

An anthropological investigation of the Chernobyl Babushka – a photographic response

ABSTRACT:

A contextual, illustrated review of current artistic practice through creative writing in a semi-academic style.

KEY WORDS: Chernobyl, babushkas, textiles, photography, home, domesticity, identity, memory, material language, place, elicitation, anthropology, culture

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise and support a cohesive line of enquiry, that is, a body of research originally an investigation into the textile practices of the Self-Settlers of Chernobyl; those who returned to their homeland after being evacuated and dispersed due to the world's worst nuclear disaster. This research developed into a focus on anthropological aspects that emerged, which pertain to be of equal importance and value.

Post the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, 91,200 people evacuated from areas around Chernobyl that were uninhabitable. However, a 'community' as described by Alan Macfarlane (1977), of 136 individually isolated and obsolescent people remain (as of January 2018). A deep personal interest of mine has developed into a narrative study of these people, during nine separate visits by me, to the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

During the process of qualitative research; working in the field, observing, recording and gathering testimonies alongside building an archive, notions of: Place, Home, (isolated) Society, Social Fragmentation and Displacement were noted. In-action research methodology was executed through the collective practice of stitching by the interviewer and the subject together, which engaged and encouraged a more personal response to and from the Babushkas.

The critical analysis of findings includes reasons for the change in expected outcome; photography became much more important and rather than being merely a recording device the resulting photographs became artworks in their own right. The visual documentation of the Babushkas at home gave an unexpected insight into

many aspects of their daily lives and culture, so much so that the focus became their present lifestyle, their 'Everyday' and that unique culture which will die with them. The intention is to preserve some of the evidence of this for future generations.

The Babushkas, self-sufficient through need and isolation, are fighting for survival on a daily basis, for themselves, their neighbours and their community, afraid that the government have forgotten them, that 'they' are just waiting for them to die so they can reclaim their land... this raises the question, for what?

The impact of my research to date is evidenced in a collective touring exhibition with visitor numbers exceeding 12,000, publications and organisational involvement in an international project; a new festival based in Ukraine which supports and raises awareness of the self-settlers and their existence.

Results gained through qualitative methodology and experimental, experiential information gathering are presented with the full cooperation and permission of the participating Babushkas and Dedushkas, 'бабушка' - grandmother or pet name for 'old woman' and дедушка- grandfather or 'old man' in Russian.

Acknowledgements:

The data collected and analysed in this paper was collected *in the main*, over two visits to the Chernobyl exclusion zone - the 30 kilometre Zone of Alienation, Northern Ukraine, each consisting of 5 days; December 19th to 23rd 2017 and April 1st to 6th 2018.

My heartfelt thanks go to:

- The Babushkas living in the villages of: Teremtsi, Kupovate, Paryshev, Opachychi and Chernobyl, whose generosity and willingness to participate was incredible, and to Olga for wishing me '*good health and good men*'
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Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons for the recording of visual information and documentation of findings. This has have led to my research developing into an artistic outcome, as opposed to pure methodology, that is, the photographic recording of visual information. This research unifies my investigations into the enduring and persisting effects on a community today, of the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986. Anthropologically, sociologically and culturally, there is fundamentally, substantial evidence of the decline of this community; 'community' as defined by Alan Macfarlane (1977).

The value of this ongoing body of research is evidenced in the plurality of critical frameworks that can be applied. Throughout recent projects, methods have included research through design, reflection-in-action, reflection- on-action, and qualitative participant observation as described by Muratovski (2016), that is, interacting with and observing the Babushkas and Dedushkas ('old men' and 'old women' in Russian) in their home surroundings.

I have been influenced by anthropologists - noted experts on linguistics, working in the field and the idea of culture, such as; Franz Boas and Bronisław Malinowski whom professed;

...that in every type of civilisation, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable part within a working whole. (cited in Craig, 1999)

I will gain new knowledge using action research strategies - activities on a one-to-one basis, developing relationships with those whom I want to discover more about.

In recent decades Anthropology has become more self-reflexive and involved with communities; as anthropologists increasingly apply their findings to real world social issues and engage their subjects as colleagues and collaborators (Anthro, 2018).

