

# PRECARIOUS ΧΒΛΙΚΗΝΗ



*Chernobyl: people never learn from their mistakes...*

# PRECARIOUS

a new film by **Merilyn Fairskye**

*Twenty five years ago on Saturday April 26 1986 an explosion and fire occurred at Reactor No.4 at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.*

*Between 600,000 and 700,0000 people known as liquidators took part in the cleanup.*

*8,000 people work there today to mitigate and contain the spread of radiation.*



*Chernobyl workers passing Reactor No.4 at the end of their shift*

## **Brief synopsis**

“Precarious” is a haunting evocation of the aftermath of the explosion at Chernobyl, 25 years on. This visually stunning road movie takes the spectator on a bleak journey from the shores of the Black Sea to the frozen heart of Chernobyl, passing through desolate, snowy landscapes, littered with abandoned villages. Squatting in this icy wasteland, the ghostly sarcophagus of Reactor No. 4 is a constant reminder of the threat still lurking below. While winter exerts its hold, ice keeps the hidden radiation at bay, but the spring thaw will once again release the surrounding rivers’ toxic flow. Accompanied by from a group of unseen veterans of the disaster, “Precarious” bears witness to both the folly and resilience of humans and to nature’s fragility.

**TRAILER AND INFORMATION**  
[www.precarious.com.au](http://www.precarious.com.au)

**FUNDING**  
The Australia Council for the Arts  
Sydney College of the Arts,  
University of Sydney.

**DISTRIBUTION**  
Plus & Minus Productions  
PO Box 590, Newtown NSW 2042  
[info@plusandminus.net](mailto:info@plusandminus.net)



# ABOUT

Title: **Precarious**

Director: Meryl Fairskye

TRT: 66 minutes

Available formats: HDVCAM, DigiBETA, Blu-Ray

Studio: Plus & Minus Productions

Completed: March 2011

"Precarious" (2011) is the first feature film by Australian artist Meryl Fairskye. "Precarious" evokes the aftermath of the explosion at Chernobyl, 25 years on. Avoiding the conventions of a standard documentary approach, it is a haunting evocation of ordinary people's capacity to endure, in the face of technological failure and state secrecy on a grand scale. With recent events in Fukushima, it is both prescient and timely.



*Meryl Fairskye on location in the abandoned city of Pripyat*

## Short biography

Meryl Fairskye is an artist who makes videos and photographs through her production company, Plus & Minus Productions. Her art videos have been screened in film and video festivals around the world including the International Film Festival Rotterdam (five times); Videobrasil; Oberhausen; Kassel; Sydney Film Festival and in art museums including the Tate Modern London; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the National Palace Museum, Taipei. She lives in Sydney where she teaches at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

## Filmography

Precarious (2011); Woolloomooloo July 10th 1982 (2010); Fieldwork II /Chernobyl (2009); Aqua/ocean (2009); Fieldwork I/Chernobyl/ Giza/Echo Point (2009); Ruth Lewis (2008); Sir William Deane(2008); Dian Welfare (2008); Aqua/pool (2007); Aqua/bay (2007); Stati d'Animo/60 Seconds/2007 (2007); Stati d'Animo (2006); Connected (2003); Chiaroscuro (2001); Eye Contact (2000); Ship (2000); Material World (1999); Flash (1998); Sleep (1997); Caesar (1996); Plane Torque (1995); After Image (1995); The Appointment (1994).

## Funding

The Australia Council for the Arts; Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

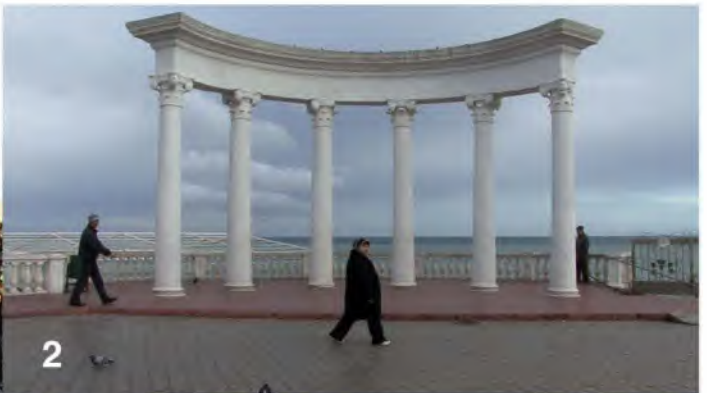


# FILM OUTLINE

“Precarious” is a road movie. The journey starts, 1,000 kilometres away, in Crimea, in inverse direction to the flow of contaminated water from Chernobyl after the accident, via the Pripyat and Dnieper Rivers, through Ukraine’s waterways down to the Black Sea. Passing through Yalta, Alushta, Gurzuf, and up to Kiev, it takes us right into the heart of Chernobyl. To Reactor No. 4.

