PRECARIOUS

MERILYN FAIRSKYE

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'Normal human activity is worse for nature than the greatest nuclear accident in history'. Martin Cruz Smith (2004)

In his thriller *Wolves Eat Dogs* novelist Martin Cruz Smith sets the action in the exclusion zone around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the setting for the images in *Precarious*. His portrait of the toxic landscape, sealed off since the nuclear disaster, reveals abandoned cities and towns teeming with strangely liberated life forms: the post-apocalyptic scavengers in the novel recall some of the more colourful characterisations of the *Mad Max* film franchise.

As *The Guardian's* reviewer notes, it is 'an astonishing portrait of an abandoned civilisation, a kind of poisoned Eden and a strange post-human, ecological dream where, with a cancer rate 65 times higher than normal, everyone feels liberated from the curse of longevity to drink and smoke to excess and ride around the radioactive forest.' (Chris Petit 'Dead zone' *The Guardian* Saturday 2 April 2005).

It is an oddly positive image in which wild life returns to the region in mutated but plentiful forms because human life has largely forsaken it. For Fairskye it is also an accurate representation of this part of the world, a place everyone has heard of but almost no-one, apart from the 8,000 workers in and around the zone, has seen. The works in *Precarious* and primarily the film itself, document a number of journeys the artist made there in the course of 2009 and 2010. I am always interested in the way that an artist can provide an image of an object or an experience that a particular public do not receive in any other way. These images do not simply repeat the mute tones of disaster, the media terror or the unfolding medical emergency in Ukraine. These images are already very much in the public sphere. What we do not see are the remains of life, the new forms of existence that have grown up around the zone.

Of course Chernobyl is for most of us not a distant industrial town in the Ukraine but a very proximate icon of technical folly and the crazy risks we run when we attempt to achieve energy security without accounting for ecological security. The disaster of April 1986 destabilised human certainties in a number of ways not the least of which is the impact on *nature* of the catastrophe. The devastated environs of Pripyat and Chernobyl have become a bizarre wildlife sanctuary. The abandoned town of Pripyat so eloquently presented in the panoramas in *Precarious* is a museum of the Soviet Union, schools and houses, buildings are exactly as they were before the end of the soviet era, dilapidated but empty, buildings frozen in time while nature re-asserts itself. Animals run wild, trees and bushes grow over the streets and encroach on the apartment buildings.

The experimental documentary *Precarious* shows images of nature and everyday life juxtaposed with the voice over accounts of life immediately after the disaster. For me, it is important to insist on the experimental status of this documentary. There are no close ups of talking heads with the camera focussed on capturing an emotion expression to help sell the human story (such an abused word in the lexicon of film) but instead beautifully framed and realised shots of places in Crimea and Kiev and Pripyat and the eloquent horror of the sarcophagus itself, the leaking and slowly failing radiation shield thrown over the blasted ruins of Reactor 4.

I respond to the tone of these images, the sense of abandonment they capture but also the subtle sense of life. There are hardly any people here, human presence has been degraded in the Chernobyl area but the voices are re-assuring. They describe different modes of fall out: the exodus of women and children from Kiev in the aftermath of the event so that it became a male enclave where predictably dodgy medical advice was disseminated:

– Drink red wine to wash out strontium.

– Drink vodka to clear radiation from the thyroid. Half a glass of vodka for every two hours in Chernobyl.

The implicit humour of this description (Russian men do not need to be told more than once that they should drink vodka) is juxtaposed with the account of the young boys aged 20-25 years old, full of energy and vigour, brought to the cancer institute in Kiev just after the explosion. As we are told in the voice over, they had no idea what had happened to them and played and fooled around like young men do but without any description or representation of the medical details we are told simply, 'They quietly disappeared from life'. The horror behind these simple words is perhaps beyond representation. With this kind of material the wisdom of Fairskye's approach becomes evident.

The images speak of the absence of people but their voices assure us that they endure the dangers of an irradiated landscape, a danger to which the title alludes. It lies beneath a ruined structure and under a blanket of snow and the promise of a future mega structure that will buy another few decades of time before the 200 tons of radioactive material in the core will need to be removed. Of the forms of precarity this situation disperses — the water table beneath Reactor #4, the thin line of defence to the rivers of Ukraine provided by the Kiev Reservoir, the snow, the built environment, human bodies, there is another less urgent perhaps but equally contingent notion in play in the images themselves, the precarity of the art work in a situation so historically over determined.

What place does the image have in this ruined post human space? What function can an artwork have in this context? Is it to record, to recall, to question?

The title also invokes for me one of the late Jacques Derrida's phrases about the making of art, particularly about the sense of experiment involved in the making of something unforeseen and new, how does one know if its finished, if the final edit is the right one, if the image is complete? In describing 'l'échéance précaire de l'oeuvre' (the precarious deadline or maturity of the work of art) he calls forth the radical sense of uncertainty within the very structure of an artwork which attempts to open up a terrain and to trigger an unknowable process for a viewer.

In *Precarious* the quiet of the winter landscape permeates the images but they speak at the same time of the unlikely endurance of nature and people. In the year of the meltdown at Fukushima they provoke some reflection, not only on the nuclear question, which is everywhere in the public discourse, but also on the status of the image to both reassure and to trouble the way we think about a disaster as fundamental as a tear in the fabric of the natural world.

Edward Scheer
Academic/writer, Sydney 2011

Front & Back: *Pripyat town* 2011 from *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*
Inside: *Apartments* 2011 from *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*
Reactor #4 2011 from *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*

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