

Thierry Buysse

Chernobyl and Its Forbidden Spaces



Thierry Buysse was born in April 1983, and grew up in Bruges, Belgium. As a young boy, Buysse often explored different artistic outlets, until he discovered photography through his aunt Greta Buysse (www.gretabuyssse.be). Greta Buysse is a well-known international female photographer who has a predilection for artistic nudity. Years later his interest in photography increased under the watchful eye of his parents who pushed him to succeed. At the age of 21, in 2004, Buysse bought his first DSLR camera, a Canon 10D. At the beginning of 2005, after one year of trying to get it right, Buysse discovered Urban Exploration. His pictures left a major impression. As a result, *Sharpood* in Knokke, Belgium contacted him for his first solo exposition. The continuous and growing interest and the unexpected success instantly garnered Buysse two more exhibitions, with almost 9 more exhibitions planned for the near future including two substantial ones in 2011 and 2012.

Inspired, Buysse decided to make an adventurous trip with his girlfriend to a heavily radioactive area, Chernobyl in Ukraine. There, the couple stayed 2 days and spent the night so that Buysse could take some extreme pictures. One year later, in October 2009, he went back to the forbidden zone of Chernobyl. This time for 5 days and 4 nights! Today you still find him at work in abandoned locations and he is still hoping for an international breakthrough with his work. His first exposition outside Belgium will be held in Germany.



Freaky doll with her teddybear friend in a Pripjat kindergarden



Some doll in one of the 3 kindergardens in Pripjat



A broken doll face in one of the 3 kindergardens in Pripjat



2 child bikes in one of the 3 kindergardens in Pripjat

Sketch of Reality

I don't like to be called a photographer because the term 'photographer' refers to someone who is a professional and who is academically trained. I am a self-taught man and I like to consider myself a photographic artist rather than a photographer. The decision as to whether I am a real photographer or not I leave to people who view my work.

As a photographic artist I look in abandoned locations for areas or objects that want to tell something to the world, the story they have lived. I search along the border of life and death, existence and decease, vulnerability and reencounter. I'm still searching for a sketch of reality, something that shows real facts. When I enter an abandoned place, it's like a step back into the past. It makes you realize that eternal life doesn't exist. All life suffers under the pain of desperate attempts to escape to it. I mainly work with black and white because it makes reality come to life.

I want viewers who look at my work to find something unexpected, the longer you look at an image, study the elements, the more you discover. I hope my work intrigues and gives rise to deep thinking.

The Story Behind the Greatness of the Abandoned

Something that captured my attention at the site of the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl was mainly the greatness of the abandoned. This time it wasn't an abandoned house or an empty factory but an entire landmass where time had stopped for 24 years and counting. The enormity of the city where someday almost 50000 civilians lived was now completely abandoned; it is a phenomenon indescribable with words. In the case of Chernobyl it wasn't just the characteristic of being deserted that appealed to me, but also the consequences of a gigantic nuclear catastrophe. Nuclear power is a worldwide hot topic, and Chernobyl is an example of how it can go wrong because of an abuse of this immense power. The theme is a huge source of inspiration for me along with the idea of a now gone glory.

When I first walked into a space in Pripjat I became overwhelmed with so much inspiration that made it more difficult to express myself. Out every corner there came so many stories that you could easily create thousands of pictures in only one space. The result was major overloading through which it was difficult to produce one good image.

Excerpt from Thierry Buysse's Journey Log

The First Trip - 2008

2 September 2008 - day 1: 8.45 - We are waiting for our driver at the entrance of our hotel in Independence Square in Kiev. Ten minutes later he appears, but unfortunately, he turned out not to speak or understand English. By means of signs and gestures we manage to load our luggage and leave. Moving through the busy morning peak-hour traffic, it turns out that we have to pick up one more couple. Our driver's crazy driving skills made for two tense hours to Dytyatky, the first checkpoint in the Zone of Exclusion.

