ETH Zurich Department of Architecture
ARCHITECTURE OF TERRITORY
Chair of Architecture
and Territorial Planning
Professor Milica Topalović

Power to the People
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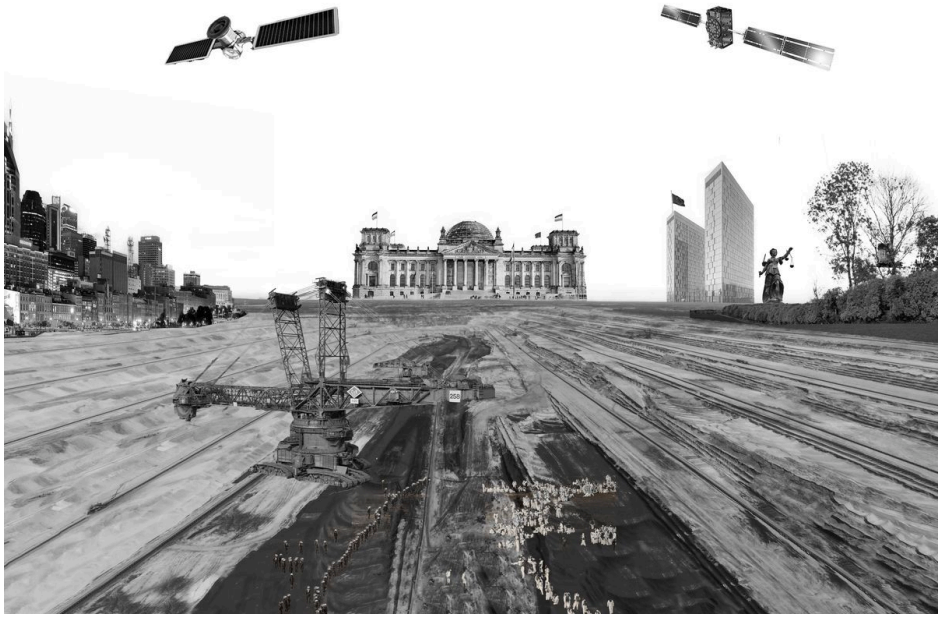
Energy and Activism

Activism and the Struggle for Change

Ella Bacchetta, Elisa Nadas, and Silvano Ursella



The mining of coal in the Rheinland by RWE has led to the destruction of its landscape and cities. Local inhabitants have been moved away from their homes and forests have disappeared due to the growth of the open pits. Different activists have emerged and started to demonstrate against the destructive mining. It has caused both local and global protests. Our analysis focuses on these different groups of resistance and how they work as a whole in this struggle.

In our research we are not experts, we are observers. We tell the story from our perspective as architects. Starting from our own experience in the territory, we then present key moments in history that influenced the current context. In order to understand the dynamics between the activists, we tell stories of the people we encountered during our trip in the Rheinland. These stories help us to illustrate the networks and relations of resistance in the region.

We concluded that successful change in today's world requires actors and tools at every scale, local, national and global. Everyone plays a role in the whole web of those who strive for sustainable change.

A Night in the Hambach Forest

The Hambach forest is located in the area of the Rheinland lignite mining pits. RWE planned to clear it in order to respond to the energy demand of Germany. This decision led to multiple protests as an attempt to protect the forest. Today, most of it has been mined away but as a result of the activism what is left has been saved. During our trip, we encountered some people that still live in the forest up to today. The place of resistance has become their home.

https://youtu.be/BCaXtmnY2xI

During our experience in the territory, we started to question ourselves about the knowledge that we wanted to transmit out of this work. We came to the conclusion that we aren't in the right position to explain how to be an activist. Instead, we would like to show various ways of how it takes place in this region. Furthermore, we want to understand how the different groups appeared through time.

Motors of Change

The concern of how energy is produced is not new. Throughout history, people have engaged in activism to protest against the the exploitation of resources and to fight for the protection of the environment. From the early struggles against nuclear energy to today's protests against the lignite mining, activist groups in Germany have been growing and their networks have become more complex.

