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## 027 / Alice Miceli

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Essay Giselle Beiguelman, 03/2007



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## Unportrayable Light-years

*The end in the beginning**The word chopped**in the first syllable.**The consonant, gone**before the tongue reached the cavity.**That which would never be forgotten**because it did not even begin to be remembered.**The field—was there a field?**helplessly withered in shadow**before one imagines the figure**of a field.**Life is less than brief.*

Carlos Drummond de Andrade

What fascinates me the most in Alice's work is her ability to face the ephemeral, refusing the logic of the instantaneous. Always investing in the image of that which cannot be portrayed, she seems to position her cameras like an astronomer, and not as a documentary filmmaker, witness, or narrator.

Astronomers are scientists who defy our earthly measurements, based in references that are anthropocentric to a greater or lesser extent, such as feet and inches, which clearly have the human body as their parameter, or the meter, based in the dimensions of the Earth.

Their distance unit is the light-year, the distance that light travels in one year on empty space, at the speed of three hundred thousand kilometers per second. The farther an object is, the more light-years are travelled, because the distance that its light travels is greater. This generates a disconcerting phenomenon that was described with rare simplicity and poetry by physicist Marcelo Gleiser: "To look at the cosmos is to travel to the past."

After all, the light that we see corresponds to the object as it used to be in the past, and not as it is in the present. Just to have a notion of the scales of displacement involved in this relation, it is enough to remember that the light of the Andromeda galaxy, the neighbor of Earth, left there two million years ago, or at roughly the time when the human species was formed.

In such spatial scales of displacement, an instant does not seem to make any sense. Here, it does not matter which is assumed as "real time," and which intoxicates the media discourse so much, the virtuality of the intersection of the here and now with the there and then. What matters is to be aware that the present, in many dimensions, is only the past, and that what one sees as real is nothing but cosmic dust. And it is here

that Alice forces us to rethink the current strategies for dealing with history and memory, assaulting us, without terror, with traces of human action, in politics and science, that are at times morbid, at others, imponderable, often tragic.

Without making a display, for example, she invites us to contemplate the weight of pain felt by victims of political prisons in Cambodia with her *88 de 14.000*, made in 2004. The project, one of the highlights at the transmediale.05, features pictures of eighty-eight out of the fourteen thousand killed in a Khmer Rouge prison, in the 1970s.

The hours or days that passed from the time of entering prison, when the picture was taken, until execution are represented by the period of time during which images are projected onto a wall of sand. In this suspended time, we are converted from spectators into accomplices of a gut-wrenching silence that seems enmeshed in the ethereal walls of the projection. It is a nearly suffocating silence, because it is incapable of retaining the phantasmagoric images that are projected in the interval between the last picture in life/first instant of death for each of these eighty-eight faces in a crowd of fourteen thousand people.

This elasticity of time, this enigma of interval, of the inefficacy of human measures against the duration of life, including that which separates life from death, is the element that, it seems to me, places Alice's projects in a single, dense line of research.

In *14 horas, 54 minutos, 59,9...segundos* (2006) she proposes a very short long video, which lasts forty seconds, and in which she extends the last moment of photographer Robert Capa, founder of the Magnum agency, manipulating the last photograph taken by one of the greatest artist-documentary makers of all time.

Alice reminds us that in Vietnam, at fourteen hours and fifty-five minutes of May 25, 1954, photographer Robert Capa stepped on a mine and died, while covering the Indochina War. Nevertheless, the last picture he took, moments before his death, remained in his camera. It shows his travel companions, the soldiers, crossing the field that extends into a horizon that Capa contemplated and captured in his photograph, but which he never crossed.

In the few seconds of the video, Alice stretches this last second and makes us wonder: what is the duration of the time interval between the click of Capa's last picture and death? Is it possible to measure the time of pain, of the unstoppable, and imponderable aspects of history? Would it be possible to imagine the unportrayable character of memory?

Those are questionings that the "limit-images" by Alice suggest in a style that, at times, hints at a certain skepticism similar to that of Drummond (TN: Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade).