On the way we get to know our two companions better and they turn out to be an older Dutch couple. After a half hour ride we're finally out of the centre of Kiev on the motorway where, to our astonishment, we see a number of cyclists riding in the opposite direction in the middle lane. A bit further our driver makes an emergency brake stop because there is someone with some 250 giant watermelons on the side of the road. Our driver buys one for the kitchen of the Chernobyl Interinform. Halfway through our trip we notice that our driver is dozing off, which is really worrying since the roads are in bad condition and we're driving a rickety van. We keep him awake by tapping his shoulder every time we see his head hanging down and eventually, we let him stop at a gas station and we offer him a RedBull, which he refuses to our surprise. We're still half an hour away from the first checkpoint Dytyatky.

11.30 - We arrive at the first checkpoint Dytyatky, and a robust military man with a typical Russian look comes walking to our ramshackle van. He opens the door and asks for our documents. We have to take off our caps to prove that we look like the pictures in our passports. I asked whether we could take pictures of the checkpoint and he nodded curtly. The average radiation dose on my Terra-P (radiation reader) is $0,08 \mu\text{Sv/h}$. After 5 minutes the barrier goes up...

11.45 - We arrive at the Chernobyl Interinform Agency and meet Yuri who will accompany us in the two coming days. Yuri has already been working as a guide for 10 years and he stays alternately two weeks in the zone and two weeks at home.

12.00 - Since we're more than an hour late due to the late arrival of our fellow travelers and the stopover at the gas station, we have to skip the informative part and start right away with the guided tour. But before we can start with it, we have to sign a contract stating that we consciously enter the zone and are aware of all the possible consequences.

The first stop is at a famous monument (set up in 1988) to the firemen who took part in the fire-fighting operations and the cleanup shortly after the disaster; virtually all of them have died because due to radiation overdose. We arrive in Lelev, the second checkpoint that blocks the access to the 10km-zone. A clearly frustrated military man opens the door of the van and orders us to present our passports. He inspects us from head to toe to make sure that we're really the same people as in the photos. Finally, he returns our documents and gives a short nod to his colleague. The barrier goes up.

Yuri tells us that there are wild boars here and that we should watch out for them. But he says that the chance that we will see them is pretty slim because he himself has only seen them only twice in the past 10 years. Nothing was further from the truth: he has barely finished speaking when our driver had to brake abruptly for a horde of wild boars with some 20 cubs. We had a hairbreadth escape from a collision with 2 heavy boars that stood in front of our van. I was just in time to take a picture of the fleeing boars before they ran into the high grass again. A bit later we stopped in the village Kopatsji.

This village is the closest one to the nuclear power station and had 1114 inhabitants all of whom were evacuated on 3 May 1986. The houses have been demolished and simply covered with a thin layer of earth, a typical disappearing act of the communist regime? My Terra-P shows $0.30 \mu\text{Sv/h}$ at the roadside. Unfortunately, we cannot enter the village because the slopes are densely wooded and this is a wonderful hiding place for the wild boars. While we're going back to the van, we see a humongous latticework on the horizon. Yuri explains that this used to be an anti-rocket system put by the Russians against the Americans. We are moving in the direction of the cooling towers. There we see the unfinished cooling towers of reactor 5 and 6 that were under construction at the moment of the accident. A bit further, in front of reactors 5 and 6, there is a building under construction. The works were stopped immediately after the disaster and have never been resumed. This is made very clear by

the half open construction and the prehistoric Soviet tower cranes that have been standing there lifeless for 22 years.

Here the value shown by my Terra-P goes up to $0.87 \mu\text{Sv/h}$, a bit over the natural threshold, but Yuri says that several days after the accident the values went up to 1 million above the permitted value. Behind us, there is a new concrete bunker built and managed by the Americans, where the nuclear waste is stored. We get back into the van and continue our trip in the direction of the core of the disaster, reactor 4! In the meantime Yuri tells us that an investigation into the consequences for the environment was conducted in 1995 that has shown that nature had recovered and that this area was a habitat for hundreds of different animal species.

Biological mutation is no longer an issue, this only happened in the first generation after the disaster but these animals had no chance of survival. Worldwide there are only 1500 Mongol horses, 100 of which live in the free nature of the Zone of Exclusion. In the photo made in the Chernobyl Museum in Kiev, you can see a wild boar cub with 2 heads and 8 paws.

