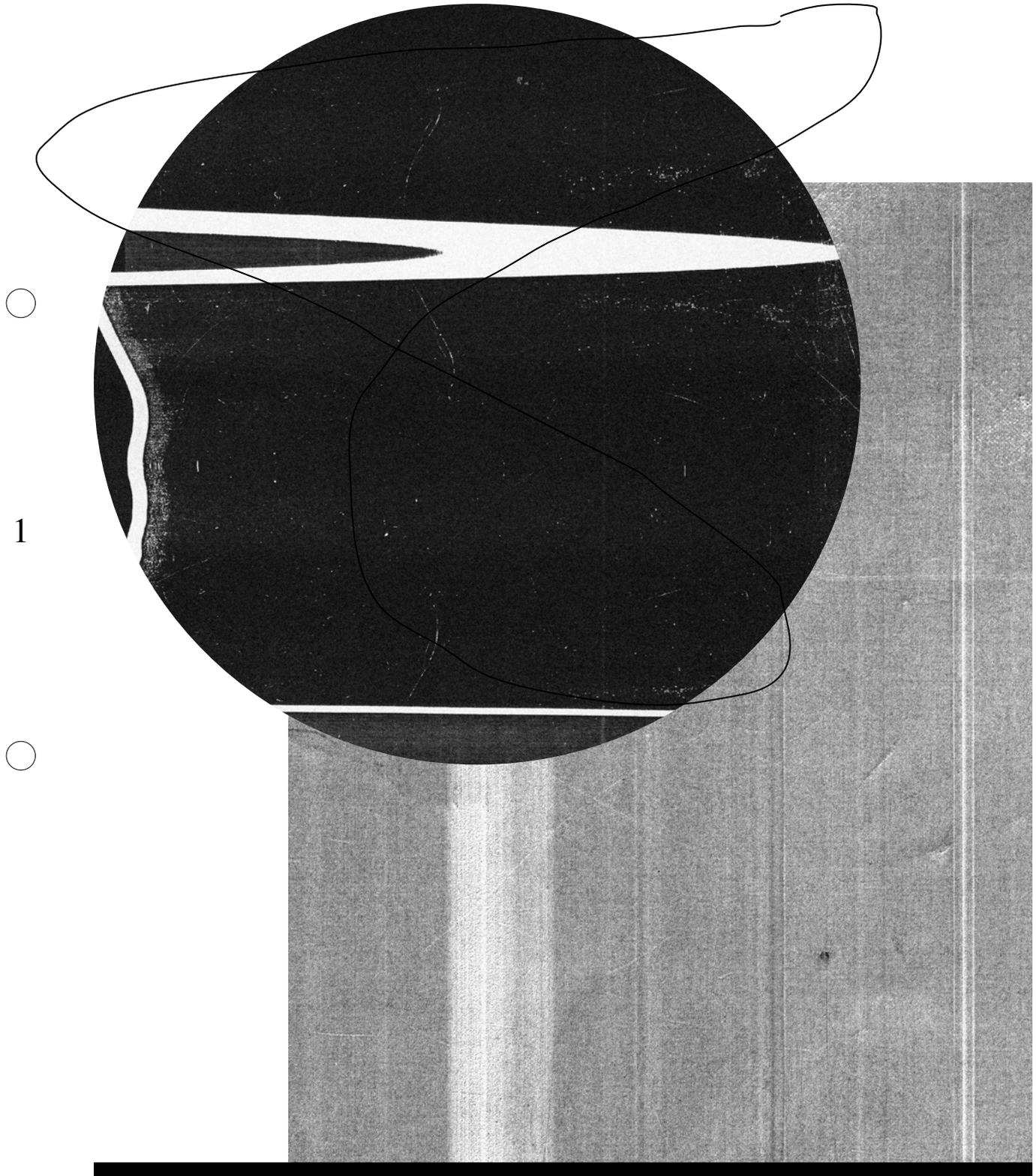


IT'S
IN THE AIR
FOR YOU AND ME



an Essay on
Art and Radioactivity



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Text by Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou
Editorial Coordination by Danai Giannoglou
Graphic Design by Bend



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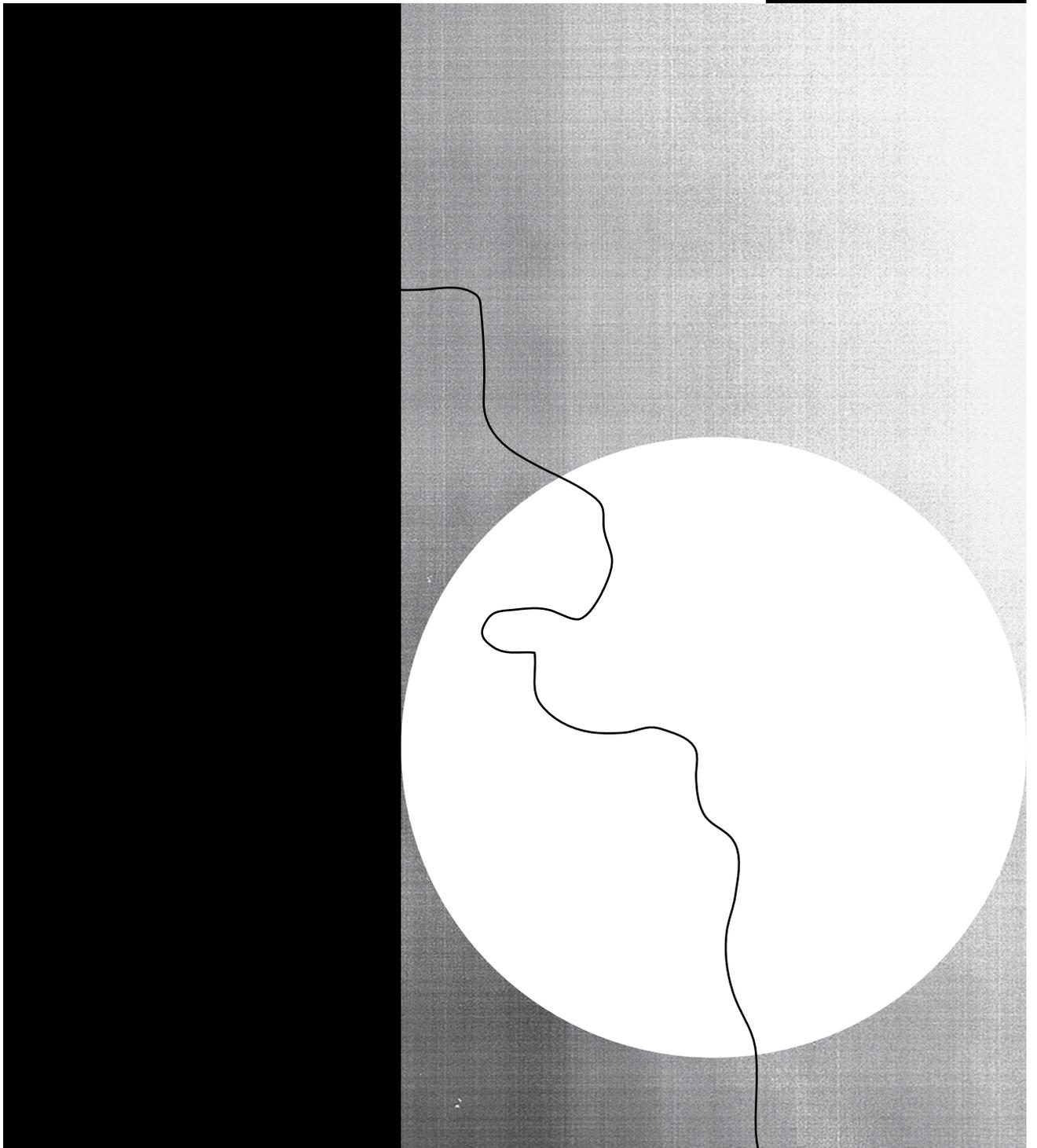


●● This is an essay about art, radioactivity, and ambivalence. It looks at the ambivalent relation of art and radioactivity, but also at the possibly ambivalent nature of one's experience of radioactivity. While great significance has been invested in the bomb, I turn to the notion of ambivalence as an interruption of the sublime visuality that characterizes nuclear images. The artworks discussed address radioactivity in indirect or circuitous ways—radioactivity takes prosaic yet ambivalent forms, whether in food, in a family excursion, or in a walk in the park. These artists probe ways of rendering it “sensible” and accounting for the manifold forms it weaves into the tissue of everyday life—for some more than others.

