

Disposable Citizens: viewing Chernobyl through the lens of those live there

Chernobyl inhabitants were given cameras to document their everyday lives

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The Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 was by many measures the worst environmental disaster in human history. Roughly ten times [larger than the Fukushima accident](#) that would lay waste to swathes of Japan almost exactly 25 years later, Chernobyl remains a worrying issue for thousands of people living in Ukraine today.

The number of premature deaths caused by the disaster has always been contested,¹ but the social and psychological impacts are less opaque. Over 350,000 people became '[nuclear refugees](#)' in the wake of the accident, and today roughly 2.15 million people still live on territory that the Ukrainian state has designated as contaminated by low level radiation.¹ Harvard Professor Serhii Plokhy has just published the first comprehensive *historical* book about the nuclear accident, titled '[Chernobyl: History of a Tragedy](#)'. What [my research](#) shows however, is that for those who still live on territory impacted by radiation, this disaster is far from resigned to history, and is an ongoing experience.

Life is particularly hard for those who live on the edge of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a highly toxic and forbidden territory roughly the size of Greater London. The photo project discussed here is not designed to reveal the *scale* of the tragedy, but its intimacies: the personal, embodied, and everyday perspective. While Chernobyl has become an avatar for living in what sociologist Ulrich Beck called a '[risk society](#)', it is also a place where people live, laugh, and fall in love. This academic and photographic project is inspired by Adriana Petryna's work '[Life Exposed](#)' where she described '*the blinding light delivered by Chernobyl*'.

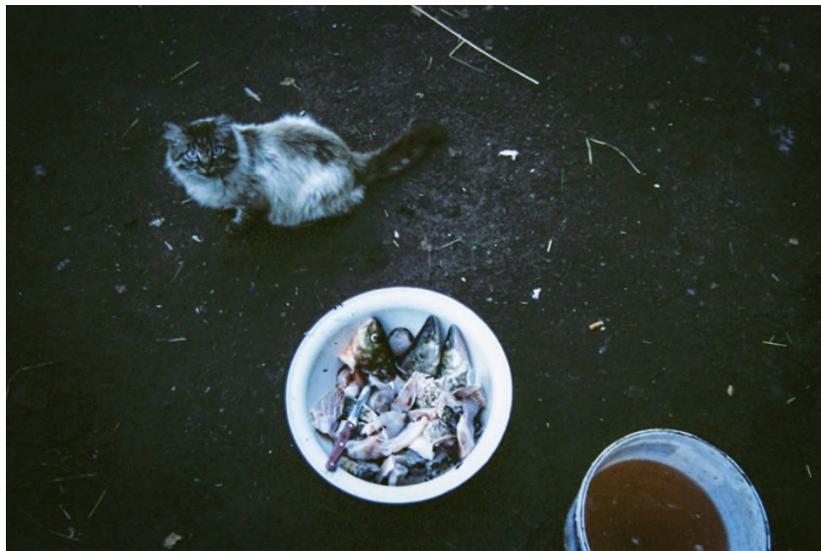
"Disposable" not only stands for the photographic medium used, but also the way many people feel they have been treated by the Ukrainian state'

Disposable citizens is a photography project that reveals images made *by* people who live in the radiated landscape around the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine. Participants were given disposable cameras and asked to show what it is like to live in the shadow of the nuclear disaster. This project formed part of my PhD research in Ukraine, as I did ethnographic research in the villages and town that are still occupied near Chernobyl.

'Disposable' not only stands for the photographic medium used (outmoded single-use 35mm film cameras), but also the way many people feel they have been treated by the Ukrainian state. Many people who live with Chernobyl believe they are regarded as disposable citizens, abandoned by the government to an uncertain future.

The images they made provide an intimate look into the hidden geographies of Chernobyl. In a landscape where the spectre of radiation is inherently invisible, being able to see spaces beyond the observable becomes all the more important. It is an ephemeral search for what Michel de Certeau called "spaces that cannot be seen."

