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(Re)Imagining the nuclear in Lithuania following the shutdown of the Ignalina nuclear power plant

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ABSTRACT

This article examines public representations of the nuclear in Lithuania following the shutdown of the Soviet-designed Ignalina nuclear power plant. The central focus of the article is the analysis of artistic practices that, since the early 2000s, interpret and transform the materiality of the plant from a nuclear object to a cultural phenomenon. The author argues that while the decommissioning process of the only Lithuanian nuclear power plant occupies a rather marginal place in the popular consciousness, art becomes an increasingly important medium for the construction of nuclear imaginaries attracting public attention and raising awareness of nuclear industry issues.

KEYWORDS Ignalina nuclear power plant; Visaginas; nuclear imaginaries; nuclear aesthetics; nuclear cultural heritage

Introduction

In the 1980s the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (Ignalina NPP), which operated the world's two most powerful RBMK-1500 water-cooled graphite-moderated channel-type power reactors, was activated on the territory of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following the collapse of the USSR, the Ignalina NPP passed to Lithuanian control and in 1993 entered the international Guinness Book of World Records for generating 88% of the country's electricity. It is unlikely, however, that these exceptional facts about Ignalina were ever widely known to anyone outside the community of nuclear professionals. As long as they continue to successfully generate electricity, nuclear reactors are considered banal and ordinary enough to resemble other industries, so they are usually invisible, and many people are even unaware of their presence. Millions of people around the world only heard about the Ignalina NPP when the already shutdown plant became one of the sites for the filming location of the 2019 HBO TV-series *Chernobyl*.¹ The Ignalina NPP featured the nuclear plant that suffered a catastrophe in 1986 rendering the civil nuclear industry highly visible and threatening. The award-winning series not only gained widespread critical acclaim and popularity, but also contributed to the perception of the nuclear theme as a hot topic.

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Locally, Ignalina, the only nuclear plant in the country, forms an important part of Lithuania's political, social, economic, and cultural history. Built as a colonial Soviet project to provide electricity for the Western part of the Soviet Union, furnished with the same type of reactors as the Chernobyl NPP, taken over by independent Lithuania after 1990 and prematurely closed as a condition of that country's entry to the European Union (EU) in the 2000s, today the Ignalina NPP represents various things, from the nuclear legacy of the modern era to a remnant of the unwanted Soviet past. In addition, the plant represents a precedent for the future through the scientific and technological challenge of dismantling this type of reactor for the first time in history (not including the disastrous Chernobyl reactor). In the social imaginary in Lithuania, however, this power plant is no longer associated with nuclear energy and its possibilities and risks, but with the seemingly banal process of its decommissioning (Mažeikienė, Kasperiušienė, and Tandzegolskienė 2019). Being marginalized, the Ignalina NPP has created another phenomenon by attracting a wide range of artists, cultural activists, and researchers whose creative practice returns the nuclear topic to the public sphere.

Since the early 2000s, several dozen art projects including texts, photographs, films, video art, installations, mixed-media and participatory art works, creative workshops, and theater performance have been created about the Ignalina NPP and its satellite town of Visaginas (formerly Sniečkus). Despite the process of decommissioning nuclear technologies already being underway in Lithuania (or perhaps because of it), the nuclear imagination – an artistic and cultural phenomenon – continues to spread and gain momentum. It can be argued that the Ignalina NPP is becoming a cultural object and generates new forms of nuclear imaginaries.² The purpose of this article is to explore how creative practices interpret and transform the materiality of the Ignalina NPP from nuclear object to cultural phenomenon. Through the analysis of Ignalina-related art projects that depict motives such as nuclear site, community, and materiality, I will discuss what kind of imageries, narratives, and sensibilities they produce. How does art contribute to the public representations of the nuclear? Does art raise troubling questions about the nuclear present and future? How do such projects affect our understanding and remembrance of the atomic era as well as our imagination of and activism for its future? The research for this article is based on content analysis, highlighting the dominant themes, symbols, and metaphors in works of art, as well as the ways in which they are expressed. Direct experience of the art works and analysis of their documentation is complemented by secondary sources consisting of interviews with artists (published as well as conducted by the author of this article), press releases, critical reviews, and other types of art coverage in the media.

This article aims to contribute to the growing research field around nuclear cultural heritage, which considers the legacy of the atomic age to be both technological and industrial as well as a cultural object (Rindzevičiūtė 2019). A vast category in the nuclear sphere encompassing military, civilian, and medical uses of nuclear technology is seen as a technopolitical phenomenon that 'emerges from political and cultural configurations of technical and scientific things' (Hecht 2012, 15). Recent research on nuclear aesthetics in the arts considers creative practices as increasingly important in framing public representations of the nuclear, constructing the memory of nuclear modernity, and speculating about the future in the context of environmental emergencies (O'Brian 2015; Carpenter 2016; Lütticken 2018–2019; Decamous 2011). As we will see below, Ignalina-related art belongs to the global trend of nuclear-themed art as well as retaining its own specific features. In this article, however, I am not interested in art

critical issues, but in what ways art contributes to the articulation of public imaginaries of the nuclear. To this end I will start the article from a theoretical consideration of how the nuclear is used in recent literature on the cultural and political history of the atom as well as in studies on nuclear themed art, then I will proceed to a brief overview of the public perception of the nuclear industry in Lithuania and an introduction to Ignalina-related art. In the last two sections I will investigate the themes that dominate in such artistic and creative practices using dichotomies such as exceptional and banal, visible and invisible, that are highly relevant in the culture of nuclear technology and industry.

The nuclear: between exceptional and banal

By definition, the word 'nuclear' means something related to the nucleus of an atom, the smallest unit of any chemical element. Nuclear fission and radioactivity are used in a wide range of technologies, from medicine and agriculture to electricity and weaponry. The nuclear, however, is not just a physical fact, but a much more complex scientific, technical, political, and cultural category. According to Hecht (2012), the notion of the nuclear changes over time and space and depends on a variety of historical, geographical, political, and institutional parameters. Being discursive in nature, flexible, and changeable, it can mean different, even opposite things in different circumstances. Hecht (2012) describes the two most common imaginaries spawned by the atomic era: nuclear as exceptional and nuclear as banal.