Our companions are an unseen group of people who have experienced Chernobyl at first hand - Yuriy Tataarchuk - Deputy Head, International Department Chernobylinterinform, who has worked there for fifteen years and is our guide; Iuri Ursul - a former helicopter pilot who was a ‘liquidator’ sent to Chernobyl after the accident; Oksana Khorozova - a teacher at the time and Kiev resident; her husband Oleg Khorozov - a scientist at the Academy of Science, who analysed contamination in the waterways; Professor Igor Schchepotin - Director, of the National Cancer Institute and Honoured Physician of Ukraine, Kiev; and Zoya Ishakaryova, a former Intourist worker who is now a manager at the Sunflower B and B Hotel. Tatiana Myciova was a local living near the Power Plant, and Igor Koston was the first photographer to capture the immediate consequences of the accident.

1. *The Black Sea at dawn*
2. *Nameless archway, Alushta, Crimea*
3. *Livardia Palace, Yalta, where Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt met in 1945.*



4. *The Black Sea , Gurzuf*
5. *Dnieper River viewed from Krehchety Park, Kiev*
6. *The People’s Friendship Arch, dedicated to the unification of Russia and Ukraine, Kiev*

## FILM OUTLINE cont'd

The nearer we get to Chernobyl, the film passes through a bleak, snowy landscape, littered with deserted villages, now engulfed by trees, as nature reasserts itself. Further on, houses lie buried, ghostly, under a layer of toxic clay. The power plant itself sits in a vast iced-over lake, its structures terminally damaged, incomplete, obsolete. The abandoned city of Pripjat, blanketed by thick snow and heavy silence, is a place after the end of the world.

Paradoxically, for locals, ice and snow provide protection against radiation, as they trap radioactive materials that still linger on. With the spring, flooding will occur, and once again contaminated water will run from the Pripjat River to the Black Sea.

Avoiding the conventions of a standard documentary approach, *Precarious* is a haunting evocation of ordinary people's capacity to endure, in the face of technological failure and state secrecy on a grand scale.

1. Ghost houses in the Exclusion Zone

2. Non-functional waste disposal unit

3. Reactor No.4



4. Looking across Pripjat from the Hotel Polissia

5. Cooling Tower for Reactors No.5 & 6

6. Leaving the inner Exclusion Zone



# PRODUCTION STORY

I never planned to make this film – I was in Crimea in early 2009 gathering material for another project. During an unexpected stay in Kiev, I'd arranged a trip to Chernobyl to get a single video shot of Reactor No.4 for an art installation. It was in the middle of a heavy winter. I drove into Chernobyl past houses still contaminated by radiation, and further along, more toxic houses buried under a thick layer of clay. My guide was Yuriy Tatarchuk, a former schoolteacher who has worked at Chernobyl for fifteen years.

The power plant structures sat in a vast white lake - the iced-over cooling channels and cooling pond. These structures were terminally damaged, incomplete or obsolete. Reactor No.4, the site of the original explosion, was awaiting a new containment to cover the breached sarcophagus that had been hastily erected in 1986. Later, alone in the middle of the abandoned city of Pripyat, surrounded by thick snow and heavy silence, it felt like after the end of the world. That's when "Precarious" started to take shape.

I returned a year later. It was harder to ignore the volatile 200-ton lump of congealed, toxic core material still lying in the basement of Reactor No.4, known locally as the Elephant's Foot, or the under-resourced remediation and containment work being planned, postponed or undertaken. Construction still hadn't started on the new Sarcophagus that was to contain the waste for a 100 years whilst a more permanent solution was found. I talked to people who had lived with the aftermath. The grey, bleak, winter landscapes were paradoxically, reassuring, and became the visual motif of the film. In Chernobyl, a heavy winter is good protection against radiation, because radioactive dust is trapped under the ice and snow.



