



Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20

Haunting Time

Irradiation, aurality, performance and ghosts

Louise K. Wilson

To cite this article: Louise K. Wilson (2024) Haunting Time, Performance Research, 29:7, 12-19, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2024.2569245](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2569245)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2569245>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 27 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 248



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Haunting Time

Irradiation, aurality, performance and ghosts

LOUISE K. WILSON

The irradiated site is inherently haunted. The trauma of the nuclear accident and its (environmentally toxic) aftermath readily creates the conditions for ghosts. In ‘zones of exclusion’, boundaries of what is dead, what is alive, of our felt senses of time and our understanding of borderlines are troubled. While the catalytic ‘moment’ of the accident at Chernobyl¹ and Fukushima may be receding further into the past (1986 and 2011 respectively), the literal and metaphorical fallout remains present, in a geographical, political and material sense. Accordingly, these tragedies² have been, and continue to be, the subject of cultural works that variously use performative practices to both summon and confront the ghosts that we have created.

This article will primarily focus on *4 Rooms* by Jacob Kirkegaard (2006a), an audio work of four tracks for CD made in response to the catastrophic nuclear accident at Chernobyl, an irradiated site emblematic of a potent kind of ‘vibrancy’ (Bennett 2010).³ The project has been developed and continues as *Aion* (image). In *4 Rooms*, it will be argued, the artist’s performative presence (at the moment of its making) enables a means for both detection and invocation. Anthropologist Nils Bubandt, with an interest in the study of the ‘otherwise’, has suggested that in a (spirit) world increasingly viewed through a psychological lens, we get the ghosts that we deserve (2012).⁴ There is a sense therefore in which artists can be said to both materialize our irradiated creations and reflect them back to us.

There are multiple ways we may choose to make sense of humanity’s nuclear ghosts: Derridean spectres, Freudian revenants, apparitions in the ruins and so on. Two prevalent commonalities or tropes will inform the work under discussion. First, and predominantly, the use of sound will be privileged. Recent

scholarship into the ‘aural turn’ (in contemporary dramaturgy) by theorists Lynn Kendrick and Duška Radosavljević has drawn attention to this shift of focus from the primacy of visual spectacle to projects in which sound, voice and acoustics are foregrounded. Radosavljević has explored how new theatrical forms (such as verbatim theatre) often emphasize sound and voice, creating a more intimate and sensory engagement with an audience who are ‘enmeshed’ (Radosavljević 2022) in the process of reception. Audiences’ imaginations are vitally engaged in works that employ ‘amplified storytelling’, for example. The work discussed here, in leaning upon environmental, non-human, site-specific ‘speaking’, could be said to extend this insight, while further divesting it of anthropocentric dramaturgical concerns.

Crucially, the relationship between the aural and the ghostly runs deep: sound has spectral qualities, ‘disturbing noises, eerie silences and the enchantments of music’ (Toop 2010: IX). There is inherent ambiguity in the aural, exemplified in that most enduring of literary cultural tropes, strange noises in the haunted house (Burz-Labrande 2022). In (Gothic) literature acoustic manifestations of creaking floorboards, whisperings and so on are encountered long before any visible ones: ‘Because these ghosts are heard before they are seen, the Gothic uncanny has an emphatically sonic mode of performance throughout its history’ (Elferen 2012: 24). Of course, Gothic fiction has often centred on damaged and abandoned places, identifying ‘ruined medieval buildings and landscapes as sources of the uncanny, terror and horror’ (Murray 2020: 30, my emphasis). In the face of such ambiguity, ghosts materialize. The recent ruin may effect a noisy palimpsest. In another vein (the second trope), enduring mythologies around the role of haunting in the history and materiality of audio

¹ The Ukrainian spelling is Chornobyl (Chernobyl is the Russian one). The Russian spelling is largely used in the article since the primary work discussed was made prior to the current war.

² These two nuclear disasters are ‘rated as a 7 – the highest grade – on the International Nuclear Radiological Event Scale’ (Flynn 2021: 95).