In the first case, nuclear technology is considered unique and inherently distinct from all other scientific inventions, able not only to produce electricity and bombs, but also to project the whole world toward a bright new or apocalyptic future. Imaginaries of nuclear exceptionalism were used in the propaganda of the superpowers during the Cold War, seeking to secure global peace through the atom. In other contexts, political, technological, and cultural practices depict the nuclear industry as banal, losing its special properties, status, and purposes. Banalization of the nuclear, for example, can equate uranium mines with other forms of (asbestos or gold) mining, thus not providing workers with protection from radioactive materials. Hecht (2012, 15) argues that it is important to not only recognize and describe nuclear imaginaries, but to also trace the consequences of rendering nuclear things exceptional or banal in real life.

The dialectics of the exceptional and the banal, not necessarily using the same terms, are often employed in current anthropological, social, and cultural studies of the nuclear industry. The effects of nuclear exceptionalism, for example, are explored by Masco (2004) through 'sublime' experiences of nuclear testing, while Brown (2013) coined the term 'plutopia' for the analysis of unique and exclusive atomic towns created during the Cold War. Other authors show how nuclear banalization through fun and playful display used in cultural practices can serve a variety of purposes, from opposition to industry in anti-nuclear movements (Valentines-Álvarez and Macaya-Andrés 2019), to promotion of nuclear safety through museum exhibitions (Sastre-Juan 2019; Boyle 2019) and efforts to incorporate the nuclear into nation building (Kasperski 2019).

Taken separately, the exceptional and banal aspects of the nuclear are often examined critically. Nuclear exceptionalism usually leads to an increased emphasis on security in this industry, thus protecting it from critical appraisal and public participation in the discussion on nuclear matters. Nuclear banalization causes the rendering of nuclear threats into something familiar and ordinary, thus reducing public attention and awareness toward this technology (Sastre-Juan and Valentines- Álvarez 2019). Most

of the authors mentioned above point out that nuclear exceptionalism and banality are often two different sides of the same coin and emphasize the constant oscillation between those two poles in the discourse surrounding nuclear technology and industry. If the aforementioned studies examine various scientific, social, and cultural practices as a means of making the nuclear exceptional or banal, my article aims to demonstrate how art explores and reveals the tension between the exceptionalism and the banality of the nuclear.

Nuclear aesthetics: enthusiasm, critique, and beyond

Art of the atomic era is often characterized by a dual response to nuclear technology, ranging between enthusiasm and critique. Nuclear themed art, or what was recently called 'nuclear aesthetics' in the arts, originated and evolved with the development of military and civilian nuclear industries.³ Although the nuclear industry often forbids visual recording of its operations for the sake of security, from the outset, visual culture and arts have been interrelated with the development of the nuclear (Carpenter 2016; O'Brian 2015). The discoveries of nuclear physics since the early twentieth century have influenced the thinking and worldview of artists sometimes even leading to aesthetic revolutions (Lütticken 2018–2019). The discovery of radiation, for example, revised the perception of reality and called into question the whole human sensory system as a tool for knowing the world. This prompted the pre-war avant-garde to look for ways to make the invisible visible, gave surrealists the impetus to develop visions of a 'new world,' or as in the early 1950s, inspired a movement of Italian artists called *Arte Nucleare*.

Still, much of the art on the topic was rather critical toward the nuclear industry. As Spencer R. Weart (2012) argues that art, along with TV shows, popular movies, novels, music, and other cultural production, has largely expressed a sense of nuclear anxiety caused by the bombings of Japanese cities in 1945, the constant threat of global nuclear war, and the effects of nuclear testing and radiation leaks from nuclear power plants on the environment. In the field of visual arts, mushroom cloud shapes and explosions in famous pop art works spread the sense of nuclear fear, and disintegration was indirectly expressed in the paintings of abstract expressionists (Decamous 2011). Artists who joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Great Britain in the late 1950s or belonged to the PAND (Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament) movement in America in the 1980s directly protested against nuclear proliferation with their work and sought to raise public awareness of the threat of nuclear weapons. It can be argued that in the period of the first atomic era, the fascination with, and the fear of nuclear technology coexisted in the arts (Jolivet 2012).

Works of contemporary art created in the context of the so-called second atomic era often go beyond the binaries of the Cold War era, that is, beyond pure enthusiasm or negative critique of nuclear technology. Artists are less interested in the problems of visual perception and representation in a world transformed by nuclear science and industry (Decamous 2011; Lütticken 2018–2019; Carpenter 2016). Nuclear themed art focuses instead not on the invisible atom, but on the invisible effects of the nuclear industry on human lives and the local and planetary environment. Carpenter (2016) describes this turn as a transition from 'nuclear sublime' to 'nuclear uncanny,' which, according to Masco, means living with 'material effects, psychic tension and sensory confusion produced by nuclear weapons and radioactive materials' (9). In addition to addressing the legacies and impact on modern life and culture of various nuclear

events, from testing and bombing to disasters at nuclear power plants, artists are also exploring new topics such as nuclear geographies and nuclear futures. The first is based on an important aspect of the nuclear industry, namely that the production of nuclear energy and weapons is a complex and multifaceted process, from the extraction of raw materials to the management of waste. No less important are the artists' efforts to imagine the future of the nuclear industry, which is characterized by the retention of enduring radioactive waste, the management of which poses an unprecedented scientific and social challenge. The phasing out of first-generation nuclear power plants has raised the question of where and how to bury this radioactive waste, while artists are interested in the challenges of communicating such dangerous repositories to unimaginable future (human?) generations.

If the critical art of the Cold War period produced imagery of the nuclear as 'a condensed symbol for the worst of modernity' (Weart 2012, 287), contemporary art has a more complex relationship with the part nuclear plays in modernity. Current artistic practices rethink nuclearity as a contested heritage of modernity by raising the visibility of technological errors, revealing the broader socio-political context in which nuclear science and industry operate, questioning the modern concept of scientific progress in general (Decamous 2011; Carpenter 2016) or showing the reciprocal relationship between both the benefits and damage inherent in nuclear technologies (O'Brian 2015). In this way, art reveals nuclear modernity both as a project of scientific progress and a project of colonial exploitation (of lands, people, environment), with long-term consequences for both the present life and the distant future. It is the ambiguity and ambivalence of the nuclear as well as the interplay between visible and invisible that is also relevant when it comes to such art in Lithuania.