The importance of a pathfinder and translator who has an understanding of my need to carry out this research becomes paramount in this aspect of my work, as with an extremely limited personal knowledge of the Russian language it is imperative that my subjects are aware and fully understanding of my intentions from the start. The self-settlers involved were each given project information in writing (translated), which described the activity and use of data, and signed a consent form, which was written in Ukrainian and also explained verbally by the pathfinder. She already has personal relationships within the community and is held in high regard. Her local knowledge is extensive and she has links with the administration organisation who govern the exclusion zone. She was instrumental in organising my permit and accommodation in a border village, which allowed me to be further integrated into the community by staying and eating with the family of one of the official military guides.

This body of research is unique, of critical importance and political value as the subjects (the self-settlers) are dying out, as is, their populace, civilisation and way of life in the exclusion zone, which lies within the Kyivshchyna area of Northern Ukraine. 350,000+ people (Orfanus (n.d.) states 130,000 from the 30km zone around Chernobyl nuclear power plant and 220,000 people from the polluted territories of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia) were eventually evacuated or displaced from the area, either immediately or shortly after the nuclear disaster, due to extreme levels of radioactivity and its far-reaching consequences. One-year later (1987) 140 families without children were allowed for a short time to return to their homes. Today only 136 self-settlers remain, notably 80% of those still living in the exclusion zone are women. The area is represented by a 30km radius around the V.I. Lenin Nuclear Power Station, and is deemed to be uninhabitable for between 10 - 65000 years (sources differ wildly). Nowadays the self-settlers are all elderly, most live alone, often in abandoned villages such as Opachychi, and in total isolation. Ages range from 56 to 90, with an average of 80 years. These people believe there is no future, and that the government is '*waiting for them all to die so the problem just goes away*' (confidential source).

Year on year the number of self-settlers decreases.

Chernobyl, as 'Place', is now dominated by its disaster and is wholly subsumed by it, consequently, the word 'Chernobyl' is synonymous and interchangeable with a nuclear disaster and its worldwide trauma and is therefore *not* immediately thought of

as a place, but, either way the accident does not define its remaining population. 'Place' is intrinsic to this project; precisely because it is the definitive Motherland of the self-settlers, and their lifelong relationship with it plays a crucial role in the development and findings of this research. The Chernobyl exclusion zone is a place like no other and the self-settlers a forgotten people.

My interaction, knowledge and understanding has come from recurring visits and an intense and passionate interest in their daily lives, their history, their struggle, and subconsciously characterising, personalising and humanising them, that is, making them real to the outside world, through their surroundings, homes, belongings, by means of my photographs and artistic practice. I have no idea how much is obvious to the viewer who has no idea of who they are or where they are from: in terms of ethnography, I invite further scrutiny and hope to depict the 'relational and collective aspects of self'.

The collective self reflects membership in, as well as similarity and identification with, valued social groups. This representation comprises characteristics that are shared with in-group members (Sedikides, Gaertner and O' Mara, 2011).

I am privileged to have the opportunity to spend this time with the Babushkas as a visitor, guest, instructor, facilitator and collaborator.

Initially, intentions in terms of embroidery and textiles included:

- a. To discover whether embroidery is a 'signpost' of tradition and culture
- b. To explore how embroidery (as an activity and shared interest) and an exchange of skills can be used as a connective device, promoting closer, more honest relationships

Further intentions were initiated on site and later through my continuing learning, and came to include:

- To use the 'Everyday' as an indicator of a lifestyle/culture
- To realise the importance of photographic dissemination or exposition and as an integral and essential tool

- To ensure the authenticity of the project, what is real? (can only be discovered through time and friendship, as opposed to tourist visits)
- To personally build an archive as a way of preserving and communicating a unique heritage and tradition

For the past five years my artistic practice has been ultimately concerned with:

...the phenomenology of displacement and the societal collective memory of those forced to leave. The disintegration of past lives and that of hope for the future is continuing to be investigated, informing both methodology and process. I have a deep-rooted fascination with abandonment, memory, place and the lost (Baker, 2016),

This is becoming more so since engaging with Chernobyl as 'Place', the development of my work has caused me to look deeper rather than further. My research methods have been extended and one of the more successful is action research as discussed by Muratovski, G. (2016), as due to the lack of a communal language, expression and body language actions are heightened and easy to read. With the introduction of a shared collaborative activity, it becomes a more physical, engaging and mutual experience. However, there is the danger of an overly subjective view as relationships become closer;

you can gain insights into the group and their behaviour [but can]...become too emotionally involved and risk losing the ability to assess the situation accurately. (Muratovski, 2016, p.58)

Muratovski (2016) goes on to say that in a research capacity, becoming too involved and immersed in the studied culture is certainly disagreeable; where the researchers became so emerged in the culture they were studying that they eventually went native...[was] a highly undesirable outcome.

