

Interreg Art Residency: Visaginas, Lithuania
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Report

Lucyna Kolendo, December 2019



My name is Lucyna Kolendo and I am a visual artist based in Gdańsk, Poland. I recently spent six days in Visaginas, Lithuanian's youngest city. It stands in the north-east corner of the country as the home for the employees of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP). It's three residential regions are referred to locally as *microdistricts*.

The first thing which comes to my mind while remembering my residency in Visaginas is Ilya, a Russian musician who holds music classes for children at a local community centre.

While in Visaginas I visited the INPP and was struck by the magnitude of the now silent plant. I asked Ilja if he could imagine the sounds that the INPP had produced before being decommissioned. "What does uranium sound like, Ilya? And what sound does the cooling water make?"

We arranged a recording session in which Ilja recreates these sounds on his instruments.

Day 1. Thursday

Getting to Visaginas takes almost twelve hours. For the last part of the journey, I hop on a train and sit down next to a father with two small boys who, it turns out, are deaf. They use sign language and I wonder if it can express more abstract sounds. The children are playing hide-and-seek among the seats and they want me to join them. The younger boy strokes my hair. Outside the window, buildings quickly give way to dense forests. We watch the monotonous landscape go by: long stretches of birch groves; some burned houses; and hens rummaging in the dirt. Santaka, Pabradė, Ignalina, Dūkštas, and finally Visaginas.

Sasha, my guide, picks me up from the empty station. It's been raining since the moment I arrived, but late in the evening we decide to go for a walk. Sasha explains that there are only fourteen streets in Visaginas and an hour is enough to tour the entire city. The architecture here follows the five styles known from Vilnius, Klaipėda, Kaunas, Leningrad and Obninsk. I noticed that no two balconies on any building are the same. The place seems deserted. There are lots of pines growing among the blocks of flats, giving the feel of a seaside resort. Apparently, while building the city, care was taken to preserve as many trees as possible.



In Visaginas children are still given traditional names inspired by nature: Liepa, Ieva, and Ažuolas are trees, Ramunė is a flower, and Audra is a strong wind although Jekaterina (this project's producer) says Audras are usually very calm.

For those remaining in Visaginas anything that is associated with the soviet past is traumatic and local people avoid bringing back bitter memories. Sasha explains to me that, unlike Lithuanians, Estonians coped with their difficult history with a sense of humour. The INPP is a very present reminder of the city's past and many of those who took part in the plant's construction still live in the city.



Day 2. Friday

In the morning I go for a walk to the lake. I don't find the path and as I enter the forest there is a smell of wet plant matter. A red ribbon is hanging from one of the branches. A *babushka* greets me as she passes. I reach a clearing as woodpecker begins drumming on a tree. Although the bird is high up I can feel the vibrations at the very bottom. I hear a group of men approaching in the distance, which makes me jittery, they pass me by, altogether ignoring my presence. I carefully climb down a steep embankment to the water's edge. The lake is calm; the water clear. I remember Sasha telling me the night before that the lake is his favourite place in Visaginas.

The red ribbon helps me find my way back.

Local activist, Oksana shows me a collection of items which might in the future become an archive available to the public. They help me sense what the life here had been like before the city was founded. Clay vessels. Weaving looms. Horseshoes.

A primitive wooden rake and a hammer. Some nails and spoons. Old photographs and a wallet with some documents inside. A pair of leather shoes and a bottle of *Żytnia* rye vodka. 'Thank you for a good childhood' reads a letter addressed to Visaginas written by a former resident who moved to Birmingham, England.

Most of the archive looks as if it has been dug up and cleaned. In a second room Oksana shows me more recent findings. Some glass balls on a dry Christmas tree. A plastic head of a horse on a wooden stick. Cupping glasses. Musical instruments made of plastic.

A kerosene lamp. A megaphone: Oksana picks it up to shows me it still works. A small yellow radio the likes of which could be found in every household. These were essential in order that the population could receive alert announcements in case of the need for evacuation.



The city was meant to resemble a butterfly. It's symmetrical, although one part of it has never been completed. Local legend has it that in the event of a major incident at the INPP the residents could be moved to the equivalent housing found on the other "butterfly wing"! I'm browsing through some old photos of the playgrounds built during the Soviet times. There were fourteen of them and they were themed as space stations and rockets. The city authorities have recently replaced them with a generic design that can be now found in many parts of Europe.

Tired of our explorations of the city, Sasha and I feel like going out to grab something to eat. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a light in a local community centre. There are trombones, tubas, and other wind instruments hanging on the walls, some of which I cannot even name. Standing in the doorway, I'm eavesdropping on a music teacher composing a song using a keyboard. I'm recording the sound through the crack under his door.