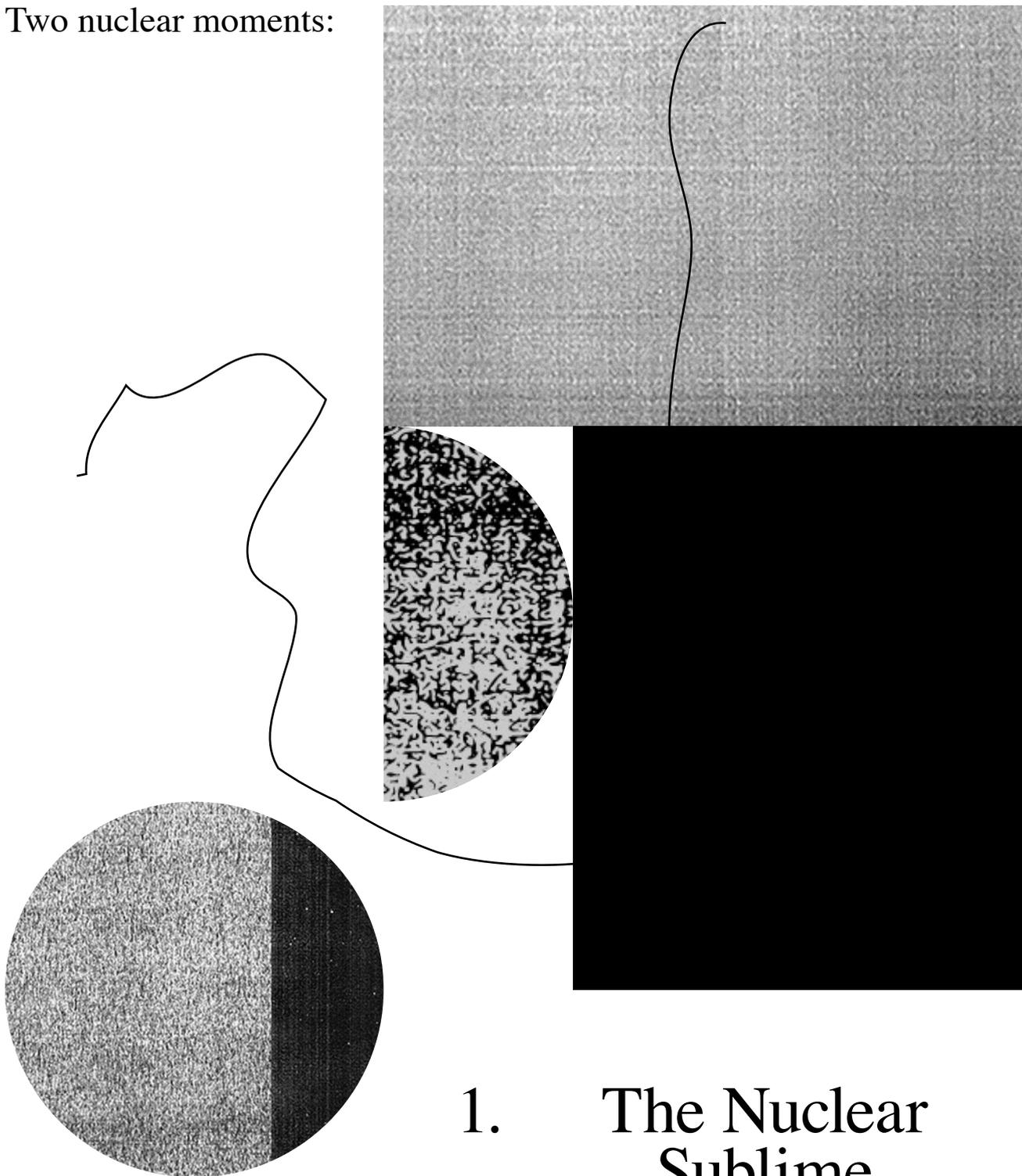
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Two nuclear moments:



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1. The Nuclear Sublime

In 1982 Michael Heizer proclaimed, “The H-bomb, that’s the ultimate sculpture.”¹ This bold assertion epitomizes the rhetoric of what came to be called the nuclear sublime, a term describing the very image of nuclear apocalypse: **the mushroom cloud**. In this period, nuclear catastrophe signaled the “end of everything,” a possibility vividly illustrated by atomic mushrooms looming over landscapes. The nuclear sublime brings reasoning to a standstill due to the awe and scale of the atomic spectacle. Doubt becomes incompatible with one’s experience of said spectacle—its sublimity is possible only when the viewer is safely sheltered in a detached gaze.

2. Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?

Thirty-two years after Heizer's statement, in 2014, Japanese performance artist Ei Arakawa and his brother served soup to art-goers at Frieze Art Fair in London. Hardly a radical idea among art connoisseurs, there was an apocalyptic twist: the soup contained vegetables grown in Fukushima. Living in New York during the mediatic aftermath of the nuclear meltdown made the Arakawa brothers feel distant from the event itself, and serving soup was a way to bridge this gap. Instead of attempting to visualize radioactivity, they demonstrated that radioactive toxicity could constitute a **permanent presence in everyday life.**



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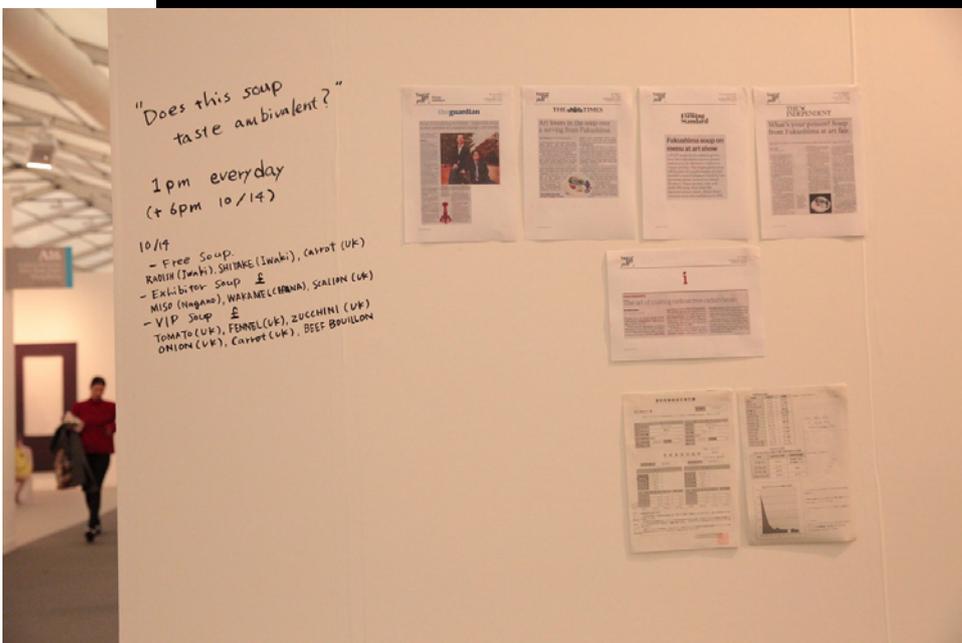
I. UNITED BROTHERS with Miwako Arakawa, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, Frieze Live at Frieze Art Fair, London, October 14 - 18, 2014. Photograph: Tomoo Arakawa

There is a veritable abyss between Arakawa's performance and Heizer's statement outlined above. The nuclear sublime delivers dramatic spectacle, whereas the soup intimates a mundane event. On the one hand, Heizer's pronouncement that the H-bomb is the ultimate sculpture found fertile ground in the arid landscape of Nevada, in the raw materiality of the atomic desert that bred his monumental earthworks. On the other hand, Arakawa's performance can be read as a form of resistance to the falsehood of distance promised by the nuclear sublime as spectacle. Not surprisingly, potential soup eaters at Frieze hesitated to take a bowl. Despite the Arakawa brothers assuring people the soup was safe to consume, uncertainty saturated the crowd. This indecisiveness lies at the core of the veiled forms radioactivity disguises itself in. **It speaks to the uncertainty inherent in radiation itself.** The visitor's unease introduces the ambivalences of an embodied nuclear experience, one that is experienced on actual nuclear sites and their surroundings, away from posh art spaces. In a quintessential gesture of relational aesthetics, you are not looking at the art but are part of it. Distance compresses. **"Radioactivity is in the air for you and me,"** as Kraftwerk hummed in 1975 in a song that today roars with foreboding and captures the dubious aftermath of nuclear power.²