We approach the elongated buildings of reactors 1, 2, 3 and 4 but before we go to number 4 on the other side, we stop at the bridge for a moment. There, Yuri shows us the giant catfish, which come in swarms to polish off the bread that we throw them. At reactor 4 with its famous sarcophagus only the reactor building itself could be photographed. We could come as close as 50 meters, which gave a very intense feeling. My Terra-P indicated $\pm 5.00 \mu\text{Sv/h}$. Yuri tells us that 70% of the construction has been made open to the public (on condition of severe safety regulations). Daily works are still needed for the maintenance of the sarcophagus. These works are extremely difficult because each workman can stay inside the building only several minutes per day. 18 countries have already given donations for the maintenance and repair of the sarcophagus, the sum amounting to almost 2 billion USD.

We proceed in the direction of Pripjat. There we come to a fork with a monument that was constructed in 1970 on the occasion of the beginning of construction of Pripjat and the nuclear power plant. We arrive at the last checkpoint. We can finally enter Pripjat! Pripjat had 50,000 inhabitants and was evacuated using 2000 buses in 20 hours. We stop here and there at some buildings and get the necessary explanations.



A piano in the music school of Pripjat



A piano in the music school of Pripjat



Detail of a piano in the music school of Pripjat



Inside a half sunken boat at the wreckyard near Chernobyl



On deck of a half sunken boat at the wreckyard near Chernobyl



A boatwreck at the wreckyard near Chernobyl

The swimming pool has only been deserted since 1996: for 10 years it was still used as a form of recreation by the workers who were clearing the town. On the way back I ask Yuri about the red forest and the square with vehicles and helicopters. Unfortunately, the helicopters and vehicles were dismantled in 2006 due to the great demand for metal in the world. Meanwhile, the radioactivity level shown by my Terra-P went up to 10.00 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$ when we were driving through the red forest. Since I didn't see any red forest around, Yuri told us that it had been cut down ten years ago. We return to the 10 km checkpoint where a military man examines our van with a Geiger counter. A bit later his thumb goes up and the barrier is opened. On the way to the last stop of day 1 we stop at a lake with half sunk boats. Unfortunately, we could only see them from one side...

15.30 - a meal prepared by the friendly people of the Chernobyl Interinform is the last item on today's program. Before we are allowed to sit at the table, we have to wash our hands and then stand on a prehistoric radiation counter that checks our hands and shoe soles for infected substances. The light goes green so we can go to the table. There we are treated to a sumptuous five-course meal that consists of 75% vegetables, 10% pasta and 15% very fat meat. Alas, our western stomachs cannot manage such a quantity of food and fat and we have to leave most of our food on our plates. During the meal Yuri tells us that at the moment there are approximately 250 elderly persons who still live in the 30 km zone, all those who didn't want to leave their houses after the accident. They've been living there illegally for 6 years and were legalized only in 1992. Nobody lives in the 10 km zone and it is prohibited for anyone to enter the zone at night, exclusion zone employees included. Our meal is finished and we take leave of our Dutch fellow travelers. They go back to Kiev but we stay for the night to have one more day in one of the most special places on Earth.

17.00 - Yuri goes with us to our hotel where we get a simple but clean spacious room. Tired but satisfied, we immediately flop into a sofa and take some rest. One hour later Yuri comes to fetch us and offers us 2 extra hours in the zone, which we just cannot refuse. This time we go with his personal car, a blue Lada. We drive along deserted and dilapidated roads and occasionally he tells us about the things we see and stops so that we can enjoy the silence. Finally, we arrive in Yampol, a deserted village with some 30 wooden houses, all of them ramshackle and totally covered by wild overgrowth. The road is also covered by wild overgrowth, in some places we can barely pass. There is no church; it was

destroyed during the Second World War. We stop at some houses and go shortly inside where we still find a bed, some books and calendar leaves. When we come out of one of the houses, we hear some grunting and rush to the car: the wild boars followed our heels. Here and there you could see traces of large herds of boars. We still stop at the only bus stop of the village and have to make a U-turn since a fallen tree has blocked the road. It's getting late so we go back to Chernobyl while Yuri tells us that there is a curfew and we cannot go out after 8 pm. Not only because this is a rule but also for our own safety. A lot of military men have little to do after their daily duties and go to the local supermarket to get their daily dose of alcohol. We're dropped off at our hotel and agree to meet at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning at the restaurant across the street.