OPEN CAST MINE FRECHEN
Source: mein-stadtarchiv [https://mein-stadtarchiv.de/document/5a266f0e034472135fe94903]

1949
The history of the mining industry in the Rhineland began in 1949 when the Frechen opencast mine was opened. It was the first large-scale opencast mine in the region.

THE WORLD'S FIRST BREEDER REACTOR
Source: Encyclopedia of Forlorn Places [http://eofp.net/ebr1.html]

1951
Only 2 years later, the first chain reaction was successfully carried out in America as part of the Manhattan Project.

FIRST ATOMIC POWER PLANT IN GERMANY
Source: spiegel [https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/deutschlands-erstes-akw-atomstrom-ja-bitte-a-947242.html]

1961
Ten years later, the first nuclear power plant in Germany fed electricity into the grid.

1973
The expansion of nuclear energy was slow in the beginning. The new technology was not as profitable as expected. The first oil crisis in 1973 led to a greater focus on nuclear power plants.

DEMONSTRATION IN WHYL
Source: mitwelt [https://www.mitwelt.org/kein-akw-in-wyhl.html]

1974
The expansion of nuclear energy then led to greater resistance. For example, in Whyl, where 100,000 protesters demonstrated against the newly planned nuclear power plant.

DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE HAMBACH MINE
Source: BUND [https://www.bund-nrw.de/fileadmin/nrw/dokumente/braunkohle/2018_01_27_Hambacher_Wald.pdf]

1978
It was also at this time that the first, much smaller demonstrations against lignite mining began in the Rhineland.

FIRST STUDENT ORGANIZATION AGAINST BROWNCOAL
Source: christophwagnermusic [https://christophwagnermusic.blogspot.com/2014/03/pop-recycling-live-aufnahmen-von.html]

1979
The resistance developed out of the hippie and student movement in Aachen. They resisted the expansion of the mines and educated people about the dangers.

FOUNDING OF THE GRÜNEN
Source: ndr [https://www.ndr.de/geschichte/chronologie/Die-Gruenen-Als-die-Protestler-zur-Partei-wurden,gruene1322.html]

1980
At the same time, the anti-nuclear movement gave rise to the political group: Die Grünen.

THE BATTLE OF BROKDORF
Source: Deutschlandfunk Nova [https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/atomkraftgegner-ein-leben-lang-gegen-akws]

1981
The Brokdorf occupation marked the climax of the anti-nuclear demonstrations of the time. There were also violent clashes between the police and militants.

DEMONSTRATION AGAINST CASTOR TRANSPORTS
Source: mittelbayerische [https://www.mittelbayerische.de/fotos/bilderstrecken/panorama/proteste_gegen_den_castor_tran-22068-gal12700.html]

1995
The demonstrations decreased in the following years. It was not until 1995 that demonstrations against the transport of nuclear waste resumed on a larger scale.

2010
After Germany had actually given the go-ahead to phase out nuclear energy in 2000 with the nuclear consensus, Merkel announced the extension of nuclear power plant operating times in 2010.

DEMONSTRATION DUE TO THE FUKUSHIMA DISASTER
Source: neckarwestheim [https://neckarwestheim.antiatom.net/blog/1257-anti-atom-demonstration-in-neckarwestheim]

2011
The disaster of Fukushima led to large demonstrations and finally to the decision to phase out nuclear power.

FIRST CLIMA CAMP IN THE RHEINLAND
Source:flickr
[https://www.flickr.com/photos/58013730@N08/albums/72157685086896491]

2012
It was exactly when the first Klimpacamp took place in the Rhineland that the back was turned to nuclear energy.

It was also during this time that the occupation of the Hambach Forest began. The lignite activists were largely formed from the anti-nuclear resistance. They were therefore able to draw on a lot of knowledge and methods that had accumulated over the years.

