

ALICE MICELI:  
PROJETO  
CHERNOBYL

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AMERICAS  
SOCIETY

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EXHIBITIONS

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For Silvia Vásquez (1984–2019)



First Entrance Checkpoint, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Belarus, 2008



Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Crossing the Fourth Checkpoint, Belarus, 2008



Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Radiation-Dose Meter, Belarus, 2008

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## FOREWORD

Americas Society is pleased to present *Alice Miceli: Projeto Chernobyl*, an exhibition of radiographs of the gamma radiation present in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Alice Miceli is an important figure in Brazilian contemporary art whose work exposes the urgency of recognizing humanity's negative impact on the global environment.

This is the final exhibition organized by Gabriela Rangel, former Director of Visual Arts and Chief Curator at Americas Society and current Artistic Director of the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires. I want to acknowledge her long-standing commitment, during her fifteen years at Americas Society, to

providing a platform for exciting and significant work by artists from Latin America to a New York audience. I am grateful to Gabriela and exhibition co-curator Diana Flatto, Assistant Curator at Americas Society.

I am indebted to Karen Marta and her colleague Todd Bradway for their editorial support and to Garrick Gott for designing the Visual Arts exhibition series. Carolina Scarborough, Assistant Curator of Public Programs, deserves special recognition for bringing a diverse audience of scholars and viewers to the gallery.

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SUSAN SEGAL  
PRESIDENT AND CEO, AS/COA

**A CONVERSATION  
WITH ALICE MICELI**

**Gabriela Rangel and Diana Flatto**





Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Radioactive Woods, Belarus, 2008

“What’s it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? Some people say it has no color and no smell, and other people say that it’s black. Like earth.”

—*Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*

RANGEL: In *Projeto Chernobyl* (2006–10) you rejected presenting a traumatic image of the disaster in Chernobyl in favor of something else: the materiality of the poison in the atmosphere.

MICELI: Is this work still a representation of Chernobyl? Yes, it is, one that is metonymy rather than metaphor, but I was also interested in doing a more conventional photojournalistic record of the Exclusion Zone, even if only for myself, as a visual diary. The problem for me was trying to look at Chernobyl by way of visible light—the radiation that shapes our sight and photography. *Photography* literally means “drawing with light” (*photos* = “light”; *graphé* = “representation by means of lines,” “drawing”). In Chernobyl, where the defining quality of the environment is the invisible radioactive contamination, which is pervasive but not perceived by our senses, the question of the project became: How to look, and by what means? If I went there and asked this question,

tried to look at Chernobyl only by means of visible light, I'd arrive at only one kind of solution, the documentary approach: images that capture the appearance of a place, how it appears to our eyes by way of a camera that captures the reflections of visible light. If, instead, the means are the gamma radiation we can't see, the radiation from the contamination of the explosion, what would that result be like?

RANGEL: You decided to go back to the etymology and materiality of photography and its chemical properties, and to form your images from the poison that contaminates and encapsulates the area.

MICELI: I call them "radiographic negatives," because they're not X-rays in the sense that they were produced by X-rays—they were produced by gamma rays; they're not photographic. The film I decided to use, after trying out a number of different radiographic films in different sizes in the lab, is human chest X-ray film. The reason for choosing this option was that it's an extremely sensitive emulsion,

since it's designed to be used with humans, and humans aren't meant to be exposed to radiation for extended periods of time. After many, many exhaustive experiments in the lab in Rio de Janeiro, it turned out to be very important that we use an extremely sensitive film as a way to speed up the exposure time once we began the experiments in Chernobyl.

RANGEL: Did you develop a special film or is it something commonly used in labs? The radiographic negatives are human size.

MICELI: The size, as we see in the light boxes, is thirty by forty centimeters—the reference size for this analog film. The radiographic negatives were directly exposed in Chernobyl. Once the exposures were completed and the negatives processed, I considered them the final work, not to be enlarged. Nowadays it's almost discontinued, but it's the classical radiographic film designed to be used for chest X-rays. This film is sensitive to gamma rays because it's sensitive to the whole spectrum. Even thirty-five-millimeter film can be soiled by invisible radiation. All

film is impacted in different ways by radiation, visible or invisible, depending on whereabouts on the spectrum the ray is located.

