

*Unsettling Dust*, a collaborative short film project, explores the lived, bodily experience of radiation by focusing on the relationship between post-nuclear landscapes, radioactive dust and breathing. It draws attention to Fort de Vaujours, a former nuclear weapon testing site on the outskirts of Paris and asks what it means to be living with the threat of contagion, with doubt cast upon your every single breath.

The year 2020 became marked by a renewed focus on air, atmospheres we inhabit, our bodies, as well as physical and psychological conditions that interfere with our breathing. The presence of an invisible enemy with a respiratory system as its target reminds us that we are not in charge - not only are our infrastructures inadequate, but our own human senses and understanding fail to comprehend and contain the scale and effects of potential contagion.

For those of us interested in nuclear discourses and the slow violence of an atmospheric, enveloping condition, this is an unprecedented, yet familiar story. Both virus and radiation are invisible threats to human flourishing and shared patterns of life, both take on an apocalyptic bio-horror narrative, and both expose the hidden inequalities within our social fabric. Nuclear contamination is one of the so-called 'hyperobjects' [1] that defy human time, spatial scales, and transgress our senses. Global pandemic is another. Such phenomena are difficult to grasp, describe and visualize precisely because their spatial and temporal scales are disproportionate and monumental, while simultaneously intimately present.

The film attempts to tackle this gap in understanding by changing scale: instead of detachment, the spectacle and the experience of the sublime that commonly characterizes nuclear landscapes, the project wishes to focus on felt, intimate uncanny and draw attention to minute invisible entities that carry the threat of contagion. Nuclear aesthetics and an exploration through the aesthetic registers of landscape are therefore central to the proposed project. Radiation goes beyond the visual, its appearance is dispersed, thus calling for a change in how we approach its representation.

The film addresses these concerns by focusing on the nuclear contaminated landscape of Fort de Vaujours, more specifically on its connection to radioactive dust. This former nuclear weapon testing site lies approximately 20 km from Paris and is, considering its location and recent developments, surprisingly unexplored and still shrouded in secrecy.

Fort de Vaujours is originally one of the forts built at the end of the 19th century to defend Paris. During World War II the fort was used as ammunition and explosives depot by the Germany army and after the army retreated, the fort became the site of pyrotechnic experiments by the national powder mill of Sevran (la Poudrerie Nationale de Sevran). Finally, from 1955 to 1997, the fort was used by the CEA, France's Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (Commissariat à l'énergie atomique). The site was significantly modified and was used for pyrotechnic experiments that focused on the study of explosives and the dynamic behaviour of shock-loaded materials, including natural and depleted uranium. It was here where the core components of the country's first atomic bombs were developed, with weaponry later tested in the Algerian desert. There were no full nuclear detonations at Vaujours, but more than half a ton of uranium was blown up in about 2,000 detonations. Before being moved to one of the nuclear testing bunkers, these explosions were taking place outdoors, with the site functioning as an open-air laboratory. After the research center was closed in 1997, CEA proposed the site for sale.

In 2010 most of the area was sold to Placoplatre, a local plaster company, which plans to demolish the fort and make way for a new gypsum mine, a key ingredient in plaster. The site is believed to contain enough high-end gypsum for Placoplatre's nearby factory to function for the coming 30 years. The company's other gypsum deposits will shortly run out, so Placoplatre desperately needs the site. The mining proposal has raised many questions about the safety of local inhabitants and a petition has been launched to stop the project as the digging and the demolition of old buildings will likely spread the toxic dust.

In 2014 twenty-five buildings were demolished, but the process was interrupted due to radioactive risk. From mid-2015 on, with the approval of the ASN (France's Nuclear Safety Authority), the demolition continues with the site being closed off to the public and under constant surveillance. Mining activities were initially scheduled to start in 2020 but are now planned to begin in 2022. <sup>1</sup>

While it is difficult to determine precise levels of contamination and risks associated with the site, it is fair to say that the total area of 45 hectares remains marked by natural and depleted uranium up to this day. The current public health concerns primarily stem from airborne, not surface contamination, with radioactive dust being the site's most significant hazard. Radioactive particles are relatively heavy and without disturbance eventually end up stuck to the soil. The risk of contagion becomes much higher once the particles are displaced around the site and beyond, especially if processes such as demolition and extraction lift the particles from the ground and unleash them into the atmosphere. Once up in the air, dust particles move freely. They get carried by the wind far beyond their original location, to eventually land and get absorbed by porous landscapes, breathing bodies.

By focusing on the relationship between nuclear landscapes, radioactive dust and breathing, the film wishes to explore the lived, bodily experience of radiation and question what it means to live with invisible contagion today. It investigates movements of dust, uncontained radiation, and risks of contamination by inhalation or ingestion.

While Fort de Vaujours and radioactivity are the main subject matters of the film, the conceptual underpinnings tie the subject to the universally shared experience of breathing as a basic need for human existence. As such, the air and atmospheres we are always already immersed in are approached as dynamic and political components of landscape – ephemeral and elusive, yet equally powerful.

The starting point of the film goes back to 2016, with our introduction to Fort de Vaujours. Since then, we've thought hard about how to best present the main problematique of the site and have now decided to begin working on a short film. The beginning of the film project is therefore a research and filming trip to Vaujours in August 2020. The aim of the trip was to collect research material, perform experiments, conduct interviews, and film various sections of the film. This stage is now followed by post-production in Den Haag.

The project was initially born out of our long-held interest in post-nuclear landscapes in general and Fort de Vaujours in particular. In our previous work we have both explored different aspects of the nuclear and believe that important lessons lie in ways nuclear modernity and its landscapes are interpreted and perceived. The present global pandemic instilled in us a renewed sense of urgency to engage with the nuclear and thinking about the parallels between the two proved intriguing and fruitful. Even though the nuclear sometimes seems to be a thing of the Cold War era, its effects remain firmly embedded in our environment and our society. Nuclear anxieties are part of today's world and only gain momentum as global crises, such as global warming or the current pandemic, hold sway over the world.

The motivation for the film came from our conviction that visual practices of imagining the nuclear are crucial in order to shape our understanding and facilitate a critical perspective on the topic. By providing reflections on place and subjectivity, artistic practices can point to larger phenomena that underlie visible landscapes as well as stimulate discussion on how to acknowledge and responsibly address the consequences of the nuclear age.

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[1] A term coined by Timothy Morton and elaborated on in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*.