



"The air is fresh. The sky is clear. Much better than the Donbass," says Sergei, who was a coal-miner back in the dirty east near Russia until he moved here and bought a wooden village house for the equivalent of 400 US dollars.

Sergei points to his throat, indicating the asthma that is going to kill him sooner than whatever it is that lies invisible in the soil and water and trees and frogs of this burbling landscape near the deserted town of Prypyat.

POST ATOMIC

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ALISON SPERLING AND
ANNA VOLKMAR WITH A VISUAL RESPONSE BY DONALD WEBER

Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou and Ruby de Vos

From 2005 until 2007, Canadian photographer Donald Weber spent time around the Chernobyl region in Ukraine, documenting the area and its inhabitants. The result of this is the photographic series *Post Atomic (2005-2007)*. On a late November afternoon, Alison Sperling, a post-doctoral fellow at the ICI (Institute for Cultural Inquiry) in Berlin, and Anna Volkmar, a PhD candidate at Leiden University, engaged in a conversation on these photographs, which functioned as an impulse for a broader reflection on the nuclear era and its conceptual challenges. Faced with a phenomenon that resists comprehension, Sperling and Volkmar deal with ways of challenging popular framings of the nuclear, especially in the so-called 'exclusion zones', through different theoretical tools and objects of study. What kind of artistic practices can unshroud the complexity usually associated with the nuclear in popular imaginaries? What potential does the (non-)human body hold to broach the disturbing effects of the nuclear legacy? How can we face and responsibly address the ethical stakes that come with living *in* and *with* the nuclear, more than 30 years after the Chernobyl disaster?

We asked Weber to provide a visual response to the conversation through a selection of photographs from the *Post Atomic* series. The photographs included here, in combination with the captions that contextualize them, function as a third voice in this discussion about Chernobyl, toxicity, the nuclear human and non-human body, and the role of art and culture in raising awareness about the nuclear condition.

Kunstlicht (Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou & Ruby de Vos): To begin, could you tell us more about the projects you are working on right now?

Alison Sperling: My current project, *Nuclear Afterlives*, is a part of a two-year project at the ICI in Berlin on the theme of *Errans Environ/s*, in which I am thinking through the always ongoing relationship between toxic and flourishing nature(s). How can 'Nature' be both toxic and flourishing at once? If we take toxicity, damage, or contamination as the state for most living and non-living beings, is a kind of 'toxic flourishing' possible in the Anthropocene and what does that look and feel like? The project looks to so-called 'exclusion zones' or 'zones of alienation', spaces marked by radiation due to nuclear plant disasters or places still bearing the marks of nuclear testing or nuclear warfare. I want to problematize the ways in which these places have been called a kind of 'nuclear wilderness' (a term proposed by Sharon Cram), where non-human life is often presented both in popular culture as well as in nuclear scholarship as toxic but adaptable, thriving in the spaces

where humans can no longer go.¹ I want to continue to probe the rhetoric of adaptability and survival in these contexts. What has the non-human got to say about these 'exclusion zones'? In order to answer this question I look at science fiction, but also at many dozens of articles about fauna and flora proliferating in 'exclusion zones'. My investment in questions of embodiment in the Anthropocene, are formed primarily through queer and feminist theory, and disability studies.

Anna Volkmar: In my research I ask how visual art helps us to 'muddle through' the nuclear condition. I am drawing on the work of Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz who suggest 'muddling through' as a way to navigate the complexity of what they call the techno-human condition, instead of mastering it.² When faced with the complexity that nuclear and other technologies generate — the earth system interacting with a nuclear reactor, producing a nuclear disaster, as we have witnessed in Japan for instance — there is no way we can totally master the situation. However, that does not mean we should not be held accountable for the technologies we produce and operate. That is why the idea of 'muddling through' sounds appealing to me: it accepts that there is a lot of ambiguity and complexity inherent in the nuclear context without using this as a pretext to not take responsibility for it. Art offers a suitable platform to experiment with this ambiguity since an artwork can accommodate contradicting perspectives without striving for a consensus; it is quite radical in that sense. So, I wonder how can art point us towards ways of 'muddling through'?