FLATTO: You choose to subject yourself to various degrees of risk in what you call “impenetrable” spaces: the radiation of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and the minefields for your series *In Depth (landmines)* (2014–19). You have faced similar dangers to a long line of documentary photographers, including Robert Capa.

MICELI: I think the question of risk is a given in the situations I choose to implicate myself in. I try to approach the danger in practical terms. To access what I need for the work in Chernobyl or the minefields I never go alone. But it’s a calculated risk, as in extreme sports, for instance—nobody jumps out of an airplane without a parachute. Preparation is necessary if you’re to be able to move through these kinds of spaces. But the implications of your question are greater than this. For me, Robert Capa’s last image is an entry point.



Robert Capa, Indochina. May 25, 1954. Vietnamese troops advancing between Namdinh and Thaibinh. This is one of the last pictures taken by Robert Capa with his Nikon camera before he stepped on a landmine and was killed at 2:55 p.m.

FLATTO: Your work from 2006–7, *14 horas, 54 minutos, 59,9 . . . segundos (dízima periódica)*, rethinks the last moment of Capa’s life before he stepped on a landmine and was killed.

MICELI: The last image Robert Capa took in 1954 was a photograph of the minefield he was crossing with the army—he was taking photos for *Life*—during the Indochina War. The last exposure in the film roll recovered from his camera shows a space that extends itself unto a horizon he never crossed, never reached. I wanted to continue from the vantage point in the minefield where Capa was forced to remain forever, at least physically. For me as a photographer going back to similar situations, I ask: What does it mean to continue, to go farther? How deep, and until what point?

FLATTO: While Capa captured images of war, your work directly confronts its effect on the landscape and stands in ideological opposition to the effects of militarization.

MICELI: There has been this tradition, by now well established, of documentary photography that

is actually war photography, and most of it is photojournalistic. Images are produced and are supposed to be consumed as news. I think that, when people say “documentary photography,” this is what they’re referencing a lot of the time. In my case, I’m cooperating with humanitarian disarmament campaigns; I’m not embedded in the military with armed soldiers. They aren’t there to try to forcefully keep peace or to protect or assault anyone. I go with the humanitarian workers, in order to have the proper access to do my work. The occupied spaces are no longer active battlefields but what remains of them.

RANGEL: It’s been said that the Soviet Union fell because of the Chernobyl disaster.

MICELI: It was the acceleration of the end. The gamma radiation in Chernobyl isn’t something in the past, it’s in the present, as are the active explosives in the ground in the minefields. These may be different kinds of “impenetrabilities” but nevertheless I see the act of walking through impenetrable spaces as a form of

resistance. It's not condoning any of the actions that created these spaces; on the contrary, it's a form of counteraction that confronts them. I'm specifically trying to access and offer a point of view from within the land that has been occupied. The resistance is in that action.

RANGEL: What was the first image you produced as a photographer?

MICELI: I have been actively interested in film and photography since I was twelve. In 1995, when I was fifteen, I got my first analog reflex camera and a group of different lenses. It was then that I started to learn about the use of different focal lengths, the architecture of an optical lens, and what these choices can do to the image. For the end-of-year project in my first year of high school, we went to land occupied by Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra.<sup>ii</sup> MST is a movement in Brazil that is linked to the rural workers who don't have land. They occupy land that isn't being used, that's owned and being kept idle by agribusiness. We went there and documented their work. It was the first time I

felt like I was trying to understand a particular stretch of land, and the world, through photography, even if I was only fifteen and it wasn't formal photojournalistic documentary work.

RANGEL: What made you think of yourself as a photographer rather than a filmmaker?

MICELI: I've been in love with film since I can remember. At that time, Fernando Collor de Mello was president;<sup>iii</sup> the administration was a catastrophe and Brazil's film industry basically died. Because there were no Brazilian films being produced whatsoever, the one way for me to consider cinematographic questions—how an image is made and what the process involves—was through photography. That's how I started to explore photographic questions.