Overnight in Chernobyl: 20.00 - Once in our room, we take turns in the shower as instructed by the safety regulations that we received in Belgium. When finally in bed, we can enjoy a good night's rest.

3 September 2008 - day 2: 8.00 - During breakfast Yuri told us again about the town of Chernobyl. All the people living here, about 4000 of them, are here on a temporary basis. They all have a function in the framework of the clearing and maintenance works at the reactor building or in the infected zones in the 30 km zone. A lot of buildings in Chernobyl are still being used, mostly as accommodation for the 4000 persons. There are also some office buildings and a clinic. The pipeline that runs through the whole city was reinstalled after the accident because the old one was contaminated. The biggest part of the city consists of the usual small houses but all of them are abandoned and rundown. While we are driving around, the average radiation level on my Terra-P is 0.12 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$.

We stop once again at reactor 4 and drive straight to Pripyat where we want to have a closer look and go inside the buildings. We ask Yuri to show us the highest building in Pripyat and we get to see a 16-storey building. Unfortunately, the lift is broken. After an exhausting climb up we were rewarded by a wonderful view of the skyline of Pripyat with reactor 4 on the horizon as the icing on the cake. We both wondered what it must have looked like from here 22 years ago when reactor 4 turned into an inferno. We received 20 minutes but finally stayed there for an hour. The buildings are built in the typical prefab Soviet style and are full of shortcomings. Yuri tells us that these defects don't only come as a result of the natural dilapidation but are also due to the bad and cheap architecture. Harsh winters also give a hand in this: here the temperatures can go down to -40°C .

In the sports hall of Pripjat we can still see the traces of use as if they were still playing football here. On the wall there are still football pictures that bear witness to the life before the accident. Outside we see the world-famous Ferris wheel and the bumper cars. We've already seen them a lot on the Internet but being there in person gives quite a particular feeling. Near the Ferris wheel there is one square meter of moss and there we measure the highest radiation level in the past two days: my Terra-P registers 16.22 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$. Pripjat hides more dangerous situations than just dangerous substances. It's full of manholes whose metal lids disappeared two years ago thanks to the metal dealers who received free play. The pits are treacherously hidden among the overgrowth are about 80 cm wide and 15 meters deep. You can't make it out of there alive. One of our stops was at a hospital, which gave us an eerie feeling, to say the least. There definitely was some strange energy in that place, a door slammed not far from us and next to us a door opened by some 30 cm while there was no draft in the building. We step into the car again and drive to the famous swimming pool. It became even more famous after it was used in detail in the Playstation 3 game 'Call of Duty 4'.

15.30 - The day is nearly finished and we're driving for the last time through the main street of Pripjat to leave the city through the checkpoint. A bit later we leave the 10 km zone for the last time through the checkpoint Lelev. We arrive in Chernobyl and get through our last Chernobyl meal of this terrific trip. Once again we receive the same type of food as yesterday, a huge amount of vegetables with pasta and very fatty meat. We take leave from Yuri and thank him for the two fantastic days and our driver takes us back to Kiev.

17.00 - We arrive at the last checkpoint at Dytyatky where our car is thoroughly examined for dangerous substances. We have to present our documents once again and, after a careful inspection we are being told in straightforward Ukrainian that we have to go into the building. There is a big control device there that you have to enter. It gives us a complete body check for contaminated material but luckily the light flashes green and we can get back to the car. Unfortunately, it's prohibited to take photos here (you can find them on the Internet posted by other exclusion zone tourists). The barrier opens, the driver floors the accelerator and we look back for the last time: the barrier comes down and this puts an end to our terrific two days in this very special place.

The Second Trip 2009

5 October 2009 - day 1: 15.40 - Just like last year, we are back in the Ukraine on a pre-planned trip, at the airport our driver was waiting for us. I was amazed and surprised that this driver looked exactly the same as the one who drove us around last year, and even the mini-bus looked quiet familiar, as it was the same wreck as last year. I wondered if I had made the wrong decision by coming back. I might be punished for this sooner or later. While driving, my first impression was positive, the driver was driving calmly.