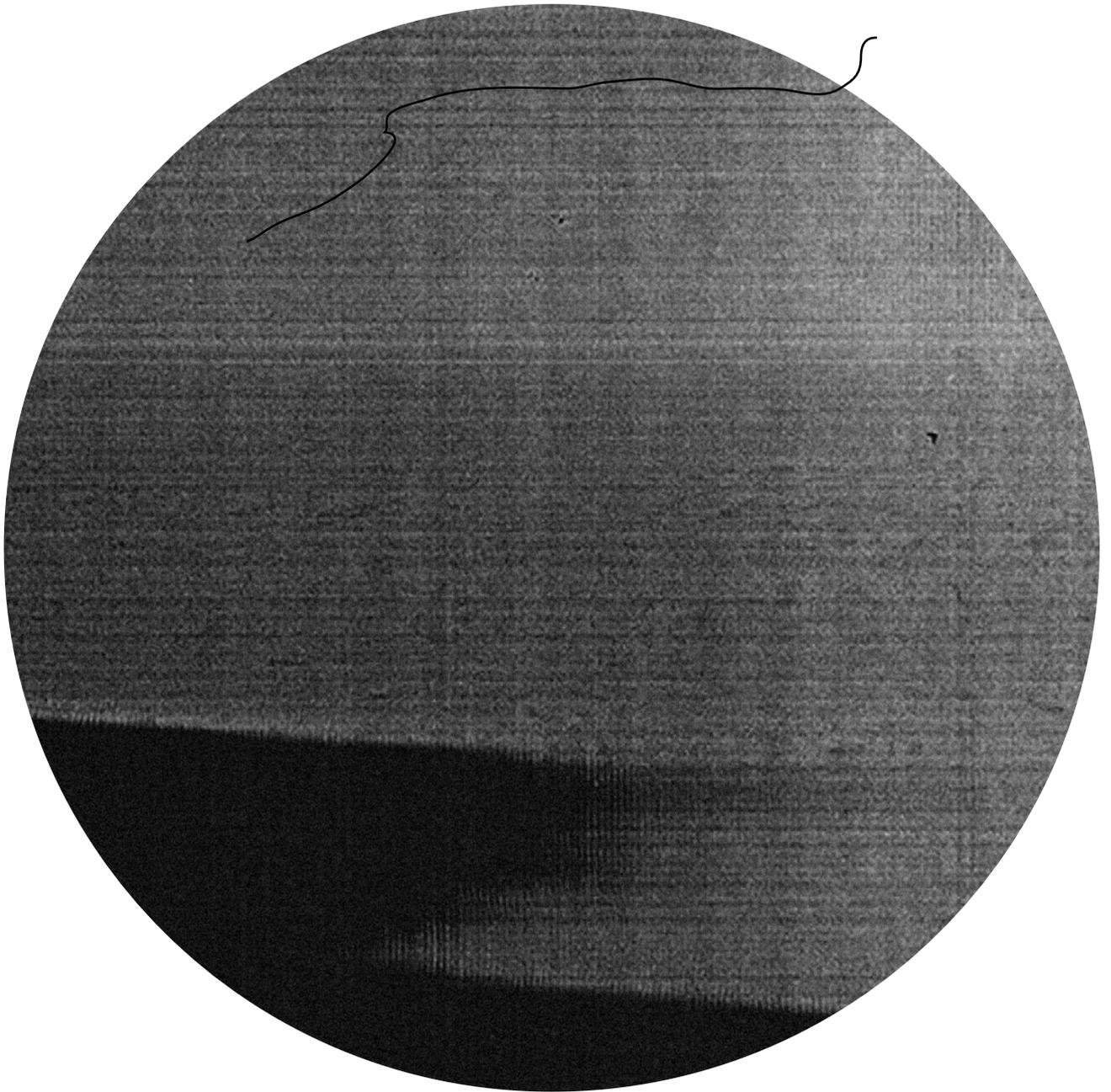
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II. UNITED BROTHERS with Miwako Arakawa, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, Frieze Live at Frieze Art Fair, London, October 14 - 18, 2014. Photograph: Tomoo Arakawa



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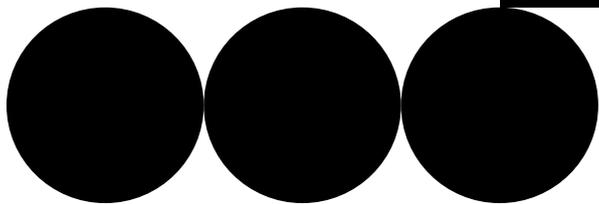
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III. UNITED BROTHERS with Miwako Arakawa, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, Frieze Live at Frieze Art Fair, London, October 14 - 18, 2014. Photograph: Tomoo Arakawa

The notion of the “nuclear sublime” was coined in 1984 by literary and cultural theorist Frances Ferguson. Ferguson was pondering the absence of nuclear disaster in the list of calamities covered by her home insurance; everything seemed to be there except for the sudden and blinding end that nuclear apocalypse stood for throughout the Cold War.³ Nuclear catastrophe is not quite a *confrontable* hazard. Since Heizer’s totalizing imaginary, we have come a long way to an art fair soup kitchen. By complicating the political and artistic valences of the nuclear sublime, a Fukushima vegetable soup attempts to confront radioactivity’s intangible qualities. What registers at first as a frivolous performance unfolds into a refusal of spectacular images, gesturing to the confluence of the nuclear, the quotidian, and oozing ambivalence. Let us leave the soup for now, and start with ambiguity in the “atomic desert” of the 1990s.



Clouds Of Nuclear Doubt

Through a revisionist performative action, the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang overhauled the aesthetics of the atomic bomb in his series *The Century of the Mushroom Clouds* (1996). Visiting different places linked to the bomb, the artist detonated handheld explosive devices that spawned pint-size mushroom clouds. The locations of the performances and their attendant significations varied: from the Nevada Test Site to New York to the Great Salt Lake, where Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) quietly disintegrates. The artist documented himself in action, mostly from the back, and the resulting pictures have since circulated in manifold formats, from postcards to large photographs for gallery display. Rather than replicating the explosion as a moment blasted into a state of exception, Cai literally downsized the event and took up an ambivalent position that was not that of the perpetrator—his explosive act was innocent, after all—but nor was it that of the victim. This awkward space between culprit and victim was suddenly occupied by the artist himself, inducing ambiguity and making room to wonder about the artist’s part in that story.

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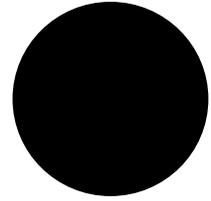
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Michael Heizer, *Double Negative*, 1969–70. 240,000-ton displacement of rhyolite and sandstone. View from Google Earth.



11 One of Cai's performance locations was Michael Heizer's seminal *Double Negative* (1969–70), in which the drift toward monumentality and destruction is unquestionable, as it consists of two deep cuts in Mormon Mesa in southern Nevada. Heizer displaced 240,000 tons of rock and earth. The geological crack runs far and wide: it has a width of nine meters and a depth of fifteen, and extends for about five hundred meters in length. Photographs of *Double Negative*, as is the case with most major works of Land Art, are generally aerial views. This "view from nowhere" has been the prevailing documentation format of most monumental works. Aesthetically speaking, the aerial views of *Double Negative* look very similar to the craters engraved on the soil surface of the Nevada Test Site (NTS), also documented from aerial viewpoints. Yet, as Heizer's ambitious quote reminds us, *Double Negative* is **haunted by the atomic bomb's sublime visuality** in ways that exceed its documentation patterns. One cannot help but think of the not-so-distant NTS and the thousand or so nuclear tests that were performed on, below, and beyond its grounds. Further, Heizer's ongoing *Complex I* (1972–ongoing), a colossal structure near the NTS, speaks to the artist's nuclear predilection as well.