³ The work for the *4 Rooms* CD also extends to a reworked track for Leonardo Music Journal (*Concert Room*), an audio-visual installation (entitled *AION*, now also distributed on a DVD) and a live performance (also entitled *AION*).

⁴ Bubandt is referring here to societies in which discussions about human subjectivity, psychological self-awareness courses, self-help materials and so on are integral to power and governance, and as the ‘spiritual world is increasingly psychologised, new forms of haunting are made possible within the worlds of... “psy ontology”’ (2012: 8).

recording (the so-called ‘ghost in the machine’) prevail and are instrumental to this discussion.

The work *4 Rooms*, by Danish-born performer, composer and artist Jacob Kirkegaard, embodies such haunting and haunted qualities. His practice typically uses the methodology of field recording: the audible ‘out there’ becomes raw material and an array of unconventional recording techniques is employed to capture the more than immediately perceptible. Kirkegaard credits these devices for inspiring him to ‘listen behind the surface of things’, where ‘the less obvious, or hidden messages are the more exciting to explore’ (Batty 2006). In *4 Rooms*, his method (untypically) involved the durational process of ‘sound mirroring’, or as he refers to it, ‘sonic time layering’. This is essentially appropriated from composer Alvin Lucier’s seminal *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1971), a piece that heightened and materialized the acoustic resonance of space through a repetitive process of playing, recording, replaying and re-recording a piece of spoken text until the very acoustic of a room had taken over. Over time, legible speech progressively decays, and semantic meaning is corrupted. In Kirkegaard’s version (which involved no recorded human voice), traces of presence seemingly materialized from empty spaces and were attributed to ghosts. The work was produced on location: the artist travelled to Ukraine in October 2005 and made recordings in several abandoned and contaminated spaces (fig. 1). His intention was to investigate the sonic potential of radiation, desiring to ‘unlock a fragment of the time existing inside the zone’ (Kirkegaard 2006b). While Alvin Lucier’s technique was originally performed in the domestic setting of the composer’s home, four apparently silent and derelict interior spaces were chosen for this work: Church, Auditorium, Swimming Pool and Gymnasium. The making of this work will be returned to later in this text; for now it is important to consider *4 Rooms* within a reading of prevailing recording mythologies since the precise methodology of this work may retrospectively be viewed as an inadvertent séance.

The question of how sounds are disclosed by recording media – in the sense of being brought forth – requires further contextualization within



■ Figure 1. Chernobyl, October 2005.
Photo Jacob Kirkegaard

the realm of ‘haunted media’ (Sconce 2000) and the wider (historical) relationship between recording and the (reanimation of) the dead. *4 Rooms* inescapably taps into the fascination with the possibilities for recording and broadcasting media to act as conduits beyond tangible physical phenomena. This territory has been the subject of some extensive media histories (and archaeologies) in recent years. For Friedrich Kittler, ‘Media always already provide the appearances of spectres’ (1999: 12) and in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, the relationship between new media and spiritualism is discussed. The invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837 (for example) was promptly followed by the tapping spectres of spiritistic séances sending messages from the realm of the dead. Steven Connor, with his cultural-phenomenological ‘take’ on the history of ‘ether’, traces a persistent lineage from the nineteenth-century belief that it was ‘a kind of limbo or aerial graveyard of lost sounds’ (Connor 2006: 20), up to technological developments in the twentieth century with ‘anomalous voices turning up in recordings of birdsong’ (21). He cites the infamous work of Latvian parapsychologist Konstantin Raudive, who in 1964 began working with Friedrich Jürgenson to try to detect and record Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), the so-called voices of the dead, ‘often by tuning a radio to the static

⁵ One (psychology-derived) explanation for this phenomenon is what is termed auditory pareidolia where a vague stimulus is perceived to be significant.

