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ISSUE

No entry and no way out: photographer Alice Micelli's travel diary to Chernobyl

Alice Micelli

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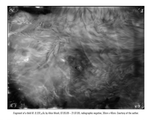

Exposure #1 to #60 © 2.35, ch. Ice Man, F/2.8/8 - F/2.8/8. Antiquity negative, Ilford, 4 Hour, Stand up of the tanks.

On April 26, 1986, reactor number 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the former Soviet Union exploded, causing the largest nuclear catastrophe of the 20th century. And ever two decades later, the Rio de Janeiro artist Alice Micelli visited the abandoned city of Pripyat, the closest inhabited place to the nuclear power plant. Using analogue photography and pre-link contrast and autoradiography techniques, the radioactivity will present in the so-called Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, within a radius of 30 km around the destroyed reactor.

Between 1997 and 2002, there were many trips to the region to be able to record the invisible, since the film used by Micelli was not sensitive to light, but to gamma rays, not visible by the human eye. After months of exposure, the films were developed and the photographs were printed in black and white, with the exception of the photo taken on July 9. To reach this technical solution, the artist conducted for eight months preliminary research at the Institute of Radioprotection and Dosimetry in Rio de Janeiro, and then joined a German medical research group that was authorized to visit the region.

About 10 years after the trips that resulted in the *Chernobyl Project* (which was exhibited at the 54th Sao Paulo Biennial, the Photo Biennial in Moscow and the Photo Festival in Arles), Micelli returned to the region with her husband, Ice Man, and unpublished, the photos show the journey to Belarus, the environment of the abandoned city of the Exclusion Zone, and the urgency of the escape of the people who lived there and had to leave everything behind overnight.

Inside the Berlin-Moscow Express train, departing from Berlin - Ostbahnhof at 6:40 p.m., to jump in Minsk - Passajirskii at 11:11 a.m. the next day.

First stop after crossing the border to Poland: in Kunjin, at 8:14 p.m.

In Poland, we also pass through the Poznan-II, Wieruszow-Zachodnia and Wieruszow-Centralna stations until we reach the Terespol, in the photo above, at 10:38 a.m. - this is the last stop in Poland before a long wait for the intersection of the Belarusian border in Brest.

Stop at *Brest Central* at 3:48 a.m. Raised engines and rail change to the Russian standard. At this time of the trip, we pretend to change inside the train speaks English or German, only Polish or Russian. I try to jump out of the wagon to photograph the rail change from the outside, but they won't let me. Passengers must stay inside the train while the rail change occurs. Cagey jump anyway, but the possibility of maybe leaving me locked in Brest makes me change my mind.

Arrival in Minsk at 11:11 a.m. (in this city, I meet my travel partners, scientists from the Ulric Haig Radiation Institute in Munich, and we go together to Gomel, the second largest city in Belarus, 120km away (an hour and a half by car) from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

The next day, we left at dawn for the Exclusion Zone, a radius of 30km around the plant. On April 26, 1986, a chain of explosions and fires released radioactive substances into the atmosphere, contaminating the surrounding area of the Chernobyl Power Plant. It was the biggest nuclear accident of the 20th century. Reactor number 4 has since been the center of the Exclusion Zone, contaminated by radioactivity for at least the next 300 years. Radioactivity increases as you advance in this yellow radius, and consecutive checkpoints appear. In this image, our team is going through the first of them.

Inside the Zone, we see for the first time an abandoned construction, the remains of a farm. The first of many.

Signs through the landscape: "Danger of radiation - Verbal entry".

Dosimeter, an instrument with which we guided ourselves inside the Zone, both to know where to stop and also to choose where to assemble the experiments, since gamma radiation is not perceived in any way. A dosimeter is an ionizing radiation dose meter absorbed in organic materials.

Going towards reactor number 4, the "sarcophagus". Nowadays, it is still the main radiation emitting source on site.

Passing through another abandoned house, we decided to enter.

What you see inside are remains, ruins, rockings. Which Nico left behind, in amount.

Newspaper of March 26th. Image of Ivan Gomez, with a lion on Boulo Rivet Gil, newspaper of the central committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, reporting the XXVII Congress of the Communist Party, which took place from 25/2 to 6/3 of that year.

Back outside, nature in the Exclusion Zone is embrazed.

End of route, image produced from the top of an observation tower, which captures, in its depth of field, the Exclusion Zone extending over Belarus and passing in Ukraine, where reactor number 4 is located, just after the border. Crossing the Zone on the Belarusian side, this was the closest point to the reactor we managed to reach. ///

Alice Micelli (1980) lives and works in Rio de Janeiro. From staff to print, he studied a bachelor's degree in cinema at the School of Cinematographic Studies, in Paris, and in 2005 he graduated in History of Art and Architecture from PUC-RJ. Participated in the 54th Sao Paulo Biennial (2011), the exhibition The Materiality of the Invisible, in Mamirauá Institute (Amazonas, 2012), and in New York (2016) and the Cinecera Festival (Spain) (Cinematrix Award in Miami-Dade), among others.

* Thomas Nogueira contributed some translations from Russian to Portuguese.

Tags: Chernobyl, Travel diary, Travel photography

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