Cai Guo-Qiang

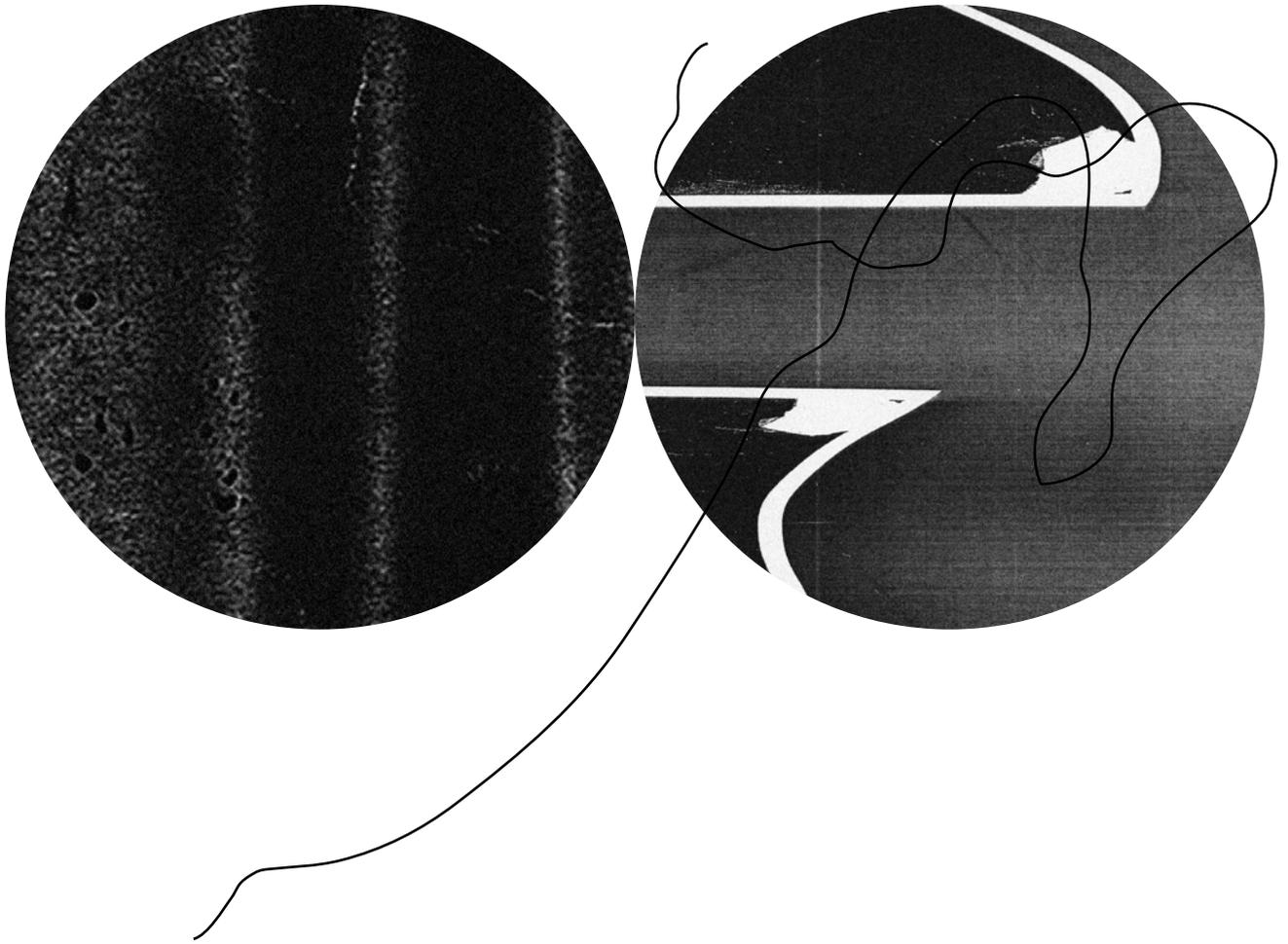
The Century with Mushroom Clouds: Project for the Twentieth Century (Mormon Mesa) 1996. Realised at Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* 1969–70, Mormon Mesa, Overton, Nevada, 14 February 1996. Gunpowder and cardboard tube. Photograph : Hiro Ihara



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Cai's blasts toyed with the sense of scale and wonder of the gargantuan enterprise of *Double Negative*. The monumental site suddenly became agitated through an act of playfulness that eerily evoked memories of atomic bombs being dropped over cities. Cai's transitory intervention exposed *Double Negative's* previously invulnerable position to uncertainty by messing with the logics of macho monumentality. *The Century of the Mushroom Clouds* places Heizer's work in a different narrative than the one favored by art history. **It contaminates it with unwanted political meanings.** Emily Eliza Scott has pointed to the importance of reading canonical Land artworks through the lens of technological and military wastelands, such as the NTS, rather than that of sublime monumentality. The apparent blankness of such places is particularly prone to abstraction and projection, she writes, leading to the desert coming to embody potential nuclear disaster.⁴ To be clear, Heizer was not merely mimicking nuclear science. Yet where he saw aesthetic possibility, Cai made room for what Hal Foster has called a "parallax" that involves "the displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its





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observer.”⁵ This means that the framing of a past object relies on our position in the present. The mental image of an observer changing position becomes particularly relevant in our case: radioactivity is approached from unsteady ground, viewed with ambivalence, evading safe distances and vast scales.

Against such a process of abstraction, though, Cai’s fleeting disturbance complicates the viewing experience: at first sight the faint plume from the explosion *does* look like a mushroom cloud, but it is clearly too small to be one. On the one hand, the figure of the artist next to the white puff—importantly, on human scale—grounds the bomb in the realm of the real, transforming the location of *Double Negative* into a site of historical confrontation. On the other hand, its circulation as a postcard locates it in the sphere of the banal, mellowing the heaviness of the historical precedent. *The Century of the Mushroom Clouds* quietly alerts us that the long aftermath of 1945 is still around, in forms equally traumatic and dire, even if invisible.

Beyond The Nuclear Unseen



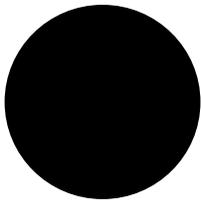
Zoe Strauss, *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)*, 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.

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Like many toxic industrial processes, radioactivity evades human vision. And like many contaminants, this invisibility has functioned to the benefit of the nuclear industry. When there is nothing to see, there is nothing to prove, rendering the establishment of a causal connection impossible. In other words: when invisibility holds sway, ambiguity rushes in. The practice of the US photographer Zoe Strauss dwells in that ambiguous threshold opened up by radioactivity's insidious nature. Strauss deploys a documentary gaze that, although reminiscent of recognized genres—landscape or portrait photography—does not deliver easily legible pictures. Strauss has spent much time in the US Southwest, an area that has been essential to the atomic project, from the testing of the first atomic bomb at the Trinity site in the New Mexico desert to the now-defunct Rocky Flats Plant nuclear weapons facility in Colorado and innumerable uranium mines. In photographing people who live or work in those places, and the landscapes that surround them, she works at the intersection of two surfaces—of the earth and of the human body—whether her portraits

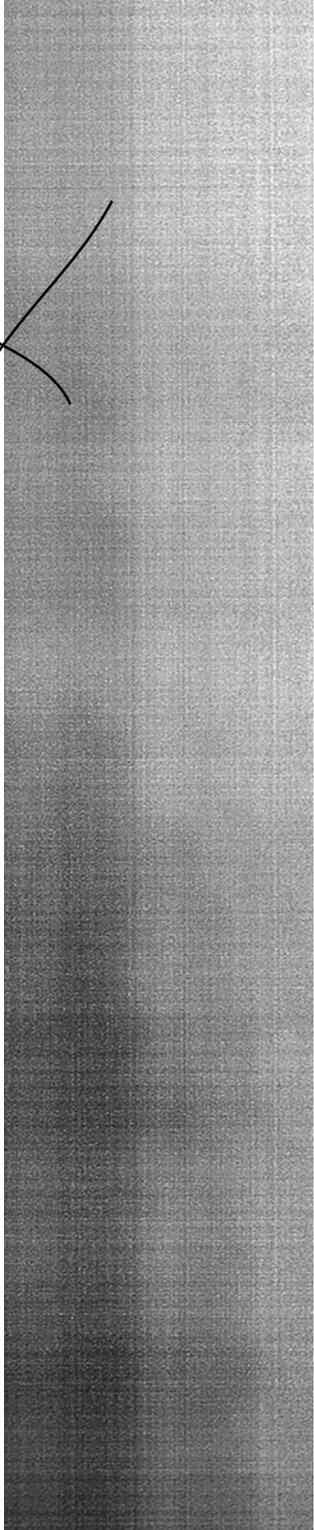
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are of illness, family touristic jaunts in former atomic test sites, or scarred landscapes. A thread of ambivalence weaves throughout the images. In lieu of the hopeless spectacularity of the bomb, Strauss renders its ambiguous legacy today: for some, a perverse tourism destination, for others, a site of scarred existence.