Watching Alice's videos, it is difficult not to hear the verses of the poet who taught us that memory is resistance to what is tangible and the senses of demise. Something that is present with both delicacy and power in the video *Little White House* (2005), which portrays the trip from the Chelmno-nad-Nerem concentration camp, in Poland, to the nearest village, alongside two survivors of Nazi violence. The path is short, but not the pain and the imponderable aspect of the time that is lodged in that space.

And *Little White House* works with this paradox, stretching the trip into a fictional time of forty minutes, as if seeking not the measure of pain, but once again a limit-image that will allow itself to be cut through by the unportrayable aspects of memory and history.

Not only does this unportrayable defy the logic of the instantaneous, but also that of the presumed current technical ability to provide a visible shape to our own genetic code.

In an extreme situation, such as that of monozygotic twins, which have the same DNA, what does the mapping of their genetic code portray? By making herself a target for her own cameras, Alice begins with this question to force us once again to think about the interval and the unportrayable.

In *Interim/auto-retrato*, for twenty minutes she shows her face turning into that of her identical twin sister. The transformation is so slow that the image appears to be still.

Alice said:

“Me and her, we are so alike, one has the impression that little or no change takes place. Nevertheless, between the initial and final points, the images run the gamut of all the minimal degrees of difference between us two. These images are neither me, nor her, but rather one and other, that which we have not been. Based on the two only real actualizations of a same genetic heritage—me, the first one to be born, and my sister, who was born twenty minutes later—a series of potential phenotypes was created. This series fulfills the interval between the two of us. In this interim, what takes place is a virtual sequence of unrealized possibilities. They are everything that I have not been until there was her, and everything that she has not been until there was me.”

When projected in a sequence, within intervals that have no scale of parameter in human measures, these nonhappenings announce what is to come in Alice’s award-winning project of invisible images of Chernobyl.

In this new enterprise, she seeks to produce a series of radiographic images of the exclusion zone through the very radiation that haunts the place, using a pinhole lead camera specially built for her project.

Working only with the radiation present in the exclusion zone, Alice’s proposal is to provide a body to the immeasurable aspect of destruction. In the emptiness that will be imprinted, we might be able to glimpse the invisible light-years within each fleeting moment “unportrayed” by her astronomical lenses.

*Giselle Beiguelman is a web artist, graduate professor of communication and semiotics at PUC-SP, and coeditor of electronic magazine Trópico. Her projects have been presented in exhibitions such as the 25th Bienal de São Paulo, Arte/Cidade, Net\_Condition and Algorithmic Revolution (ZKM, Germany). She is the author of the book Link-se(arte/mídia/política/cibercultura), among others.*



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Vila Leopoldina - São Paulo - SP BR  
05311 020

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**Interview** Paula Alzugaray, 03/2007



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**In your ongoing *Chernobyl Project*, by creating a previously unheard of technology to capture radioactivity-generated images in the exclusion zone in Ukraine, you remind me of the inventors of the technological foundations that spawned the beginnings of cinema, in the late 19th century. The invention of a device designed to capture moving images, in their case, was due to technical-scientific motivations. What type of motivation—artistic, political, or scientific—led you to invent an object that is sensitive to radioactivity?**

I became interested in Chernobyl because I was impressed with that place, haunted by an evil that is everywhere, yet invisible. I thought it would be interesting to go there and produce images, but then I started to ask myself: what type of specific image could I produce? I was not interested in a traditional mode of documentation, with images illustrating a text, but rather I wanted to deal with the very making of the image. I thought about what would happen if the history and the context of that place were represented in the process of image formation. I had never drawn a direct comparison with the beginnings of cinema. This is an interesting thought because, for one of the branches of the project, I am precisely thinking of building a magic lantern. Narrative cinema as we know it today is just a way of creating meaning in the form of images. If we look at the early history of moving images, there are eight thousand different ways of operating these vision machines, and eight thousand different ways of providing images with meaning. So, I love to make stuff up and play the mad scientist, but my motivation is obviously not just technical.