18.00 - We arrive at the first checkpoint Dytyatky.

19.00 - We arrive in Chernobyl, with the table set for us. The menu is identical to last year's, as we recognize the cabbage structures and fatty textured meat again.

22.30 - We try to catch some sleep. And of course, as we had the same driver, mini-bus and food as last time, the bedroom was also the same, room number 16. It felt a bit like coming home again.



A clock at a school in Pripjat, stands still at the time of the accident



Some medication in a hospital



A log at the hospital of Pripjat



Some items in the hospital of Pripjat



In a waitingroom at the hospital of Pripjat



A teddybear laying outside handed over to mother nature

6 October 2009 - day 2: 07.30 - I'm already awake when the alarm is buzzing, it was extremely cold last night. Temperatures are already in minus, while the heating system is only allowed to work from October 15 on.

09.00 - Sergei, our assigned guide, is picking us up after a distasteful breakfast. We quickly set off for the first trip, passing the 10 km checkpoint in less than 15 minutes. This checkpoint will be a recognizable landmark when passing in the coming days. While approaching the towers of the nuclear plant, we are gladly enjoying our freshly received special permission, giving us the authorization to approach the towers closer than ever allowed. We begin to enter them while Sergei explains the technical function of these towers. Quite spectacular is the echo sound around, hurling from wall to wall. The outer boundary of the biggest tower is the place where I picked up a small stone, as big as a fist, on which my Terra-P was freaking out. A measured value of 352,3 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$ was the result, which was the equivalent of 1175 times the maximum natural radiation.

09.35 - We pass the storage bunkers positioned next to the cooling water canal. The view is similar; the story is different this time. These bunkers were not constructed by the American government but by the French government, who paid millions of dollars for something, which was of no use, why? The bunkers would house concrete containers custom-built to store nuclear waste, but unfortunately these bunkers were 5 cm too small, so totally of no use at all.

09.45 - We arrive in the epicenter of the disaster, Reactor 4. All preparations are still going on to place the new sarcophagus over the heart of the reactor. New construction is installed on the outside of the reactor, raising new problems to cope with. Directly after the disaster, around the reactor a 6m thick layer of clay has been added to cover the contaminated surface from radiation. Underneath this layer, you'll probably find the most infected, festering and putrid earth on the globe. This causes dangerous conditions for labor, as workmen are only allowed to work for a maximum of 5 minutes a day in this area. All operations are under supervision of Novarka, a cooperation between the US, France, Germany and Ukraine. Ukrainian laborers are risking their lives at 5m away from the reactor for a monthly salary of 350 USD, while Novarka Employees can earn up to 30.000 USD a month, sheltered in a safer environment 200m away from the reactor in a 'safe zone'.

10.00 - The cranky mini-bus enters Pripjat, Sergei at the wheel, bringing us to an abandoned military factory. On the floor of the factory, we find metal cans that look like hairspray containers; some of them still containing liquid substances. Sergei informs us that these are not hairspray cans, but cans containing a special liquid which neutralizes contaminated materials. Shortly after the disaster, an enormous demand for these cans was required, and in order to fulfill this, the Ukrainian government purchased millions of these hairspray-printed cans in Latvia, to fill them up with the decontaminating substance themselves.

11.30 - Our driver drops us at a kindergarten called Pinokio. Koen, one of our 3 fellow travelers suddenly starts screaming, as a huge animal ran off into the distance. Inside the kindergarten, the floor was seeded with dolls and pulled-off dolly heads. Being considered to have a Chernobyl-doll-fetish, it's hard to leave the objects on the floor instead of taking one everlasting souvenir home. I have to but I cannot take them home, and I'm not allowed to take them home, even if I could. Smuggling an item, whether it's a doll, a truck or a rock, is strictly forbidden in Ukraine, and punishable with a high detention in one of the country's state penitentiaries.