KL: Would you say that *Post Atomic* is such an example of 'muddling through'?

AV: *Post Atomic* is very different from the kind of photography that I have seen on the Chernobyl exclusion zone. In popular imagery, we usually see images of ruins, images that aesthetically construct wild nature (whatever that might be), populated by lots of animals of course. If humans are depicted, then it is usually the elderly that stayed behind. Informed by this kind of imagery, the idea of nature returning and reclaiming the site of man-made disasters has taken root in most popular, and some scholarly readings, of these places. I find this reading problematic, because it provokes the conclusion that no matter how badly we messed up the situation, nature strikes back and we are fine, theoretically. Aesthetically perhaps. In this popular imagery, you do not really see disease, you do not see suffering. In *Post Atomic*, however, you encounter communities just outside of the zone's borders with children (which surprised me a lot), young mothers, disability, drinking men, *stalkers* (they call themselves like that in reference to the homonymous film by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979) — people that disrupt the dominant representations of the exclusion zone. I also found his work interesting on a formal level, for its use of blur, situational irony, and humour.

¹ Shannon Cram, 'Wild and scenic wasteland: conservation politics in the nuclear wilderness', in: *Environmental Humanities*, 7:1 (2016), pp. 89-105.

² Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, *The Techno-Human Condition*, Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2011.



The year before the Chernobyl meltdown, most of the region's collective farms collapsed; agriculture was by far its largest employer. Then there came the fall of the Soviet Union, the transition to a market economy, recession, the mass closure of factories, and a government that has proved to be as inept and is it is unstable. Even if some of these illnesses are due to factors other than the accident, the ability of the country to confront these challenges has been severely compromised.



Dima Pokhil, 19, rests in a sauna. Pokhil suffers from muscular dystrophy, and finds his times in the sauna relaxing. A resident of the small eastern town of Zholtse Vody, Ukraine, Pokhil is just one of many residents who suffer from some form of disability due to its past – and present – as a source of uranium mining and enriching. With the country's growing appetite for nuclear energy, uranium is keeping Zholtse Vody alive even as it kills the people who live there.

AS: The series seems to be about a kind of daily survival of the human, be it, perhaps, in a new form or mode. Maybe Michelle Murphy's concept of 'alterlives' can be brought to bear on Weber's work.³ What does it mean to yoke the toxic body to ongoingness? In a lot of the accounts I have read about the various irradiated zones around the world, and I am thinking for instance of the well-known example of *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997) by Svetlana Alexievich, many of the survivors describe feeling like specimens, being treated like mere scientific evidence, objects of wonder or study as damaged bodies under scrutiny. I am more invested in thinking about what Murphy calls 'alterlives'.⁴ Murphy wants to move away from obsessively needing to diagnose, pathologize, quantify in numbers the effects of toxicity, sickness, disability. That is, living in the Anthropocene denotes, at least in part, to live with the molecular residues, the genetic changes caused by products of capitalism, militarism, colonialism, of all of these things that are very much tied to 'nuclearity' as Gabrielle Hecht's work points out.⁵ How do artistic approaches and responses to events like Chernobyl resist the quest for quantifiable scientific data as the only way to measure or represent toxicity not primarily (or at all) as a suffering but also, possibly, something else? *Afterlives* then, the title of my project, is kind of playing with the idea of Murphy of 'alterlives' about the ways in which radionuclides, in this case, live on.

AV: Would you say then that a change of representation is what we need? Do we just need to find a different language, a different image?

AS: I do not really know. In order to do what? I think that we need to continue to interrogate the tethering of science and technology to the ways in which we approach nuclear toxicity. There are so many things still unknown, things that will never be known about levels of toxicity, about low-level radiation, about inter-generational damage. So much that is simply not measurable or that we have not yet seen develop. And because of this, there are so many people who do not receive compensation for what they have gone through and continue to go through because of radiation dangers and sickness. I think the many urges to (artistically or literarily) represent these zones and these tragedies is in part a response to the impossibility to do so in other conventional forms of knowledge and study, like the hard sciences.

