



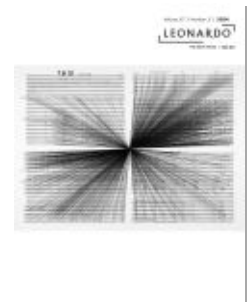
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Unveiling the Unspoken and Invisible: Analyzing Artistic Responses to Radiophobia

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Leonardo, Volume 57, Number 5, 2024, pp. 516-521 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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Unveiling the Unspoken and Invisible

Analyzing Artistic Responses to Radiophobia

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

ABSTRACT

The persistent nuclear threat continues to loom large, particularly in the contemporary landscape shaped by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, often referred to as the Second Cold War. This conflict has drawn global attention and triggered an upsurge in nuclear discourse within the media, leading to a resurgence of *radiophobia*. This article aims to introduce the works of several artists who have undertaken the challenging task of rendering visible the imperceptible, ensuring that the nuclear threat and the repercussions of radiation are not relegated to oblivion.

BACKGROUND

Public debate about the nuclear threat is culturally and politically important because it shapes perceptions of radiation risk and influences apocalyptic narratives. These narratives, derived from atomic bomb explosions and nuclear power plant accidents, perpetuate *radiophobia*, the modern fear of radiation. Radiophobia contributes to *solastalgia* [1], a form of nostalgia for a lost or transformed environment felt even while still at home. Solastalgia arises from natural and artificial causes, including ecological disasters, wars, and radiation hazards. Unlike atavistic nostalgia, which looks to the past, solastalgia can be future-oriented, prompting efforts to create new living conditions and collective action to counteract further losses.

The term radiophobia has played a key role in nuclear discourse, especially after Chernobyl. Initial assessments suggested that mental and physical ailments in radiation-affected regions were due to fear rather than radioactive fallout, leading nuclear energy advocates to dismiss concerns as excessive emotional reactions resulting from public ignorance. Conversely, opponents used radiophobia to increase fear of radiation. Thus, the radiophobia debate is central to nuclear discourse, carrying memories of past events and influencing current and future perceptions of nuclear risk.

The nuclear threat has two key dimensions, as the concept of radiophobia emphasizes. First, there is a tangible threat, evidenced by the use of and accidents involving nuclear weapons and power plants. Second, this threat persists in the discourse, and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse is constantly stoked and manipulated by references to past events and predictions of a dystopian future.

Scholars such as Jacques Derrida [2] and Rosanna Farbøl [3] note the alternative nature of the nuclear threat, with Farbøl suggesting that the Cold War fear of nuclear war was a form of human naivety lacking moral and ethical restraint. Karen Barad [4] criticizes the temporal perspective of nuclear threats, emphasizing that the discourse on nuclear wars, although ongoing, often ignores the real and present danger. She argues that in the “post-atomic age,” time seems synchronized with the coming apocalypse, creating a suspenseful present. Public discourse involving politicians, scientists, and artists often portrays efforts to prevent nuclear war as if it had already occurred, perpetuating the fear of total annihilation.

Derrida [5] argues that the vision of nuclear conflict remains a significant but unreal reference, existing only through a discourse akin to myth and fantasy. This vision fuels radiophobia, political struggles, and ecological narratives. Kate Brown [6] emphasizes that the nuclear age continues, suggesting that humanity has not fully faced this problem; she argues that it remains a “text in context” [7], giving meaning to facts without sparking deeper discussion.

The importance of nuclear discourse is obvious today [8], especially in the context of current conflicts such as the Russian-Ukrainian war. There are frequent references to real nuclear threats, including concerns about re-contamination in the Red Forest, threats to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and military maneuvers near the nuclear power plant in Astrowiec, Belarus. Discussions also concern the construction of new nuclear power plants in Poland, leaks at the German Isar power plant, and radioactive Saharan dust in Poland originating from historic French nuclear tests in Algeria.

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These reports convey real threats while fueling fear of an approaching catastrophe, creating a double narrative of information and sensation. Kate Brown [9] describes this as a mixture of fear and camouflage, in which sensational fear of nuclear weapons and radiation threats permeates media discourse, portraying lives in constant danger. Jacques Derrida and others [10] argue that the expectation of nuclear war as a terrifying fantasy defines the rhetorical condition of contemporary humanity. They emphasize the charismatic nature of the nuclear threat in its projection of an irreversible apocalypse that threatens to destroy the world, its culture, and its memory.

