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# ‘Life After People’: Maxim Dondyuk’s project for Chernobyl

by Lisa Stein • 09.07.2020

When countries around the world went into lockdown in March 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, several photographs and videos of animal life returning to deserted cities began to circulate on social media: swans and dolphins in the canals of Venice, the water crystal clear and teeming with fish; a civet – a mostly nocturnal mammal – roaming the streets of India in broad daylight; a herd of over one hundred Kashmiri goats marching through an empty town centre in Wales. Although the majority of these posts turned out to be fabricated, their virality demonstrates our endless fascination with the idea of a world after humans and the enduring appeal of the ruin. The slow picturesque decay of manmade structures, a popular motif in art since the late eighteenth century, has served as a backdrop to countless blockbuster films and binge-worthy series. *Chernobyl* (2019), a historical drama about the aftermath of the 1986 nuclear disaster, led to a recent surge in tourism to the area, where visitors pose for selfies in front of overgrown vehicles and crumbling buildings.

The largely abandoned city in northern Ukraine is the focus of *Untitled Project: From Chernobyl*, an online exhibition by Maxim Dondyuk. In the wake of COVID-19 the artist created a virtual gallery to display the innumerable postcards, letters and photographs he collected during visits to Chernobyl’s exclusion zone, together with his own photographs of the area. ‘Chernobyl’, Dondyuk notes, ‘is associated only with tragedy [. . .] But what if we come back to the flourishing times that were so far from the events of 1986?’<sup>1</sup> Before he began making regular trips to the ‘ghost city’ in 2015, Dondyuk worked on a number of documentary projects on the ‘social and historical reality of his country’ including the tuberculosis epidemic in the Ukraine (2010–12), the military training of Crimean children (2010–13) and the Ukrainian Revolution (2013–14). *Culture of Confrontation* FIG. 1, which captured the violent clashes between police and protesters during the Euromaidan FIG. 2, marked a turning point for the photographer, who ‘moved away from classical documentary narrative form and [. . .] plunged into emotions, reflection, and more universal forms’.

The images that make up *Between Life and Death* (2017), Dondyuk’s project on the aftermath of the war, demonstrate a burgeoning interest in the symbolism of the ruin FIG. 3. Taken in territories in Eastern Ukraine that were left devastated by the

conflict, the artist's serene landscape photographs depict abandoned military vehicles and destroyed buildings covered in a layer of fresh snow **FIG. 4**. 'This project is about the scars that wars leave in human souls', Dondyuk writes. 'It's about emptiness and loneliness'. Unlike the ruins depicted in *Between Life and Death*, the personal ephemera the artist collected in Chernobyl over a period of three years are not meant to be understood as monuments of fear, pain or death. Rather, these items symbolise life: 'among photos eaten by mold, appeared smiling faces of people, their holidays, wedding ceremonies, the birth of children. [. . .] Chernobyl was no longer associated with death and tragedy for me'. Dondyuk wanted to preserve these memories of life in the city before the nuclear disaster, which are now on display in his virtual gallery.<sup>2</sup>

*Untitled Project: From Chernobyl* is divided into six 'chapters', which can be accessed on the main project page by clicking on small tabs that are often accompanied by a quote from the artist or a preview photograph. 'Genesis Chapter: Untitled Project' serves as the introduction to and summary of the project; many of the images visible here are presented again as part of individual series of photographs in the following chapters. After reading a short text, set underneath a digital collage of two landscape photographs by the artist, a damaged contact sheet and the front page of the *Washington Post* from 29th April 1986 (three days after the accident) **FIG. 5**, the viewer can scroll down through numerous images and a small number of films, none of which is accompanied by captions or allows for viewer interaction. They include archival images of Chernobyl before the disaster; landscape photographs by Dondyuk depicting abandoned buildings **FIG. 6**, fairgrounds and disintegrating interiors as well as aerial photographs; found imagery and film footage of family gatherings and outings, school performances and class photographs; letters, postcards and other personal ephemera; newspaper cuttings; and a small number of maps and diagrams.

The virtual gallery has been designed to a very high standard; all images have been photographed at high-resolution and personal items, such as albums or drawings, are revealed in an astonishing level of detail. It is frustrating, however, not to be able to zoom in on smaller images and it is not clear why a letter, for example, is displayed a lot smaller than, say, a pocket-sized portrait photograph. In this sense the exhibition is more like a physical display than the websites we interact with every day: the artist or curator determines what we are allowed to see and how close we are allowed to get. Some of Dondyuk's own photographs are also smaller than others, mirroring the archival images they are presented alongside. Scrolling down, the viewer is encouraged to make connections between older photographs and the artist's recent landscapes, constantly looking out for clues that might help us to understand the associations between what we are seeing. In

some ways our encounter with the material corresponds to that of the artist, who, upon finding these photographs and letters must have tried making sense of these visual clues.