A classroom in a school in Pripyat



A classroom in a school in Pripyat



The big hall of the cultural building in the centre of Pripyat

13.00 - We go to the swimming pool where I came last year as well, but back then the sun was a disturbing element in my photos. This year the sky was cloudy, so with a little patience, making a better photo without annoying sun flare was possible. I hope you like the result.

13.30 - As it's the first time for my fellow travelers in the forbidden zone, we decide to pass by the Ferris wheel and the box caddies. This enormous wheel is the perfect subject for a new set of photos, so I do not hesitate for a moment and go ahead for another shoot. It keeps amazing me that even after 23 years, none of the fixed caddies has thundered down.

14.45 - Time for lunchtime, therefore we return to the Chernobyl interinform, where our daily portion of cabbage and meat is waiting for consumption. Before eating we, or at least our hands and feet, have to be checked by the prehistoric machine for contamination. Green light, so we are considered 'Safe'. I asked Sergei if they ever had a red light who confirmed they did just the week before. Sergei had visited a highly contaminated place that day, and at the end of the day his shoes were considered unsafe, resulting in a red light.

15.50 - After our attempt to boost our energy levels with a sufficient meal, we re-enter the 10km zone for the last time today. Eventually we arrive at the well-known lake with abandoned ships. Last year we were only allowed to make photos from the shore, this year we had more luck to be allowed to enter the vessels and go all the way inside the hull. We left Sergei with his companion, the mini-bus, and told him to be back in one hour. He clearly enjoyed this and responded sarcastically saying, 'enjoy it, have fun! And we were lucky, as the water level was low. On the Internet you find photos of these ships completely or partly under water, today we have more luck with almost the complete view available. As these boats are unstable, walking over them is hard, but valuable. It's also rather dangerous to walk over them, as they have started to dismantle them partly, by taking away panels, leaving holes and sharp sides where anyone can get hurt. We succeeded in entering the main deck of 2 ships, and even the sleeping cabins. Unfortunately everything else was still under water. The most amazing thing about these ships was probably that on top of one of them, 3 military soldiers were fishing in this lake.

17.00 - Playtime is over, the day is over! We return to the mini-bus. We leave the zone with a sincere feeling of happiness and satisfaction.

7 October 2009 - day 3: 09.00 - After another long and cold night and a breakfast of cabbage with 3 sunny-side-up eggs, we were ready again for Chernobyl. Such a small place with such a major impact on human history! We cross Duga, also known as Chernobyl 2. Unfortunately we are only allowed to have a look at the radar from behind the walls. Long ago, one bottle of vodka was enough to pass security, but after some incidents, this period is now gone forever. Despite these restrictions, we do succeed in taking some photos; giving us a good idea what the strange and complex radar system should have looked like in the old days.

10.15 - Finally we get to see some of the surrounding nature while driving over untamed and wild roads. We pass some rare but still existing villages, in which most houses are totally captured by the dominating nature. We can spot some fresh tracks of wild bore. In Zamoshnya, we find one of the three last standing churches in the zone, of which only the outer walls and some parts of the roof construction are still standing. The roof tiles are gone forever, as are the floor, windows and doors. A hundred meters away from this church, we find the remains of an old cemetery, captured by wild trees, bushes and animals. It's on this place we meet the flying ticks, heavily

armored insects, which can fly and attack humans. Sergei directly informs us about the direct danger caused by these small bastards, and they're quite aggressive in their attacking style, as some try to land on my face.

12.30 - Duga was rather disappointing, and so Sergei brought us to the former observation tower of the fire department, as we hope to get a better view from the radar system. This tower is 37m high, but only 1.5m by 1.5m wide. During our trip, Sergei is assigned a government guide by the name of Sergei. As this guide is a former military general, we named him 'the general', to avoid misunderstandings, as we also have a third Sergei, our driver. The general decided to guide us up the ladder, a little bit drunk, but so proud by leveling up the speed he was climbing on this small ladder. As I went up, I quickly noticed that the wind above the tree line was pretty active, unlike below. I saw a small wooden house, with an abandoned mattress, that was giving protection for sleeping soldiers. The wind is playing with this small, unstable piece of handcraft, so I decided not to stand up and to take photos from the sitting position only.