Nuclear memory is a multifaceted concept encompassing collective, personal, and cultural memories of nuclear events and their consequences. Nuclear memory refers to the collective and individual recollection, interpretation, and commemoration of nuclear events and their consequences. These memories encompass a wide range of experiences, narratives, and artifacts related to the development, deployment, and consequences of nuclear technology. Nuclear memory serves as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that nuclear weapons and energy have had on human society, the environment, and international relations.

AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF THE NUCLEAR THREAT—TELLING THE STORY OF THE INVISIBLE

The current discourse on the nuclear threat is shaped by the challenge of understanding radiation that is invisible to most people without scientific knowledge. Art provides a key bridge between scientific knowledge and public understanding, enabling artists to holistically approach complex concepts and make radiation visible. Gabrielle Decamous [11] emphasizes that art can foster open discussion and renewed interest in nuclear issues, while Robert Jacobs [12] emphasizes the role of art in presenting these issues and exploring the consequences of nuclear weapons.

The artists search for metaphorical expressions to explore the nuclear threat, offering a perspective different from that of scientists or journalists, although their possibilities are limited. Roman Rosenbaum [13] divides artists' statements into three types: presenting consequences, identifying past and future threats, and opposing nuclear energy. He concludes that artistic exploration has touched upon and demystified key aspects of the nuclear world, making the issue visible and audible. An important challenge in visual arts is to present radioactivity in a sensory way.

Numerous artists, predominantly photographers, have embarked on the task of visually representing the invisible aspects of nuclear disasters. One notable example is Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, a Swiss scientific illustrator and visual "knowledge artist" who has meticulously depicted insects inhabiting areas around nuclear power plants. Her photographs of these insects, showcased in museums and galleries globally, traverse the boundaries of art and science, portraying insects as both witnesses to a beautiful world and victims of endangerment. Hesse-Honegger's field research, particularly in regions affected by the nuclear fallout from Cher-

nobyl and other nuclear facilities across Europe, has revealed enduring consequences for the morphological health of insects. The artist documented and painted deformed objects while conducting controlled mutations, providing visual evidence of the long-term impact of nuclear accidents. In 1985, she painted a housefly (*Musca domestica*) that had been mutated in a lab through X-ray exposure. Hesse-Honegger's work plays an important role in preserving and promoting nuclear memory. The artist shows the invisible effects of nuclear disasters and documents their long-term impact on the environment. Her work not only informs but also inspires reflection and action, contributing to preserving the memory of nuclear events for future generations.

Similarly, Monika Niwelińska explores the theme of invisibility in her works. Niwelińska employs chemical treatments and exposures on film and objects, replicating the destructive processes initiated during nuclear emergencies. Recounting the events following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, Niwelińska refers to the markings of contaminated nature on Kodak film and in its cardboard packaging made from corn leaves and water contaminated by radioactive fallout. Inspired by such historical incidents, Niwelińska aims to reproduce the record of annihilation in her works, imitating the catastrophe's impact. She subjects materials to photosensitive emulsion, causing contours to disappear, depicting chemical reactions. In series such as *Radioactive* (2010–ongoing) and *Radioactive Dust* (2010–2011), she meticulously documents the successive stages of image disappearance. In the artwork *Void* (2007–ongoing), Niwelińska illustrates the blurring and loss of shapes, mirroring the impact of nuclear disasters on visual records.

Moreover, Niwelińska's work draws inspiration from records of exposed areas, objects, and individuals following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the broader theme of human body irradiation. Through her artistic endeavors, Niwelińska captures the involuntary markings of catastrophic traces on film, offering a visual narrative of annihilation and mirroring the impact of radiation on the recorded image.