Most of the photographs depict people in what seem to be habitual sites and situations, but trivial elements suggest otherwise. One picture from 2006 shows two women posing in an uncontrived manner in a barren landscape. The caption, *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)*, informs us that this outing took place at the Trinity site, where the first atomic bomb was detonated as an experiment preparing for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a month later in 1945. Once a year the site is open to tourists willing to engage in this tactless pilgrimage. These particular women, however, seem oblivious to this violent history. The ambiguity here looms in a piece of information that lies beyond the photographic frame, but this is not necessarily the case in other pictures from the series. In pursuit of the intimate affinities between bodies, the earth, and the atmosphere, Strauss has also focused on the scars left on people and landscapes by decades of nuclear testing and weapons production. In conjunction with her photographic work, she conducted interviews with individuals who self-identify as “downwinders.” The term refers to inhabitants of towns near test sites where from 1945 to 1963 (the year aboveground atomic tests were banned) radioactive fallout sprinkled down and crept into bodies and landscapes. Strauss portrays its ubiquitous presence, emphasizing the critical reality of the phrase “radioactivity is in the air.”

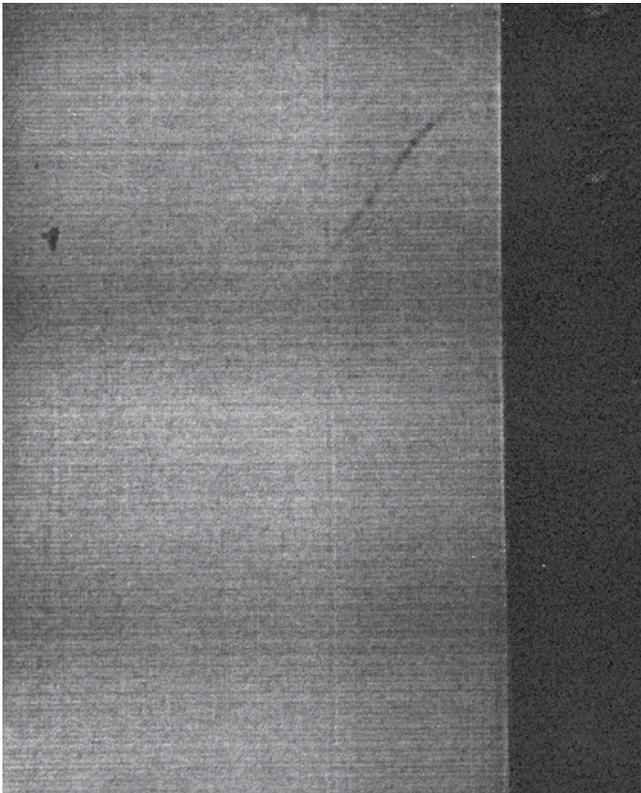




Zoe Strauss, *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)*, 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artist



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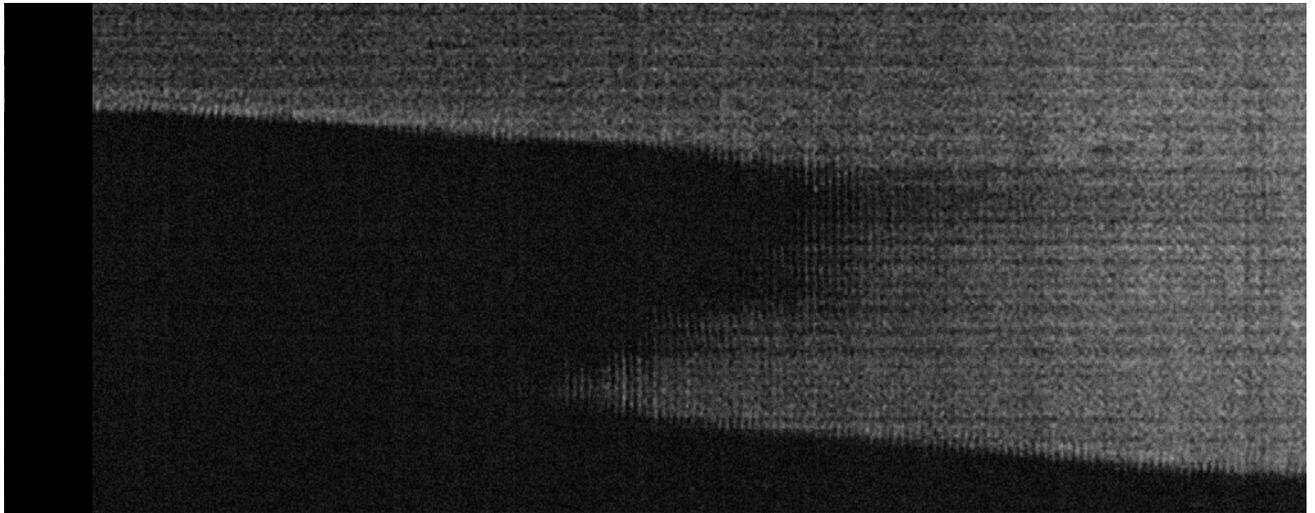
Marked Landscapes,
Scarred Bodies





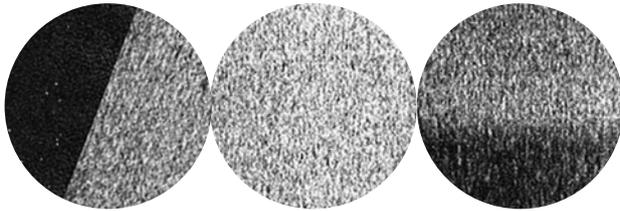
Zoe Strauss, *Charlie Wolf (Rocky Flats, CO)*, 2009. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

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In conversing with downwinders and former workers in the nuclear infrastructure, it became clear to Strauss that, for some people, radioactivity has already been in the air for too long. Her work on the nuclear landscapes of the Southwest thus attempts not to fall prey to the spectacularity of nuclear disaster, and instead grapple with the veiled and at times mundane manifestations of radioactivity. One example is at Rocky Flats, a major manufacturer of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, where cancer levels among workers and inhabitants are high and access to compensation has been insufficient.

One pair of pictures juxtaposes a close-up of a man's head and a barren landscape. Both of them are scarred by nuclear testing, complementing and amplifying each other, epitomizing the wound-inducing operations of radioactivity. In *White Sands (Trinity Site, New Mexico)* (2006)—now devoid of sightseers—the earth's surface appears hilly, unequal, traversed by cleavages blanketed in a weedy texture. Although we cannot be sure that the fissures are related to nuclear testing, the scar analogy throws into sharp relief the uncertain presence of radioactivity in the image. The juxtaposition of this ambivalent landscape with the portrait of a man, *Charlie Wolf (Rocky Flats, CO)* (2009), partially resolves that ambivalence. Here the camera zooms in on a surgical wound resulting from occupational illness at Rocky Flats. The man is pressing his scar with his fingers, drawing attention to it while simultaneously transforming the skin's surface into an indirect referent to the landscape. The picture's light is sumptuous in contrast to that of the landscape, allowing for a very detailed representation of the head's surface, pushing us closer to certainty about what we are looking at.