**Had this penchant for invention of yours ever manifested itself before?**

I had never invented a device for creating images, but I did invent a way of making images seen in a specific manner. In the project for Cambodia (*88 de 14.000*), I built a machine that would drop sand, and then I projected the images onto a curtain of sand. The machine worked for two days only, while I was shooting, and then it broke down. It was all very precarious. But the conceptual stances of the two projects (Cambodia and Chernobyl) are very similar in my quest to create a specific image of a place, seeking to expose its particularity. The work in Cambodia is fully documental, because the images are documental: the prisoners of the Khmer Rouge. My question was, how to make those images seen in a specific way, disclosing the context in which they were produced? With Chernobyl, I was interested in the fact that the place was empty, yet filled with something invisible. Then it dawned on me that the key issue was precisely that of visibility. In the beginning I was thinking about physical visibility, because of this energy that is everywhere, yet cannot be seen, but it touches upon other layers of social and political visibility.

**Can a photograph of the invisible be considered a documental photograph?**

believe that in some way it is documental. I am the first and probably the only artist at the Institute of Radioprotection and Dosimetry (locally IRD), among physicists, engineers. In the beginning, they thought my experiments were funny, but many of them are now interested in reproducing my experiment in a scientific, thoroughly organized fashion. I do what I do to get a visual result, whereas they interpret it as a document.

**This seems to me as a quite complex documentation project, because it focuses on two categories of recordings: the recording of the radioactivity emitted by matter, and the “political recording of the ghost city,” as you said in an interview. The recording of the ghost city takes place in video and in writings that are published in the form of a diary, in your blog. Your first-person account seems to me as a contemporary version of the old road movie genre.**

At first I had not considered making a blog; it was an invitation of the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper. I don't even like blogs; I was sort of prejudiced against that type of media. But since this project involves a huge amount of research and a whole process that stems from a conceptual decision, I thought it was worthwhile documenting. Therefore, it can be said that those “more traditional” images document the process, whereas the blog is the place for my questions: how do you enter a place called “exclusion zone”—which, by definition, is a place that excludes you? I don't know, I am just groping, and I have no answers. The entire project builds itself as it develops. It is an empirical experiment. That is why I thought it would be right to keep a diary. The explorers had this tradition of documenting their process, they did it using the book format. I read Darwin's diary: he lived in a ship for five years, exploring the world, and only afterwards did he finish the Theory of Evolution. It all happened in transit. The process is a leap into the unknown.

**The democratization of image technologies took the exclusivity of covering the distant facts of the world away from 19th-century traveling photographers, and even 20th-century photojournalists.**

And since it is all a matter of testimony, little does it matter if it is well framed or out of focus.

**Nowadays, everybody travels and everybody photographs everything. There are few places left to which few people have access. Your project bears that particularity: you found your way into a territory that no one enters, and brought back a story. And then, after tackling all of these obstacles to entrance, you also invented a documentation model. Are you giving new meaning to activities that had become obsolete?**

I am really interested in these unseen places, or inaccessible places, these no man's lands. Because of this interest, I started thinking of minefields, which are physically inaccessible spaces that no one actually enters. That is why I used the image by Robert Capa in the *Dízima periódica* [Periodic decimal] project. The last image he produced in his life was that of a minefield, in Asia, moments before he stepped on a mine. In my work, there are many images that allude to the impenetrable.

**In 88 de 14.000, when you project the images of Cambodian prisoners onto a sand screen, are you discussing the time contained in the images?**

Yes, those are the last images recorded of those persons in life. The S-21 was a prison in which the Khmer Rouge executed people. They tried to be very organized, so they would take pictures of everyone who entered the prison. The pictures bore the person's name and date of entry. Those are some of those horror images we were talking about. Those are horrible images. Only they are not explicit, such as mothers holding dead children. Therefore, the issue here was how to make those images seen in a significant way, one that would convey the power and meaning of the story. But I did not want to do so in an illustrative fashion, as in a bad documentary film.