Methodology:

- Icebreaker: On one of my return visits, a photo book acted as a visual

record of my previous visits and was evidence of my 'professional' interest in their homes and an indication of how I may use my research in the future

- Interviews
- Photography (self plus assistant)
- Video (assistant)
- Note Taking
- Shared activities

Findings:

Findings are based on a small sample of fifteen settlers, this enabled my research to be more focused and in depth than if there had been a larger number of participants. However, in real terms this equates to over 11% of the whole self-settler population, which would indicate a more accurate result when discussing the population as a whole.

II. Portrait of a Babushka

a. People and Place

'Babushkas' (Бабушка), make up 80% of the 136 people who still live in the exclusion zone, but already this year two more have sadly died, Valentina who looked after the church and Matryona the wife of Vassil from Teremski, who is now sadly bereft. The same time last year (2017) the population stood at 145. Most inhabitants live alone, approximately half (70) in Chernobyl town (where in 1986 the population was 13,700), but the rest are scattered over a number of abandoned villages, many in the golden triangle of Opachichi, Teremski and Kupovate but still, predominantly in remote and otherwise unpopulated areas (Figure 1).

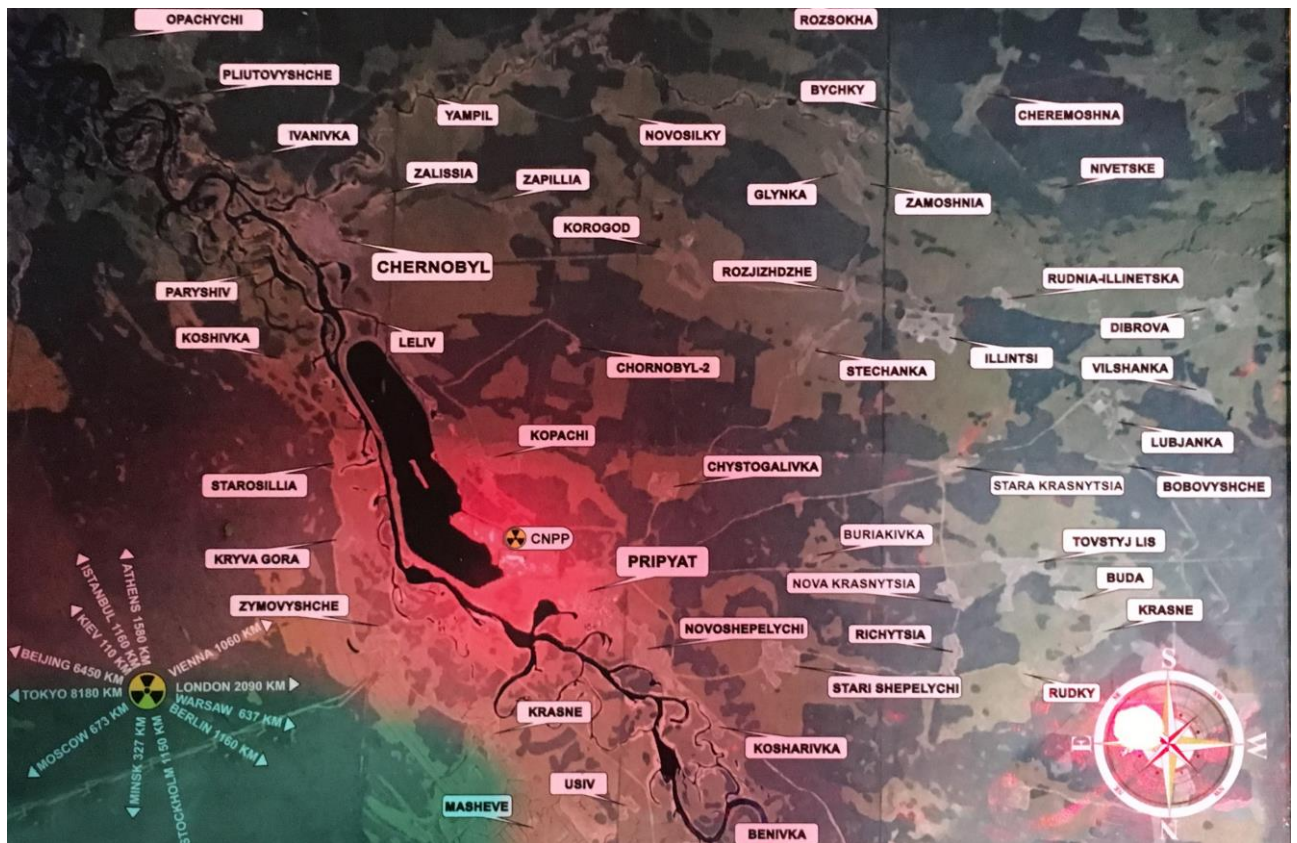


Figure 1 Baker, C 'Map of villages around Chernobyl' 2018

I have entered the Chernobyl exclusion zone on at least twelve separate occasions - twenty days and eleven nights; researching, photographing, documenting, archiving, exploring and investigating.