A (post) nuclear country

The Ignalina NPP has been closely connected with the history of Lithuania and its transition from Soviet to Post-Soviet. Some key information is worth mentioning at the beginning. Two RBMK-type reactors of the plant were put into operation in 1983 and 1987, while the construction of two additional reactors were canceled after the 1986 accident at the Chernobyl NPP in the Ukrainian SSR. As one of the conditions for Lithuania's accession to the EU, the reactors were prematurely shut down in 2004 and 2009 respectively. The complete dismantling of the plant to achieve the 'brown-field' end-stage is planned for 2038.

Initially, the construction and management of the plant was clearly a colonial project carried out by the central institutions of the Soviet government. In the 1980s Lithuanian scientists opposed the construction of such a plant on the territory of Lithuania, citing the lack of geological research and inappropriate waste storage conditions. The anti-nuclear claims were crucially important for the national revival movement *Sjūdis*, which organized the 1988 rally 'The Ring of Life' around Ignalina, attracting around 100,000 participants demanding the suspension of the construction of the third reactor. Baločkaitė and Rinkevičius (2008) argue that like Chernobyl, the Ignalina NPP also played an important role in expressing social dissatisfaction and questioning Soviet rule, and the nuclear industry became one of the causes of the collapse of the Soviet regime.

After Lithuania took over control of the Ignalina NPP in 1991, nuclear energy exerted a symbolic significance in the life of the new state. In the 1990s, the plant was the main electricity supplier in the country, while in society 'anti-nuclear activism was replaced by nuclear attitudes' (Stsiapanau 2018, 8). The numerous public opinion surveys on nuclear

energy, carried out in the 1990s and 2000s, indicated that Lithuanian society experienced nuclear fears associated with the ‘cultural trauma’ of the Chernobyl disaster, but a more important factor influencing attitudes was the rather banal economic benefits of the nuclear industry (Gaidys and Rinkevičius 2008). The decision to close the Ignalina NPP was strongly related to a new stage in the development of Lithuania – accession to the EU. The end of the 2000s was marked by a public debate on the construction of a new nuclear power plant, but a referendum in 2012, which produced negative results, seemed to suspend Lithuania’s future prospects as a country producing nuclear energy.⁴

Although an important part of modern Lithuanian history, nuclear energy is neither considered a valuable heritage nor a relevant topic in the public sphere. Research on ‘memory work’ conducted during the closure of the plant and immediately afterward has revealed that the public discourse tends to forget rather than remember the nuclear past (Baločkaitė 2012; Storm 2014). Ignalina-related practices of forgetting reflect the general approach to the history of modern industrialization in Lithuania. After 1990, in the popular imagination, industrialization was long associated with an ‘alien’ Soviet legacy that seemed the opposite of a pre-industrial, rural country, and signified Russian labor, poor quality, and environmental pollution (Drėmaitė 2012, 72). In some areas of memory practices, such as history textbooks, it is nuclear energy that is portrayed as a symbol of alien, colonial industrialization (Dovydaitytė 2021).

Over the last decade, sociological research on the public perception of nuclear energy has presented a rather pronounced indifference to nuclear energy, its past, and future (Genys and Krikštolaitis 2017). A study of the most popular media news portals in Lithuania for the period 2017–2018 revealed that the decommissioning of the Ignalina NPP is an important topic, but it is covered through banal economic and administrative rather than socio-technological and environmental aspects. The media is dominated by the topics of funding, management, and public procurement, while technological and environmental challenges related to both the dismantling of the power plant and radioactive waste management remain uncovered (Mažeikienė, Kasperiušienė, and Tandzegolskienė 2019).

Contrary to the banalization of its own nuclear industry, the issue of an exceptional nuclear threat related to the emergence of a new nuclear power plant in neighboring Belarus has, in recent years, been strongly reflected in Lithuanian politics and the public sphere. Since 2016, the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, located just 50 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, has been considered a direct threat to Lithuania’s national security, human health, and the environment. The Lithuanian government has been actively seeking means to prevent the construction of the power plant and is currently pursuing a cessation in production. In recent years, news portals have been flashing reports of threats posed by an allegedly unsafe power plant. Thus, it can be stated that today in Lithuanian public discourse the nuclear topic is used to fight an external enemy (Kinsella 2005) rather than to reconsider its own nuclear past and present (that is, the experimental dismantling of the Ignalina NPP and the challenges of managing radioactive waste). In contrast, various artistic projects about the Ignalina NPP, which emerged after the shutdown of the first reactor, have brought the nuclear back to the Lithuanian public as an issue.

Art in the (post) nuclear site

The Ignalina NPP was part of a common Soviet techno-political system, which 'was built as a monumental iconography of the victory of science and technology over the power of nature' (Stsiapanau 2018, 4). As a symbol of scientific and technological progress that could lead Soviet society to communism, nuclear energy had certain representations in socialist culture and art. A portrayal of the Ignalina NPP can be found in paintings of that period or in documentary photographs by Vasily Chupachenko, which provided romanticized industrial images celebrating working people and emphasizing the greatness of technology.⁵ Various art works have used the symbol of the atom pointing to a bright future, for example, the atom represents the sun in the sky in *ex-libris* created by the artist Petras Rauduvė (1982) and it was also common in public art in the atomic town.⁶ The main public art installation in Visaginas is a 154 m² mosaic entitled *Man and the Elements* by the Russian artist from St. Petersburg, Viktor Tatarenko, is on the wall of a residential house. Commissioned by the Ignalina NPP in 1987 and completed in 1990, the mosaic portrays the mythological figure of Icarus carrying four elements: water, earth, fire, and air. Despite being commissioned by Soviet industry, the artwork also points to the Chernobyl disaster through the symbol of a broken atom, thus revealing both the celebratory and threatening aspects of nuclear science.⁷

During the period of political change, art seems to have played an important role in the popular consciousness in re-conceptualizing the Ignalina nuclear site from Soviet colonial to Western-oriented national imaginaries. The atomic town Sniečkus, built together with the power plant, where mostly Russian-speaking immigrants to Lithuania settled in the late 1970s and 1980s, was a relatively closed, isolated settlement in the context of the Lithuanian SSR.⁸ At the beginning of 1991, when the Ignalina NPP was still under Soviet jurisdiction, the Lithuanian country-style musician Virgis Stakėnas chose this city as a 'place in nowhere' in search of a site for a new music festival. As the locally-based producer of the festival remembers, 'Sniečkus was chosen because it was so closed, mystical, hidden from everyone. The country music festival was supposed to uncover the veil of this city and invite people to listen to good music' (interview with Čekienė 2018). In August of the same year, during the attempted coup in Moscow, the first international country music festival *Visagino Country*, primarily sponsored by the Ignalina NPP, took place in Sniečkus. This festival, annually attracting about 20,000 visitors, has made the city a well-known center of country music and cowboy culture in Lithuania. It can be said that the music festival turned the Soviet atomic town into a place of American culture, symbolizing the democratic West.⁹ Such an image of the city was quite widespread in the popular imagination in the 1990s.