This collaborative project involved using forty disposable cameras. A selection of the images from *Disposable Citizens* are shown below. You can find more [here](#).



A pet cat stares at the camera near a bowl of half-prepared fish, caught from the river that runs past the abandoned Chernobyl power plant. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



"Chernobyl" road sign inside the nuclear Exclusion Zone. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



Guard dog. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



An elderly lady doing embroidery outside her rural home near the edge of the Exclusion Zone. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies

"My son was playing in the field when the catastrophe happened, he was covered in dirt. And some soldiers who had a dosimeter said 'Who's son is this?' and I said he was mine and they told me that he has received a very large dose and said that he will not live beyond twenty years. He died when he was twenty three"

Baba Olga, Stari Sakoli Village



A cow drinking in a field. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



Drying fish caught in the local river. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



Memorial to the Great Patriotic War in the village of Orane, south of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



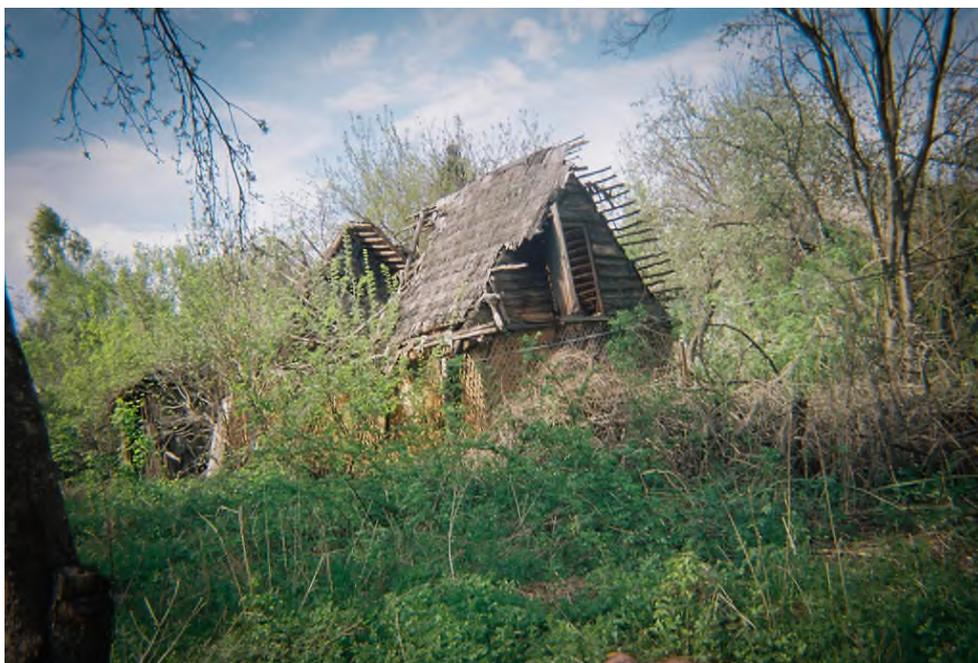
A woman hangs washing in her garden near Chernobyl. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



A man's thumb. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies

"It does not smell, you can't touch it, you can't see it; nothing seems out of the ordinary, you just live and work and so on. But still everyday, every hour, it still has an impact on you"

Mayor of Orane Village



An abandoned home. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies



A mother stares at her son who is photographing her in their back garden near the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. From the series 'Disposable Citizens' by Thom Davies

"We just eat what we have always eaten - where can we get clean food from? For 27 years they only gave us 2 hryvnya 10 kopeks 'to buy clean food', but what can we buy for that? Our government fill their pockets, but what about us? Who cares that we are living here? Nobody! You have to gather money for two months just to buy a loaf of bread"

Former Liquidator, Frozinivka Village

If you are interested in the academic research associated with this ethnographic project, you can read more about it [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). You can follow Thom Davies on twitter [here](#).

Footnotes

1. Reliable estimates on the number of premature deaths caused by Chernobyl vary widely, from 4000 to 90,000 people.

References

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