The self-settlers have been the one constant throughout, those who have the strongest and most enduring bond with this, their Motherland. I have an intense and passionate interest in their daily lives and all that involves, their history, their struggle, and have subconsciously characterised, personalized, and humanised them, that is made them real to the outside world, through their surroundings, homes, belongings, by means of my photographs and artistic practice. I feel compassion and empathy with them and admire them immensely. I have no idea how much is obvious to the viewer who has no idea of who they are or where they are from – in terms of ethnography, I feel I have represented the relational aspect of self and the personalised bonds of attachment formed between us even without a common spoken language.

The exclusion zone as an entity becomes addictive and demands my immersion in it (Figure 2). To describe what it is like to interested parties is difficult. My personal feelings upon being there are disparate and contradictory; melancholy, pure excitement, deep sadness, wonder at the sheer beauty and the aesthetics of decay, destruction, disintegration, solitude, community.



Figure 2 Baker, C. 'Pripyat, Excursion Zone'. 2017

To the self-settlers it is merely 'home' as it always has been and they shrug off the possibility of any radiation related illnesses 'because it is invisible' and although invariably aware to their very souls of the Chernobyl tragedy of 1986 and all that happened in that place, the pull of 'home' completely overshadows and negates any ill effects. The sense of belonging, of memory – collective and individual, family complexities and rich history, the cultural importance of this place is limitless and immense, not only because it will soon have completely disappeared. Valentina, who lost her husband some years ago, says she buried her husband here, in this very village, so how could she ever leave him? There are many reasons given by the self-settlers for returning to the zone for the rest of their lives, most were only away from it

for a year at most, so...

Why are they still here?

Our psychological development is punctuated not only by meaningful emotional relationships with people, but, also, by close affective ties with a number of significant physical environments, beginning in childhood (Marcus, C. 1997).

- To be close to their loved ones (deceased), '*my husband is buried just there [pointing outside the window] how can I leave him?*' (Valentina Ivanivna, 2017) and to feel close to and remember their families whose photographs adorn their walls
- '*Why should we leave, this land is ours [and has been for generations]*' (Ivan Ivanovitch, 2017), some self settlers on returning to the zone found their old homes destroyed, either by being burned to the ground or buried (if they were made of wood and in an area of extreme levels of radiation, as part of the decontamination or clean up programme), Valentina of Chernobyl town found her house buried and dug it out again with her husband, they stayed there until her husband built a new house, others simply moved into an abandoned home that was still standing, close by in the same village
- They have no qualifications, some cannot read or write, they are very old, they have a tiny pension, no experience of city life, how would they live if they could not grow their own food, without family to care for them (some do have family in the outlying towns and city of Kiev but prefer to live this solitary and isolated life, '*if I didn't live here I would die*' (Baba Hana Zavorotnya, 2018), they have little regard for the dangers of radiation, '*it is invisible [so it is not there]*' (ibid)
- Upbringing and tradition decrees it; Olga simply says '*it is what we have always done*'

How are they here?

If they had no family to go to, when they were evacuated or forcibly removed to the unknown; either far off villages or Kiev, citizens had to knock on the doors of strangers

(who had heard about the accident and were already afraid of the Chernobylites). They had to ask for a bed for a few nights, or they were inadvertently sent to villages with even higher levels of radiation. Some did try to get work and settle, but could not, and all felt they had absolutely no choice but to return. They all said they would rather take their chances and if they should die, at least they would die at 'home', in the place they knew and loved, most did not believe it was dangerous at all;

- Some are illegal re-settlers, some of whom refused to be evacuated and who escaped the military by hiding in the forest.
- Others suffered discrimination or racism, and did not have permission to return but returned anyway.
- Some were allowed to stay living in the zone as they had been employed as liquidators and after the clean up operations simply stayed on (semi-legally).
- They came with the 140 families (no children) who were allowed to return in 1987 due to a short-lived government resettlement policy. Some less affected areas were planned to be evacuated for only a limited period of time, so some people were brought back but when people from other areas learned of this they protested, so to avoid greater chaos and dissatisfaction among the evacuated population, the government stopped this process completely. Those already inside were given the opportunity to move out again, but some stayed.