FLATTO: After studying film in France, you returned to photography.

MICELI: After film school I started working small jobs in the film industry in France and then Brazil as an assistant director. I realized my

main interest lay in how we look at things and, conversely, what the images are that we produce: from which vantage point (literally, but also philosophically), what it is that we see, and how this vision is morphed into a thing, an image.

FLATTO: How does this experience working in film manifest itself in experimental photography-based work?

MICELI: They're intrinsically linked. If we look at the early history of photography and the moving image, there were so many different ways of operating the vision machines and investing images with meaning. So, in that sense, it has always been experimental, from the start.

RANGEL: There's an ongoing theoretical debate that originated with Theodor Adorno's famous statement that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz.

MICELI: I have said in the past that I disagree with Adorno, and I still do. I think art is possible, and even necessary, after a tragedy like the

Holocaust. This is not to say that any attempt at representation is going to be exhaustive, but, for me, one way of resisting this kind of annihilation is to represent it.

RANGEL: Georges Didi-Huberman rebuts Claude Lanzmann's contention that the Shoah is unrepresentable.<sup>iv</sup> Their ongoing dispute has raised important ethical dilemmas about image production after the Holocaust.

MICELI: I agree with Didi-Huberman. I don't think there is such a thing as an absolute "unrepresentable." In the decades since the Holocaust, we have seen different attempts to represent that unimaginable horror. Otto Dov Kulka, Steven Spielberg, Alain Resnais, Primo Levi, Roberto Benigni, Giorgio Agamben, and Lanzmann too: all try to narrate, to testify, to think about and represent those events, or what remains of them. Their work expands our capacity to experience the unimaginable, thereby touching on the political aspect of the image, its non-illustrative power.

RANGEL: I'm interested in your abstract approach to the topic. You started with a subject that everybody knows, but you approached the project in a way that probably nobody else had thought of before. Perhaps the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich has created something equivalent—perhaps even more complex—in her accounts and oral testimonies, but other visual artists and photographers have tackled the problem more conventionally.<sup>v</sup>

MICELI: When confronted with events as horrific as Auschwitz that seem to elude the possibility of representation, or, in a similar but shifted way, Chernobyl, where what defines it is precisely what escapes our perception, my effort is to find ways to confront and resist: to ask if it's possible to grasp this invisibility, this pervasive "nothingness"; to attempt to touch what, in that environment, is everywhere but never really perceived in any way, except for the destruction it leaves behind. I had to create my own tools in order to see this.

RANGEL: You are interested in landscapes that, as you say, are not only impenetrable but subject to a process of devastation, or militarization.

MICELI: Yes, they are impenetrable, as a result of the mis-action of men, of humans, as a result of what we're doing to our environment. They're not impenetrable in the way that an extremely high mountain is, or any natural place that has developed over millennia. The nuclear reactor is a place created by the energy industry to exploit the earth and produce wealth.

RANGEL: I'm curious about your use of the term *impenetrable*. Hélio Oiticica and Jesús Rafael Soto called their interactive built environments Penetrables in the 1960s, and some of Oiticica's structures were modeled on Rio de Janeiro's favelas. You want to enter spaces that are impenetrable, that are segregated by technology or militarization.

MICELI: You're the first person to make that connection. I hadn't, until you mentioned it, considered the relationship of Oiticica's Penetrables to my own work. It's an interesting



connection, not only in terms of the similarity of language, but in terms of my practice, which is precisely to find a way to enter impenetrable spaces. Chernobyl is visually impenetrable, because although the danger is pervasive, it can't be perceived by our senses; the minefields are vast impenetrable spaces that are no longer safe to access. The action of my work is to penetrate such spaces with my body.

FLATTO: Has *Projeto Chernobyl*'s political relevance changed since you began making the radiographs in 2006, now that today's leadership in Brazil is directly threatening the natural environment?

MICELI: Yes; it's a catastrophe here. Gabriela mentioned earlier that Chernobyl was a paradigm shift in history, and it was. Like 9/11 or other human-created disasters, we have unfortunately grown used to them—we see them as historical events with a date in the past, like Chernobyl: April 26, 1986. But the paradigm shift is global because the consequences for humans will continue long after we die.

