

April 26, 1986

by *Arslohgo*



Arslohgo, Apriln 26, 1986 (DW26). 5940 x 4200 Pixels. CMYK, 300 dpi.

Today marks the fortieth anniversary of the reactor catastrophe at Chernobyl. *Arslohgo* takes the date as the title — exact, unadorned, a bare marker on the calendar. That the work appears in the Dutch Works 26 series already hints, before one has even looked at the image, that the "26" is not merely a count but a date: the twenty-sixth of April. Nor is it accidental that the work was created on April 26, 2026. *Arslohgo* works with the calendar; the calendar works back on him.

We are looking at a clouded sky, dramatic, almost Romantic, with that interplay of dark storm-edges and milky brightness that the Dutch have tattooed onto European eyes ever since Jacob

van Ruisdael. In the left field of the image, a hand holds a radiation meter up to the sky. The display reads 178.0 $\mu\text{Sv/h}$. This is not a dramatized number but a precise one: roughly six to eight hundred times normal background radiation, the kind of reading still measured today in parts of the exclusion zone. The yellow-and-black radiation trefoil on the device is the only colored element in the picture. Hand and instrument are rendered semi-transparent; the sky shows through them. The hand is there and is not there. That is how radiation behaves.

In the lower right, in spectrally faded white, an inscription stands that at first glance reads as Russian: ПЕАИТ ОП 4 ГЕТ. Here lohgorhythmics opens into a third language. Read phonetically as Cyrillic, the string yields a slightly stumbled РЕАКТОР 4 — Reactor 4, the failed block of the V.I. Lenin Nuclear Power Plant. The same letters, regrouped, also read in English: REACT OR 4 GET, that is, REACT OR FORGET. The "4" is the hinge that joins both readings: once the designation of the reactor block, once SMS-shorthand for "for." The same glyphs, two fully formed sentences, two languages, a single imperative.

The typographic point sits in the one letter that does not fit: И in place of the Cyrillic К. Anyone expecting the word phonetically correct stumbles. The stumbling stone is set there on purpose, because И is a stranger to the Latin eye — not a letter but a sign that looks like a "U" with a spur or a rounded "C." It is precisely this fissure between alphabets that produces the legibility of the English layer: where the Russian word would need a К, there stands a letter that makes the separation between REACT and OR possible in the first place. Language held up to the mirror of two alphabets disassembles into two contradictory sentences.

The translucent hand is the iconographic core of the image. Radiation is invisible, odorless, tasteless — it does not stain the sky; it stains the subject. Whoever measures has already been contaminated; the meter is at once self-portrait and diagnostic instrument. The hand is not dissolving because the picture is underexposed, but because the human, in a contaminated atmosphere, no longer stands clearly against the background. The gesture of "measurement" becomes a gesture of self-interrogation: Am I still here? What values does the device give me back about myself?

Placement within Dutch Works opens the specifically European reading. In May 1986 the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl drifted over Central Europe to the north and west, reached the Netherlands, settled on pastures, cows, milk tanks. Dutch farmers had to pour milk away, plow

under spinach fields, keep livestock in barns. The "Dutch work" of the catastrophe was damage control on a cloud that did not belong to them. The Hanseatic tradition of free trade, the polder culture of minute land-gain wrested from water — none of it helped against a wind that brought cesium-137 from two thousand kilometers away. Dutch sobriety, which elsewhere in this series serves as the punchline against German heaviness, reaches its limit here: there are weather patterns against which no polder holds.

What protects the work from the temptation of mere memorial politics is its imperative. React or forget is not historiography but a second-person summons. The image leaves open what one is to react to — Chernobyl, Fukushima, new reactor plans, the long half-life shadow that lies over European soil — and precisely in that openness it is political. Forty years after April 26, 1986, the counter still reads 178 microsieverts per hour. The message is arithmetic: forgetting works differently from decaying. Forgetting is instantaneous. Cesium-137 takes thirty years to forget half of itself. We are faster.