The abandoned ghost city of Pripyat (Figure 2) was built for the workers of the nuclear power plant, which was planned to be the largest in the world. The city with its disintegrating and crumbling buildings, once a model Russian city, is forecast by locals and the zone administration, to be obliterated by nature within ten years. The outlying desolate villages (Figure 3) will disappear even sooner, and their inhabitants dwindle to a double population at best.



Figure 3 Baker, C. 'Opachychi Village'. 2017

So, their present and day-to-day survival is all that matters to the Babushkas and Dedushkas of Chernobyl. They rejoice in their memories and have many historical stories to tell, of the collective peasant farms where they worked as milkmaids or on the land, together with their neighbours, for produce as wages, working from dawn to dusk. But, by the time of the accident there had been a decrease in productivity so the farms could no longer feed the people, mainly due to many young people migrating to the cities (and later, including Pripjat), and before they were evacuated the peasants were tending their own smallholdings often with chickens, pigs and cows. Upon returning they inadvertently became an emergent group or tribe, if you will. The self-settlers as a group are fundamentally a community of culture, with:

the shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behaviour that allow a social group to function...[and]... anthropological research

would aim to identify groups with shared cultural knowledge (Hudelson, P. 2004, pp 345-346).

The main characteristic they have in common is the world's worst nuclear disaster, which gives them a unity with each other and a diversification from the rest of the world. This genuine and palpable unity comes from shared experience and is not just geographical. Collective traits, as in descriptions of a tribe, include tradition, dress, interior spaces and domicile buildings which remain unchanged for hundreds of years, possibly due to them being effectively cut off from the rest of the world and modernisation. Polunin (2017) states that;

Tribal societies are at the polar extreme from modernized communities. However, with the breakdown of isolation this distinctiveness is being eroded, slowly for genes [though not in the exclusion zone], more rapidly for ideas and behaviour.

Polunin (ibid) also states that tribal life is characterised by comparative physical and cultural isolation, simplicity, small group size, low population density and closeness to nature, both physically and conceptually. Exactly the characteristics of the self-settlers of Chernobyl.

When looking at people together in particular places, Campbell (1958, cited in Nugent, 2018) concluded that we rely on the following to make judgments about entitativity, which deals with how groups of people are perceived as a group or as a mere aggregation of individuals;

- Common fate – the extent to which individuals in the 'aggregate' seem to experience the same, or interrelated outcomes.
- Similarity – the extent to which the individuals display the same

behaviours or resemble one another.

- Proximity – the distance among individuals in the ‘aggregate’ (or group). (Campbell, 1958)

The self-settlers as a ‘group’ have idiosyncrasies and a particular culture, which does have entrenched many elements of old Russia and Ukraine, but that has been further established communally due to the shared patriotic pull of their motherland and from living under strict governmental control (Zone Administration Organisation). These Babushkas and Dedushkas insist on remaining in the Chernobyl zone and against all odds do so, seemingly ignored by their government. In terms of innate satisfaction and quality of life, ‘it would appear to be for the best that a great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born’ (Eliot, 1949). Their regionalism is a love of, and an honest loyalty to, this distinct region with a homogeneous population.

III. Portrait of a Babushka

b. Home, Domesticity and the Interior



Figure 4 Baker, C. ‘Ghana at Home’. 2017

The supporting photographs (throughout this paper) were taken over a period of 3 years, most in December 2017 and April 2018. I was captivated by the seemingly careless compositional texture and colour of the poor and simple interiors rich with the individual's presence (Figure 4) and the essence of 'home-ness' as narrative. It was not until my return when I examined and evaluated each photographic resource and identified that, which I had not been completely aware of 'in the moment', a subconscious personal focus on the intimate belongings of a Babushka, the contents of cupboards and drawers, that which was on show, and that which was hidden. Unwittingly curated personal effects and objects. These photographs immediately transport me back into the homes of Babushkas, their place and their space. I feel very privileged to have been welcomed into their homes.



