



Chernobyl Project

---

Alice Miceli

---

## Images of Chernobyl

*Gunalan Nadarajan*

---

For Walter Benjamin, “(the) true picture of the past flits by” to be “seized only as an image which flashes up at the moment of danger, instantaneously, when it can be recognized and never to be seen again.” The coincidence of the past, danger and the image are the very elements that Alice Miceli’s *Chernobyl Project witnesses*.

It is interesting that two of the photograph’s early names, heliograph, a name Nicephore Niepce employed since 1826 and *photogenic image/drawing* used by William Talbot since 1837, seem to present the image as if it was (re) produced by the aid of nature. The idea of the *heliograph* suggests that the images have been written (Greek, *graphein*) by the sun (Greek, *helios*). Talbot’s photogenic drawing also purports to be a result of nature’s production (Greek, *phos* or light and *genesis* or produced/originated). This predilection to impute to nature’s prowess what was/is technologically never free of human intervention seems to have been instrumental in retaining an element of mystical authori(ali)ty for photography; almost authored by nature with the photographer being a mere facilitator of the image coming into being. Photography, the name we have settled on, exploits this semantic (etymological) ambiguity through the Greek suffix “-graph”, for it could be translated as either ‘written’ or ‘that writes’. “Thus, photography is, at one and the same time, ‘light writing itself’ and/or ‘writing with light’, a system of representation that is projected as both (but never quite either) active and passive, producer and produced, inscribing and inscribed.” (Batchen)

This uneasy relationship between nature and artifice that photography as a technology has mediated and even embalmed in its very nomenclature, provides an interesting reference point to think about Miceli’s radiographic traces of/from Chernobyl. The artist initially began with the pinhole camera to capture and

give presence to the radiation using a method akin to photography. However, Miceli found the images that registered on the radiographic film to be highly restricted by the confines and protective mechanisms of the camera itself. At this point, her investigations led her beyond the pinhole camera to methods that would create “direct contact” between the radiographic film and the radioactivity that permeates Chernobyl. Miceli refers to the technology that she employs as ‘autoradiographic’ insofar as she conceives the radioactivity to inscribe itself onto the film by direct contact; that is, without her mediation. The films were allowed to come into unmediated contact with the radioactive environment and its objects. It is of course readily apparent that she is in fact the person who makes the choices of what, when and where the film is directed. I would suggest that this desire to let the film do the work of directly capturing the radioactive presence poses the artist as a *modest witness* – as Haraway defines it – “seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one’s visions and representations”. Miceli’s work has for a long time worked from an imperative to bear witness to things that have happened even if she was not physically present when/where the event happened. For example, her work 88 de 14,000 poignantly reminds us of 88 prisoners killed in a prison in Phnom Penh by having a picture of each prisoner appear and disappear to reflect the time elapsed between their entry into the prison and date of execution. Having done research on the executions of these prisoners in Cambodia and keen on developing an empathic connection to their lives, Miceli chooses to enact a temporal restitution of their fading away; a veritable staging of their absence to make them present to the viewers. Miceli’s work here, as well as in the *Chernobyl Project*, seeks to bear witness, not as an objective onlooker but as an empathic nexus, to an event that itself is characterized as and is irrecoverably absent.

The artist reminds us, “the Chernobyl accident actually produced more survivors than victims” – meaning that there were/are more who were at the accident than those who perished as a result of it. However, despite the fact that there were so many who ‘were there’, there were few who could bear witness to the accident. Miceli cites Svetlana Alexejewitsch, author of the book “Voices from Chernobyl”, who observes that many of the survivors continued to insist on the lack of any reference points

from their previous experience to make sense of this event – “I have never seen it in any book, nobody has ever told me of such a thing”. This inability to locate the accidental – i.e., the rupture of/from the normal – is not a failure of language but a failure of our habits of history. “The tradition of the oppressed,” Benjamin notes, “teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.” His “Theses on the Philosophy of History” attempts to undermine the concept of progress that relegates the state of emergency, the catastrophic and the accidental as exceptional. Such an idea of progress presents whatever happens in history as anticipated and as necessary in a way that makes revolutionary change impossible and accidents incredible. He claims that “(the) concept of progress should be grounded on the idea of catastrophe. That things ‘just keep on going’ is the catastrophe. Not something that is impending at any particular time ahead, but something that is always given.” Thus, Benjamin conceived of the possibility of history not as some teleological movement of events, but rather as that which establishes “a conception of the present as the *Jetztzeit* which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.” History is therefore, not what is past, but rather what “passes away”; that which “is always on the verge of disappearing without disappearing”. It is in the recognition of the traces of the past as and in such traces that the promise of history holds. “For every image of the past,” Benjamin claims, “that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably.” Instead of a historical truth lying in wait to be imaginistically revealed to an inquisitive eye, Benjamin posits these images as essentially fleeting and involuntary in their appearance. “It isn’t that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past”, in the image of the historical object, “the Then and the Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning.” It is this capacity to constitute a dialectical movement between knower and known, between “past” and “present” even in its “stasis”, in what he calls the “now-time”, that leads him to characterize “image as dialectics at a standstill”. According to Benjamin, the photograph presents such a dialectical image; a time-kernel (*Zeitkern*) that potentially binds every photograph to every one of its observers/readers. Miceli’s *Chernobyl Project* presents two forms of

witnessing – the photographs that documents, in a stark and historically loaded black & white, her journeys to, at the border of and into the now abandoned ‘zone’ of the accident; and the ‘direct contact’ radiographs of the spaces that bear the radioactivity that permeates the zone. These photographs are documents that ‘give place’ to the absence insofar as they locate the accident and its evacuating aftermath in a specific geographical and social space. The images of the bureaucratic rituals the artist endures to make her way into the zone; the empty neighborhoods of the urban areas contiguous with the zone; the gates that emblematically announce the zone’s intent to keep one out in the name of danger; the passports with special authorizations that insist on entry; and the spaces void of people and movement in the zone, are dialectical images in their capacity to open a time-kernel that connect the past and present, the accident and the absence.

“Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an invention in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen.” Paul Virilio

In developing the autoradiographic method, Miceli was creating a mechanism that would give presence to the radiation that itself is invisible. Unlike the conventional pinhole camera that imprints the image by a photographic process, the autoradiographs are created by direct contact of the radiation on the film. Insofar as these are created by direct radioactivity without a resulting image, they are strictly speaking, *not images* and in fact are closer to *radiographic objects*. However, the method is photographic in its reliance on the light in the environment where the direct contact occurs and therefore also continues to capture the objects and environments it encounters albeit obscured/affected by the radiation. The resulting radiographs are therefore images under erasure, or *images*. These *images* “exhibit the accident” (Virilio) that cautions against our conflation of progress and technological development, while forcing us to contend with our complacent relation to the past as *already past* and the accident as *exceptional*.

*Gunalan Nadarajan is an art theorist and curator and is currently Vice Provost for Research at the Maryland Institute College of Art, USA.*