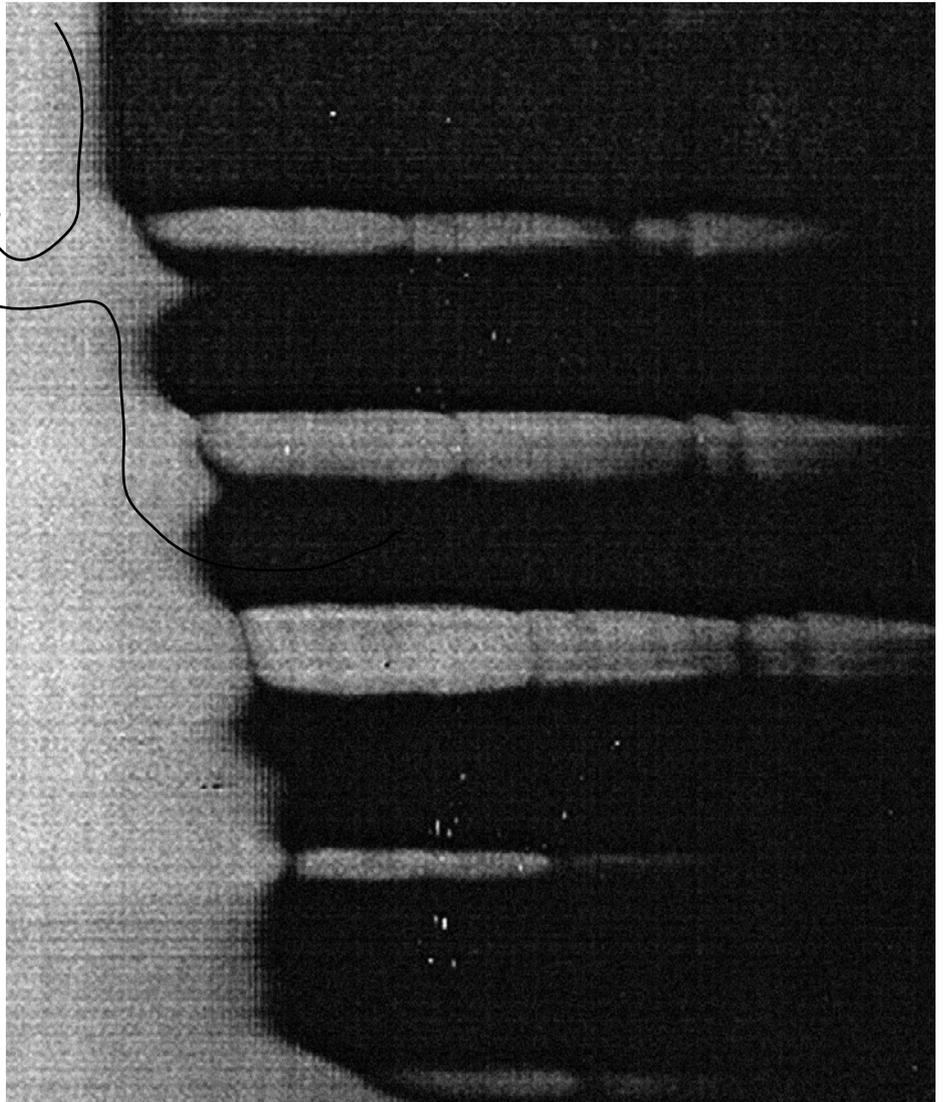
Perhaps indirectly, the picture picks up on a repertoire of images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors. Taken for scientific documentation purposes, these feature close-ups of injuries and focus so closely on the ravaged skin that the identities of the victims are usually lost. In Strauss's work, however, full context is amply given, and the disclosure of the locations evades the injured body's objectification—something also evidenced in the imaginative continuation of the scarred earth's surface onto that of human skin. In another picture, a breast cancer survivor and a former worker at Rocky Flats, holds up a document issued by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health that reads "No Mutation Detected." Strauss's staunchly unsentimental lens neither victimizes the photographed subjects nor tempers the burden of radioactivity. Rather, the series' distinct ambivalence creates a zone of possibility where nuclear ghosts are dislodged from the impersonal glossary of policy and the medical sciences to enter the status of the ongoing, the not-quite-resolved.

Strauss's practice shows how nuclear disasters do not disappear in an atomic flash. Their toxic persistence is slow and unfolds in manifold realms: temporal and spatial, emotional and traumatic, bodily and environmental. Drawing our focus away from the spectacle of the bomb, such artworks provoke an engagement with a different array of themes that refuse the aesthetic possibilities of the nuclear sublime. They yield questions around radiation-induced illness, the unequal distribution of toxicity, as well as labor and gender. This observation becomes all the more terrifying as the damage done by radiation is often unquantifiable, and thus can all too easily remain undefined. For the woman holding the insurance policy document, the experience of radioactivity is diametrically opposed to the objectifying jargon of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

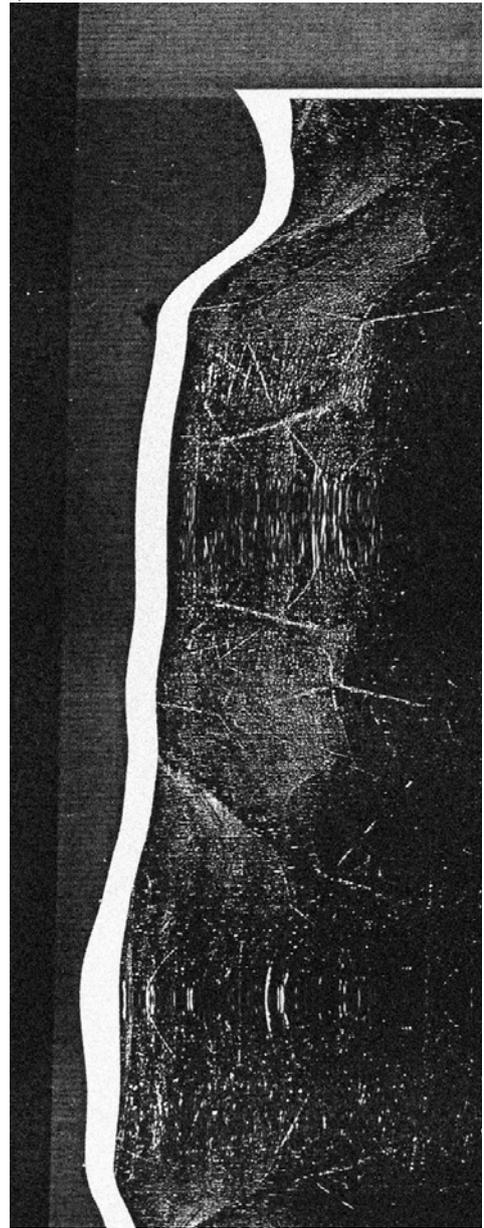
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Disrupting (Nuclear) Monuments



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Film Still from *Aldona*, dir. by Emilija Škarnulytė, 2013. 13 minutes, HD single-channel video.
Courtesy of the artist.

Strauss's practice frames radioactivity both urgently and intimately. Her pictures are not characterized by nuclear matters in visible ways—a gesture that signifies the deep vulnerability at play, both in artistic terms and in terms of the depicted subjects. The Lithuanian artist Emilija Škarnulytė also reveals forms of vulnerability in her video *Aldona* (2013), here varnished with unexpected tenderness. The piece frames a grim but affectionate narrative in which the experience of radioactivity is palpable in familiar and historical terms. It shows the artist's grandmother, Aldona, immersed in household tasks: peeling apples, arranging her kitchen, listening to the radio in her home in southeastern Lithuania. But she is blind. In the summer of 1986 she lost her sight, something doctors attributed to the Chernobyl catastrophe of a few months earlier. Her body bears the mark of nuclear history, quietly carrying it into the present. In the film, Aldona makes her way in a vivid sonic environment; the film beautifully reproduces the surrounding acoustics, mainly birds and the occasional rustling associated with domestic tasks. In the context of nuclear history, sound has its own significance, for instance the audio detection of radioactivity thanks to the infamous clicking of the Geiger counter. Although this is not thematized in the film, ambient noises do take central stage, particularly in the absence of sight.