Figure 5 Baker, L. 'Bedroom'. 2018

It is evident that home is not an object, a building, but a diffuse and complex condition that integrates memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present. A home is also a set of rituals, personal rhythms and routines of everyday life... as well as culturally conditioned reactions and values (Pallasmaa and Benjamin, 2003).

Visually describing a unique moment in time, these photographs are evocative of the emotional attachment I feel towards these people and are a response to my understanding of the cultural relativism of their personal and intimate lives (Figures 5 & 6). Their collective identity is illustrated by similarities such as the icons in opposite corners of a room, watching over and protecting them, draped with their own embroideries, their inherent religion is inextricably linked with their collective culture;

The culture of a people [is] as an incarnation of its religion [and] any religion, while it lasts...gives an apparent meaning to life, [and] provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair. (Eliot, 1949, pp 33-34)

These are often further decorated with memories and photographs of their deceased family members, which give one an impression of the importance of these 'shrines'. Their linens, 'evidence' of the domestic are, 'returned to a position of cultural prominence' (Reed, 1996).



Figure 6 Baker, C. 'Ivan's Sink'. 2017

Environment is key and influences the interior decoration of these simple isolated homes and an absolute minimum of material things show us all what is important. A cooking pot, some crockery, a table, textiles - a reminder of Rauschenberg's use of fabric (scraps of lace curtains, cotton ticking) creating a trace of domesticity and reminiscent of comforting surroundings. We relate to these objects because we also surround ourselves with such items (Figure 6). Borzello (2006) determines that this;

illustrates what it means to be human, [this] detail of everyday life...reassuring us we are not alone.



Figure 7 Baker, C. 'Maria'

Usually, I photograph to record my visual research, where the technicalities of technique are not of importance, but as Figure 7 shows, documenting what is there and communicating warmth and an emotion is. Even devoid of its dweller this space is obviously a home, it is 'a staging of personal memory' (Pallasmaa 2003). With the inclusion of the owner however, this domestic landscape or scene;

functions as a two-way mediator - personal space expresses the personality to the outside world, but, equally important, it strengthens the dweller's self-image and concretizes his world order. (ibid)

The photographs as a collection conjure up a complete narrative; not least of loneliness, marginalisation, exile, simplicity, etc. giving context to the body of research as a whole. Taken in the documentary sense or as that of the 'kitchen sink school of 1950's Britain [which was] dedicated to a realistic depiction of daily domesticity', as described by Borzello (op cit, p.176), I show you what I see in order that you may also see it. Where the main subjects are the everyday objects, the ordinary, they become more valuable or rather, valued, and an insight into a person's life. When someone has so little, what they do have gains in importance and the everyday is elevated.

I aim to show a collective truth, as Fiona Tan does in her work 'Countenance' (2002) and who gives crucial significance to the concept of the archive.



Figure 8 Baker, L. 'Shrine to the Past' 2018

In every home family photographs surround the Babushkas, memories are of major importance, in fact one of the reasons they returned to the 'motherland' was to be close to the graves of their loved ones, for example, Valentina chose to stay in her village after she had buried her husband there, she could never leave him. Old family photographs help us all to identify with our past, that which has formed us, and including them in these domestic interiors photographs is an attempt to show the subject's lives; past and present (Figure 8). These images of deceased family members seem to mirror the live subjects and remind us of their eventual fate, however, they are much less likely to be immortalised on a shelf together with the religious icons, as they are the 'last' ones.

Perhaps the Babushkas surround themselves with these loved ones (images) because they are lonely, Olga still talks to her mother, propped up, slid into the coving of the glass fronted cabinet on the sideboard (Figure 9). I wonder what will happen to these portraits as Olga has no family or children who would take the faded images and prop them up on a different sideboard in a different town together with photographs of Olga too.



Figure 9 Baker, C. 'Mother' 2017

I take photographs and write my notes almost unnoticed, my subjects completely immersed in telling their stories, encompassing grief, despair, sorrow, memories of the most terrible event in their personal history, that I cannot hope to identify with, but there are also moments of humour, fortitude and the happiness of pre- accident times. I attempt to capture reality and the intense emotion of that split second in time.

Using the notion of Home and the interiors, I capture a little of who they are and their 'air' as described by Roland Barthes in *Portraits and Persons*, the aura of them. My portraits of the Chernobyl Babushkas are for me to remember, but also to show others that these people exist, existed. Matryona is already gone. I aim to give you a form of personal contact with these special women as well, as though they each are an icon, 'the photograph [of them] manifests them as real [to you]' (Freeland 2010). These photographs are a fine thread between two worlds; 1. The Babushkas world of the exclusion zone and 2. That other world (where they are not). When observing my photographs I feel I am pulling on that thread and bringing myself back ever closer to the Babushkas, fulfilling the function of the portraits to provide a point of contact, evidence of their physicality and actuality and, not least, proving I was actually there.

