



Stenersenmuseet ønsker velkommen
til åpning av utstillingen

SIRI HERMANSEN

The Economy of Survival

Chernobyl Mon Amour
Land of Freedom

Film, foto og skulptur

Kuratert av Selene Wendt og Jon-Ove Steihaug

Torsdag 29. november 2012, kl. 18:00

Utstillingsperiode: 29. november 2012–20. januar 2013

www.stenersenmuseum.no
www.sirihermansen.com

Besøksadresse: Munkedamsveien 15

Returadresse: Munch-museet, Postboks 2823 Tøyen, 0608 Oslo

Forsidefoto: *Dennis Fishing in the Chernobyl River*, Siri Hermansen, 2012

BILDENDE KUNSTNERES HJELPEFOND (BKH)



KUNSTHØGSKOLEN I OSLO
OSLO NATIONAL ACADEMY OF THE ARTS



Program for kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid
Strømgaten 1
5015 Bergen

Returadresse:
Munch-museet, Postboks 2823 Tøyen, 0608 Oslo

THE ECONOMY OF SURVIVAL

Film, photography & objects
Siri Hermansen

ABSTRACT

Background

At the start of the project, I set out to examine consequences and adaptation-processes in places affected by political, cultural and economic processes of change. I wanted to investigate the dilemma between wanted and unwanted changes in what can be considered catastrophic areas. Over the past years I have explored these questions by engaging with three sites,

- 1) Chernobyl (Ukraine), evacuated after the nuclear accident in 1986 and a 30 km forbidden zone surrounding the factory was established.
- 2) Detroit (USA) Due to the economic collapse in the motor-industry, it's citizens fled the city and Detroit is considered to be one of USA largest ghost towns ridden by great economic depression, poverty and crime.
- 3) The Sami territories surrounding the mining town of Kiruna (Sweden) are in danger of being destroyed by the expanding mining industry. As the Nordic countries do not have sufficient laws to protect Sami culture and territories, international mining company's are moving into their territories that possess some of the richest mineral-grounds in the world.

The destinies and consequences of these sights have all been extensively exposed in the media and are a part of collective memory worldwide. From my point of view the histories of these places also speak of larger political, economical and cultural shifts in the world, which informed my interest in engaging with them artistically. These three areas can be considered as zones of uncertainty due to industrial implosion (Chernobyl and Detroit) or industrial expansion (Kiruna).

CHERNOBYL MON AMOUR

The project focuses on my meetings with two state-employed guides, Dennis and Maxim. Following their subjective perspectives and relationship to the forbidden zone of Chernobyl, the project touches on the mysterious ability of both man and nature to adapt to the still radioactive air. We discover that paradoxical realities can live side by side in the human body and mind, as well as in nature, and that this is in itself a survival strategy.

On a daily basis, the guides take catastrophe tourists, journalists and scientists into the affected area. Despite their deep knowledge of the high health risks, they choose to live and work in the radioactive zone. They express that to them the zone offers a unique situation of hope, freedom and possibility within the hardships of Ukrainian society, and they describe Chernobyl as their "paradise".

The stories of the guides convey the mystical nature of the paradox they live, where what hurts ultimately does them good. Dennis describes how, after five years in the zone, his body actually becomes acutely ill when he enters the normal world, but stays well as long as he breathes in the radioactive air. His body has adapted to the radioactive environment. Tuning

in to their changing bodies, both guides stay longer and longer periods in Chernobyl, ignoring the breaks their doctors advise.

Chernobyl Mon Amour consists of a video film, photographs and sculpture. A series of black and white photographs, titled *Miming the Mother Tongue*, focuses on nature's adaptation, showing trees that have visibly mutated into new species. A series of bell sculptures form installation elements that simultaneously symbolize the calling and warning of the zone.

LAND OF FREEDOM

Land of Freedom explores what can grow out of the financial catastrophe that ruined the Motor City, Detroit. The industrial and financial collapse has dramatically changed a city that was once one of the most productive and cosmopolitan cities of the US, a symbol of the success of capitalism and a pioneer in the development of a black middle class. In sharp contrast, Detroit today has become one of the most unproductive and under-privileged cities in the US. Crime, poverty, unemployment and a collapsed health and educational system are evident everywhere.

Drawn by the possibility of unique artistic and intellectual freedom, cheap housing, and free studio spaces, Detroit has started to attract individuals interested in creating new ways of living, away from the globalized economy. They have started filling the deserted areas by means of urban farming. For them, Detroit opens up the possibility to create a new kind of American dream out of the remains of the lost society.

The project evolves around a group of white artists who have taken the initiative to settle down in the primarily black district of Farnworth street.

As activist artists and urban pioneers KT and Emilie use urban farming as their artistic strategy to create a new sustainable way of living for themselves, hoping to influence the poor neighborhood to use urban farming as a way out of poverty. Trying to free themselves from the global market, the urban farmers have developed an exchange economy, where they trade food from their gardens against goods and services.

What is particularly striking is that the quantity of food they produce is so minimal. This makes us question how controlled we all are by the global economy, and how much it influences all aspects of our western life. The artist-farmers appear to be ready to live the consequences of their ethical values, in their aim to liberate themselves from the global economy that governs the surrounding society. But watching their attempts also makes us wonder whether the new model of life they propagate is possible. When we see the urban farming ideology of sharing knowledge and tools in action, in a scene where the farmers are teaching young girls the survival skill of slaughtering rabbits for food, the practice proves to be more demanding than imagined. Monk voices other doubts about urban farming as a model for a future society, explaining that for him and his black community having to grow your own food is too tainted by the memory of times of slavery when home farming and exchanging services were part of an involuntary exclusion from society.

Land of Freedom consist of film, photography and objects.