Top right: Marilyn Fairskye on location in Crimea. Bottom: left: Ognian Pishev, cheerful in Crimea. Right: less cheerful in Chernobyl

This time I stayed overnight, and my interpreter, Ognian Pishev, came along. The weather was more extreme than the previous year. Shooting conditions out in the field were challenging - equipment froze, and sometimes, seized up. The wind chill factor was lower than the year before. There was a lot of snow, sleet and ice, which explained why outdoor radiation levels were surprisingly low. It also made focussing cameras really difficult. The conditions were both punishing and liberating. Bleak beyond bleak, the images I captured easily shifted from documentary to imaginary. Anchored to this particular place, but also loosened from it.

Our overnight accommodation was comfortable and warm, in a former Swedish scientific barracks, and we ate the same meals in the visitors' canteen as the people who worked there. The only drawback was that Ogi had to spend the second day in bed, his face swollen beyond recognition from a tooth abscess that developed in Kiev the night before we set off. Standing knee deep in snow the previous day hadn't helped. We had to conceal his condition as sick visitors aren't allowed in Chernobyl and I was afraid we'd be told to leave.

When we returned to Australia I had to find my way through a bewildering array of often-contradictory versions of anything and everything to do with Chernobyl - a shifting, subjective landscape of political and economic agendas. As an artist I looked for a way that was anchored not to facts and figures but to human experience, and the expressive potential of image and sound. And that's where sound designer, Robert Hindley, came on board.



# PEOPLE/VOICES

These are the people whose stories unfold in "Precarious". Each of them experienced the accident and its aftermath in different ways but they have many shared experiences - how no one was told anything at first, and when they were, the dangers were always downplayed. Just close the windows and don't step in puddles! There was the mass exodus of Party officials' families from the city, the advice to drink plenty of alcohol, and disconcerting physical symptoms. Today, with the new sarcophagus designed to cover the breached Reactor No.4 still on the drawing board, they continue to live with uncertainty - in the presence of a long-term foe that you can't smell, feel or see..



1. Yuriy Tatarchuk - Deputy Head, International Department Chernobylinterinform, Chernobyl
2. Iuri Ursul - former liquidator
3. Oksana Khorozova - researcher
4. Oleg Khorozov - scientist
5. Igor Schchepotin - Director, National Cancer Institute, Honoured Physician of Ukraine, Kiev
6. Zoya Ishakaryova - former Intourist worker

# CREDITS

## VOICES

YuriyTatarchuk  
Iuri Ursul  
Zoya Ishkaryova  
Oleg Khorozov  
Oksana Khorozova  
Igor Shchepotin

Igor Kostin, additional Igor Shchepotin, voiced by Ognian Pishev  
Tatiana Micieva voiced by Ilza Burchett

Conception, camera and editing: Marilyn Fairskye  
Sound design and mixing: Robert Hindley  
Online editor and grading: Greg Ferris  
Production manager Ukraine: Ognian Pishev  
Translations: Ognian Pishev Peter Kirievsky George Burchett  
Subtitles: Ognian Pishev

Igor Kostin's words reproduced from: Christine Daum, Igor Kostin "The vodka was supposed to cleanse our thyroid glands" Osteuropa 4/2006

Tatiana Micieva is a composite of several different residents of the Chernobyl region.

Kiev Reservoir image: Jacques Descloitres, MODIS Land Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFC  
Cooling pond image : NASA EO-1 Team. Instrument: EO-1 - ALI.

## THANKS TO

Tom Arthur Sandra Arthur George Burchett Chernobylinterinform Vlad da Cunha Michiel Dolk Anne Ferran  
Jane Gavan Kate Harrison Virginia Hillyard Betty Hounslow Zoya Ishkaryova Peter Kirievsky Oleg Khorozov  
Oksana Khorozova Andrew Leslie Nicholas Maunsell Jackie McKimmie John Pinder Dasha Ross Toni Ross  
Ruby Ruff Lander Gary Sangster Igor Shchepotin Benjamin Stone-Herbert Yuriy Tatarchuk  
Anita Taylor Iuri Ursul

Produced with the assistance of Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.



**Australian Government**



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



© 2011 Plus & Minus Productions  
PO Box 590 Newtown NSW 2042 Australia  
info@plusandminus.net www.plusandminus.net  
M. +61 412135791

**TRAILER AND INFORMATION**  
[www.precarious.com.au](http://www.precarious.com.au)