Artists' interest in the Ignalina NPP emerged in the 2000s, when the shutdown of the power plant caused unemployment and emigration, and began to dramatically change the social and cultural life of the region. Creative projects have intensified again over the last five years, this time probably not due to the decommissioning processes, but rather a general increased focus on the modernization processes of the late Soviet era on the one hand and the globally popular themes related to the concept of the Anthropocene epoch on the other. Since the early 2000s, there have been several dozen Ignalina-related professional art projects produced, which have been widely distributed both nationally and internationally.¹⁰

From the very beginning, the Ignalina NPP and its satellite town attracted artists from both Lithuania and abroad. A review of artistic and creative projects created over the last two decades reveals a strong international dimension: often these were the results of collaborations between Lithuanian and foreign artists (as in the case of the Lithuanian-Norwegian couple Ignas Krunglevičius and Siri Harr Steinvik, or the production of the theater performance *The Green Meadow* directed by Lithuanian Jonas Tertelis and German Kristina Werner) or the art projects created by artists of Lithuanian origin who were studying abroad and/or working on the international scene (as in the case of Olga Černovaitė, Neringa Rekašiūtė, Augustas Serapinas, and Emilija Škarnulytė). It can be argued that most of the highly visible artistic representations about Ignalina have been created by artists (and researchers) from outside. Apart from this, there are several remarkable artistic and creative projects produced in collaboration with local residents and Ignalina NPP staff (such as the aforementioned *The Green Meadow* and the creative workshops *Mapping Visaginas* organized by the European Humanities University). Texts, photographs, films, video art, installations, mixed-media and participatory art projects, creative workshops, and theater performance, created by Lithuanian and foreign artists (and sometimes researchers), examine various scientific, cultural, social, and political aspects of nuclear energy and reveal different angles of the nuclear through the lens of the Ignalina case.¹¹

All these different art projects are characterized by a specific tension between fact and fiction, real and imaginary. None of these art works are complete fiction or a mere work of imagination (as might happen, for example, in a novel or feature film). In all of them, the principle of documentary is particularly important: artists film and photograph the authentic environment of the Ignalina NPP and Visaginas, observe and record un-staged situations, and talk to real people. Artists often use anthropological and sociological methods: they carry out field research, collect archival material, hold interviews, gather data, and interpret it. Meanwhile, academic researchers use artistic methods (for example, urban researchers from the European Humanities University in the aforementioned series of creative workshops *Mapping Visaginas*). Unlike science, however, the images produced by these art projects are not considered accurate, reliable documentations of reality, and their goal is not an objective depiction of reality. Artists often experiment with the data and testimonies gathered in their works, giving them an artistic form combining observation and editing, and blurring the line between fact and fiction.

The tension between fact and fiction can be illustrated by the example of the theater performance *The Green Meadow* (directed by Jonas Tertelis and Kristina Werner, see [Figure 1](#)). Produced by the Lithuanian National Drama Theater, successfully performed about 40 times between 2017 and 2019 in various Lithuanian cities, receiving critical acclaim, and nominated for the national theater awards, this performance presented the nuclear theme to a wide and diverse audience. Following the principles of documentary theater, *The Green Meadow* was performed not by professional actors, but by ten former and current Ignalina NPP employees and local residents. Real people on stage share stories of their life, work, dreams, and fears while facing the closure of the plant and on-going changes in the atomic town. Some critics appreciated the performance as an affective 'social act,' where the audience meet with real people and directly experience their emotions (Balevičiūtė 2017). Others criticized it for the non-reflective 'performance of authenticity' on stage, arguing that the production did not reveal, but rather invented the past through nostalgic and, therefore, false memories (Staniškytė 2019). Obviously, the



Figure 1. A scene from the theater performance *The Green Meadow* (2017). Photo by Dmitrij Matvejev.

nature of the performance is dual. The emotional impact of *The Green Meadow* was determined not only by the stories of real people, but also by the artistic decisions, such as script sequence, selection of metaphors, and scenography with chopped Soviet-style furniture. Moreover, the directors of the performance failed to involve representatives of the first generation – power plant builders and city developers – in the creation of the performance, so the stories are told by their children who already have a certain distance and a different attitude toward the closure of the plant.¹² It can be said that the performance did not reveal the existing social drama of the atomic town, but rather concealed it. Therefore, *The Green Meadow* is neither a reliable illustration of reality nor fiction, but rather the result of documenting, which in itself intervenes in, alters, and stages reality, in which other nuclear concerns arise, as we shall see below. I will return to this performance in the following sections of the article, examining the two dominant themes in Ignalina-related art, namely the socio-cultural side of the nuclear industry and nuclear materialities.

The atomic town and the nuclear community

One of the themes that dominates in the Ignalina related art is the fate of the atomic town and the nuclear community after the shutdown of the power plant. People who worked in the nuclear industry were part of an exceptional strategic sector and enjoyed a privileged status since the Cold War. Public discourse, however, then and now, rarely focuses on the seemingly banal social, cultural, and urban aspects surrounding this industry, concentrating instead on the political and technological sides of the nuclear. In the case of Ignalina, artists, by contrast, blend the exceptional and banal, making visible invisible everyday lives, experiences, memories, and concerns of Visaginas inhabitants and Ignalina NPP's workers.