Trying to make sense of my work, and how I see the Babushkas, I notice how my photographs, particularly the portraits, even in their original format, can themselves be thought of as icons. My photographs are purely iconographical where everything has meaning, all objects therein are symbolic, the framing of said objects by the dweller, as well as my framing of their objects within the interior spaces. As Gerhard Richter (2002, p.121) said, 'snapshots are like little devotional pieces that people have in their environment and look at'. An icon depicts the spiritual (Figure 10); the Babushkas have such spirit and should be held in high esteem, venerated, just for surviving, and fighting to live how and where they wish. They are a strong people; they defied the government, the military, often their families, the threat of radiation illnesses, the loss of their homes, and a lack of money, food, nearby hospitals, all in order to come 'Home'. They are truly authentic.

They evoke an emotional response. Like icons the self-settlers are not works of art to just be admired, their portraits within their interiors are an expression of what they

stand for (Figure 11). I have elevated the Babushkas to an iconic status and the sanctification of their portraits is a memorial to them all, rightly ennobling and dignifying them.



Figure 10 Baker, L. 'Saint' 2018



Figure 11 Baker, L. 'Maria Framed' 2018

IV. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the reasons for the recording of visual information and documentation of findings becoming an artistic outcome, as opposed to it as methodology, that is, the photographic recording of visual information, through development of initial research into the embroidery practices of the Babushkas of Chernobyl. As well as to explore additional foci on anthropological aspects of the self-settlers current status. I determined to explore the notion of action research methodology to extract more personal information than could be expected in a formal interview setting. This was however, not manipulatively gained, or predetermined but was an organic and subconscious process.

Summary of main points:

- Photography as catalyst to change expected outcomes: on later scrutiny these (research) photographs became a consummate method of communicating a message
- Authenticity: honest and real results were gained by commutual respect and sharing of interests through practice
- Self-settlers as 'Tribe': the characteristics of this group came to be manifested as research widened and common traits discovered
- The Everyday: as an indicator of a shared and common culture between the self-settlers was realised through photographic recordings
- Archive: the building of an archive becomes more urgent with the realisation of a finite period of time available, in order to document cultural indicators for posterity

Summary of key findings:

1. Becoming known to the self-settlers through the physicality/practical stitching workshop (session) did result in a more honest, personal and in-depth response from them as they came to trust me. Evidence of this included Valentina opening up about her experiences as an emergency nurse on duty at the hospital on the night of the accident. I have witnessed her trying to tell of this experience once before, then, she could not bring herself to speak of it at all without breaking down. I also had many requests for me to return soon, and a marriage proposal.

The contrast between a tourist group visit and this more personal experience was stark; it felt less voyeuristic, more equal and authentic.

2. There is a danger of becoming too involved, close. When describing Josef Koudelka's work in 'Gypsies' (1975) Anna Fárová surmised that;

Koudelka was attracted by the physical beauty of the gypsies...the strangeness of their movements... their facial expression...later by their lifestyle. In the end he was completely absorbed by his subject.

Participant observation with the Babushkas was an emotional, qualitative and quality experience - therefore making an issue of intervention and interference just by being there (which, as far as I can see, is impossible to avoid), but became more about us making friends and then, in conversation, naturally learning about their lives and developing a mutual feeling of closeness. However I do not see this as a problem, I am allowed to be subjective and emotional, as a creative practitioner, an artist rather than a scientist, sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist, an outsider or someone who has to remain impartial for scientifically rigorous results. That is not my role or my purpose, this study is to inform my artistic practice and inspire emotive work that will communicate the plight of the self-settlers or in a wider context, those who have ever had to leave.



Figure 12 Baker, C. 'Kindness & Generosity' 2017

Figure 13 Baker, C. 'Interior Study' 2017

3. Photography as central to research and as outcome is an essential tool and communicative art form as seen in Figures 12 and 13. This has been evidenced by peer and public feedback and the inclusion of selected imagery in two exhibitions at The Northern School of Art, UK; the first a test hanging of two photographs as final

artistic outcomes in February (Figure 14) and another in June, 2018, illustrating the importance of documentary photographic elements as primary research within the design process (Figure 15).