AV: I wonder, then, if it is not more useful to switch the perspective and make the viewer/the reader more sensible towards these kinds of framings. Especially when it comes to photography, as photographs are not really able to depict the biological health of an ecosystem. What we interpret as 'health' really is a certain iconography on which our eyes have been trained over more than hundreds of years, through painting and photography mainly. I wonder if it is more effective to change not *what* we depict, but

³ Michelle Murphy, 'Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations', in: *Cultural Anthropology* 32:4 (2017), pp. 494-503.

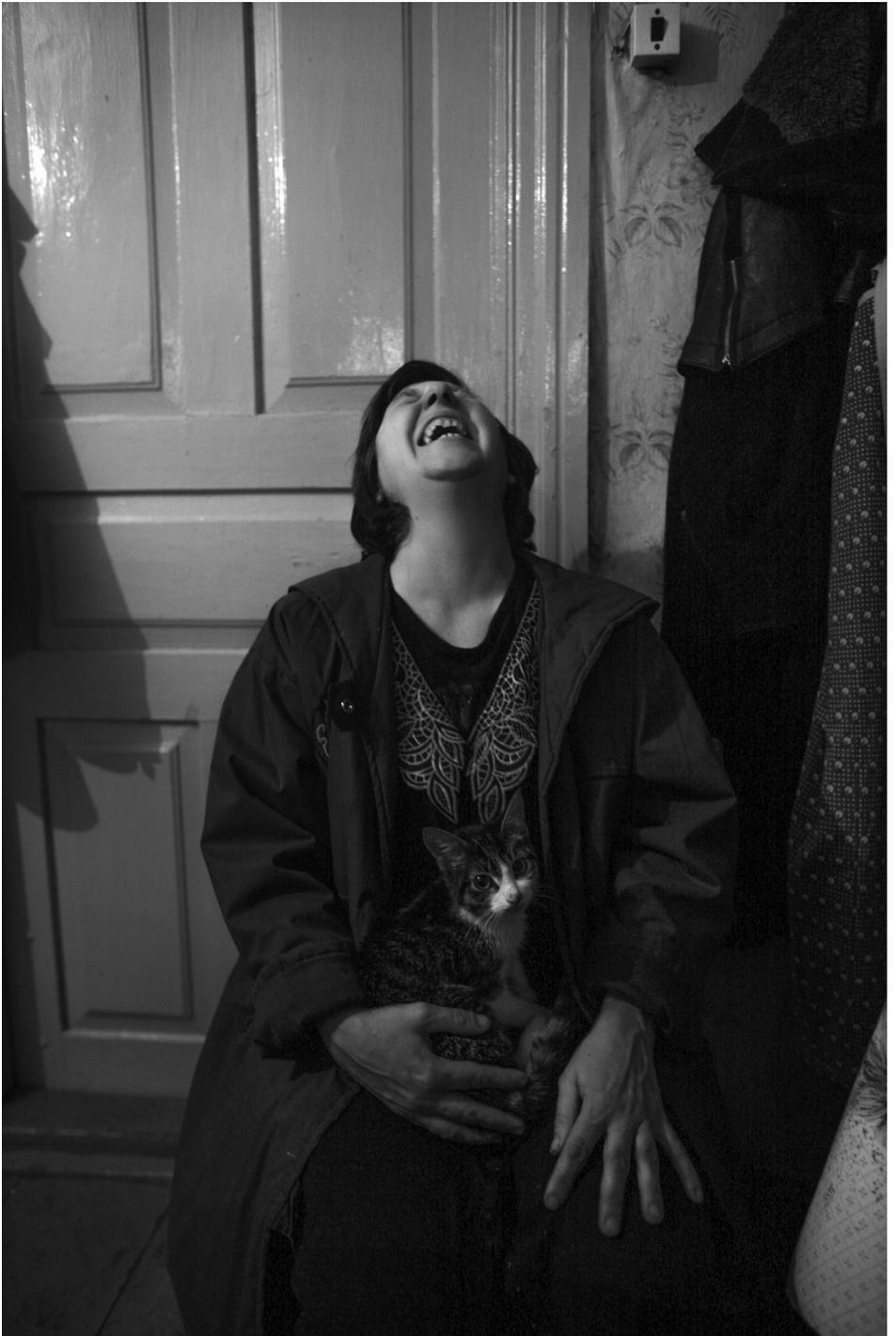
⁴ Svetlana Aleksievich (translated by Keith Gessen), *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, New York: Picador, 2006.