Since the early 2000s, many artists have been attracted to Visaginas, once founded as a mono-industrial, nuclear-serviced town whose residents' life have been changed by the closure of the nuclear enterprise. The atomic towns established during the Cold War enjoyed a special position as they were provided with better infrastructure, social services, exclusive goods, and higher wages in exchange for work in this strategic state industry (Brown 2013). Like other mono-industrial cities after the decline of the industry, however, Visaginas lost not only a source of income and its privileged status, but also its ideological foundation (Storm and Kasperski 2017). In her research around the Ignalina NPP community, Kristina Šliavaitė (2010) argues that it faced not only social insecurity and unemployment, but also a lack of meaning in life, as at least part of the community supported their worldview with modern ideas such as scientific progress and continuous growth.¹³ Therefore, the biggest crisis for the former nuclear community, which is also addressed in many art works, is having to destroy what was built by their own hands.¹⁴

Works of art often portray an atomic town as an empty place where life came to an end. Kristina Inčiūraitė's short video work *Leisure* (2003) begins with the image of red flowers blooming in the town square, which is quickly replaced by a long and static episode depicting an empty stage in the Visaginas Culture House. Throughout the film, the viewer is shown an empty stage – an image of suspended action, a broken history, and an uncertain future. The impression of abandonment of the site is enhanced by the soundtrack – an ironically sounding Soviet-era Russian song 'We wish you happiness, happiness in this big, big world,' rehearsed by a local youth choir. Images of empty streets, squares, and the courtyards of Visaginas also dominate in the video work of Ignas Krunglevičius and Siri Harr Steinvik's *Ignalina mon amour* (2007). The interviewed architects talk about the specific urban structure of an atomic town and compare socialist and capitalist architecture, thus making the city static, as if a monument to the past. Images of abandoned, dilapidated or simply empty places in the city (even colorful children's playgrounds are empty) are captured by British artists Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon in a series of photographs entitled *Babochka* (2015) (see Figure 2).¹⁵ The high quality of the photographs, the bright colors, and the central composition give the images a monumentality characteristic of a curious and exoticizing perception of the Soviet past.

Alongside the images of an empty stage and playground, the figure of a butterfly is also employed in a variety of art works. The butterfly is an urban metaphor for Visaginas, because, according to architectural historian Marija Drėmaitė, the atomic town, built from scratch, was planned in the shape of a butterfly, with a central axis and four wings (Cinis, Drėmaitė, and Kalm 2008). Only two lower butterfly wings were developed and a third was begun, while the fourth wing remained unrealized when it was decided not to build the third and fourth reactors after the Chernobyl disaster. In the aforementioned series of photographs called *Babochka*, which in Russian means 'butterfly,' the city is not captured from a bird's eye view to enable us to see the city layout, but the majestic images of the empty city and frozen nature speak of the interrupted and unfinished nature of this nuclear site. Olga Černovaitė's documentary *Butterfly City* (2017), which examines the identity of the current inhabitants, also indirectly refers to the 'split' as a founding myth of the atomic town's present. The Russian-speaking residents of Visaginas, who are interviewed in the film, think a lot about their identity, some emphasizing Soviet nostalgia and pro-Russian sentiments, others – the liberal,



Figure 2. Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon, photograph from the series *Babochka* (2015).

European future. The strength of the film is that the artist, a Russian-speaking Lithuanian herself, takes no sides and leaves it unclear how these conflicting identities co-exist and shape the city's present.

Using the butterfly metaphor, the problematic identity of the atomic town is also emphasized by the social scientist Rasa Baločkaitė in her essay *Visaginas, a Quotation of Modernity*, which accompanies Gintaras Česonis' photographs in the book *Keys to the Cities of Lithuania* (2010). The black-and-white photographs capture the courtyard of an apartment building with a children's playground, the road to the power plant, a huge empty city square, a bridge to the lake with a rare passerby turned away from us. The accompanying text summarizes:

Viewed from above [...] Visaginas repeats the shape with the look of a butterfly spreading its wings. [...] Visaginas is a quotation of Soviet modernism. It is strange and foreign; however, it is written into the text of Lithuania and cannot be erased out of it. It is a magical symbol that can be read from airplanes up in the sky – a signpost for Lithuanian pilots, gods, and all sorts of cosmic personnel. What does it mean – that butterfly that can never rise up and fly? (Baločkaitė 2010, 91, 96).

Thus, it can be said that in artistic projects the atomic town is depicted as an incomplete butterfly unable to take off, and this void symbolizes the interrupted, unfinished project of (Soviet) nuclear modernity.

In art projects, the metaphors of an empty stage, an empty playground, or a butterfly without a wing are complemented or even outweighed by the voices of the nuclear community. In the video work *Leisure*, local Russian-speaking women talk about their leisure



Figure 3. Neringa Rekašiūtė, photograph from the series *Post-Nuclear Identity* (2018).

opportunities, about the lack of women's clubs, but emphasize that, despite nothing, they try to look good. The stories of residents of the atomic town also enliven the images of the empty boulevards in the film *Ignalina mon amour*. They are largely based on the contrast between a glorious past (overcrowded kindergartens and schools) and a sad present (a vacant city). In both films, however, the residents of Visaginas stoically believe in the future ('everything will be fine,' 'let's not give up'). The photo series *Babochka* also includes photos of Visaginas residents – staged portraits of local people in their environment. The effect is ambiguous – they resemble species displayed for our inspection, but at the same time they look straight into the eyes of the viewer as if they were inspecting us. Neringa Rekašiūtė's photo project *Post-Nuclear Identity* (2018) also consists of staged portraits of Visaginas residents, created by the artist after moving in and deciding to reveal the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of the atomic town (see [Figures 3 and 4](#)).¹⁶

Art plays an important role in giving a voice to those who are not represented in the official public discourse around the Ignalina NPP. While the media is dominated by economic and managerial themes about the decommissioning of the plant, the works



Figure 4. Neringa Rekašiūtė, photograph from the series *Post-Nuclear Identity* (2018).

of art highlight the stories and destinies of the nuclear community itself in the face of change. Moreover, the active involvement of the residents of the atomic town in local self-representations is encouraged by a number of creative workshops and performances in *Mapping Visaginas*, which since 2015, have been organized by the Laboratory of Critical Urbanism (European Humanities University, Vilnius) as a summer school for international students in Visaginas. The goal of this multi-year creative project is 'to examine how inhabitants of towns and cities in the Post-Soviet Baltic states [...] are, and might be, included in and excluded from the new forms of urbanity thus emerging ...' (Ackermann, Cope, and Liubimau 2016, 9). Thus, it can be argued, that artists not only create affective metaphors for a nuclear site, but also seek to empower the nuclear community itself by giving it a voice and sometimes a stage (as in the theater performance *The Green Meadow* discussed earlier).