between broadcast frequencies or recording from an untuned diode' (ibid.). More pertinent to this discussion, Raudive initially made recordings in empty (and otherwise silent) rooms. Tiny traces of sound were then amplified with the resulting 'noise' of crackle and hiss thought to contain identifiable words and phrases.⁵ Interestingly, EVP provides a context to re-consider Lucier's 1980 CD version of *I Am Sitting*. Writer Thibaut de Ruyter found it amusing that despite the artwork's auditory similarity (from at least halfway through its forty-five-minute duration) to a Spiricom, 'a transcommunication device based on emitting pure frequencies rather than radiophonic white noise' (2009: 157), the working method is the exact reverse of that used by EVP scientists:

The microphone is held up 'in the air' and listens to the tape recorder at the other end of the room, with enough space between them to allow for all kinds of interferences (and distortions) ... Here, the voice shifts from figuration to abstraction, while EVP practice, which teaches us to listen to what lies beneath the veil of sound, moves from abstraction to figuration. (de Ruyter 2009: 157)

De Ruyter's delight is in the slow production of 'white noise', an aesthetic bi-product resulting from a performance coordinating electrical circuitry and recording media. A very low signal-to-noise ratio is 'characteristic of EVP recordings, which are generally very noisy, meaning the unschooled listener has to make an effort to understand anything at all' (Arnes: 139). The question remains why, for all our enlightenment, 'irrational capabilities are regularly ascribed to the new media and technologies of a given time – for instance, the ability to act as a channel for messages from the beyond' (De Ruyter: 18).

Jeffrey Sconce conceptualizes 'haunted media' (in the eponymously titled book) through a cultural history of electronic presence, characterized as a changeable social construct across media history. While the exact form may vary, he argues a consistent metaphor of 'flow' has been evoked, 'suggesting analogies between electricity, consciousness, and information' (2000: 7). On the specific subject of 'rational explanation' around Raudive's research, Sconce refers to the sound engineers who suggested

that interference, scrambled reception or circuitry problems contaminated the (radio) signal. The most persistent critics though were the psychologists attributing EVP to 'the unconscious mind of the experimenters' who, in their 'performance' of repeatedly listening back to the tapes, 'were merely projecting their own fears and desires onto the hissing static, fashioning "spirit voices" from the debris of their own psyche and, in the end, hearing what they wanted to hear' (89). Sconce describes how – in a masterstroke – Raudive defended himself against the 'Freudian assault' by 'dismissing the "unconscious" itself as a "scientific fiction," likening its role in psychology to that of the ether in premodern physics' (ibid.). From this Sconce makes a fascinating leap – the possibility of a shared project, in short, one acknowledging that both Freud and Raudive 'were in their own way interested in contacting "voices from the void"' (ibid.). Each was interested 'in language as a key for liberating hidden entities' (ibid.), with, on the one hand, the analysis of spirits speaking in multiple tongues, and, on the other, the 'baffling logic of dreams' (ibid.). Whether they were 'the personal "ghosts" of a lone subject's mind or the despairing spirits of a shared afterlife' (ibid.), these projects both clustered around the 'increasingly unsettled' and divided subject:

At their core, both of these 'interpretative' sciences shared the hope that their practices could overcome the trauma of a profound loss. They sought to repair a decisive moment of separation – either in the founding moment of psychic repression or the final moment of bodily death – that left 'conscious' subjects abandoned and alone. This mutual though antagonistic interest in the occluded mysteries of human subjectivity suggests that 'electronic voice phenomenon' and the 'talking cure' may be more closely conceptual cousins than either analyst would care to admit, in goal at least if not in actual model and method. (Sconce 2000: 91)

Regarding *4 Rooms*, we might ask to what extent it is possible to read Sconce's comparison in terms of the (performative) relationship between the sound recordist and the irradiated room. This will be discussed after further establishing the context of the 'zone of exclusion', with reference to other artists who have likewise responded to its eerie characteristics.

