobyl, I encountered problems regarding the limits of representation, how to try to look at what cannot be seen, at what does not reveal itself visually. How to look and

through what? In Chernobyl, due to the fact that conventional photographic cameras could not see much in this particular environment, precisely because it is one dominated in an ubiquitous way by a seemingly eternal "nothing" (the invisible contamination caused by gamma radiation), my point became to consider whether it would be possible to somehow touch this "nothing", this "invisibility", and get closer to what it is. It became clear to me that in such a case it would be necessary for me to create my own tools from scratch in order to reveal this visual impenetrability.

After Chernobyl, I wanted to continue with this problem. I began to wonder what other kinds of impenetrability existed with us, on our planet. Looking at minefields was the next logical step in these questions, considering another situation that offered an interesting variation of the problem. In this case of fields occupied by landmines and other explosive remnants of war, impenetrability shifts from the problem of vision itself, as it was in Chernobyl, to the depths of space inside a minefield, which brings with it a whole new set of questions.

I could have considered staying outside each minefield, at the entrance to the mined area, and pausing there to capture an image that extends beyond the horizon - a depth that I would have contemplated, but not reached. This is related to the tragic story of Robert Capa, the renowned war photographer who died stepping on a landmine in old Indochina. He captured an image that stretched to a horizon he never reached. His interrupted work inspired me to pick up where he left off.

So this is the performative aspect of the work, where my body, in the out-of-frame, not only looks at an impenetrable depth from the outside, but also enters and moves through it, producing images from within, and articulating in these crossings how this penetration takes place both in the physical space and in the visual outcome of the image.

The methodology for this was originally developed from a draft diagram that functions like a musical score. Of several drawings and sketches from the beginning of this work that I made during the aforementioned artist residency, this was the first that made sense in terms of helping me understand how to



activate the intertwining of positioning, focal length, point of view, and magnification of an object as it is projected onto the back of a camera.

The focal length of a lens determines its angle of view and thus how much of the object in the image is magnified from a given position. In the diagram, different focal lengths are represented in successive points of view on the same axis in order to keep the object in the center of the image at a constant magnification size, precisely to activate the question of positioning, perspective, and the issue of the photographer's body outside the frame, in the moment and place where a picture is taken.



Selection from the Angolan Series



*Your previous project, Chernobyl, was also about recording a landscape where the invisible is the threat that remains after the tragedy. Do you see other connections between Chernobyl and the project on the minefields?*

**AM:** Yes. Unlike remote and obscure natural landscapes, both Chernobyl and the remaining minefields around the world are not only the result of traumatic facts of the past, but also spaces that remain in the present tense, that remain urgent, and that continue to occupy and negatively impact parts of our world ad infinitum.



Selection from the Bosnian Series



*Is there a difference between the four countries you chose to photograph? Did the different landscapes change the photographic outcome of the project?*

**AM:** Yes. It's like different landscapes have different timbres. I think a lot in musical terms, because this work deals specifically with interval problems. For example, first there is an equal and regular division of space, given by the diagram, as if it were the regular temporal division of a score into bars. These spaces are then activated, perceived and experienced through the possible path in each minefield, which depends on the topography and the specific contamination of the area crossed. In theoretical geometric terms, there would be an infinite number of viewpoints aligned on the same axis between any two given points in space. In fact, as I cross each minefield, the pattern of landmine contamination updates this infinite virtuality and reduces it to a limited number of points of view, creating a tension between the egalitarian division of space given by the diagram and the way my body is forced by the irregular patterns of contamination to cross each of these spaces.

This is why the work exists as a series of photographs, not as individual images that can be presented separately, and also why some series have more photographs than others, depending on how far I could get into the depths of each minefield before having to turn to safer terrain or retrace my steps. In this way, what I had to avoid and dodge, where it was impossible to tread, where it was impossible to photograph, that is, the space between each image, is as important a part of the work as what is captured in them.





Selection from the Colombian Series

*Do you already have a new project in mind? Does your interest in registering "invisible landscapes" continue?*

**AM:** I continue to be interested in places that, even in our globalized time, seem to remain off the map. Places that remain in the sense that they continue to exist in the present, even if they have been forgotten. Let's see what the next destination will be.

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*Alice Miceli (1980) lives and works in Rio de Janeiro. From 1998 to 2002, she studied cinema at the School of Cinematographic Studies in Paris, and in 2005 she graduated in History of Art and Architecture at PUC RJ. She has participated in the 29th São Paulo Biennial (2010); the exhibition *The Materiality of the Invisible*, in Maastricht (2017); *Basta!* at Shiva Gallery in New York (2016); and the Cisneros Fontanals Grants & Comissions Award in Miami (2015), among others.*

Source: [Revista Zum](#) / For views of the installed work, check: [install-views](#)

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