OCCUPATION OF THE HAMBACH FOREST
Source: flickr
[https://www.flickr.com/photos/58013730@N08/albums/72157685086896491]

2013
The organisation BUND files a lawsuit against RWE and the expansion of the Hambach mine. The lawsuit will drag on for several years.

ENDE GELÄNDE ACTION
Source: flickr [https://www.flickr.com/photos/133937251@N05/albums]

2015
The first big activism action was carried out in 2015 by the association Ende Gelände. Since then there have been annual Ende Gelände actions where the mine is stormed and tracks are occupied.

BUND also organised a human chain with 6000 participants against the expansion of the Grazweiler mine.

DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE HAMBACH MINE
Source: web.de [https://web.de/magazine/politik/tausende-demonstrieren-hambacher-forst-festivalstimmung-33198066]

2017
The lawsuit filed by BUND four years ago led to a stop to the clearing of the Hambach Forest. However, the enlargement of the mine itself will not be stopped.

2018
A large-scale anti-coal demonstration with 50,000 participants was co-organised by BUND and Greenpeace, among others.

It was also during this time that the police started to clear the Hambach forest. The media attention increased strongly during this time and was even featured on the front page of the New York Times.

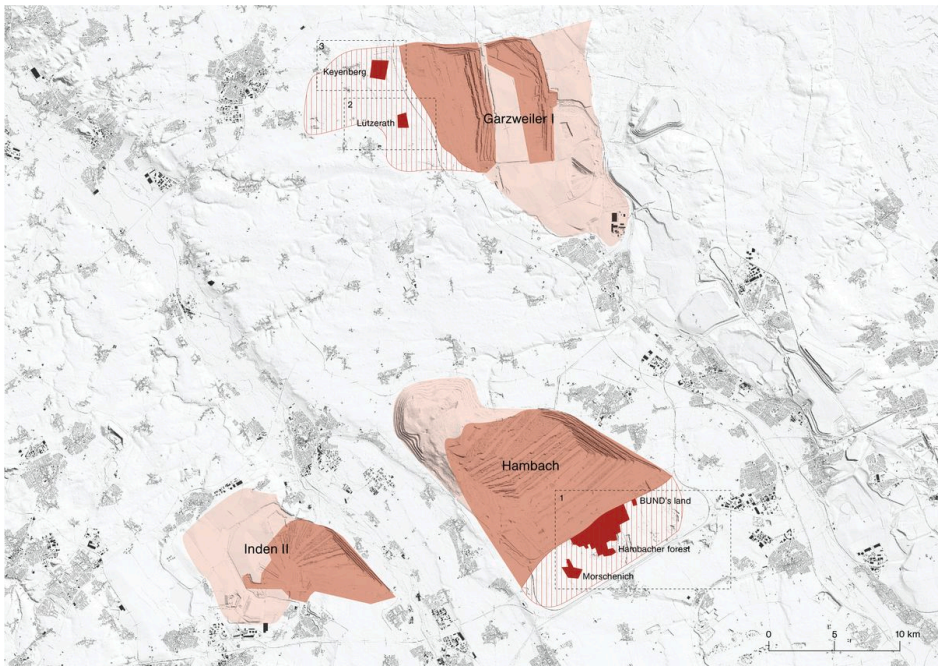
GRETA THUNBERG IN HAMBACH
Source: wlz-online.de [https://www.wlz-online.de/politik/greta-thunberg-macht-am-tagebau-hambach-ueberraschungsbesuch-zr-12904858.html]

2019
Greta Thunberg's visit to Hambach also shows the new attention that was paid to the issue.

This brings us to the present day. Currently, the hamlet of Lüzerath is being occupied by activists to prevent the expansion of the Grazweiler mine.