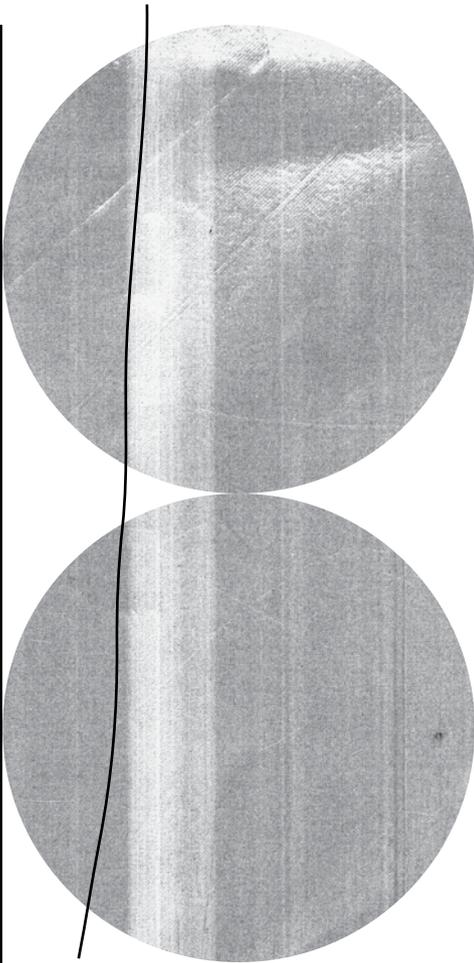


Film Still from *Aldona*, dir. by Emilija Škarnulytė, 2013. 13 minutes, HD single-channel video. Courtesy of the artist.

Receding further from the realm of visuality, Emilija Škarnulytė film introduces yet another sense: touch. Aldona's daily routine includes a stroll to Grūtas Park, a leafy garden punctuated by imposing sculptures from the Soviet era. The piece resists rendering the nuclear monuments into images and transforms them into sensory experiences. Her promenade involves an unusual ritual: groping the large-scale figures of Marx, Stalin, and Lenin in a presumed act of recognition. These are monuments to a dubious past that, instead of being bluntly rejected, are caressed in what becomes a form of emancipating ambivalence.⁶ Tampering with the monuments is indeed rife with ambivalence, as it is presented as an act that meticulously bandages over monumentality. **Škarnulytė's camera documents a process that is gentle and moving, broaching a world of extreme violence with disarming intimacy.**

Unlike the visual sense through which monuments are usually experienced, the physical touch that occurs at the meeting of hand and stone uncovers a compounded ambivalence: Aldona's gesture is ambivalent, and the statues' status today is even more so. In one of the shots she is moving toward a statue of Lenin, engaging in what might be mistaken for an act of accidental admiration. At first glance, the austere sculpture's surfaces seem unaffected by Aldona running her hands over them. This eccentric ritual, however, throws into sharp relief the apparent passivity and indifference of the stone monuments. In the film, touch emerges as a sense that is by definition mutual and mitigates the disconnected viewpoint of the monuments, opening up the possibility for mutuality: Aldona touches the sculptures and the sculptures touch her. Aldona exposes herself to the sculptures and the sculptures expose themselves to her. Aldona is vulnerable, and so are the sculptures. In articulating the imprint of Chernobyl on a body in contact with monumentality, the film offers an alternative way to engage with solidity. What arises from Škarnulytė's piece is an attentive encounter with the nuclear, one that becomes disentangled from the past and comes to inhabit an ambivalent present through the woman's body. The rigid temporality of monumental scale is domesticated, rendered oblique, indirect.

Attentive Encounters



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Where one violence occurs, the smoke caused obscures another somewhere else: bombs, borders, the border as a bomb dropped into people's lives, and all the deadly effects lingering, lingering.

—Lou Cornum,
“The Irradiated International,” 2018⁷

Nuclear disaster lingers and drifts. It cannot be contained in bombastic images and bold quotes. The artists outlined in this essay read the nuclear in new ways and apprehend it through its inherent ambivalence. Importantly, their work is not about creating new visual vocabularies but about investigating and illuminating what is already around us, in food, in bodies, in homes. If we are seeking to understand the nuclear story, the everyday, in all its ambivalence, is one place we can begin. With this in mind, the artists discussed dare to take up that ambivalent space between the (radioactive) world and work to find resonance in the tissue of the quotidian. Ei Arakawa and Škarnulytė's pay attention to the nuclear concealed in the harmless facade of the mundane. Zoe Strauss attentively investigates a reality existing beyond the visible realm. It's all about encounters and attention, holding space for ambivalence—for the possibility of the doubt Heizer chose to smother into silence.



Notes

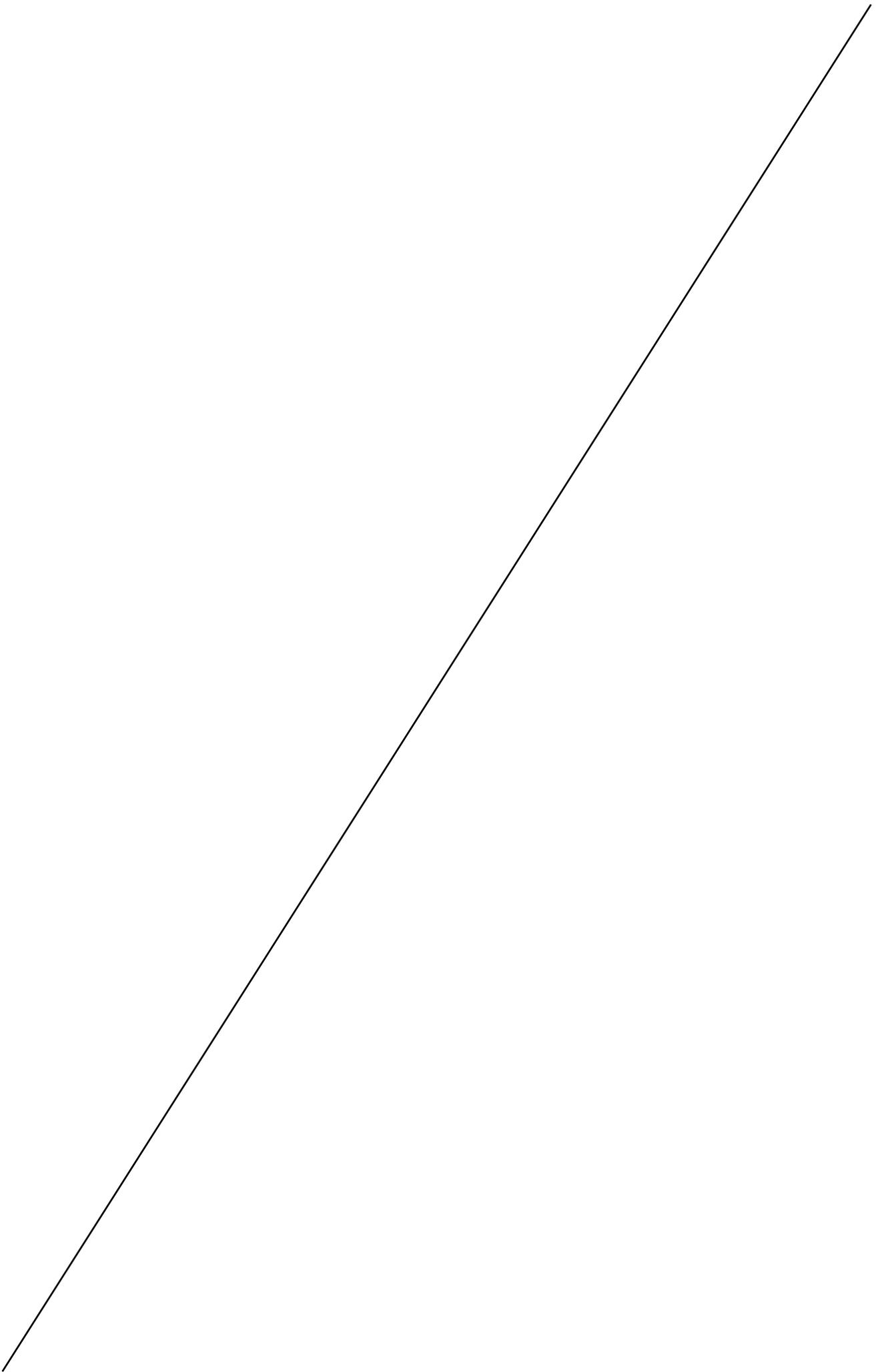
1. Gabriel Bertram, “Works of Earth,” *Horizon*, no. 1 (January–February 1982): 42–48.
2. The title of the essay derives from the lyrics of “Radioactivity”, a track from Kraftwerk’s 1975 “Radio-Activity” album. The group has performed different versions at various anti-nuclear events, such as the “Stop Sellafield” concert in 1992, commemorations of the Chernobyl incident and more recently the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, where alternate lyrics were sung in Japanese. The track famously features Morse code signals spelling out “radioactivity”.
3. Frances Ferguson, “The Nuclear Sublime,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 4–10.
4. Emily Eliza Scott, “Desert Ends,” in *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, ed. Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 66–85.
5. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xii.
6. Lithuania was under Soviet rule at the time of the Chernobyl catastrophe and suffered environmental damage from the ensuing fallout. Additionally, some months after the event, the country had to send a workforce to support cleanup operations at the site, and they lacked sufficient protection or medication for their exposure to the high levels of radiation.
7. Lou Cornum, *The Irradiated International*, 2018, non-paginated. Text published at the occasion of the Future Perfect conference held at the Data & Society Research Institute in 2018.