Chernobyl is a landscape that is emblematic of the Anthropocene in the worst way (Bubandt 2017). Although the isolated zone that surrounds the power plant has geographic finitude, the time scale into the future is unfathomable. The aftermath of the accident in 1986 is routinely described in terms of its incomprehensibility, exemplifying a hyperobject (Morton 2013), since its radiation effects transcend time, space and human comprehension. It is, as Paul Virilio asserts, an ‘unknown quantity’:

[A]n accident of time more than an accident of space. Accidents in the past related to space ... But in this case it was an accident in time, in temporality. The Chernobyl event is outside the norm in the sense that it concerned astronomical time, the time of generations, centuries and millennia. (Virilio 2003: 200)

In conversation with Virilio, journalist Svetlana Aleksievich discussed this temporal paradox of time after the accident when ‘(t)he end and the beginning were joined’ (ibid.). While those resilient people who stayed behind felled trees with axes, used ploughs to work the land and torchlight for evening illumination, physicists tried to unravel the ‘unrivalled complexity’ of the problem (ibid.). Time was and remains out of joint (Derrida 2006). In her book of the oral history testimonies of Chernobyl survivors, Aleksievich concludes: ‘These people had already seen what for everyone else is still unknown. I felt like I was recording the future’ (2005: 236). While it continues to be a compellingly photogenic place (for those who extract its sights), it is sated with profoundly terrible actualities. While radioactivity is invisible in its physical form, it is experienced as potent, vibrant matter by those it harms and kills (Schwab 2020). It acts on the body at the cellular level; our bodies are defenceless in the face of this insidious energy. As Jelewska and Krawczak assert, ‘Each time we breathed in and out, we became enmeshed in the hyperobject of the catastrophe. Unrecognizable at the first breath, it was glued to our clothes, hands and hair, and then it got inside our flesh’ (2018: 3). By degree, it can be seen, heard, felt and imagined.

The explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on 26 April 1986 was a materially violent and seismic event: the concrete roof, upper walls and part of the machine room of the fourth reactor were blown apart with the force, and the heat generated by the resulting fire turned metals and minerals into running lava (Brown 2017: 33). The nearby town of Pripjat, built to house the plant’s employees, was evacuated by the Soviet military (Ukraine was then under the control of the USSR) thirty-six hours later. The town was hurriedly emptied of its primarily young inhabitants who, aside from a few possessions, were forced to leave all belongings and pets behind.

In the intervening decades since the accident, streams of visitors have proliferated, both the idly curious and the creatively and scientifically invested – tourists, documentarists, artists and international scientific monitoring teams. The deserted living spaces of Pripjat have drawn familiar and haunting visual responses: thick dust covering a disturbed tableau of overturned furniture, a child’s doll seemingly dissolving into the ‘stuff’ of the floor, a picture of Lenin on the wall. The town itself is familiar to those born decades later as a video game. Despite the ongoing war, work on a long-delayed sequel *Stalker 2: Heart of Chornobyl* continued to its realization.⁶ Mutant creatures, not ghosts, are the envisioned actants in this recreated Exclusion Zone. This ‘visual’ over-consumption of the Chernobyl disaster marks a strong distinction that can be strongly distinguished from sonic/aural works such as *4 Rooms*.

⁶ The first *Stalker* videogame was entitled *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, a first-person shooter survival horror video game that was developed by GSC Game World and launched on 20 March 2007. The sequel, developed by Kyiv-based developer GSC Game World, was released on 20 November 2024.

■ Figure 2. Power cables in sight of the exploded reactors at Chernobyl, near the abandoned village of Kopachi, Chernobyl exclusion zone Ukraine, 2006.