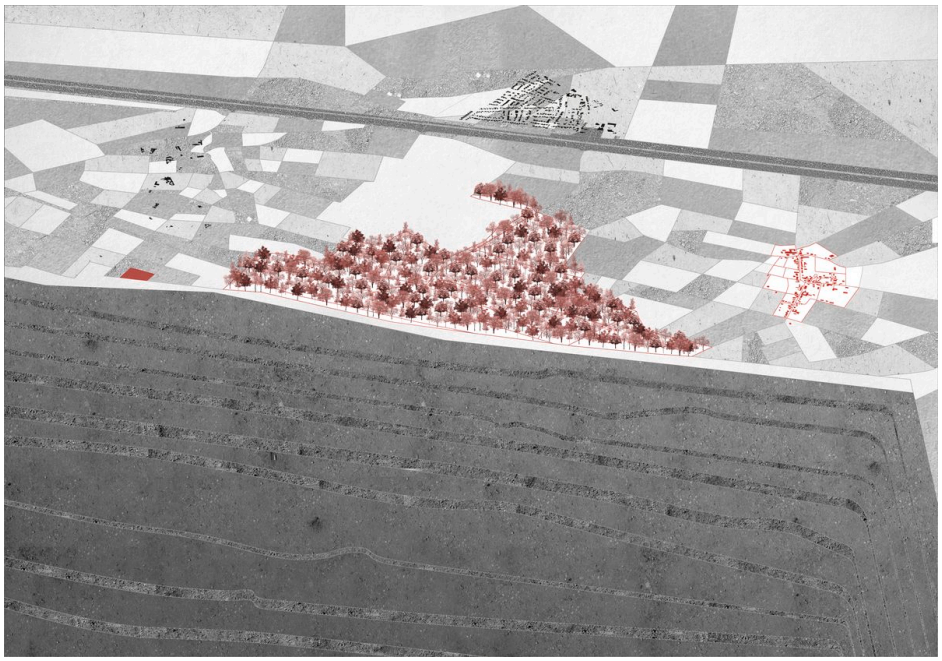
Case Studies: Hambach Forest, Keyenberg and Lützerath

In order to illustrate the different places of resistance in the Rheinland today, we will analyse three case studies: Hambach Forest, Keyenberg and Lützerath. The analyses of these places are based on encounters we have had with people engaged in activism and they helped us to understand the relationships between the different actors.



First Case Study : the Hambach Forest

As previously said, the Hambach Forest is a site that was supposed to be mined away completely. This has resulted in a physical occupation of the forest. This first story explains the experience of an activist, who goes by the alias Half Tooth, that lived in the forest as a sign of protest against the mining. Equally important, the demonstrations and lawsuits by the organisation BUND participated in the narrative of saving the forest.



The Hambach Forest

Half Tooth's story

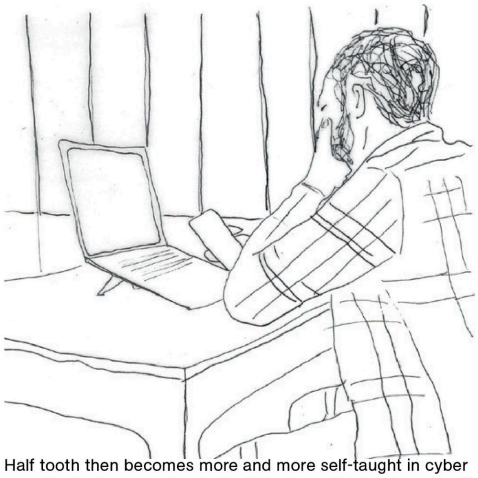
Half Tooth's tree house

The activist, who goes by the alias Half Tooth Guy, grew up in the city and spent his whole life there before activism. He always found life in the city to be stressful and had a lot of worries about how to get by.

He was introduced to activist life through a guided tour of Ende Gelände, where they showed how the activists lived in the Hambach forest. It was the first time he saw a forest and he experienced the then still healthy forest like a fairy tale.

When he gets home, he immediately packs his things and sets off for a new chapter in his life. He wants to live in the forest with the activists and fight for his survival.

He then constructs his own tree house and immerses himself in activist life. After each police clearing, he returns to occupy the forest.