The above-mentioned creative practices highlight the mixture of the exceptionality and banality of the nuclear by combining industrial and human scales, by transferring the nuclear industry issue from the exclusively state affair to the hands of the people

who worked with it. This mixture could be experienced live by visiting the contemporary art exhibition *Splitting the Atom*, which took place in autumn 2020 at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, where gallery staff wore specially designed sweaters decorated with the pattern of a nuclear reactor grid. According to the idea of the artist Augustas Serapinas, the image of the sublime technological invention was incorporated into the casual wear by two former workers of the Ignalina plant, now in retirement, who spend much of their time knitting (*Yelena and Vera*, 2020). Colorful sweaters draw visitors' attention to otherwise invisible exhibition invigilators, and in a broader sense, the project makes visible what is often socially invisible, that is, the workforce in any infrastructure, including the nuclear industry.

Nuclear materials

A further important theme in Ignalina inspired art, is the specific materiality related to the nuclear industry. What distinguishes the nuclear sector from other industries is that it uses highly radioactive materials, the management of which is still an unresolved challenge in the case of decontamination after the nuclear accident and in case of the final disposal of nuclear waste. Although the Ignalina NPP has been shut down and public discourse so far depicts its decommissioning as banal as any other standard industry, artists are interested in the peculiarities of nuclear space, landscapes, infrastructure, systems, objects, and leftovers. At a time when the government and the media in Lithuania are emphasizing the threat of a new Belarusian nuclear power plant, artists are reigniting our interest in Ignalina, exploring its decommissioning processes, and trying to imagine the future of nuclear materials.

The tension between the banality and exceptionality of the nuclear is illustrated by the art works created from the remnants of the Ignalina plant buildings and equipment. At least two artists have noticed the regular public auctions organized by the plant to sell parts of the infrastructure being demolished. These auctions symbolically turn the remnants of a former strategic and secret nuclear object into an ordinary commodity that anyone can buy. Italian artist Rossella Biscotti created a modular floor sculpture from auction-bought lead, and the copper scrap was recycled into a cable to supply electricity for the 'Manifesta,' the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2012. The artist returned the nuclear from the banal market to politics through the title of the installation *Title One: The Tasks of the Community*, which is a quotation taken from the 1957 Treaty Establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), the main aim of which was and remains, the promotion of nuclear energy (European Union 2010). If Biscotti emphasizes irony by juxtaposing the European Union's funding of the dismantling of the Ignalina plant with the mere commerce of the auction, then the work of Augustas Serapinas, *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas* (2018), is less politically explicit (see Figure 5). Having bought two pieces of the wall from the Ignalina plant at auction, the artist invited three eponymous children between 10 and 12 years old to re-arrange materials into the form of an abstract sculpture. The material remains of the disused plant have become the material for a kind of monument created by the children of former nuclear workers, those who will have to deal with the post-industrial nuclear future.

Material infrastructures and objects, otherwise invisible to an outsider, are the focus of Emilija Škarnulytė's documentary *Energy Island* (2017) (see Figure 6). Excerpts from the film were first shown in the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian joint exhibition *The*



Figure 5. Augustas Serapinas, installation *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas* at the Venice Art Biennale (2018). Photo by Francesco Galli.



Figure 6. A still from the documentary *Energy Island* (2017) by Emilija Škarnulytė.

Baltic Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016, and the title of the film refers to the Baltic energy system as an 'Island' within the European Union, transitioning from ex-Soviet to Western networks supplying energy resources. The film has neither

a narrative nor characters and is created as a meditative trip through industrial surfaces and landscapes, beginning with the Ignalina power plant and ending with the liquefied natural gas storage vessel *Independence*, which has been an energy alternative to Russian supplies in Lithuania since 2014. As in her other films, created in closed nuclear reactors, submarine bases, and mines, Škarnulytė explores the very materiality of industrial systems and contaminated spaces as leftovers of human activity that will eventually become part of the planet's geological structure. The poetic visual narrative of her films allows us to view industrial materials as if through the eyes of a future archeologist.

Images of industrial decay dominate in the series of photographs *Ground* (2015–2016), by British artists Jonathan Lovekin and David Grandorge, which was created by traveling through the three Baltic countries and capturing the ruins, remains, and marks left on the ground by various industrial buildings.¹⁷ Abandoned obsolete sites and empty landscapes of an extinct nature were photographed in winter and early spring, thus reinforcing the impression of their neglect and ominousness. In this context, several photos from inside the Ignalina NPP appear different. Depicting a brightly lit empty turbine hall and a colorful control panel, they seem to capture the imaginable disaster that has just happened, which has halted the industrial processes that have just taken place here. According to Ines Weizman, artists, in creating such post-apocalyptic landscapes, simply document the man-made wounding of nature and irreversible environmental modifications. Conversely, these artistic documents also have a broader meaning: 'Chemical leaks, residues of industrial processes, coloured earth turned over and carved out are the remains of social, economic and chemical events and processes that are now past, but whose afterlife represents a burden and duty of care for this new Baltic Sea region' (Weizman 2016, 224).

The apocalyptic imagination also plays an important role in the theater performance *The Green Meadow*. The metaphor in its title means a return to an innocent beginning, when nature reverts to a de-industrialized site. In the prologue, however, performers already talk about a 'brown field' instead of a 'green meadow,' which refers to such post-industrial places where hazardous waste continues to pollute the soil. Thus, the optimistic title is modified from the outset by a more 'realistic' and gloomier version of the future, while coding anxiety as an important line in the performance. Although the performers on stage share fairly commonplace stories, the metaphors used by some are menacing and frightening. The power plant is equated with the skeleton of a dragon, a mythical fire-breathing beast, and the future of the site is linked with a nuclear burial or repositories for short-lived low and intermediate level radioactive waste: 'What will happen to the city? Rome is a city on seven hills, and Visaginas is on three cemeteries?' (Alexander in *The Green Meadow*). In the context of a performance, a burial ground does not mean an eternal resting place, but rather a temporary solution for the final depositing of radioactive waste. The burial ground in this case symbolizes not the end of human work, but the frightening inability of man to control the consequences of his activities.