CONTESTED LANDSCAPE (Unfinished project)

«Legal protection for indigenous people is at present weaker in the Nordic countries than in most other industrialized nations». This interesting statement comes from Professor Mathias Åhren at the University of Tromsø. He claims that as a result international mining companies are investing in the north of Scandinavia.

The mining town of Kiruna and its surrounding territory holds some of the largest deposits of iron ore in the world. Due to the extensive mining operations, the ground of the city has eroded and has produced cracks in the surface, threatening the city to sink into the ground. As a result the mining company LKAB will demolish the city-center and rebuild a new center.

With the destiny of Kiruna as a backdrop, I am exploring the urgent issue of the conflict between the fundamentally different value systems that underlie the Sami relationship with the Sami territories on the one hand and the mining company's ambition to expand on the other. Whereas the Sami believe that mining activities are destroying grazing areas and that changes to the landscape are damaging reindeer migration routes, the mining companies claim that these divergent interests can coexist.

Through micro-perspective focusing on survival strategies and adoption processes I will be guided through this contested landscape.

The project will consist of film, photography and objects.

METHOD

The places I decided to work with have been explored extensively through the global media and can be considered as "exhausted geographies", a term I borrow from Irit Rogoff's description of the fatigue that surrounds the Israel and Palestine conflict.

A central issue during this process has been to develop an artistic method that allows me to gather other perspectives from this sights than what is commonly known which can shed new light on these subjects.

Instead of trying to grasp a general overview, I decided to focus on a few selected individuals, who would act as my guides and thus show me how they view and deal with their changed environments. The method I developed is based on gathering knowledge and experiences through the micro-perspectives of these guides. The method resembles a form of participatory observation from anthropology. In Chernobyl and Detroit my guides were men and women who deliberately moved into these zones of uncertainty; in Kiruna it will concern people who find themselves confronted with invasive change at the heart of their society and territory.

Hanna Arendts work on public space where she states that "being seen and heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from different positions", has been a significant reference for finding an artistic position in the intimate encounters with the guides on site. It helped me recognize how micro-perspectives can have social, political and visual potential.

All three projects are based on participation in everyday activities with the guides. The experiences we shared were in large controlled by the guides and their own choice of where we would go, what we would do and how we would do it. The material and knowledge in the projects comes from these shared experiences and conversations that derived from our interaction, which was both professional and personal in character. During these experiences, the fact that I was travelling alone was an artist (not a journalist or scientist) and female played a central role in the different outcomes of the visits. Being a guided involved positioning myself as a visitor without preconceived ideas about what I was going to encounter. This approach opened up a new sensitivity to the place and the people I met with, which allowed me to react spontaneously and intuitively to what we experienced together. This intuitive way of encountering the Guides and experiencing life on their territory and on their terms seemed fruitful as a method to understand survival-strategies and adaptation-processes from a personal point of view. I have tried to transfer this intimate intuitive, way of encountering the sights and people into the finished artworks.

The projects also explore the ancient role of the guide as a storyteller and a carrier of wisdom and truth for society.

Throughout the process video became a central medium in ways it has never been in my work before. Both as a documentary tool on site, but also as the core medium in the finished artworks. The camera became a third witness, not only to document the site and the guides. This led to a shift in the projects from being interested in the historical events and the ruins which I knew through the media, to focus on how to some people these places (Chernobyl and Detroit) can represent places where the value of individual freedom proves more important than life outside of these zones.

For that reason the video medium has been an important discovery for me artistically because it has the ability to express complex issues and touch on several layers at the same time.

For the men in Chernobyl and women in Detroit, the deliberate choice to move into these uncertain zones proves to be more valuable than the costs of staying within the so-called «normal» society. As conveyed through their own views of their existence in what are normally considered uninhabitable areas, we learn that the economy of human survival in post-industrial societies is complex, and sometimes even paradoxical.

(is there perhaps also a link between your valuing of micro-perspectives and the particular way in which you use the camera?)

ARTISTIC REFERENCES

The methods of the French filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch have been a great inspiration. He characterized his way of working as a form of shared anthropology involving active collaboration with the people he documented. This open method inspired me to risk to travel to the zones without pre-fixed aims or motives, trusting that I could gather different experiences and information by means of being guided through unknown territory, documenting and giving value to the micro-perspectives of my guides. The blurring between fiction and facts in Rouch's films, also opened up the perspective of bringing in a

mythological aspect which appears to be present in catastrophic places against all odds, and which attracts people, including my self.

Furthermore reading and seeing how artist and theorist Trin T. Minh-ha-developed a method where she positions her self as an artist who talks not "about" but "near by" her subjects, was a key moment for me, which opened up a new perspective on how to create art from sites outside of my own cultural sphere.

Finally the art historian Jill Bennett's work on empathic vision and contemporary memory where she analyses affect and trauma in contemporary Art has been important to me. In particular Bennett's analyses of subjective contemporary memory and of Deleuze's argument that "feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought" have been helping me to trust and develop my sensitivity as an artistic researcher and participatory observer of contemporary survival strategies and adaptation processes in traumatic landscapes.

PRESENTATION OF THE ARTWORKS

For the assessment committee, the final project titled *Contested Landscape* (Kiruna) will be premiered in Oslo Kunstforening from 10.th of October – 10.th of November 2013 (if necessary the exhibition will be open for the assessment committee until 13th of November.

The Exhibition *The Economy of Survival* featured the two projects *Chernobyl Mon Amour & Land Of Freedom* at the Stenersen Art Museum 21. November 2012 – 19.th December 2013. The artworks and documentation of the exhibition will be made available for the assessment committee in a gallery space at KHIO.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

The critical reflection will be in a written format. The critical reflection and the documentation material from the exhibitions will be sent the steering committee and the assessment committee within the 10th. Of January 2014.