Half tooth then becomes more and more self-taught in cyber security. He takes on the task within the activists of making the mobile phones as secure as possible and protecting them from police spying

After a few years, he moves to Mörschenrich. There, together with other activists, he helps an old woman who has remained in the village that would originally have fallen victim to the mine. He never really liked living in a tree house anyway because of his fear of heights.

Dirk Jansen and BUND’s story

BUND's land

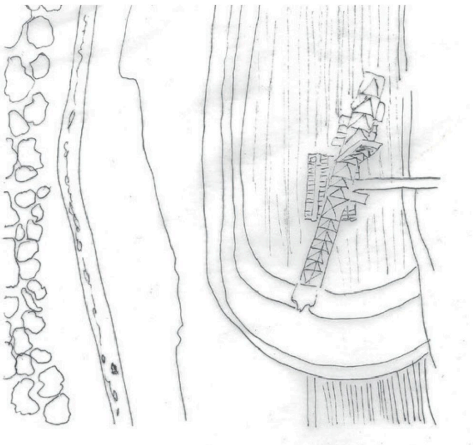
In 1975, the organisation BUND, Friends of the Earth Germany, was founded. One of its co-founders is Dirk Jansen, who studied geography. BUND is recognised as a non-profit organisation and is committed to environmental protection and nature conservation.

The opening up of the Hambach open-cast mine can be seen as the starting signal for regional activism. Demonstrations, guided tours, local citizens’ initiatives and educational events were organised.

Apart from the legal proceedings, Dirk Jansen also bought land near the mine and wanted to block the expansion of the open-cast mine.

In 2015, BUND files a lawsuit against the expansion of the Hambach mine. In 2017, they then manage to stop the clearing by means of summary proceedings.

However, this did not stop the general expansion of the open-cast mine. RWE has requested the expropriation of Dirk Jansen's plot of land. BUND considers this unconstitutional and is fighting against the initiative.

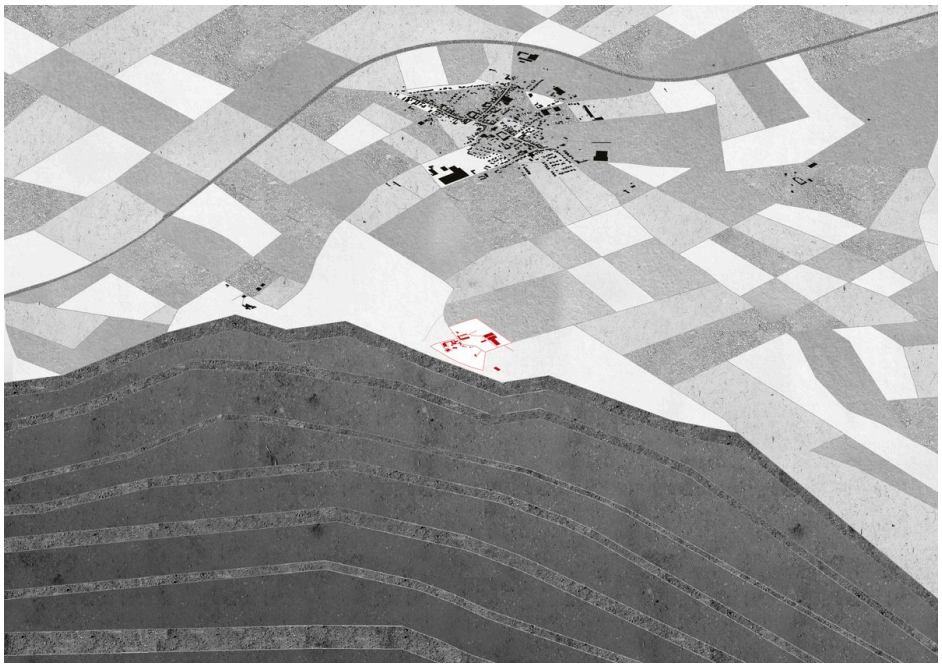


The expansion of the mine would cut off the Hambach Forest even more from its surroundings. The open-cast mine also heats up the forest more and thus damages it. Whether the dying forest can still be saved is therefore still open.

