



Exhibition «Once upon a time Chernobyl»  
20/04/2006 - 23/07/2006

## **Chernobyl as a metaphor**

Chernobyl as a reality and as a metaphor. As a reality: the terrible nuclear accident caused by human error, which shows that risk in the contemporary world has no boundaries, and that we are all exposed to the catastrophes of others. The final toll is a matter still pending. There is no officially recognised, objective figure about the number of victims. The information about the effects and their spread over space and time is still vague, and disputed by its particular sources.

As a metaphor. Chernobyl represents the collapse of the Soviet-type regimes. Just like the system that was considered invincible years ago, with Chernobyl everything was a lie, everything was a façade: the power plant didn't meet requirements, the emergency services didn't work, confusion and disinformation did the rest. Just like the Chernobyl power plant, these regimes fell three years later as a result of this vast accumulated incompetence, of an inability to keep up with the technological shifts which western capitalism challenged them with.

Chernobyl is also an emblem of the risk society. Man threatened by his own constructions. The disaster can no longer be ascribed to chance, to nature or to the unforeseeable. The disaster combines with the very logic of progress without limits.

Chernobyl as a global accident. Nothing that happens to others is alien to us. We are all neighbours in the same neighbourhood that we call Earth and which is becoming ever smaller. Frontiers serve no purpose: neither in stopping the signals from the powerful, present-day media, nor in preventing contamination from the catastrophic handling of danger by one set of people or another. And at the same time, we have the impression we are living on top of one another: «claustropolis», as Paul Virilio says.

Twenty years on, wild untamed nature has sprung up again in Chernobyl. Plants have grown in the middle of the abandoned towns and the animals have returned to stay. In this sense, Chernobyl is also a kind of metaphor for earthly paradise after a disaster. As if it wanted to warn us that Arcadias also have a trick up their sleeve.

However, Chernobyl is also the story of people, victims who had no desire to be so, heroes who had no reason to sacrifice themselves. People who died or carry the burden of disease on their shoulders due to the lack of expertise and incompetence of others: the inhabitants of the area and the liquidators who went there to put out the fire because someone ordered them to do so, because someone had to do it. The story of Chernobyl is full of heart-rending personal experiences: people forced to relocate who lived through the collapse of their mother country and the destruction of their natural surroundings and family environment at the same time; people who lost everything; people who were no longer able to move and chose to live a kind of clandestine existence in a contaminated world. There were even people who went to Chernobyl because there are places in the world that are even worse. Of all these stories, one in particular sticks in my mind: a widow woman from Chechnya went to live in an abandoned village in the Chernobyl area, «because, here at least, death is slower than it is in Grozny».

The debate about nuclear energy is back on the table. Chernobyl is a warning that cannot be overlooked. Be that as it may, it is more important as a metaphor for a world, our world, in which technological chaos, in the hands of powers that offer no guarantees, combines with a disdain for



Prologues by Josep Ramoneda to the CCCB's catalogues

humankind by those in power. Chernobyl is a metaphor for the end of twentieth-century totalitarianism, but it can also be a metaphor for the new totalitarianism of indifference.