**The idea of “making seen” is one of the features of classic documentary film, since “docere” (to make seen, to show, to disclose), in Latin, is the root of the word document.**

To tell a story in a narrative fashion, as in cinema, is but one of the possible ways of making things seen. Six thousand people had their pictures taken and their entry dates recorded. I thought about finding out the dates in which those people were executed. Therefore, the work also dealt with what separates one point from another, as in

*Dízima.*

**Does the projection time for each image vary according to the duration of life?**

Yes. First I set an initial parameter, according to which all images should be visible. Then I took all of the original negatives (which are currently in the Genocide Museum, at the site of the old prison, where they are gathering mold, because Cambodia is a mess), I made new enlargements, and did a research on the execution dates at the Documentation Center (maintained in the capital of Cambodia by the University of Yale). Out of six thousand images, I found eighty-eight entry and exit dates. Thus, the sand is a way of keeping time. Duration is the key issue in the video: one day equals one kilogram of sand. So, there is a specific amount of sand for each person. The idea was to really create an implication for images we see in an obscene fashion, in between the toothpaste ad and the primetime soap opera. I hope those images can actually be experienced.

**In many of your projects I sense a desire to focus on historical moments. Is history another motivation of yours?**

Memory, in particular. My work is also permeated with extreme political issues that end up in tragedies. Once I was asked as to why I did not work with 9/11. I think this is a complicated thing to do: first off, because the event is right here in our faces. Secondly, you see it in all media, all around. There are so many images, they cause indigestion. It is like horror images in photojournalism: a mother holding her dead daughter on the cover of *Veja* magazine. There is a certain obscenity, because those images only have value in the moment. Soon the toothpaste ad goes on air, you have dinner, and it does not even seem like you just saw something terrible. You are forced into a passive stance. But what is the actual implication of what you just saw?

**Is it the artist's role to think about the actual implication of those images?**

Are not we, artists, producing images and looking at the world? There is an issue of presence here: the way in which you look. I became interested in events that are forgotten. The implications of the Khmer Rouge are still very present in Cambodia. To a large extent, these implications shape the social reality in a place that is completely fucked up, but they are not on newspaper covers and no one talks about them. It is roughly the same thing with Chernobyl. The difference is, in Cambodia, I am approaching an event that already took place and left its marks. The contamination in Chernobyl, on the other hand, is still present. So, to answer your question (*about a historical motivation*): it is more a matter of thinking about how we relate to our past nowadays. It is a matter of responsibility. I cannot stand to look at those images and, out of not having a choice, agreeing with the way in which things are being conducted. No, I don't want it like that.

**But then why not deal with recent facts?**

I do not know how to answer that question yet, but I think we must be very careful. I lived in Finland for a while, as an artist-in-residence in a contemporary art center, and some of my colleagues were European artists. All of them, without exception, were doing contemporary artwork with a social conscience, verging on social assistance. I was a bit concerned with that, because it seemed like a stance of guilt-relief: many of them came from very wealthy countries, which spawn this geopolitical situation we find ourselves in today, and they worked with impoverished communities, not wanting to impose a "white form of Western supremacy" on them, believing that contemporary art is an elite thing. Beware: the actual elitists are those who think that way. The elitists are those who think that just because the other person came from the slums and does not have the same access to culture that we do, that he/she cannot connect to a phenomenon taking place right in front of him/her. I hope I can touch upon political issues in a responsible way.

**In your choice of subjects, you not only approach past events, but also distant ones. Why not deal with what takes place next to you? Weren't you interested in**