⁵ Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade*, Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2012.



Mothers sought to be photographed sitting close to their sons, in domestic scenes of proud companionability. Their eyes signal an unalterable communion. And more—elevation. A man's mother transcends the material order, and rises easily above even the most squalid circumstances. It is the frank declaration of her biological supremacy: This is my child.

This domestic possession echoes the claims of Chernobyl's nature over the products of its fiery liaison with technology. Its offspring is a bastard Eden, born unsanctified. The invisible father, now ruined and impugned, is irrelevant.



Life goes on, as it must. The matter-of-factness about the continued fertility of the despoiled landscape is both thrilling and terrible.

how things are depicted, because what we see is never the full story. Some ecocritics, for instance, have argued that we should cultivate a general ironic sensitivity, an ironic comportment that changes the power relation between the viewed and the viewer. To not reproduce an idea of superiority, but rather create a sense of complicity and relationality: I cannot really set myself apart from what I see.

KL: You are both advocating for a shift in the ways we perceive nuclear imagery and discourse today. Anna, would you then suggest irony as a strategy to deal more consciously with such images?

AV: There is a growing body of scholarship in ecocriticism and beyond that points in that direction, for example the work by Nicole Seymour or Bronislaw Szerszynski.⁶ I would not frame *Post Atomic* as ironic per se, but I would argue that it adopts a more general ironic sensitivity. Weber's images are questioning the mediality of photography, as there is an incongruence between what is shown and how it is shown. Susan Sontag says that photography, as a medium that works with still images, has this 'truth' claim of a moment that cannot translate into a process.⁷ You look at a picture and think: it has always been like that, it will always be like that. This moment is true. Weber, on the other hand, undermines this truth claim. He uses a lot of blur; he creates situations that you cannot really read. The pictures do not convey a truth claim in that traditional objectifying sense. However, perhaps, there is a blind spot that remains, which is himself, as the one who is taking the pictures.

AS: It is also interesting to see how disaster tourism photography represents these places as frozen in time. Photography seems like the perfect medium for that. For example, because of the evacuation of humans, accounts from people who return to the zones describe time appearing to have stopped exactly at the moment the area was evacuated, evidenced by a soda that was left in a vending machine, or a pot of soup left on the stove. Life stopped at one exact moment, preserved in time. It is interesting that you are pointing to the motion that some of the pictures of Weber possess. I wonder about that contrast.

AV: We are confronted with all these images that will stick with us in some way. In my research, I look for artworks that reframe these popular images of the zone, that use popular genres like photography or film to critique and experiment with the nuclear imaginary rather than niche traditions that propose a new kind of language. I mean, there is relevance in developing new vocabularies and representations (visual and verbal), but I wonder if they can effect change. I wonder if a new vocabulary is all that we need to set up a different ethical framework when the problem is

⁶ Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018; Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The post-ecologist condition: irony as symptom and cure', in: *Environmental Politics* 16:2 (2007), pp. 337-355.

⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 2008.

not so much that we do not know enough yet, but accepting and incorporating in our ethical models the fact that we will never know enough. How can we take responsibility for something that we cannot fully understand?