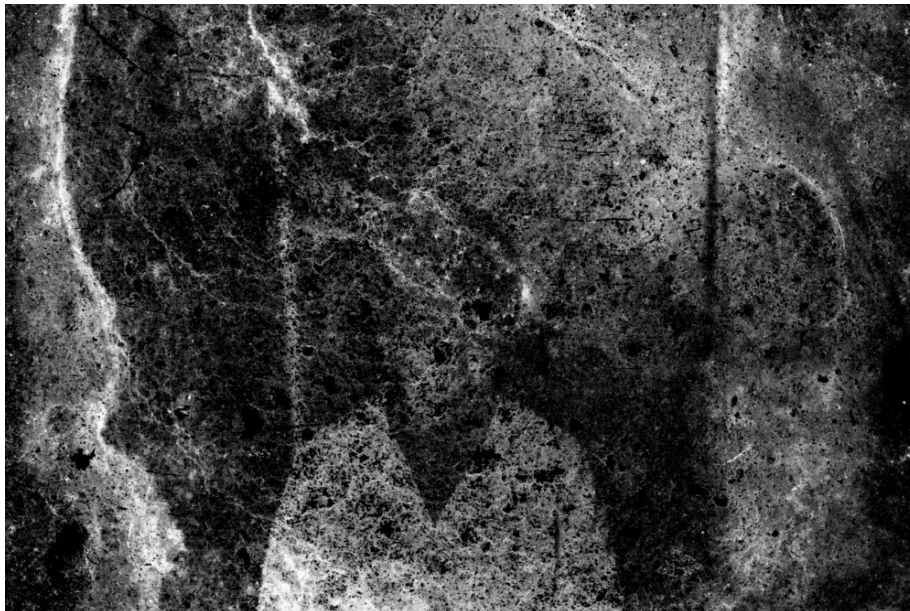
Only one of Dondyuk's photographs, of an indoor swimming pool, is displayed next to an archival image of the same place, taken from the same position. Whereas one pool is crowded with young swimmers, one of whom is preparing to jump in the water, the artist's pool is empty and slowly decaying **FIG. 7**. Dondyuk's images of the insides of houses or schools demonstrate how sudden the evacuation of the city was: posters and fabrics still adorn the walls, a book lies open on the edge of a mattress, science equipment and instructions litter a teacher's desk. In the introduction the artist recalls that the Soviet government 'didn't allow people to take with them anything except the most necessary things [. . .] Unfortunately, most people didn't see their homes again, as well as such priceless things as letters, photos of relatives and friends. With time these memories were covered with a thick layer of trash, mud and radiation'.

Chapters 1 ('Unknown Contact Sheets') and 2 ('Lost Family Album') present these memories, the former allowing the viewer to scroll to the right through what feels like an infinite amount of film, the latter presenting an equally high number of sepia portraits and family photographs. Once again the design has been carefully considered: in 'Unknown Contact Sheets' the direction in which we scroll to view the images corresponds to the orientation of a roll of film. Looking through these intimate black-and-white photographs **FIG. 8**, many damaged by radiation, weather and time, one is reminded of a type of image virtually extinct in the age of digital cameras and smartphones: the accidental image, the literal mistake, which is often erased immediately. In these images the same person is photographed three to four times, from different angles, and against different backgrounds. One image is blurry, another overexposed. Being privy to these failed attempts makes seeing the 'successful' shot, usually the last photograph in the series, all the more moving. These images show us what is deemed important, what those taking the photograph wanted to hold on to but ultimately lost after they left the city, never to return.

The high quality of the photographs in 'Lost Family Album' comes at a cost; this page takes longer to load, and the cursor does not move smoothly across the page. But this is a minor glitch on an otherwise beautifully designed dense grid of vintage photographs **FIG. 9** and various notes written on the backs. In 'Chapter Three: Repercussion' the viewer can scroll – again to the right – through a selection of Dondyuk's recent photographs of nature gradually absorbing what is left of Chernobyl, most of which were included in the introductory chapter. Similar to the buildings and vehicles in *Between Life and Death*, some of the ruins photographed here are covered in a layer of fresh snow, while others are being claimed by

the surrounding vegetation. Chapter 4 is a short film about the project, a montage of photographs included in the exhibition accompanied by sound bites, including a recording of the announcement made by the government on the day after the disaster, as well as footage of Dondyuk in Chernobyl.

The final chapter in the exhibition is a preview to Dondyuk's latest project. 'Epilogue: Apeiron', in which the artist presents negatives so severely damaged that the images are no longer recognisable, makes a fitting end to a body of work that sits between art photography and traditional forms of documentary, and seems to mark another turning point in the artist's 'experimentation with themes, meanings and forms'. These abstract images, rendered illegible by radiation and the elements of nature **FIG. 10**, evoke what is beyond the sphere of the intelligible, and signal a growing preoccupation with the image-as-object. As Dondyuk notes, these films passed through 'stages of disappearance, erasure and decay', retaining 'traces of evidence of bodies or things that left their mark on the photosensitive film emulsion'. Scrolling through these images we can, however, discern a faint silhouette or familiar outline here and there **FIG. 11**, suggesting that the artist is not ready to leave the people of Chernobyl and their stories behind just yet.



**Fig. 11** *Untitled 06*, from the series *Apeiron*, by Maxim Dondyuk. 2019. (Courtesy the artist).

## Footnotes

- 1** All quotes in this review are taken from texts on the artist's website, available at <http://maximdondyuk.com/>, accessed 6th June 2020.

- 2** Available at <https://maximdondyuk.com/works/untitled-project-from-chernobyl>, accessed 6th June 2020. Dondyuk has not been in contact with anyone depicted in the found photographs. The artist is currently planning an interactive website that will allow former residents of Chernobyl and their relatives to locate houses on a map and download digital images from the archive.

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