Artists originating from Switzerland and Poland substantiate Georges Didi-Huberman's thesis [14], highlighting the potent role of visual art in solidifying image and memory and thus wielding a notable epidemic power. Didi-Huberman emphasizes that modern history acquires documentary, realistic, and formative attributes through the artistic medium. The image, functioning as a record of traces, plays a crucial role in making traumatic experiences transmissible and memorable [15]. Unlike how images usually represent reality, recording moments, people, and places to convey information, nuclear images function as trace records, playing a key role in transmitting and remembering traumatic experiences. These images go beyond mere representation; they embody the ever-visible or residual impact of catastrophic events, retaining the invisible traces left by trauma. Capturing the indirect effects of such experiences—such as the stains and haze on Kodak film reels after Hiroshima—creates a tangible connection to the past. This function of images enables

the transmission of trauma across time and space, allowing subsequent generations to remember and engage with the historical and emotional weight of these experiences. This, in turn, facilitates the resurrection of history, serving as a poignant reminder of the genuine threat of an apocalypse.

Didi-Huberman's assertion underscores the transformative impact of visual art, transcending its role as a mere visual representation. It becomes a conduit for the transmission of historical trauma, encapsulating the collective memory of societal experiences. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the artistic endeavors of artists who, through their works, demonstrate the enduring power of the artistic medium.

The documentation of nuclear disasters, such as those documented by Hesse-Honegger and Niwelińska, serves as a poignant example. Their works not only capture the visible aftermath of nuclear incidents but also embody the invisible threats and lingering consequences. Their photographs act as historical records, solidifying the traumatic experiences associated with nuclear catastrophes and fostering a collective memory.

In light of Didi-Huberman's perspective, the photographic medium becomes a dynamic force that engages with history, rendering it tangible and perpetuating its impact across time. The artists' ability to convey the real threat of an apocalypse through their visual narratives aligns with Didi-Huberman's argument about the epidemic power inherent in photography. Through their visual narratives, the artists uniquely contributed to the discourse on nuclear threats and potential apocalypse. In his photographic series, Canadian photographer, artist, and activist Robert Del Tredici showed the impact of nuclear energy and weapons on people and the environment. His work documents the aftermath of nuclear events such as the Three Mile Island accident, providing a stark visual narrative of the potential dangers of nuclear technology. James Leroy Acord was an artist who worked directly with radioactive materials. He created sculptures and installations in an attempt to answer questions about the long-term storage of nuclear waste. Using radioactive materials, his work aimed to bridge the gap between science and art, as well as show the real and present dangers associated with nuclear energy and waste. The Portuguese artist Marta De Menezes often focuses on the intersection of biology and technology. Her project *Nuclear Landscapes* used photography to depict nuclear test sites and accidents, illustrating the long-term environmental consequences of nuclear activities. American multidisciplinary artist Taryn Simon's photographic series *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* includes photos of nuclear waste storage facilities and nuclear research laboratories. Her works expose the often hidden aspects of nuclear technology, prompting viewers to consider the consequences of its use and management. Underwater photographer Ernest H. Brooks II documented nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific. His haunting images of underwater nuclear explosions demonstrate the destructive power of nuclear weapons and the resulting environmental damage. Bruce Conner's experimental film *Crossroads* (1976) uses archival footage of nuclear testing at

Bikini Atoll to create a powerful visual narrative. The film juxtaposes the beauty and horror of explosions, prompting reflection on the apocalyptic potential of nuclear war. Yoko Ono's work, especially her song "Sky TV for Hokkaido," also reflects on the destructive power of nuclear weapons. These artists use their narratives to convey the profound and real threats posed by nuclear technology, encouraging reflection, dialogue, and a deeper understanding of the apocalyptic potential inherent in nuclear proliferation. By encapsulating the traces of trauma, the artists' images transcend mere documentation, becoming a catalyst for remembrance and a vehicle for understanding the gravity of historical threats.

AN ARTISTIC EXPLORATION OF THE NUCLEAR THREAT—TELLING THE FORGOTTEN STORY

The imperceptible threat of radiation and its commemoration find discourse among authors who resurrect memories of a time when radiation eluded public awareness. Such discussions are evident in various works, notably, those showcased at the *Chernobyl 30 Years Later* exhibition (2016, Chicago). The exhibition presented narratives from individuals whose lives were profoundly impacted by the Chernobyl disaster, including Eden Ünlüata-Foley, a Turkish interdisciplinary artist whose oeuvre centers on themes of cultural identity formation, its connection to place, the sense of belonging, memory, and personal stories.