AS: I think that is exactly the question that the texts in my project also raise. It is very difficult to locate whatever or whoever is culpable for the various forms of toxicity present in the environment in a single form. We might say it is US militarism or global capitalism, but what are we really pointing to? What do you do when culpability is actually nearly impossible? It cannot just be offering reparations to communities. It is embarrassing. What does it actually do to give a family 500 dollars a year when they are suffering from the effects of cancer through generations? So for me the question here becomes: what kind of responsibility are we calling for, and are there perhaps other narratives around that go beyond looking for culpability?

AV: In this context, I would like to return to your project's conceptual framing, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene seems to point towards one *anthropos*, whereas you also seem to invest in the gender and class divides that toxicity produces. So why do you still use the concept?

AS: You mean as opposed to the Capitocene, or some other word – Chuthulucene, Plastiscene, Petrolscene, Anthrobscene... I use it because it is the term that is most directly recognized. Feminist scholarship, of course, has overwhelmingly taken the concept apart by showing that the Anthropocene is not only unevenly distributed across populations, but also caused unevenly by different groups. But I still think you [need] to have a concept for whatever you want to call the moment that we are in now, which is markedly different from the Holocene.

AV: It also introduces a kind of temporality that can be useful, of course. It projects vast time frames into the future that must be taken into account when talking about things like contamination. But it also seems to respond to some very strong longing to have an unambiguous starting point.

AS: Yes, with the first nuclear detonations in 1945 as one of the leading understanding for the starting point of the Anthropocene and one that I am interested in thinking about those particular implications now. And of course there are all sorts of problems with this, but at the same time I wonder: if we take the nuclear Anthropocene as a marker of a new epoch in which all bodies are even more radioactive than they were before, and in which all bodies globally are affected in very similar ways (except of course for those very concentrated sites), then, what does it mean to think about embodiment as inherently radioactive (though of course primarily from other sources) in the Anthropocene?

KL: One of the things we are really interested in is how both of you bring in the body as a locus to talk about toxicity. How do you think this plays out in Weber's work? There are, for example, a lot of mothers posing with their sons, some clearly affected by radiation, others what we would call a 'healthy person'?

AV: Yes, 'mothers and sons' is explicitly marked as a theme in the accompanying texts. The text suggests that this is something that came out of the community: mothers wanted to be depicted with their sons, not with husbands or other male members of the community. It shows a kind of pride, a very intimate relation.

AS: I was interested in that mother-son relation as well. Some of the objects that I am working with are accounts of people of the zone, where they will say: oh, there is a mother with a calf, and the calf has no ear tags, this means it was born after the accidents – it is a product of the zone, but it is sturdy and strong, without evidence of mutation of which we hear so much within the context of the zone. And so the evidence of reproduction serves as an image of flourishing. It seems to be that this is also part of Weber's work. The mothers show a kind of pride, and of course people take pride in their children very often, but here it is kind of evidence of the possibility that these people can go on. But what kind of ongoingness is it? The photographs of children and especially adolescents in Weber's work point, perhaps, to this question.

KL: Alison, as you said, you also work on the non-human body. Could you elaborate?

AS: So one thing I am really interested in is this [popular discourse] that claims that there are strong, reproductive forms of life proliferating in the zone. It seems to be that there is something about this framing of the non-human that gives us something that is not talked about in the same way when the subjects are contaminated human bodies. I have been collecting popular news articles from the last five years or so about so-called flourishing, rampant wild boar and other animals, which are regularly presented as figures of resistance and adaptability. Part of why I am interested in the non-human narrative or toxic flourishing is related to this problem of adaptability and resilience, which seems especially strong in non-human narratives about these toxic spaces. The boars' population multiplied by two or three times in Chernobyl and Fukushima since the accidents. Do these populations 'thrive'? Of course thriving must mean more than simply the ability to reproduce. Is this indicative of how culturally non-humans are imagined?

AV: Perhaps they offer this wonderful projection screen that is less difficult to grasp than human bodies, because it is not riddled by class or gender so



Evgeniy Kravchenko, 14, contracted a heart condition as a toddler. Born into a poor family in a suburb of Kyiv, Evgeniy's mother, Valentina, moved her three children to the Chernobyl region for chance of a cheaper life, so as to save for Evgeniy's medical expenses.