Photo Peter Cusack



Artist Cornelia Hesse-Honegger undertook a clandestine visit to Chernobyl in 1990 to make paintings of morphologically disturbed insects. Trained as a scientific illustrator, she was engaged in a long-term visual study of Heteroptera (true bugs) and had already monitored the health of these creatures affected by the radioactive cloud in Sweden and Switzerland. In Pripjat she reported hearing music broadcast from public loudspeakers, 'a measure to keep the guards from going crazy in this ghost city' (Hesse-Honegger 2000: n.p.). These were broadcasts to a very small human population and a larger non-human one. Despite the habitual influx of visitors, the swell of thousands of Pripjat's resident voices remains stilled or at least dampened.⁷ The soundtrack of vibrancy and life has intensified as the Zone has been reclaimed by the natural world. With his practice of 'sonic journalism', artist Peter Cusack has made numerous audio recordings as part of the series *Sounds from Dangerous Places*. In volume 1 (Chernobyl), collecting field recordings that attested to the perhaps surprising proliferation of species – wild boar, frogs and summer grasshoppers – all signalled their vigorous existence, since '[s]eventy per cent of the zone is now forest' (Flynn 2021: 93). In a surprising first recording made inside the Zone, Cusack heard fizzing from overhead pylons (fig. 2). He recorded this ambience of synchronous electrical crackling, chaffinch song and wind through pine trees, curious as to the origin of the electricity (since Chernobyl's reactors were shut down). In effect the sound was 'electricity flowing in the wrong direction, into Chernobyl rather than out' (Cusack 2012). In this context, sound recording illuminates the complex processes at play, highlighting how 'all sound, including non-speech, gives information about places and events and that listening provides valuable insights different from, but complementary to, visual images and language'. Cusack offers a lively, noisy sound picture of the zone; surprisingly the 'Dead Zone is not dead at all' (Flynn 2021: 97): some species thrive in greater numbers, now that the human population has decreased. Chernobyl is thus 'radioactive wasteland' and 'safe haven' (101), both dead and alive. The (contaminated) past is

carried into the future, through the blood:

Human-made radiocesium has ... uncanny quality: it travels in water and soil; it gets inside plants and animals; we cannot see it even as we learn to find its traces. It disturbs us in its indeterminacy; this is a quality of ghosts. (Gan *et al.* 2017: 2).

While Cusack emphasizes the ability for audio to powerfully transmit senses of space/spatiality, time and atmosphere, other creative work uses field recording to communicate the ontology of sound. For *4 Rooms*, Kirkegaard made a 'raw' recording lasting 10 minutes using a Sanken CSS5 shotgun microphone, connected by a 30-metre cable patched directly into a computer, which was placed outside each of the selected rooms in turn. This recording of the empty space was played back into the room, and then subsequently recorded again and again, a process that was repeated ten times. No voice was amplified inside the room since the artist departed the room for the duration of each recording. The rooms were effectively left to speak for themselves: and as the layers increased in density, each room slowly revealed its own peculiar overtones and distinct drones. This audible thickening characterizes the idea of tactile ruins, of 'immanent immersion ... and the feel of decaying matter' (Edensor 2005: 837).

The listener is not earwitness to the gradual accumulation of sonic evidence in this (apperceptual) experiment. The four approximately thirteen-minute-long compositions are presented on the *4 Rooms* CD in the final iterative phase (to which no post-production, aside from equalization of the sound file, was applied). These constitute a raw sonorous mass, albeit holding these distinctive drones (a recognizable feature of the sound mirroring process). Drones can be described as carrying sinister associations since

in many sound cultures, there is a connection between the low frequencies and danger, sadness, or melancholy ... many warning signals, for example, bells and foghorns, that require broad propagation and therefore must use low frequencies, thus inducing a feeling of fatality. (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 42)

The previously noisome spaces are home now to sound events of unknown origin, each revealing distinct qualities. As David Toop observes,

⁷ '[I]n 2012 the Ukrainian government announced that they would turn a blind eye to the presence of the – almost entirely elderly – unofficial population of the exclusion zone' (Flynn 2021: 98).

'Auditorium vibrate(s) with luminescent, pulsing density, as if some entity previously indiscernible from the silence of evacuation and radiation had clustered, finally to manifest itself, during this absence of human life' (2010: 213).