Figure 14 Baker, C. 'Test Exhibition' 2018



Figure 15 Baker, C. 'Process Exhibit' 2018

The role photography has played as a research method, cannot be overestimated. The photographic results from both my introductory Babushka trip and following 'research through practice' have become not only an invaluable personal resource and visual record, as well as supporting content for many publishing platforms, but ultimately and unexpectedly, an applauded artistic and creative 'artwork' in their own right. These resulting photographs were pivotal in changing my expectations. Also, frequently portraying the babushkas in an environmental context supports the integral importance of their surroundings, illustrating ethnic identity and, as a creative response was a natural phenomena.

The notion of photo elicitation, somewhat unknown to me until after the fact, was first named in a paper published by the photographer and researcher John Collier in 1957, and gives credence to the application as an anthropological research method. The use of documentary photography within the research process, for example, photo books given to the Babushkas on a practice trip acted as an icebreaker and were successful as a means of crossing cultural boundaries, using images as bridges between worlds that are more culturally distinct. And the use thereafter, encourages a more emotional response, identifiable with and evocative of, an autonomous people, time and place. Photo elicitation will evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than words alone and give a different kind of information (Harper, 2002, pp 13-26). Evidence of which is communicated within this paper, as 'Elicitation interviews connect "core definitions of the self" to society, culture and history' (ibid).

It is the overall quality and polysemic qualities rather than the technical 'perfection' of the imagery, when used in this way, which is of most importance encouraging serious engagement, and in turn, triggering closer scrutiny.

4. Self-settlers as a 'tribe', indigenous to the Chernobyl area and their legacy; identification of their unique culture as short-lived: this is important precisely because it will soon end. The self-settlers can teach us much, not least: strength, humility, fortitude, generosity, courage, determination, endurance, perseverance, tenacity, steadfastness, character, resolve and spirit.

5. Through the recording of artifacts and practices for future generations, importance and value is given to a forgotten textile and wider culture, including religion.

6. This body of research is seen to be an invaluable resource for my teaching practice and on behalf of my educational institution, it informs and raises students (and the public's) awareness of external issues in the real world, international practice, contemporary artist practice, collaborative practice, textile art/installation work, using it as an example of where in-depth and involved research (of any subject) can take you, with the implications of the importance of hard work, communication and engagement. It is essential with regards to: setting a good example, Professional

Practice and engaging with 'the world of art & design' nationally & internationally. Furthermore, by involving the students it gives them further ideas of future careers, widening the scope of their imaginations and being encouraged to think externally and to have higher expectations and aspirations.

Culminatively, it has a wider connotation in that I (and therefore The Northern School of Art) am becoming widely known for this work.

Note: Findings on notions of Embroidery as an action research technique and bonding mechanism are delivered in a previous paper: An experiential investigation into the embroidery practices of the Chernobyl Babushka (Baker 2018).

I had determined to investigate this particular community on the verge of extinction, with a view to the preservation of artifacts and tradition, and have certainly achieved this to an extent, though this project not only requires continuance in terms of being 'authentic' (by definition genuine, legitimate and/or real) and deepening personal relationships, but the process of photo elicitation also, compulsorises rephotography and the continuation of building an archive, either physically or digitally curated.

Through the execution of this body of work I have been influenced to further explore diverse and arrestive ways of keeping the memories and knowledge (including that of the world's worst nuclear accident) of the self-settlers alive: perhaps through comparisons with the testimonies of holocaust survivors, World War I veterans for example, and the curation and logistics of that.

Recommendation: read previous paper:

An experiential investigation into the embroidery practices of the Chernobyl Babushka.

Paper No.1 of a series

Personal opportunities for further research:

Photography as an outcome was unexpected but was a valuable and integral part of the whole resulting creative artworks, my practice has become more multi-disciplined

and through this body of research now includes: as well as textiles, printmaking, creative writing, manuscript, bookmaking and publishing, filmmaking, archiving, video, fine art installation and constructed jewellery.

In order to extend this research I intend to continue to proactively research and archive the legacy of the self-settler community before it is too late and their heritage destroyed. This can be achieved only through external funding, collaborations and a sabbatical for example, but will further validate previous findings and allow the making of new work, a touring exhibition and further publications, raising awareness of the dangers of a loss of cultures worldwide. As a creative practitioner I will continue to record, document and archive the lives of the self-settlers of Chernobyl, with the focus on the obsolescence of a community and therein extending the life of their artifacts, traditional craft of embroidery and individual and collective memories.

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