These photographs document the surprising nature of Chernobyl residents, as well as the new emigrants who find the low crime rate and clear skies worth the risks that no one has the power to spell out for them. It's a field of green grass, versus statistical improbability.

These people are immigrants in their own land. They are taking huge risks not only with their own lives but with their future genetic makeup, as well. Do they have a choice? Who knows.

much. You have to look into studies from environmental biology to actually see the differences across species.

AS: Yes, I have seen that some species have been seemingly unaffected — but the boar is really affected by radiation. And its toxicity is measured by whether it can still safely be consumed by humans. The question of consumption in the zone raises all sorts of other questions about toxic non-human bodies and their circulation as meat, relevant especially for the boar. Boar meat is still too toxic to be consumed. This again takes us back to how we define toxicity, in what kinds of bodies, and what forms of measurement we use and in what contexts. Is an animal no longer toxic because it still exists, reproduces, because its population is still thriving?

AV: So toxicity here defines a relation between human and non-human bodies, rather than an essentialist claim of the body.

AS: Yes, that is an interesting way to put it — relational rather than essential. A lot of the studies that come out of places like Chernobyl focus for example on the quality of milk, animal products used to test whether people can return to the land.

AV: In Weber's work the boar also functions as an animal of consumption, it is slaughtered. But rather than taking it as a measurement, the boar here speaks of a different relation to the human, as an example of the informal economies that emerge in and around unliveable zones. These activities are not measured and escape the eye of the state.

KL: To conclude, we would like to ask a question in relation to the title of Weber's work *Post Atomic*. What does it mean to be post atomic, who is post atomic?

AV: There is an irony in that title, of course. It raises the question: does the title refer to the atomic age, which is then supposedly over? Have we arrived at an age of contamination, which is separate from the technologies that produce contamination? The body challenges this idea of being post atomic, due to mutations that appear only generations later — there is no post, just this weird, disrupted non-linear sense of continuity.

AS: I think to be post atomic also means to live with the atomic, *with* its residues and facts. I mean this in the sense that we also use the post-human: this does not mean not to be human, but to understand what it means to be human in a different way, to understand that what is human is also necessarily not-human and non-human. It includes the fact that we are made up of radio-nuclides, PCB, plastics, silica — all these elements that interact with our bodies in different ways.

AV: I like what you propose. To see the post atomic as a concept that adds a reflective layer, rather than framing the atomic as something to be overcome. Yet, I wonder if this reflective element is part of Weber's photographs. There is a sub-series in *Post Atomic* called *Chernobyl Riviera* (2005-2007), depicting rich communities having their holiday homes close to the zone's borders, because it is cheap and quiet. They do not seem to reflect much on what happened across the zone's border. And Weber also incorporates communities that engage in uranium mining, turning the focus away from a very prominent part of the nuclear energy chain (that is, the nuclear reactor, and the disasters it produces) towards nuclear mining and the waste products this generates. *Post Atomic* also contains these levels, and they enlarge our perspective. They encourage us not only to think about bombs and reactors, but also to ask: Where does the atomic come from? Where does it go?

Alison Sperling received her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2017 and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry Berlin (ICI Berlin). Her dissertation manuscript, *Weird Modernisms*, theorizes literary and cultural 'weirdness' through feminist and queer theory, science studies, and theories of the non-human in the Anthropocene. Her recent publications concern contemporary weird and science fiction, and the relationship between embodiment and temporality.

Anna Volkmar is a PhD researcher in contemporary art and theory and an individual grant holder within the NWO Graduate Programme Arts in Society at Leiden University. She has organized several interdisciplinary events at the Environmental Humanities Center (VU) on the societal and cultural implications of nuclear technologies.

Donald Weber is a photographer who originally trained as an architect. His work explores the hidden infrastructures of power—be it social, political, or economic. He currently serves on the faculty of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and is a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths University, London.