### rethinking the radioactive accident in Goiânia, for instance?

Yes! Goiânia is always very present in the discussions about the *Chernobyl Project* at the IRD. Contamination in Goiânia was caused by the same element that is now the most present in Chernobyl, Cesium 137. If efforts are not made in order to “clean up” the place, then it will take years and years, at least three hundred years, until it can be inhabited again. Chernobyl was truly a disaster, and the contamination that takes place when an accident of this magnitude happens is very wide-ranging. The case in Goiânia was a different one, it cannot even begin to be compared, fortunately. To explain it with my very limited knowledge, here is roughly what happened there: people broke the lead safe in a Cs 137 source, which was inside an abandoned radiography device (I am always flabbergasted, how could it be “abandoned??!!”). The Cs 137 inside that source was in the form of a shiny blue powder (glows in the dark). People had no idea what it was, so they rubbed it on their skin, they ate it (!!!), and went walking around with it. They caused inner and outer contamination. Those people had a very high contamination rate and either became really ill, or died. But it was just them. At the time of the accident, the area in which those people lived and the surroundings were isolated and all objects, clothes, etc. were seized and analyzed to check for contamination. The soil there was analyzed as well, but no significant changes were detected. My supervisor and many other people at the IRD worked on cleaning up Goiânia. It rained on the days following contamination as well, so everything got spread out and diluted. Since the amount of Cs 137 was small (it does not even compare to the reactor), in addition to the fact that, to some extent, it had been cleaned at the time, the remainder got sort of diluted into nature. This is why there is not an “exclusion zone” there, as in Chernobyl. I could try to get images in Goiânia, using my lead pinhole, of places where there might still be contamination. I could also try to get an image of the Sugar Loaf, which is a naturally radioactive rock. But since it is radioactive in a very low scale, it would take years for me to get an image, without any guarantee that something would come out, even after a very long time of exposure.

### By preserving an interest in how to approach the “other,” the documentary film relates to anthropological strategies. In the *Chernobyl Project* you confront the absence of this “other.” What is the type of alterity you are working with?

I don't even know. This alterity should come to being as I look at it. In physics, they say a phenomenon only takes place if there is an observer looking at it. That is the idea.

### The *Ínterim/auto-retrato* video, in which you draw a path from your face to the face of your twin sister, is far from documental. Nevertheless, it shares with documentary films a questioning of the limits between the self and the other.

I also see a connection between this issue and the *Dizima periódica* project. This is the field, in mathematics, that investigates precisely the extension of the limit between one point and another. It is a black hole, a problem that mathematicians are unable to explain: how does  $0.9999$  *ad infinitum* become 1? In *Ínterim*, I was trying to look into the issue of identity and self-portrait: of course there are endless ways of defining a person's identity. But in here I tried to analyze all of the possibilities of what I could have been, until I became my twin sister. I reached as many possibilities as my computer software was able to create.



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## 027 / Alice Miceli

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### Comment biography Paula Alzugaray, 03/2007


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By devising projects for distant, often difficult-to-reach places, Alice Miceli behaves as a true traveling artist. Her experiments on foreign lands are similar to those of the seamen that Walter Benjamin described in *The Storyteller* as “past masters of storytelling.” The travels of Rio de Janeiro-born Alice Miceli began at the age of nineteen, when she attended the École Supérieure d’Études Cinématographiques, in Paris, under a scholarship from the French government. After obtaining a degree in cinematography and audiovisual techniques, Miceli returned to Rio de Janeiro in 2002 and, during that year, she took assistant director and trainee jobs in the field of cinema, working with documentary filmmaker Silvio Tendler and as trainee editor in the film *Un passeport Hongrois*, by Sandra Kogut.

The detour in Miceli’s path happened when her growing interest in the visual arts led her to take a graduate course in history of art and architecture in Brazil, at PUC-RJ, and to enter the Project Study and Discussion Group led by Professor Charles Watson, at Parque Lage, also in Rio de Janeiro. The first work to emerge from this new process, *Ínterim/auto-retrato* (2003) used a classic genre in the history of art to produce a reflection about the mutable, indefinite character of contemporary identity. The video was nominated for the 4th Sergio Motta Art and Technology Award, in 2003, and shown in exhibitions and festivals, such as the Videofomes Festival, in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and the laisle.com exhibition, in Rio de Janeiro.

One year later, Alice Miceli was back on the road. With support from the on-line news agency News Market, she went to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, searching for the photographic identification files of people who were executed in a prison of the Khmer Rouge. The interest in “off-track” places led Miceli to forego the easy way—Yale University or Columbia University also have copies of the negatives—and to choose as her destination the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, an old S-21 prison, where fourteen thousand people were murdered by the dictatorship regime during the 1970s. In fifteen days of research, the artist managed to sort out the time that eighty-eight prisoners had left to live, from their incarceration to their final moment. The result of her trip was the video *88 de 14.000* (2004), in which the identification photos are projected onto sand curtains. The work was at display in a loop at the 15th Videobrasil International Electronic Art Festival and was a finalist for the award of the transmediale.05 International Media Art Festival, held in Berlin, Germany, both in 2005.