While he is reticent about explicitly committing himself to the idea of 'ghosts', Kirkegaard has described the perceptual experience of travelling into these rooms as akin to feeling the release of strange energy in an old house after peeling down its wallpaper. Spending time in spaces where people have lived and done things certainly exerts an effect: what had taken place there is held within the architecture. It doesn't surprise Kirkegaard that *Church* recorded in the abandoned town of Krasno (Pripyat, constructed on communist ideals, has no churches) is arguably the most sonically 'colourful' piece: a deep slow hovering drone, interlaced with intermittent higher notes, suggesting a cavernous space. He attributes this to the spiritual nature of human activity that took place at that site of recording:

If I go and record that room and playback, what do I hear? Do I evoke some energies? But that's not something I am ever saying, I wouldn't write that on the CD because then it would become esoteric and I don't want to be esoteric. But definitely that would be one thing for me personally being in a place like this and recording and playing back, it's a very spiritual thing. I think the church sound actually sounds a bit like bells. (Kirkegaard 2007)

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, an impulse towards Christianity was witnessed. Congregations in (non-Zone) churches swelled as religion provided consolation for many effected people where other certainties were lacking. 'The past, which seemed to be a reliable resource (like a world archive), has suddenly become powerless. Many people are seeking consolation in prayer... The churches are full' (Aleksievich 2005: 208). The empty (but replete) church recording assumes further poignancy in this light.

The context and history of the site is made more significant by the live (performative) presence of Kirkegaard. This work prompts the question as to how far we should also consider the vibrant performativity inherent in audio recording machines. For as geographer Michael

Gallagher notes:

In the recording process, the texture of the recording medium is shaped through an ensemble performance involving various human and more-than-human actants: the vibrations in the environment being recorded; its acoustic qualities of reflection and absorption; the recording apparatus of microphones, cables, preamplifiers, electrical currents, memory cards, batteries, and headphones; and the recordist's ears, hands, and eyes. All of these forces and machines function together in a carefully orchestrated arrangement. (Gallagher 2015: 568)

The concept of field recording somehow 'capturing sounds' is misleading, since contingency conditions the whole process of (field) recording. As Gallagher signals, it is prompted by an awareness not only of the fragility of each of the technical components but also the variable phenomenal aspects that surround the recordist and their kit at that time and place:

Sounds are not objects but fleeting movements, waves propagating amongst bodies ... What the field recordist brings home is not sound from the environment, but arrangements of charged particles in the semiconductive materials of solid state 'flash' memory, or the magnetic surfaces of hard drives, tapes, and minidisks. These recordings are not sounds. The sounds, if they are anywhere at all, are still 'out there' in the field, dissipating through space.

On playback, the texture of the recording acts as a set of instructions for a further performance, something akin to an extremely precise musical score for an electromechanical orchestra. Data are spun into vibration through digital to analogue converters, amplifiers, loudspeakers, air, and ears, again working together as an ensemble. Only through this process do recordings become sounds (Gallagher 2015: 570).

Arguably the microphone itself produces a performance, since whatever is 'picked up' and 'stored' as a trace for the record has, in another sense, been enacted and brought into being. The agency of the recordist is key. Jacob Kirkegaard's *4 Rooms* project serves as a powerful example:

Was I bringing forth a micro-activity that only unwraps itself to the human ear when it is made denser by technical means? ... Or could it be *me*, my physical or mental presence that opens a gate to a world that was formerly inaudible? (Leonardo 2006: 72, my emphasis)

Consideration must then be directed to the

mediating presence of the recording kit. Leaving aside possible technological ‘noise’ that may have intruded (although the digital nature of the recordings directly into the laptop makes it unlikely), the artist was prompted to question where the room tones were coming from and what was making them materialize. This subjective assigning of meaning is prompted by knowledge of the fact that it’s not just a normal room, that it is Chernobyl, will help an audience to listen in another way (Kirkegaard 2007). The drones will always be more than drones, in other words.