Both actors were necessary for the successful rescue of Hambach Forest. The activists delayed the clearing because of their physical presence. At the same time, they raised awareness in society about lignite mining. The fact that the activists' struggle for the forest became known on an international level certainly increased the pressure on the court that dealt with the BUND lawsuit. In the end, it was this lawsuit that saved the forest.

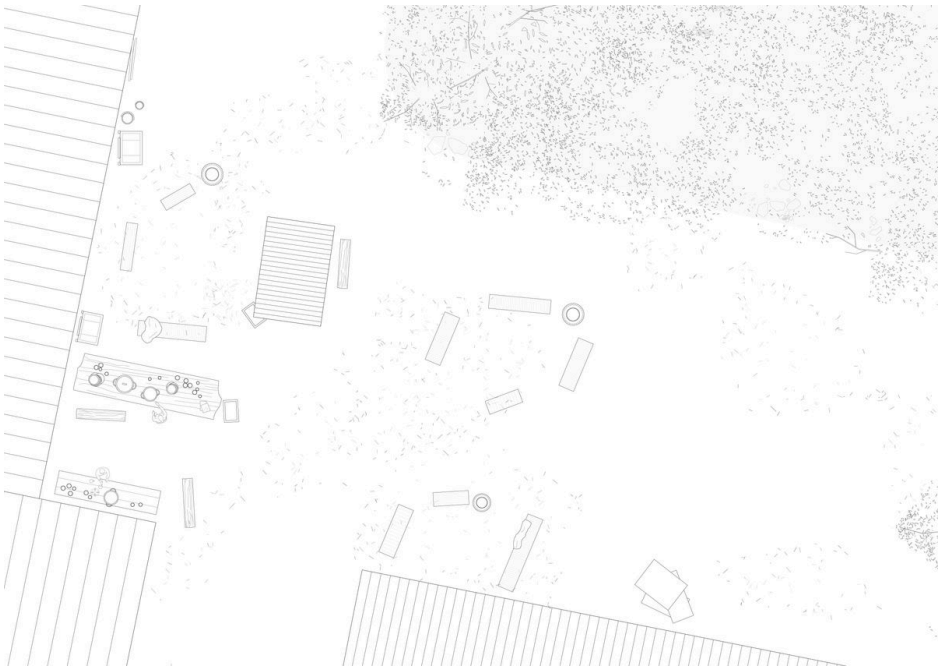
Second Case Study: Lützerath

Lützerath is one of the last places that was supposed to be mined away. The activists started to occupy the village even though it was already abandoned by its original inhabitants. The activists groups argue that Germany's CO2 target cannot be met by destroying Lützerath. Through social media they try to generate as much attention as possible and attract people to come.



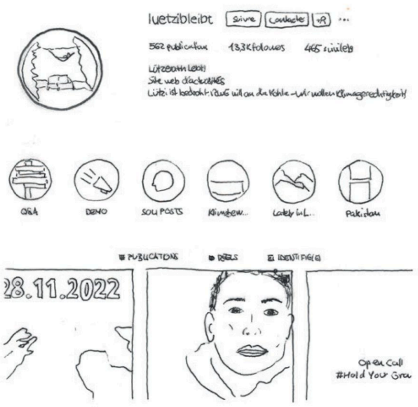
Lützerath

Rita and Ruby's story

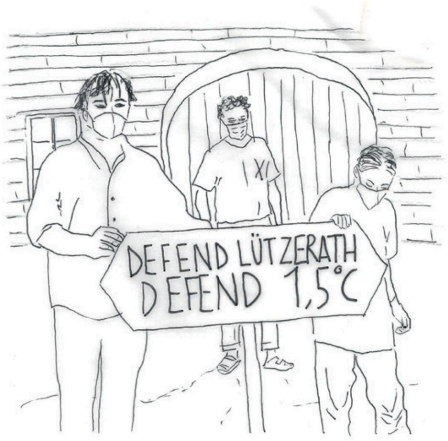


Rita and Ruby are two students that were in the camp of Lützerath for a few daysin order to support the cause. They came multiple times during the year to play a role in the fight against the mining.