In his piece *Serving with Love* (2016), Ünlüata-Foley recounts his experience of residing in Turkey with his parents during the Chernobyl disaster. The performance sheds light on the significant tradition of tea consumption in Turkish culture, in which the ritual of drinking tea together plays a pivotal role in social interactions. The artist narrates how radioactive particles from Chernobyl contaminated the tea crops on Turkey's eastern Black Sea coast. Despite the contamination, the harvested tea was sent to market, leading to widespread panic when media reports suggested its potential hazard in the late spring/early summer of 1986.

In an attempt to allay public fears, the Turkish government took extraordinary measures, including showcasing the Minister of Industry and Trade drinking tea from the same contaminated batch on television to prove its safety. They even asserted that the television sets people were using to watch the program emitted more radiation than the tea could ever have. Despite these reassurances, the government clandestinely burned large quantities of the contaminated tea batch over the following years, further releasing radioactive particles into the atmosphere. Ünlüata-Foley's work exposes the hypocrisy of Eastern governments in concealing facts deemed inconvenient and denying the existence of radiation, contributing to the invisibility of this threat, attention to which was referred to as radiophobia.

Ünlüata-Foley emphasizes the political and cultural nuances surrounding the Chernobyl disaster, highlighting its differing treatment in Western Europe and the East. The artist underscores the profound connection between place, social experience, and personal narratives. By delving into the emotional attitudes of Eastern countries toward the radiation

threat, Ünlüata-Foley draws from cultural and familial rituals, such as those associated with drinking tea. In Turkey, tea drinking is deeply rooted in culture and family customs. Tea is an integral part of everyday family meetings. Offering tea is a symbol of hospitality. During larger family gatherings such as birthday parties, weddings, and other celebrations, tea is served in large quantities. Traditionally, when the future groom and his family visit the future bride's home, the bride prepares a special tea. In many Turkish homes, drinking tea is a ritual that brings the family closer together. Sitting together at the table with tea is a time when the family can spend time together, regardless of everyday duties. Additionally, he points out that Eastern artists address the nuclear threat differently, often being regarded—paraphrasing Decamous—as “global Hibakusha.” As Decamous [16] notes, the artistic voices of the East are frequently overshadowed by those of the West. The *Chernobyl 30 Years Later* exhibition provided a platform for Eastern artists to showcase their unique perspectives and experiences, allowing for a richer and more diverse representation of the impact of radiation.

These artists frequently engage in discussions surrounding the concept of the “zone of silence,” as articulated by Ukrainian writer and poet Oksana Zabuzhko [17]. They endeavor to unveil the truth, echoing Zabuzhko's assertion that the “civilization [of the East], contaminated by the melancholy anticipation of its end like that of an organism by radioactivity,” seeks appropriate words and forms of artistic expression to “manage the zone of silence.” Their discourse revolves around the compounded invisibility of the threat—imperceptible radiation and the absence of a dialogue on radiation that pervaded society at that time. Ünlüata-Foley presents this unconsciousness and absence as traditional and tethered to a specific place. Ünlüata-Foley's work is a profound exploration of nuclear memory, combining personal narrative, cultural tradition, and political criticism. Focusing on the contamination of tea crops and the Turkish government's response, Ünlüata-Foley highlights the complex and often contradictory ways in which societies deal with nuclear disasters. His work highlights the importance of preserving nuclear memory through diverse artistic expression, ensuring that the experiences and voices of those affected by nuclear events are remembered and honored. Ünlüata-Foley connects the invisible threat of radiation with tangible cultural practices, making the abstract effects of nuclear disasters more relatable and understandable.

The “zone of old terror” becomes a focal point for artists addressing the trauma experienced by the second and third generations affected by the Chernobyl threat. Polish artist Karolina Kowalczyk, in discussing radiation, emphasizes this aspect. To convey her family's traumatic experience and the unspoken terror of that time, in 2016 she turned to the mandala and mandala-shaped *vyshyvanka*, a Slavic folk embroidery tradition dating back to the mid-19th century that was predominantly associated with the western regions of Ukraine, particularly Galicia, and those parts of Ukraine that became part of Poland after World War II. It is a method of embroidery, but also an embroidered object: mainly a shirt.