With *4 Rooms*, the room as *subject* is being invited to ‘speak’ and reveal its ‘sickness’. Trauma has been auralized. Yet this process (of recording) is not – and cannot be – curative, of course (the repetition of symptoms never reaching the point of catharsis). It will continue to be contaminated. Kirkegaard is not speaking into the space but activating a microphone and recording what transpires. After 10 minutes, the initial ‘session’ is terminated and the findings are iteratively attended to. Could it be a process of transference, since he (Kirkegaard), the listener, has been quoted as saying, ‘Experiencing Chernobyl is like entering another zone in myself’?⁸ The process of spending time in a place where ‘something is wrong’ was evidently transformative. Are we also being invited to speculate how much the artist/experimenter is, himself, shaped by the process he has *repeatedly* engineered in the four rooms? With the other analogy, it is very clear that Kirkegaard was not explicitly setting out to record ‘ghost voices’ in the shattered spaces he encountered. In the scorch of silence, he gathered light.

END NOTE

The irradiated nuclear accident site is routinely mined, its ghostly narratives (whether explicit or otherwise) extracted. However, are such sites really exhausted by this? Ghosts stalk these narratives – the marks left by human activity leave landscapes haunted by our past activities and shaped by change or manipulation, just as difficulties in comprehension carry the (contaminated) past into the future. Jacob Kirkegaard’s fascination with Chernobyl is

overdetermined by the unknowable nature of radioactive decay and its future persistence. Another rationale for this quiet ‘divination’ practice of Kirkegaard, *4 Rooms* points to the anxiety about the limits of representation and a created technology that is sensorially intangible since, ‘Matter has dematerialized.’ In the accounts of Chernobyl, it is ‘what is imperceptible by hands, eyes, and ears’. It, the harmful radiation, cannot even be ‘sensed’. Is it as if the human has ‘no sensory organ for something that he himself [*sic*] produced?’ (Treusch-Dieter 1989: 16), an onslaught of this energetic material that penetrates deep into the body, leaving a trace as genes are de-ranged. For Christoph Cox,

the drones that emerge from these rooms are, presumably, inflected by the radioactive particles and electromagnetic waves that still invisibly move within them. They are also haunted by the human beings that once inhabited them. Like sound, radiation doesn’t die but only dissipates, dilates, or loses energy. (Cox 2009: 25)

Artist and writer Seth Kim-Cohen doesn’t subscribe to the strongly materialist notion that we hear materially pure phenomena of waves or particles, but rather privileges ‘the story, the history of them: the radioactive, electromagnetic text’. Our knowledge of Chernobyl and what happened there inflects what we hear: ‘What we hear is haunted not by the actuality of the human beings who once inhabited the rooms but their histories and by history ... What we are left with is an actuality, not *the* actual’ (Kim-Cohen 2009: 132).

To confront enduring historical trauma, we must ask how artists can create representations that mourn the past while simultaneously encouraging critical reflection and making a powerful claim for the future. We are acutely reminded and haunted by the nuclear ghosts we have created. The spectre of Chernobyl has become so horrifically present since the Russian invasion began in 2022 – a shocking return, a beast that threatens to be prodded, to resurface. If, by their very nature, ghosts never truly disappear then we will continue to ask how the ephemeral nature of performance can reconcile with the enduring timescale of nuclear catastrophe and the fragility of traumatic

⁸ ‘Travelling for hours in an extremely lonely, but colourful and overwhelming landscape in an October autumn, knowing that there is something in the soil, something around me that I cannot see, evoked a feeling, that is very difficult to describe. I have never found myself feeling outside reality (literally alienated from the world that I understand). There is a different spirit inhabiting the place, it is divine, but devilish. Something that eats you slowly, but there is no monster to see, only wild nature. It is like a spell. So it is an extremely interesting place, and it reached beyond myself. Experiencing Chernobyl is like entering another zone in myself’ (Batty 2006).

memory. In the scorch of silence, we seek to gather light.