13.10 - We return to the Chernobyl interinform for a break. At the 10km checkpoint, we experience a problem with our mini-bus. The tires of our mini-bus are contaminated, so initially we are not allowed to pass. Eventually the guards let us pass, as they know that we will not leave the forbidden zone in the next 3 days. It appears that there is no problem, as long as they can keep the problem internally.

15.00 - The rest of the day we spent in Pripyat. After being dropped at a school, we find the remains of a propaganda campaign, such as posters informing kids how to react in case of a gas attack, instructing them how to wear a gasmask and how to assemble an AK47 Kalasnikov. Eventually we visit a piece of land on the outskirts of Pripyat, where we find a parking space full of former service vehicles, used for decontamination of houses and vehicles. As homage, they've deserved the endless rest, rusting away near the frontier of civilization. Watch out: This is not the well-known Rosocha, with hundreds of vehicles and helicopters. Rosocha is now a no-man's land, strictly forbidden for tourists, and already partly dismantled by dubious merchants.

8 October 2009 - day 4: 09.00 - Our last day has just started and we directly head for Pripyat. Sergei is guiding us around in the cells of the local police station. These cells are rather small, musty and with thick metal doors. One remarkable thing: no daylight can reach these cells.

09.30 - My companion travelers wished to see the space with the big propaganda flyers, situated in the centre of culture. I didn't protest at all, as I knew I would meet an old friend, the most known doll of the zone would be waiting for me there. A small doll, with a tortured body, 2 broken legs and half of her face burned, but still staring eyes. I personally recognize in this doll the misery and wretchedness of this region and its former inhabitants. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm was quickly subdued, as she could not be found on the place I left her last year. I've looked around, searched under and behind every obstacle, but no doll to see. She was gone... Where to? No idea, nobody knows, but I truly hope she finally gets the rest she deserves.

10.00 - Exhausted after climbing 17 floors, we arrive on the roof of the central building near the central square, with the typical Soviet symbol on the roof. We are warned by Sergei not to go to the back of the roof, as from there on, we can be seen by military, and as known there is still a restriction to enter the buildings in Pripyat, not mentioning the roof. Inside the building we found some interesting graffiti on the walls, like this little girl stretching her finger.



