

A large table topped with stenciled radiation hazard symbols on its round surface offers a seat to environmentalists, artists, activists, engineers, scientists and nuclear industry officials alike. Situated in Hanford, USA, an area with an already lengthy history of nuclear development (weapons grade plutonium and reactor manufacture alike), James Acord's *Roundtable*<sup>1</sup> was an open invite to meaningful discussion in his studio on the risks and legacies of nuclear materials.<sup>2</sup> Made in 1999, there was, and still is, a very present need to discuss the long future of this matter beyond its intended use.

In another time, another context, the first reactor of Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Lithuania came online in 1983, followed by the second in 1987.<sup>3</sup> An international team of workers from across the Soviet Union resided in nearby Visaginas, an example of an 'atomgrady': a city purpose built for the workers of the plant with 'generous accommodation, lush greenery and better social service provision.'<sup>4</sup> When the catastrophe at Chernobyl occurred in 1986, 'Lithuanian society turned against nuclear technology as the embodiment of Soviet oppression.'<sup>5</sup> This was bolstered by 'more than 6000 of Lithuania's citizens' being sent to the clean up efforts at Chernobyl.<sup>6</sup> 'In post-Soviet Lithuania nuclear sites were turned from future assets and showcases of progress into technical and social problems.'<sup>7</sup> The post-Soviet era also brought 'more transparency, revealing the scarred Baltic landscapes where nuclear missiles were kept in silos.'<sup>8</sup> After renewed independence, updating Ignalina NPP began in 1992 with help from Sweden and a newly emerging 'Lithuanian nuclear expert community.'<sup>9</sup> However, both reactors would shutdown 'as part of EU integration' in 2004 and 2009.<sup>10</sup> Perpetually, the task of 'securing and keeping . . . remaining radioactive waste generated by the Ignalina NPP poses a technical and societal challenge.'<sup>11</sup> The longevity of these 'dangerous' waste materials is 'at least 100,000 years.'<sup>12</sup>

There is another table, this one made from concrete slabs. It stands on linoleum sheeting, edges curled up. No chairs are present. On the tabletop there is a loosely unified structure made from blocks, cut from the same concrete, and also from a heavy wood. With their playful placement it's clear there is more than one architect at work. Though different in appearance and apparent function from Acord's, this table also contends with nuclear legacies and communication of an unlikely sort. Made by Augustas Serapinas, the concrete and wood used in the construction of the table and the fashioning of the building blocks came from Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant and were purchased at auction. The dismantled infrastructural materials of the NPP are safe for re-use and are dispersing. Serapinas invited children from Visaginas, their family histories entwined with that of the NPP, to build with the small toy sized blocks made from its very walls. The arrangements made on the tabletop are gestures toward possible futures, and simultaneously a dialogue with this history. A silent conversation between hand and block; between generations.

Serapinas' work is not about nuclear material per se, but about the people who worked in its midst, and their families after the plant closure. With this gesture there is an echo of Thomas Sebeok's 'Atomic Priesthood.'<sup>13</sup> A concept suggesting a symbolic quasi religious order as a means of communicating through generations the dangers of nuclear waste material repositories at a particular site. In this case, Serapinas' work does not extend through deep time as a warning. It does extend to the local, to the intergenerational need for closure, and the seeding of personal mythologies, which find ways to continue on.

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<sup>1</sup> Acord, James. *Roundtable*, 1999. Note: recreations of *Roundtable* have been included in the following exhibitions curated by Ele Carpenter: Actinium (2014), Material Nuclear Culture (2016), and Perpetual Uncertainty (2017, touring). More information can be found here: [nuclear.artscatalyst.org](http://nuclear.artscatalyst.org)

<sup>2</sup> Triscott, Nicola. 'James Acord: Roundtable.' *The Nuclear Culture Source Book*, edited by Ele Carpenter, London, Black Dog Publishing/Bildmuseet/Arts Catalyst, 2016, pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Rindzevičiūtė, Eglė. *Assembling A Nuclear Lithuania*. Published on the occasion of The Baltic Material Assemblies, exhibition at Architectural Association (AA) and Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sebeok, Thomas. *Communication Measures to Bridge Ten Millennia*. Technical Report prepared by Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, Indiana University, for Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, 1984.