Even if the amount of sand dropped for each case reflects the time of life spent in prison, Alice Miceli knows, from the laws of mathematics, that the distance between one point and another is infinite. Thus, *88 de 14.000* might be regarded as an updated version of Borges’ *The Book of Sand*. The issue of the infinitude of time would be the key subject of investigation for the artist two years later, in her *Dízima periódica* [Periodic decimal] series.

That edition of the Transmediale International Media Art Festival focused on Southeast Asia, and *88 de 14.000* attracted the attention of a foundation for exchange between Asiatic and European artists, based in Singapore. After receiving an invitation to a workshop, Miceli went off to Bandung, in Indonesia, to participate in the project Third Asia-Europe Art Camp: Artists’ Initiatives Spaces and New Media Arts, at the Bandung



Center for New Media Arts.

The work *88 de 14.000* was important for Miceli's development as an artist, because it awakened in her an interest for events erased from recent memory and by "buried" situations, which influence in a subtle and decisive manner the current social relationships of a people. These were precisely the issues at play in the exhibition *On Disappearance. Loss of World; Escaping the World*, in which the work was featured, at the PhoenixHalle, in Dortmund, Germany.

While holding a residency at the Cable Factory – UNESCO-Aschberg Bursaries for Artists Programme, in Helsinki, Finland, in 2004 and 2005, Alice Miceli worked with a representation of the Holocaust, in *Little White House* (2005). The video travels the path from a nazi extermination camp to the Chelmno nad Nerem village, in the opposite direction of the Holocaust victims. Thus, the work proposes a revision in the representation of history.

The issues raised by the treatment given to space, in *Little White House*, and to time, in *88 de 14.000*, led the artist to ask herself questions such as: "How can one actually cross the distance between two points in a given space? How can one realize, through image in motion, the conceptual transformation that can take place when one crosses a border? What are the possible natures of limits?" Her discomfort birthed the *Dízima* periódica video series, which investigates the mystery of infinity between two points. The series is comprised of *99,9...metros rasos* and *14 horas, 54 minutos, 59,9...segundos*, both from 2006. The videos were screened at the *Rumos Artes Visuais – Paradoxos Brasil* exhibition, at Itaú Cultural, and in the *Videometry – Video* as a measuring device in contemporary Brazilian art exhibition, at the LOOP Festival, held in Barcelona, Spain, both in 2006.

Miceli's latest project, still in progress, returns to history once again, addressing the issue: how do we relate to our past today? With a scholarship granted by the Sergio Motta Art and Technology Award, aimed at fostering production, *the Chernobyl Project forecasts*, for 2007, the radiographic recording of radiation produced in the exclusion zone of the city of Pripjat, in Ukraine, site of the radioactive accident in the Chernobyl nuclear plant. By inventing and developing a never-before-seen technology for the mission—which is being done in collaboration with scientists of the Institute of Radioprotection and Dosimetry, in Rio de Janeiro—, Alice Miceli becomes part of the tradition of artists-scientists, as she uses resources from science and technology in her quest for the specificity of image.



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**Jerk Off 02 - Projeto dízima periódica** 2007, video , 1'47"

Alice Miceli

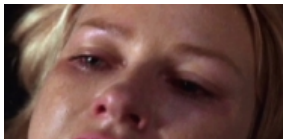
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How to represent the infinite space between two points? Making reference to Andy Warhol's classic film Blow Job (1964), the work, part of the Dízima Periódica [Repeating Decimals] series, departs from this mathematical principle to create an image of sexual enjoyment, a situation connected to the limits of experience and imagination. By refusing the logic of the instantaneous, it invests in the image of what cannot be portrayed. Leaving aside naïve notions of the present time, it presents us a standard shattered by one of the most universal and common human activities.



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