There are several Ignalina related art works that directly address the post-industrial nuclear future – a subject that dominates in global nuclear themed art. These art works reveal that the atomic era has created an entirely new imagination and perception of the future in general. The installation *Temporary Index: Ignalina* (2020), created by British artists Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead, counts down in seconds a million years from the closure of the second reactor at the Ignalina power plant – the length of time

needed for some high-level radioactive waste to decay. The fictional real estate agency *Ignalina Heights* (2003/2020) created by the American artist Lisi Raskin to promote future residential property on the grounds of the decommissioned Ignalina NPP, indicates the limits to reimagining the future (see [Figure 7](#)). Along with the fake promotional movie, the artist also exhibits a promotional poster, the image of which consists of the photograph that captures the lake used for cooling water for the plant. The slogan 'You deserve more than a half-life' targeted at an imaginary client or the exhibition visitor, it wryly refers to the 'half-life' or the period of decay of radionuclides contained in hazardous radioactive waste, a by-product of the nuclear industry, which can last thousands of years, a period exceeding the prior history of human civilization.

On the one hand, apocalyptic images can be considered part of a well-known repertoire of atomic-era imagery. According to Tim Edensor (2005), fascination with industrial decay is a way of dealing with anxiety while facing post-industrial transformations. Apocalyptic images may act as a therapeutic tool for further revival and

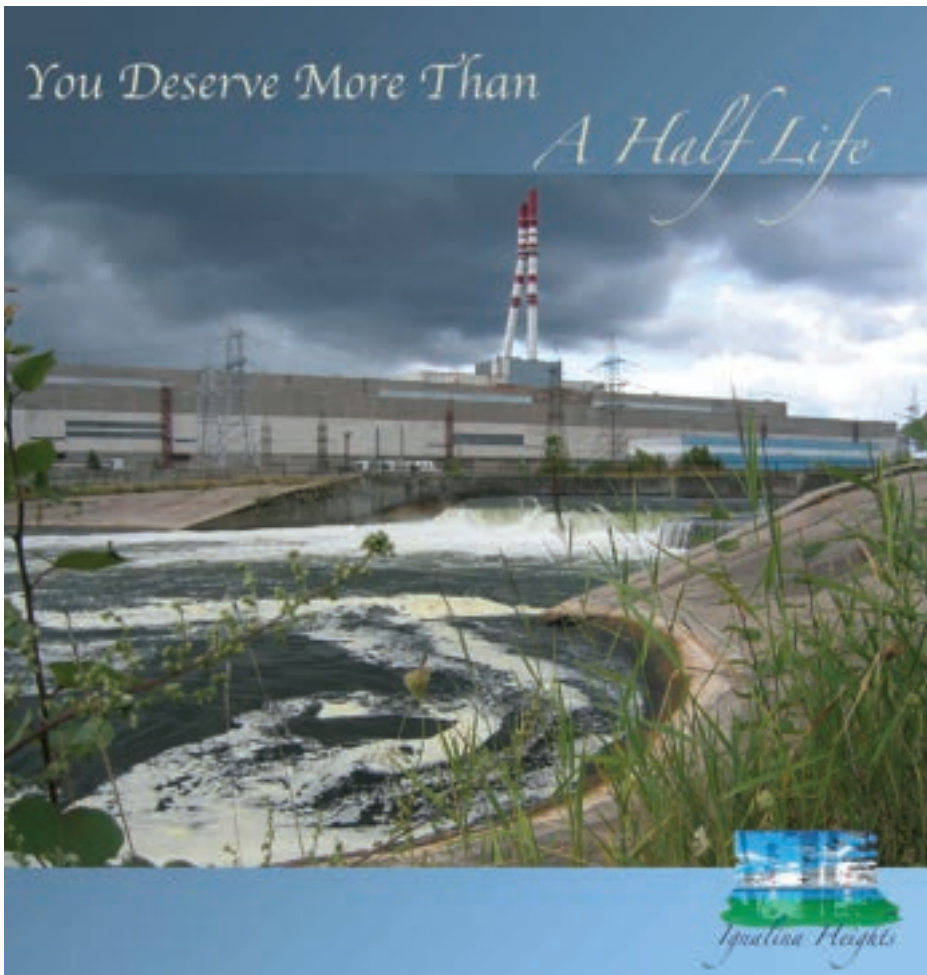


Figure 7. A poster from the project *Ignalina Heights* (2003/2020) by Lisi Raskin.

regeneration (Edensor 2005). On the other hand, these images are relevant in the Lithuanian context, as they convey fear and anxiety about the post-industrial nuclear future, which are otherwise repressed in the public consciousness and imagination. Finally, art projects raise the visibility and significance of the supposedly banal process of decommissioning a nuclear power plant, thus raising public awareness of nuclear issues. If in the Lithuania of today, the nuclear means only an external techno-political threat to the country's national security, then art points out that the nuclear is also an internal problem that raises no less serious social and environmental concerns related to the management of the radioactive waste generated at the Ignalina NPP.

Conclusion

In the context of today's Lithuania, where the decommissioning of the Ignalina NPP is banalized, while the new Belarusian nuclear power plant and its threat are made exceptional, art displays the nuclear as both exceptional and banal, stressing its ambiguity and ambivalence, to paraphrase Hecht (2012).¹⁸ Artistic and cultural practices emphasize the banal and everyday side of the nuclear industry, be it the lives of the people who work in it, the living environment, or the material infrastructure. By making visible what is usually invisible – the social, urban, and material aspects of the nuclear industry, Ignalina-related art challenges established visions of the nuclear, explores the ambiguity of nuclear things, and re-politicizes nuclear matters that have been increasingly framed in technical terms by the industry and the state.

Numerous art projects and creative practices on the Ignalina NPP, created in different circumstances and for different purposes, produce varied narratives and sensibilities from heroic stories of building the Ignalina NPP, nostalgia for the nuclear way of living and mourning for nuclear modernity to apocalyptic imagery of (post) nuclear sites, and fear and anxiety of (post) nuclear futures. In contrast to the global trend of nuclear aesthetics, Ignalina-inspired art focuses on both the social and cultural history of the nuclear, and its materiality. The artists are no less sensitive to the fate of the nuclear community and atomic town than to the environmental issues of nuclear waste. Maybe such an approach to the nuclear allows us to reflect in general on Soviet industry and its decline after 1990, which still lacks artistic and cultural representation and the subject is scarcely included in contemporary memory culture in Lithuania. Unlike, for example, in Poland, where industry was central to the anti-Communist movement and, therefore, forms an important part of national memory. In Lithuania, industry is considered an 'alien' Soviet legacy and, therefore, contradicts the national memory narrative. It is interesting to note that Ignalina-related art does not explore the nuclear industry either through the prism of Soviet colonialism or through the history of the anti-nuclear movement even though anti-nuclear activism played a crucial role in the national (and anti-colonial) movement that led to the restoration of Lithuanian independence.