Exploring her Polish heritage, Kowalczyk revisits the art of paper cutting and *vyshyvanka*, which she engaged with during her childhood. Employing intricately cut three-dimensional animals and leaves, she narrates the Chernobyl tragedy as a personal ordeal evoking painful memories. Kowalczyk recounts her mother's narrative—and her own—during the reactor explosion, when Kowalczyk's mother was pregnant and residing in Poland. The Chernobyl disaster, arguably the worst nuclear catastrophe in history, released what was estimated to be 400 times more radioactive smoke than was emitted by the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The smoke dispersed across Europe and the Western Soviet Union, leading the artist's mother to fear potential birth defects.

The process of creating *vyshyvanka*, as indicated by the artist, serves as a recollection of the feeling of being at home or “in a sense, in one's own soul” [18]. The very design of *vyshyvanka* and the mandala contributes to the interpretation of Kowalczyk's artistic endeavors. *Vyshyvanka* serves as a testament to its affiliation with the Eastern European region. The art of embroidery in Ukraine dates back centuries, with each region developing its own unique patterns and techniques. These intricate designs often tell stories, carry protective symbolism, and reflect the social and cultural context of their creation.

Historically, *vyshyvanka* has played a key role in Ukrainian culture. Embroidery was seen as a form of magic, a way to protect the wearer from evil spirits and misfortune. Each stitch and pattern were infused with meaning, from geometric shapes symbolizing earth and fertility to floral motifs representing purity and beauty. Traditionally, women spent months or even years creating these clothes, which were worn during important life events such as weddings, baptisms, and festivals.

Furthermore, in Ukraine, *vyshyvanka* played a crucial role in communicating content deemed uncomfortable or prohibited. It evaded censorship, allowing narratives to unfold about topics that were passed over in silence and concealed. For instance, following the defeat of the Ukrainian National Revolution of 1917–1921, *vyshyvanka* used for embellishing items of clothing and everyday use and objects associated with traditional celebrations were adorned with state symbols to express Ukrainian identity and convey a sense of Ukrainian-ness. The colors yellow and blue were employed to signify a connection to the Ukrainian land. Until the postwar era, *vyshyvanka* retained symbolic and magical significance.

In the contemporary art scene, some artists continue and develop the embroidery tradition, infusing it with modern narratives while honoring its historical roots. By combining traditional motifs and techniques, artists pay tribute to Ukrainian heritage. This is often seen in the use of red and black threads, which are the traditional colors of Ukrainian embroidery symbolizing love and sadness, life and death. In response to recent events, such as political upheaval or social change, they introduce new elements to traditional designs. These can be symbols of unity and peace or abstract patterns representing the chaos and complexity of modern life.

Some works may also reflect the artist's personal journey or the stories of individuals in the community. Vyshyvanka remains a powerful medium of artistic expression and cultural storytelling. Whether rendered with traditional designs or modern interpretations, the art of vyshyvanka is a testament to the enduring spirit and creativity of the Ukrainian people.

Vyshyvanka, in this context, served as a means of commemorating the past, carrying it forward in a veiled manner. The popularity of the Ukrainian vyshyvanka represents a unique phenomenon on the European scale. It has evolved into a manifestation of national identity, fostering pride in the nation and its heritage, while also functioning as a symbol in political struggles. Vyshyvanka symbolizes culture, intergenerational connections, and resilience. The utilization of vyshyvanka can be understood as both a reference to cultural heritage and an expression of a coded narrative about unspoken aspects, thereby preserving family, social, or cultural memory. Vyshyvanka, akin to history or heritage, is passed down from generation to generation.

The amalgamation of vyshyvanka and mandala in Kowalczyk's artwork underscores transience on the one hand along with the cyclical nature of life and history on the other. It alludes to the circle of life and death and simultaneously narrates a tale of exclusion. The choice of the mandala shape for "Untitled" is particularly significant. Mandalas represent universes themselves, symbolizing wholeness and unity. Kowalczyk uses this form to convey the sense of isolation and self-sufficient worlds in the Alienation Zone around Reactor No. 4. This area, heavily polluted and devoid of human life, has returned to a natural state in which nature sporadically develops without human intervention. The inspiration for Kowalczyk's work is the Alienation Zone, the most polluted area around the reactor. She captures the incredible beauty and desolation of the region, highlighting how nature has reclaimed the land. On her mandala, you can find plants that twist and tangle, as well as households and forest animals such as wolves. This duality of destruction and renewal is the main theme of her work. Animals and vegetation were destroyed during the disaster, but after years without human companionship they are reborn. There are plenty of them there, and they have their own little paradise on earth, although sometimes they are disturbed by curious tourists. As it turned out, Chernobyl, a place known for the most terrible nuclear accident in history, is a shelter for many different animals—from moose, deer, beavers, and owls to more exotic species such as brown bears, lynxes, and wolves. Scientists believe that without people hunting them and destroying their habitats, wild animals can live perfectly well there—despite the high level of radiation.