An alarm goes off in the mall and a recorded message orders us to leave the premises immediately.

Later that evening I'm talking to my Polish friend on the phone, trying to describe how well-thought-out the city planning was. I point out that the architecture here is totally homogeneous. 'But isn't there something inhuman about it?' he asks.



Day 3. Saturday

Before the city was constructed, the people who later became the inhabitants of Visaginas used to live in one-storey barracks. The area known as *Shanghai* was surrounded by swamps. 'It was like a ghetto', says Sasha, who lived in one of such facilities. 'There was the rule that everyone had to provide board and lodging for one builder. Everybody was kind to one another. Visaginas was built by the military. Buses would take them to the construction site and back. Those were the best times. Back then, all of Lithuanians struggled with food shortages, but not Visaginas.'

The guided tour with Oksana around the first microdistrict starts at noon. Around thirty people arrive. Oksana says she's never had such a large crowd on any of her previous tours.



We are standing in front of a former kindergarten, designed by Dalia Matukonytė, it has a sort of a shared space on the ground floor framed by a weird wooden staircase. The building was on everyone's lips when the city's administration decided to demolish it. The local community took action: they signed a petition that led to a re-evaluation of the facility. Oksana tells me that nowadays the local community is quite passive as it's mostly seniors who live here while the young keep leaving.

We have an appointment scheduled for 2.00 o' clock with some doctors who were the first to have a practice in Visaginas. The first hospital was just a two-roomed apartment located at No. 6 Kosmos street. 'The town was small and the clinics were open 24/7', says German, the manager at the local tourist information, who is temping as an interpreter. 'Our motivation wasn't to work for the money but to help others. The conditions were hard and we needed to work as a team. We would listen to a patient for fifteen minutes before giving a diagnosis.' Bandages and syringes weren't disposable – the medics would scald and reuse them. A lot of the organs for transplants came from Visaginas, as the main cause of deaths were construction injuries. The inhabitants were young – there were only three or four seniors – so they wouldn't get sick often. The workers had undergone comprehensive health check-ups before coming to Visaginas from different parts of the Soviet Union. 'We all speak in Russian, but we work in Lithuanian,' a female doctor concludes.

In the evening, Jevgienij is looking for birch branches to make a bath broom to use in the *banya* he invited us all to.



Day 4. Sunday

German says that in summertime the place comes to life and the young people who left Visaginas for the capital city make their way back to their hometown and gather in the many amphitheatres scattered around the city. Some of them come back for good, and using experience gained abroad, open small businesses.

There are almost 50 minorities in Visaginas. *Visaginas* means 'protecting everybody'.

Among the blocks of flats I notice some brick structures which were used for sheltering from the rain. My hosts tell me they could be the actual symbol of Visaginas. Politicians governing the city want to get rid of them. Apparently, most of the politicians live in the city's suburbs where more and more private houses appear, disturbing the city's unique urban design.

Due to current austerity measures implemented, parts of the city are in darkness; whereas before the decommissioning of the INPP, the city would always be fully illuminated.

The official reason for the closure of the nuclear power plant was because it used a type of reactor similar to the one used in Chernobyl, which was deemed unsafe by European standards. If Lithuania wanted to join the EU then INPP would need to meet western safety standards. The agenda of the Lithuanian government was to join Europe at any cost. During the referendum the government communicated only positive factors about joining the EU. The consequences of decommissioning the INPP were not publicly discussed and the public were never fully informed that Lithuania would go from being an exporter to an importer of energy.

The play "A Green Meadow", staged by the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, was based on stories told by the residents of Visaginas and workers at the INPP. In the play one character says the memorable line. "In the past, we came to work to create; now, we come to demolish."

For most of the employees working for the INPP it was the job of a lifetime. They were unaware of how the changes needed to join the EU would affect their daily lives. After the Chernobyl disaster the INPP went through many improvements and at the time of joining the EU the safety standards did actually meet the western ones. Local people believe that the closure of the plant was purely a political decision.



Day 5. Monday

We are approaching the INPP with its two smokestacks towering over a massive rectangular building. I cannot get a proper tour around the INPP, as they're booked far in advance by the numerous visitors wishing to see where HBO's *Chernobyl* was filmed.

We are waiting for the guided tour, seated on a red circle-shaped sofa with two screens in front of us. We watch, live, the nuclear power plant employees walking along a long corridor on their lunch break. They're wearing white uniforms, white hats and some sport helmets. All employees require a change of protective clothing once a week. After their shifts they shower and use a sauna. Each has their own dosimeter. I learn that radiation can be rinsed with water. The liquid waste is then mixed with cement and needs to be stored properly. I'm also told that radioactivity disappears over long periods of time and maintaining distance and simple barriers like clothes can be protective.