Considering art as an important medium for the construction of nuclear imaginaries in the public sphere, we can say that artistic practices attract public attention and raises awareness of nuclear industry issues in Lithuania. Ignalina themed art displayed the nuclear industry as an important part of Lithuanian history and national identity. Both creative and destructive, the nuclear industry was an important part of the history of the last century, and, therefore, as the 2019 position statement on Nuclear Cultural Heritage insists, the preservation of its material culture is an essential task for present and future generations (Rindzevičiūtė 2019). As I have shown in this article, the works of art

themselves are part of the nuclear cultural heritage. The closure of the Ignalina NPP as a significant techno-political and social event in today's Lithuania was recorded by artists, thus also compensating in a way for the silence in the official discourse and media that surrounded this event.

Both in Lithuania and globally, it is important for art to emphasize that the nuclear is not just a seemingly banal production of electricity (or the production of exceptional weapons), but a larger and more complex cycle including the management of long-lived radioactive waste that transcends human perception and imagination. In Lithuania, it is creative practices that may promote public awareness of how even after ceasing to produce nuclear electricity, Lithuania will forever remain a nuclear country. Works of art make us think about a different, non-human concept of time, called geological or 'deep' time, which describes the age of a planet in billions of years. Understanding the peculiarities and consequences of the atomic era requires a different perception of time accompanied by an innovative, future-oriented responsibility.

Notes

1. The series prompted nuclear tourism in Lithuania, attracting tourists not only to Ignalina, but also to the capital Vilnius, which was used to portray Pripyat in the series.
2. Therefore, in this article I will not only speak about the Ignalina NPP, but also about Ignalina as a cultural representation of the nuclear industry in Lithuania.
3. The term 'nuclear aesthetics' is used by Ele Carpenter in her book *The nuclear culture source book* (2016). Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou and Ruby de Vos (2018) attempt to define it critically in their introduction to the special issue of the journal *Kunstlicht* dedicated to nuclear aesthetics.
4. Andrei Stsiapanau (2018, 9) notes that 'the Lithuanian authorities until now, after the Ignalina NPP shutdown and the negative result in the referendum concerning the construction of a new NPP, are postponing the final decision about a nuclear power program in the country and are not daring to put an end to the nuclear story in Lithuania.'
5. Such is the painting by Adolis Krištopaitis *In the Construction of the Ignalina Power Plant* (1980, courtesy of the National M. K. Čiurlionis Museum of Art, Kaunas), in which the massive building of the plant depicted in the constructivist style completely obscures the landscape. Vasily Chupachenko (1923–2005) was the main photographer to document the construction and early life of the Ignalina NPP and its satellite city. His slides are stored in the Visaginas Culture House, some of them may be found on the Facebook page *Visagino vaizdų archyvas* (Visaginas Visual Archive).
6. A series of *ex-libris* created for the Sniečkus library by a famous Soviet Lithuanian graphic artist are stored in the Visaginas Public Library.
7. The representations of the nuclear in Soviet Lithuanian culture and art require further and deeper research that falls beyond the scope of this article.
8. The new town was named after Antanas Sniečkus, then first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, and was renamed Visaginas in 1992 after the nearby lake. In contrast to neighboring Latvia and Estonia, Russian immigration to Soviet Lithuania where Lithuanians constituted about 80% of the population was minimal.
9. The 25th festival in 2018 was advertised as an event that allegedly originally contributed to the change of the city's name from Sniečkus to Visaginas as the festival coincided with the overthrow of the pro-Soviet government in the city (interview with Čekienė 2018).
10. The vivid art scene of Visaginas, which is aimed at the local audience, is not discussed in this article focusing on art that is widely distributed and may influence public representations of the nuclear on the national and international scale. The photography series *Babochka* by Laurie Griffiths and Jonty Tacon was exhibited in the Lithuanian Photographers' Association gallery (2018); the documentary film *The City of Butterfly* (directed by Olga Černovaitė, 2017) was screened in the international film festival 'Scanorama'; the theater performance *The Green Meadow* (2017) was produced by the Lithuanian National Drama Theater; art works by Kristina Inčiūraitė, Ignas Krunglevičus, Siri Harr Steinvik, Emilija Škarnulytė, Augustas Serapinas, Lisi Raskin, Thomson, and Craighead, and others

were shown in various exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Center, Energy and Technology Museum, and the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, to name a few examples of distribution on a national scale. Among others; the presentation of the installation *Title One: The Tasks of the Community* by Rossella Biscotti at the 'Manifesta' (the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2012); the photo series *Ground* by Jonathan Lovekin and David Grandorge at the Baltic Pavilion in Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016; the installation *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas* by Augustas Serapinas at the Venice Art Biennale in 2018; and the photo series *Post-Nuclear Identity* by Neringa Rekašiūtė at the Narva arts residence (Estonia, 2018) and 'Photaumnales' festival in France might be mentioned.

11. In the following text, nationality will be indicated only next to the names of foreign artists.
12. The older generation did not accept the artists' invitation to join the preparatory workshops during field research for the performance (interview with Tertelis, 2018).
13. This idea might be confirmed by a specific source of visual culture: tombstone decoration in cemeteries. Walking around the Visaginas cemetery, it is easy to notice that several tombstones are decorated with the symbol of an atom (which is sometimes put in a curious juxtaposition with a Christian cross) regardless of whether they are the graves of nuclear power plant workers or other city residents such as sports coaches.
14. As one of the performers of *The Green Meadow* recalls: 'When the first block was stopped, on the last day of 2004, many Visaginas residents were in shock. [...] others might have been able to continue working on the decommissioning, but they couldn't destroy what they built with their own hands.' Quote from the unpublished play *The Green Meadow*, courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theater, Vilnius.
15. The project's website: <https://www.griffithstacon.com/babochka-a-european-power-struggle>
16. Rekašiūtė, while living in Visaginas for three and a half years, actively acted as a 'city ambassador' in Lithuanian and foreign media. See, for example, Rekašiūtė (2019).
17. The photographs can be viewed here: <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/05/23/ground-haunting-photos-industry-baltic-winter/>
18. Hecht (2012, 338) argues that 'the power of nuclear things depends on *both* exceptionalism and banality.'

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