Disasters may recur in the headlines—the recent HBO series *Chernobyl*, for instance—but even if they slip from public view, the consequences remain in the present tense. They exist with us, are contemporary with us, with our existence on this planet.

RANGEL: Do you think Chernobyl, as a historical marker, is beginning to be true of the Amazonia? In the 1960s, in Brazil, when constitutional rights were suppressed under the Ato Institucional Número Cinco (Institutional Act Number Five), artists like Hélio Oiticica didn't reflect this directly in their art.<sup>vi</sup> His art was experimental but didn't directly engage with politics.

MICELI: In relation to the catastrophic things that are happening here under Jair Bolsonaro, I don't think I can approach them as an artist but I can as a citizen, as a human being living in Brazil in this day and age. I do see the artistic work I do as a form of resistance, even if it's not directly addressing—in conceptual or literal terms—a particular event in Brazil. I believe

that the questions raised through the work, and the perceptions that are hopefully created through it, are forms of resistance, ways of creating new meaning.

FLATTO: Indian Point Energy Center is the closest nuclear power plant to New York City, located about an hour north; it provides about one quarter of the city's power. The state intends to shut down the reactors by 2021.

MICELI: Having a nuclear power plant so close to New York City should be in the news constantly; it's something people should worry about. After Chernobyl or Fukushima, it should be a cause for major concern. In the realm of political activism, I do hope my work will draw attention to the question: Why is it that we continue to produce energy in a way that's so damaging to the environment? It's baffling. There's radiation everywhere, only we don't experience it because it's not at a level that might be harmful to us.

FLATTO: Have you considered continuing the project at sites like Fukushima?

MICELI: I finished the Chernobyl series in 2010, right before Fukushima happened, but I think there are ways to take this research further, to think about gamma radiation in different settings, like Fukushima, where unfortunately we've created a whole new area that has become victim of nuclear disaster and the ensuing permanent radioactive contamination.

RANGEL: Your radiographs are similar to some of Geraldo de Barros's photographic experiments of the 1950s, or even László Moholy-Nagy's photograms—I'm thinking of artists who experimented with how the image is produced by optical or chemical accidents and their properties, which strikes me as similar to the important role played by chance in the production of images in your *Chernobyl* series.

MICELI: What I did in Chernobyl, the action recorded in the image, is a result of chance, of how the gamma radiation behaves or was behaving at that moment in time.

RANGEL: But the two external agents (the wave-sensitive emulsion and the on-site radiation) are separate from your actions.

MICELI: They are separate to the extent that it's a phenomenon that occurs "out there," in the contaminated environment of Chernobyl. What we see in the images, however, is an encounter between that "reality" and myself. It's an ontological problem.

RANGEL: One thing is chaos, but another thing is chance.

MICELI: Precisely. I don't know what the ultimate form of the invisible gamma radiation contamination is—nobody does. It's embedded everywhere in the environment. When we repeated experiments in a controlled fashion, they yielded similar results; that was a tremendous surprise to me. I realized, then, the difference between chance and chaos, and it was a major moment in the process of the work—I even had a celebration with the team. Before that, I had no way of knowing how to ask my questions without chaos. Once I finished

*Chernobyl*, I realized I wasn't done looking at impenetrable spaces, so I started asking myself what other kinds of spaces exist here on Earth that have been rendered impenetrable by our actions. Going to minefields seemed to be the next logical step.

RANGEL: Diana and I have been thinking a lot about *Projeto Chernobyl* in relation to *In Depth (minefields)*. In *Chernobyl*, you have a very abstract image which is produced by the action of something you can't control—the gamma rays on the emulsion in situ. But the minefield images have a very conceptual strategy, which is very controlled. Can you talk about the two different approaches?