REFERENCES

- Alexsieвич, Svetlana (2005) *Voices from Chernobyl: The oral history of a nuclear disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen, New York, NY: Picado.
- Augoyard, Jean-François and Torgue, Henry (2005) *Sonic Experience: A guide to everyday sounds*, Toronto, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Batty, Roger (2006) *The Sound of Silence*, Jacob Kirkegaard, <https://bit.ly/42CsSV1>, accessed 10 October 2024.
- Bennett, Jane (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brown, Kate (2017b) 'Marie Curie's fingerprint: Nuclear spelunking in the Chernobyl zone', in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. G33 - G50.
- Bubandt, Nils (2012) 'A psychology of ghosts: The regime of the self and the reinvention of spirits in Indonesia and beyond', *Anthropological Forum* 22(1): 1-23, DOI: 10.1080/00664677.2011.652585.
- Bubandt, Nils (2017) 'Haunted geologies: Spirits, stones and the necropolitics of the Anthropocene', in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. G121 - G141.
- Burz-Labrande, Manon (2022) *Spectral Sounds: Unquiet tales of acoustic weird*, London: The British Library.
- Connor, Steven (2006) *Atmospherics*, <https://bit.ly/4mkiOb0>, lecture given at Sounding Out 3, University of Sunderland, 8 September, accessed 15 September 2011.
- Cox, Christopher (2009) 'Sound art and the sonic unconscious', *Organised Sound* 14(1): 19-26.
- Cusack, Peter (2012) *Sounds from Dangerous Places*, book with two CDs, Berliner Künstlerprogramm Des DAAD, London: ReR Megacorp (ReR PC3&4).
- De Ruyter, Thibaut (2009) 'Death and electricity', in Inke Arns, Thibaut de Ruyter and HMKV (eds), *Awake Are Only the Spirits: On ghosts and their media*, Berlin: Revolver Publishing, pp. 153-8.
- Derrida, Jaques (2006) *Spectres of Marx*, New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Edensor, Tim (2005) 'The ghost of industrial ruins: Ordering and disordering memory in excessive space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and space* 23(6): 829-49.
- Elferen, Isabella van (2012) *Gothic Music: The sounds of the uncanny*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Flyn, Cal (2021) *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the post-human landscape*, London: William Collins.
- Gallagher, Michael (2015) 'Field recording and the sounding of spaces', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33: 560-76, DOI: 10.1177/0263775815594310.
- Gan, Elaine, Tsing, Anna, Swanson, Heather and Bubandt, Nils (2017) 'Haunted landscapes of the Anthropocene' in Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan and Heather Swanson (eds) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. G1-G14.
- Hesse-Honegger, Cornelia (2000) *The Future's Mirror*, Newcastle, UK: Locus Plus.
- Jelevska, Agnieszka and Krawczak, Michal (2018) 'The spectrality of nuclear catastrophe: The case of Chernobyl', www.scienceopen.com, May, DOI: 10.14236/EWIC/EVAC18.30.
- Kim-Cohen, Seth (2009) *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a non-cochlear sonic art*, New York, NY: Continuum.
- Kirkegaard, Jacob (2006a) *4 Rooms*, Touch Records.
- Kirkegaard, Jacob (2006b) *Articles and Features*, Jacob Kirkegaard, <https://bit.ly/42CsSV1>, accessed 10 October 2024.
- Kirkegaard, Jacob (2007) Telephone interview between Jacob Kirkegaard and Louise K. Wilson, 18 July.
- Kittler, Friedrich (1999) *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Morton, Tim (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*, Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murray, Simon (2020) *Performing Ruins*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Radosavljević, Duška (2022) *Aural/Oral Dramaturgies: Theatre in the digital age*, London: Routledge.
- Sconce, Jeffrey (2000) *Haunted Media: Electronic presence from telegraphy to television*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schwab, Gabrielle (2020) *Radioactive Ghosts*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Toop, David (2010) *Sinister Resonance: The mediumship of the listener*, New York, NY and London: Continuum.
- Treusch-Dieter, Gerburg (1989) 'The beginning of the end: On the history of radiation from Plato to Chernobyl', in Dieter Kamper and Christoph Wulf (eds), trans. David Antal, *Looking Back on the End of the World*, New York, NY: Semiotext(e).
- Virilio, Paul (2003) *Unknown Quantity*, London: Thames & Hudson.