The management of the INPP boasts that the level of radioactivity at the nuclear power plant is lower than in the centre of Vilnius. As mushrooms are the first to absorb radioactivity, they are the best indicators and are analysed everyday. Berries and fish are also good sources of data. Results go online.

Five thousand people used to work here. Currently, there are one thousand nine hundred employees, most of whom have been working at the plant for thirty years.

The process of decommissioning of the INPP will last until 2038.

There used to have two 1500 MW reactors here. Following the Chernobyl disaster a third one was dismantled when only halfway through its construction.

Three kilometres from Visaginas is another INPP facility designed for the simulation of the various problems that could happen in the nuclear power plant. These include those which are improbable in this part of the world, for instance a massive earthquake.

The turbines used to be cooled with the water from the lake. When the power plant produced energy, the temperature of the water in the lake would increase by 3°C. After the reactors had been turned off, the lake started freezing again in winter.

Spent nuclear fuel is very dangerous – more dangerous than fresh fuel. One fuel assembly is 100 kg of uranium. One storage cask holds 91 fuel assemblies. The wall of the cask is half a meter thick. By 2022, all the spent fuel will have been placed in a temporary storage which can last for 50 years. After that, the casks will have to be moved to their final repository storage 600 meters underground and this is planned for 2066.

We eat a simple lunch in the INPP canteen.

Around one hundred and forty different species of birds have their breeding grounds in this area. Thirty of them are considered endangered species some of which lay eggs on the banks of Lake Drūkšiai.



At first, Ilya is quite reluctant when I ask him the first question: 'What does uranium sound like?' However, he gradually begins to look for answers. 'This is the sound of radioactive water. It is sad', he says, pouring water into his tuba and blowing air into it. Indeed, the water in the instrument produced a kind of sobbing. The sound of uranium is created with sugar falling on a cymbal. Ilya takes his largest tuba from the cupboard and produces the sound of a space 600 meters beneath the ground in which the spent fuel will be stored in 2066. The ominous bass sound fills the room.



Day 6. Tuesday

In the early morning I catch a train to Vilnius on my way home. I'm going through all that happened in the course of the five days. It's been an extraordinary experience in which I learnt a lot and much of it has been completely unexpected. I feel the need to share it with someone on the train, but I'm alone. It puts me in a state of a quite euphoria.

List of collected sounds

woodpecker drumming on a tree

Ilya composing for piano

Ilya playing folk songs on the balalaika and the accordion

Ilya trying to recreate the sound of breathing on the accordion
sound of uranium

canteen at the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant during lunch break

water cooling the turbines of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant

alarm siren

spent fuel storage space 600 meters underground

children exercising at a local gymnastics club

shopping mall evacuation message

burner under a pot during breakfast

Jevgienij describing his kindergarten

Sasha describing his favourite place in Visaginas

Thank you Oksana, Sasha, German, Jevgenij
for taking the time to show me around Visaginas.

Thank you Jektarina and Aleksandra for selecting me for this project.



My art is all about memories and documenting them in an attempt to paint a picture of the present: its places and communities. The media I use (whether it is photography, video, or sound recordings) are of secondary importance and follow the content. It is the documentation stage that is crucial.

Memories are the basic component of my work. They are the tools to gain a deeper understanding of the history of the places I visit and the people I meet. Memories are the vehicle for critical reflection on the contemporary world, too. What I do is pretty straightforward: I look at places; I listen to local stories and music; and I search for interesting sounds. I try to create spaces and situations in which my interlocutors feel free to speak and in which their voices can be heard. I watch the everyday life, looking at the history of everyday objects. I look for memories using all the senses. Stories can be told through words, as well as images, smells and sounds, and I have recently been concentrating on the latter.

I work with analogue photography, sound recordings, radio, text, and video.

Bio

Lucyna Kolendo (born 1988) is a visual artist living and working in Gdańsk, Poland. She uses photography, film, and sound to examine memories evoked by senses and objects. She tries to keep her research open and allows the results of her thoughts to be shaped by the knowledge and experiences gathered throughout the process. She holds an MA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk and spent two years at the University of Arts and Industrial Design in Linz, Austria, where she studied photography. In 2016, she completed her first long-term photographic project within the Sputnik Mentorship Program, which she developed with Adam Panczuk. She was awarded with Hubert Sielecki Prize at the Tricky Women Film Festival in Vienna. Recently, she took up the position of an assistant in the Documentary Photography studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk.