

# ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Julia Oldham blends digital media and drawing to tell stories that she finds both troubling and beautiful, ranging from the historical tale of Laika the Soviet Space Dog's journey into orbit, to science fiction visions of a post-apocalyptic future world populated by high-tech chihuahuas. She frequently collaborates with scientists and finds hidden love stories in particle physics and theoretical mathematics, and ghost stories in wetland ecology. Oldham's work has been screened/exhibited at Art in General in NYC; MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, NY; the Northwest Film Center at the Portland Art Museum, OR; the San Diego Art Institute, CA; PPOW in NYC; The Drawing Center in NYC; The Bronx Museum of Art in the Bronx, NY; The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL; Disjecta, Portland, OR; the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA; the Dia Foundation at the Hispanic Society in NYC; the Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC; and Nunnery Gallery in London, UK. [www.juliaoldham.com](http://www.juliaoldham.com)

## SPONSORS

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The Vault functions as a media flat file where audiences can experience a variety of video and audio art. Guest curators add selections to The Vault on a quarterly basis.



# FALLOUT DOGS

Julia Oldham (Eugene, OR)

On view: January 25 - March 22, 2019

# FIRST CONTACT

On April 26, 1986, I was a child of seven, safe in rural western Maryland, when an explosion ripped through Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl Power Plant, in what was then the Soviet Union. Over the following three days this terrible accident would release about 400 times the amount of radioactive material than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Around 300,000 residents of the city of Pripyat and the settlements around Chernobyl would be evacuated. Details of the meltdown would be kept secret by the Soviet government.

On May 6, 2018, I am 38 years old, and my partner Eric and I are climbing into a van in Kiev, Ukraine to be borne away into the countryside, our destination the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. After a two-hour journey through dense forests and tiny villages with our driver Nikolai, we arrive at the first Chernobyl security checkpoint. There's nothing to see yet—just a road, a security kiosk, some tough-looking security officers, a traffic gate, a coffee stand, and a souvenir shop. There is forest on both sides of the road. Here we are united with our guide Ludmilla, a 36-year-old Ukrainian woman with a shock of bright pink hair, punky clothes, blue Adidas, and a pair of radioactive trefoil earrings. She gives me a big hug.

Ludmilla and I have been emailing for months in preparation for the creation of *Fallout Dogs*. She knows the dogs in the zone better than anyone, having spent years feeding them, giving them medications and minor medical procedures when they are injured. I have told her that I want to create a portrait of Chernobyl that is led by the movements and behaviors of the dogs, and that I want to go wherever they spend their time. We have five days to accomplish this, which is about as long as a tourist like myself is allowed to stay in the Zone.

In half an hour we pull over to the side of the road and Ludmilla leads us on foot down a back road to a rowdy pack of gorgeous mutts who are leaping, barking, dancing and delighted to see her. She carries a plastic shopping bag of freeze dried liver, tracheas, kidneys, and

other kinds of goodies that she calls her “stinky stuff.” Everywhere we go, the crinkling of this bag is a lightning rod for dogs.

“This is Samantha,” she says, pointing to a large shepherd-y looking dog who is dashing into the forest. And she points to another big dog with a puppyish gait and huge feet, and says, “And this silly-pants doesn't have a name yet. What should we name him?” I suggest Mr. George, and he is dubbed Mr. George Silly Pants forever after. “Silly-pants” is Ludmilla's pet name for all the dogs with the goofiest personalities.

Following our new dog friends, we walk along a path that leads to the abandoned village of Zalissia, my first glimpse into the haunting remnants of human life in the Zone. The Zalissia Town Hall was once a beautiful wooden building, and inside it there is a stage for public presentations with a delicately ornate but decaying proscenium. Above the stage is a large red sign that says in Ukrainian, “Long Live Communism, the Future of Humanity.” The floor is partially gone, so we walk gingerly along the remaining planks, not wanting to fall through and break our legs. The dogs join us and scamper around in the town hall, wrestling and trying to get Ludmilla's attention. This space is now theirs.

As we continue walking through Zalissia, we pass traditional Ukrainian village houses that have been empty for over three decades, an old Lada Zhiguli car rotting away in what was once a driveway, openings to root cellars, and scattered possessions, like kid's shoes, left behind. The most poignant moment for me is when I come upon an old dog house sinking into the earth, and a ceramic food bowl just outside it, filled with leaves, soil and rainwater. The heartrending duality of this abandoned dog house alongside the presence of the joyous and energetic strays sets the stage for *Fallout Dogs* and the portrait of Chernobyl that I want to share. This is the beginning of my story.