Through the work, Kowalczyk creates a narrative combining personal history with environmental commentary. Intricate designs and the use of traditional techniques serve as a bridge between the past and the present. The mandala, with its repetitive and meditative qualities, encourages the viewer to reflect on the cyclical nature of destruction and regeneration. Kowalczyk drew inspiration from the exclusion zone around Chernobyl, drawing parallels to the exclu-

sion of Soviet-era countries, particularly Eastern European nations, from Western Europe. The Exclusion Zone, as it is also known, around reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl plant remains closed off to the public. It is an area where life was extinguished, yet nature has begun to reclaim it, flourishing once again without human intervention.

In an interview, Kowalczyk revealed that she crafted the works in the shape of a mandala to represent "a universe in itself." She stated: "To me, when you're in your world or universe, you're isolated, and that's what [the Zone] felt like." In her artwork, she demonstrates that silence, isolation, and contamination are transient; her survival strategy involves breaking the silence, visualizing the threat, and allowing it to resurface. Her artistic exploration of the legacy of Chernobyl is a moving reflection on the lasting impact of nuclear disasters on personal and cultural memory. Through Kowalczyk's innovative use of traditional embroidery techniques and symbolic imagery, she creates a visual narrative that transcends language barriers, inviting viewers to confront the complexities of nuclear memory and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of disaster. Her works are a testament to the power of art to preserve and transmit collective memory, ensuring that the lessons of Chernobyl will not be forgotten over time.

SUMMARY

Contemporary discussions on commemoration processes have turned toward collective traumas, including the "heritage that hurts" [19], of which nuclear accidents are an important aspect. Commemorating the nuclear threat occurs in two dimensions: (1) commemorating historical events such as the atomic bombings in Japan and nuclear reactor explosions through monuments, museums, and photographs and (2) artistic expressions that commemorate past threats and raise awareness of present ones. This second dimension highlights the invisible aspects of radiation and the constant threat in the discourse of radiophobia, emphasizing the silent, often politically overlooked danger. The invisibility of a nuclear threat often leads to ignorance because it operates beyond human perception.

Art plays a key role in making the invisible visible and drawing attention to these quiet zones. Artists such as Hesse-Honegger and Niwelińska use their works to evoke memories and project past nuclear effects onto the present and future. Nuclear art often takes a contemporary look at the past, as seen in Ünlüata-Foley's and Kowalczyk's vyshyvanka-mandala performances, initiating a discussion about remembering and repairing. These artistic interventions engage with memory as a tangible phenomenon, moving beyond mere representation and empirically examining the nuclear narrative.

By framing nuclear art as an exploration of the processes of remembering, unremembering, and forgetting, one gains insights into the shaping of nuclear discourse and radiophobia, along with the mechanisms that have kept the threat secret. Nuclear art, in this context, is not merely an answer to the question of the current threat of radiation but is an exploration of how it is remembered and

the kinds of artifacts it produces. The artists' efforts combine remembrance with imagination subjected to analysis and interpretation, providing an attempt to comprehend the mechanism of the nuclear threat. Artists draw attention to memory reservoirs embodied in distorted objects, nonhuman essentials, witness memory, cultural memory, awareness, knowledge (e.g., of cultural codes), and a desire to understand the past. Their activities can be viewed as a

form of laboratory experiment, exploring the interaction between the past and the creator, as well as a contemporary reading of the past by the viewer. This experiment on memory, treated as an open system sustained by nuclear discourse and fueled by radiophobia, is a nonlinear montage of the remains of the past. It is constructed to make the memory of the past legible today, enhancing awareness and emphasizing the obligation to remember.

Acknowledgments

The research has been supported by a grant from the Faculty of International and Political Studies under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland.

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Manuscript received 2 February 2024.

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