MICELI: In *Chernobyl* the point was, would it be possible to touch this invisibility, this negativity, and what would it look like? We used measurement devices for radiation (dosimeters) and repeated experiments in a very systematic fashion. One negative would be placed in a certain location and have an exposure of two months, for instance, which, depending on the



Alice Miceli, *In Depth (minefields)*. From the *Cambodia Series*, 2014, Province of Battambang, Cambodia. Pigment prints on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Baryta paper. 11 photographs, each 23 ¾ × 43 ¼ inches (73 × 110 cm);

contamination, would yield a certain radiation dose that the film was exposed to, which in turn would create a visual result captured on the radiographic film. Once we had that result, we would repeat the experiment in a similar setting, in the exact same place, for a similar exposure time, to check if the results we were getting were similar. The conditions, to the extent that I could control them, were the same, and the results are systematic, only their source is invisible and the patterns of this invisible radioactive contamination don't necessarily obey the shape of things as we've learned to see them, and it's not possible to decode them with our accustomed and habitual use of visible light. The image has its own shape. That's what we see in the radiographic film.

FLATTO: And the shift to the minefields? You represent the landscape through certain protocols.

MICELI: In this project, "impenetrability" is taken to a different dimension. It's no longer a problem of capturing an energy that eludes our vision, but of the representation of a depth of

space that's no longer accessible, which has been "taken" by explosives. That's how I started to create the framework for the minefield work; it operates in the fashioning of the illusion of three-dimensional space that occurs in the bidimensional image.

RANGEL: There's something very interesting in your approach to the landscape. How do you define yourself in relation to nineteenth-century traveling artist-explorers, such as Alexander von Humboldt, who were coming to the Americas to document the landscape?

MICELI: They were pushing boundaries in every possible way—a territorial expansion that was also a technological frontier. For the European colonizers, leaving civilization to go and see what, for them, was quite literally a new world, and then asking questions about the nature of this world they had never even dreamed might exist, must have been a breathtaking experience. It was, of course, a deeply flawed colonial undertaking developed through oppression and at the expense of the suffering of millions, but,

at the same time, there was tremendous curiosity, will, and creativity in this desire to go, this need to go where they'd never been, to the other side of the known world and its oceans, to wonder, scientifically and philosophically, what other kinds of environments and nature might be possible. It must have been tremendously fascinating to expand the ontological fabric of the world.

RANGEL: But your relationship to the known world has its complexities—you address a landscape that has been harassed and damaged.

MICELI: Yes, harassed, damaged, and then used as a means of industrialization, or territorial acquisition. In terms of me coming from Brazil, a developing Third World country that is less industrialized than European nations, it's interesting to ask oneself, at what cost, for all of us living today, did this advanced state of industrialization happen, and what's the true price we're all now paying?

RANGEL: Do you locate the problem in modernity?

## Is there an alternative to modernity?

MICELI: Yes. It's entirely a problem that originated with modernity, which never ceases to accelerate in geometrical proportion. We have yet to see successful alternatives to capitalist exploitation. But now we know the planet can't take it much longer, to the point that the human species, and so many others, will become extinct. I'm sure the planet will survive, and other forms of life will continue, but ours might not.

## ENDNOTES

- i Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen (London: Picador, 2006), 52.
- ii Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement), founded in 1984, is one of Latin America's largest workers' land reform movements. The organization, which comprises about 350,000 families (many of whom are indigenous or descended from African slaves), advocates for rural laborers in Brazil and encourages the occupation of unused land.
- iii Fernando Collor de Mello was the first democratically elected president of Brazil following the military dictatorship. He held office from 1990 to 1992, when he resigned amid impeachment proceedings for corruption.
- iv Georges Didi-Huberman has advocated for a return to the image with which to represent harsh histories. See Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- v Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*.
- vi Ato Institucional Número Cinco, issued by President Artur da Costa e Silva on December 13, 1968, was one of the harshest of seventeen decrees issued by the dictatorship in Brazil following the 1964 coup, imposing a more authoritarian government centralized within the military.

# EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Projeto Chernobyl* (Chernobyl Project), 2006–10  
Backlights, radiographic negatives  
30 parts, each  $11\frac{7}{8} \times 15\frac{3}{4}$  inches (30 × 40 cm)

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Curated by Gabriela Rangel and Diana Flatto

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