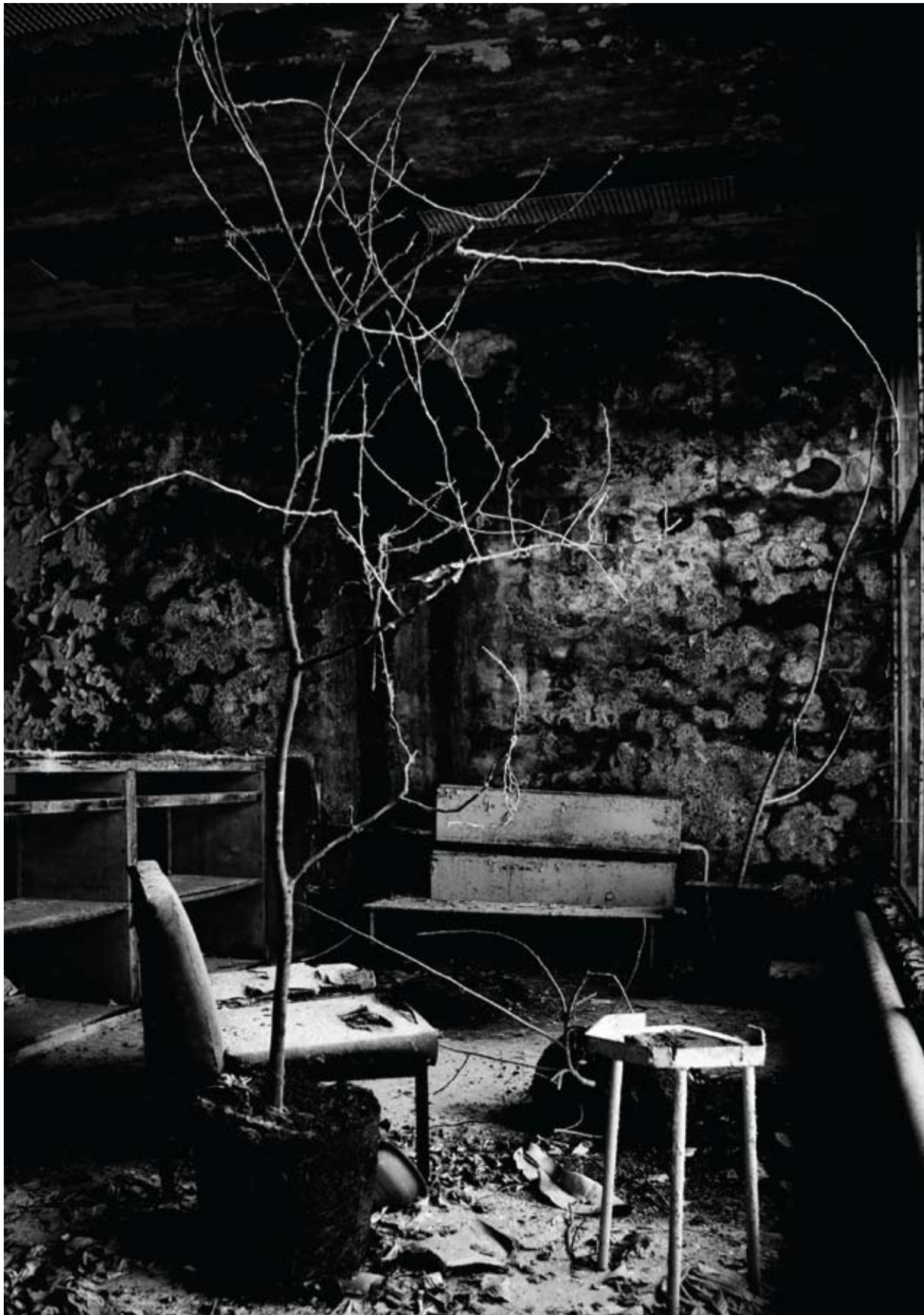
Propaganda boards at the backside of the cultural building



Some playing cards in one of the kindergardens of Pripyat



A picture of a young soldier



In a waiting room at the hospital of Pripyat



Newspaper found somewhere in an apartment

10.35 - Dropped at the 'River Station', an old place where recreational water sports were organized, there is actually nothing to see. Luckily the hospital is only within walking distance, so we decide to go that way. I remember this hospital from last year. In contradiction to most buildings, this hospital, and especially the parturition department is still in tact, so a nice place for a shoot. Afterwards we head to the mortuary in Pripyat, a smaller building behind the hospital. Inside all remains are gone, except for the tables on which the dead bodies were examined and the black rubber gloves, which can be found dispersed on the floors. Here, my terra-P measures $1.56 \mu\text{Sv/h}$.

12.50 - The last standing cinema in Pripyat is now our play zone. In the big room, the big screen is ripped into pieces and the seats are, except for some lonely ones, all gone. You can hear the water dripping down against the walls, which look obviously wet and humid. Next to this cinema, we find the school of music, with only one piano remaining.

15.30 - After the break Sergei is proposing to pass the train station of Yanov, which was rather disappointing when we finally arrived there. Except for some old trains, wagons and chariots, the most exciting thing to see there was a small snake getting away from us through the green grass. The next thing was the old football stadium, of which only one big block of concrete was left, covered with trees and grass. The place where once stood the biggest stadium is now no more than a small forest. To end the day, we visit another child garden, called 'GoldenFish'; the less spectacular of all 3, and even my terra-P (gamma and beta radiation reader) is not wild about it, at a rate of $0.33 \mu\text{Sv/h}$.

17.10 - We leave Pripyat and the 10km zone for what it is. Our contaminated tires are in the meanwhile decontaminated, so we're free to go.

9 October 2009 - day 5: 10. 00 - All our bags are packed and ready to leave. At the border of Chernobyl, the general is waiting for us. He lives just outside the zone, so we'll pick him up. At the last checkpoint, I finally succeed in taking photos of the control systems. All 4 of us get the green light to leave the zone behind, for me the second and probably the last time.

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