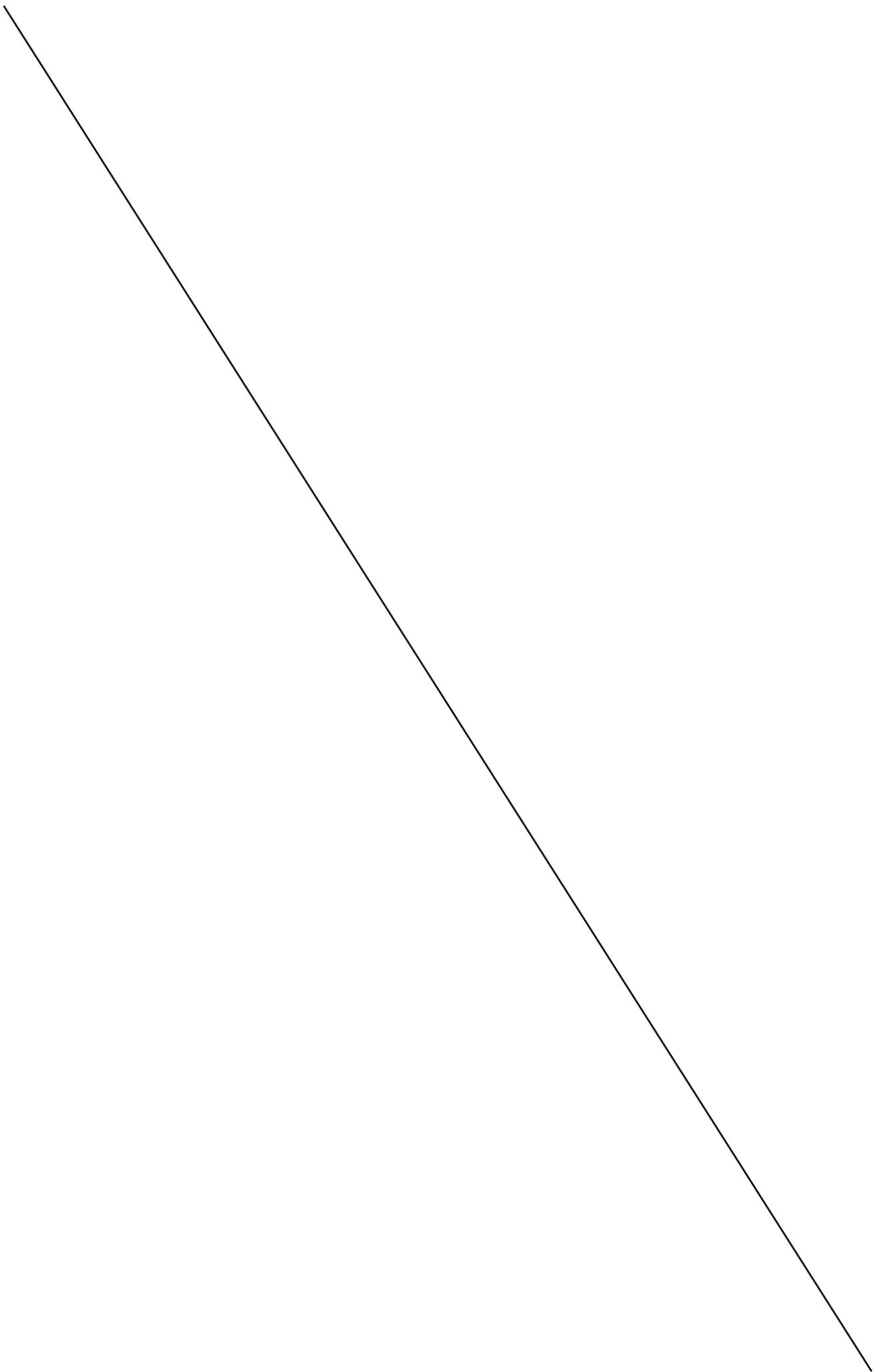


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I am grateful to Danai Giannoglou and Vasilis Papageorgiou for their invitation, for creating such an inciting editorial framework as well as attentively accompanying the writing process. I also extend gratitude to Stella Pekiaridi for the Greek translation, Theofilos Traboulis for his thorough editing, and Viktor Gogas from Bend for pulling off the most radiant of graphic designs. Heartfelt thanks go to Ei Arakawa, Emilija Škarnulytė, and Zoe Strauss for providing images, as well as to Alison Sperling for lending a hand in this process. Finally, I wish to thank Ruby de Vos for our ongoing conversation on all things nuclear, which helped shaping up this essay.





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Enterprise Projects & EP Journal

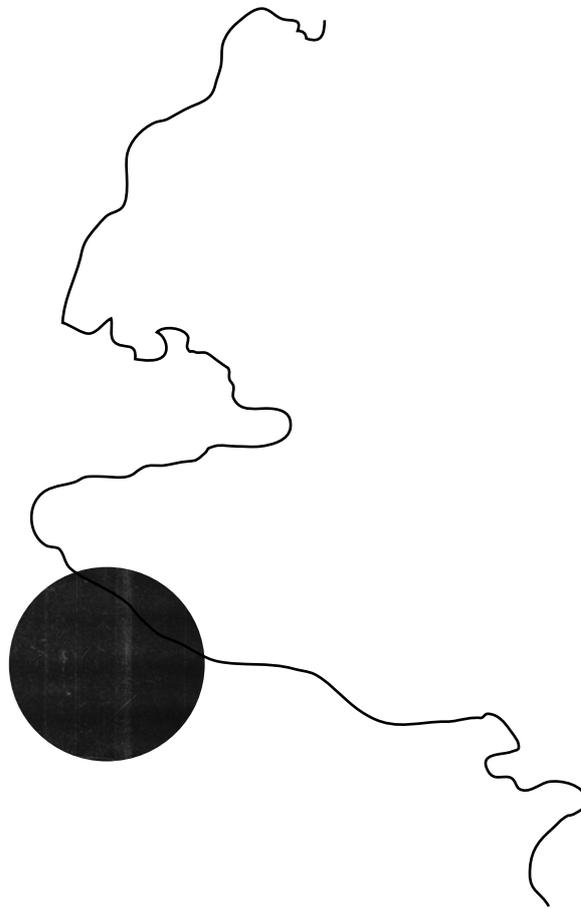
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Enterprise Projects is an Athens based project by curator Danai Giannoglou and artist Vasilis Papageorgiou. This venture aims at experimenting and conversing; experimenting with the curatorial proposal, artistic creation, self-organized function, and conversing with the artistic scene, the Athenian audience and the place itself, which houses the project. As a structure Enterprise Projects has been functioning independently and periodically since September 2015 in Ampelokipoi, Athens.

In 2018 Enterprise Projects founded EP Journal, a publishing initiative in the form of an online publication of newly commissioned theoretical and research essays, in both Greek and English. The reader can browse online, download or print each issue, presented with a design that reflects the needs of every text.



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