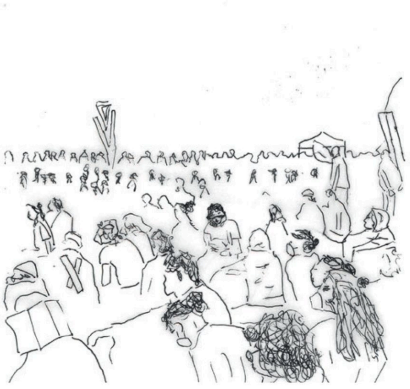
People from Lützerath were supposed to be relocated in New Immerath in 2006. RWE gave the inhabitants up to 2019 to move away from the village into their new home. In 2020, RWE started to to demolish the houses in Lützerath.



Coal opponents and climate activists village organized walks and demonstrations. A protest camp was set up on Eckard Heukamp's land, a local farmer. This is when the movement *Lützerath lebt* was created, : « We want to make the destruction RWE commits visible. »



Eckard Heukamp started a lawsuit against RWE for the expropriation of his land, at the same time environmental activists also started to occupy the farm. The movement received support through visits by climate activists such as Greta Thunberg.



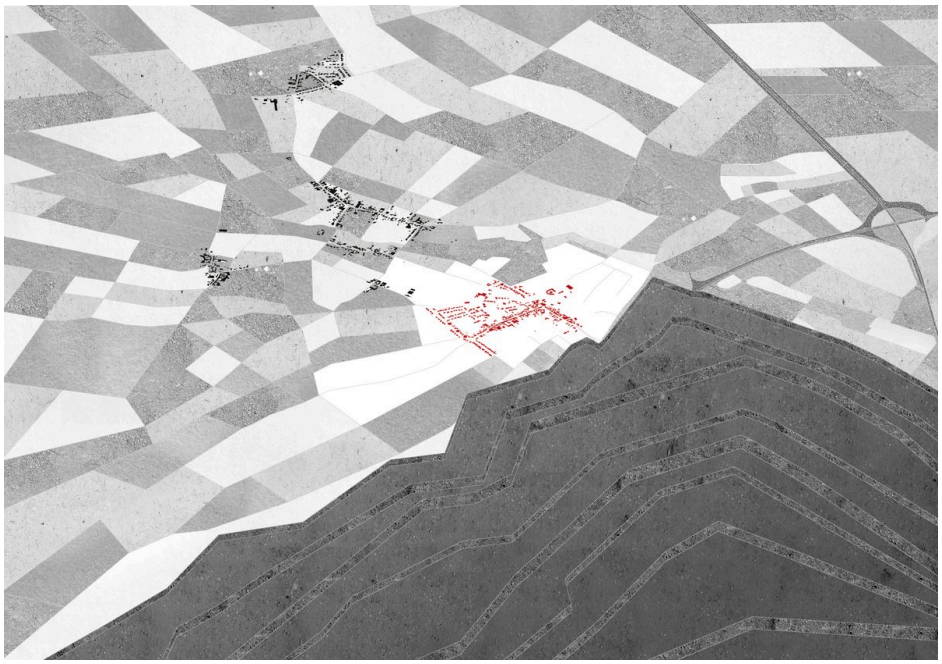
Eckard Heukamp lost the lawsuit and sold his land. The mining law on the basis of which Heukamp is losing his home was once supposed to serve the common good: Heukamp is giving up his farm so that we can all increase our prosperity through cheap coal energy. This led to a demonstration of around 2000 people.

There are today around a hundred people left in the activist camp, they are of different backgrounds and motivations. Some are in Lützerath longterm, others come by on the weekends or support them from afar. Some have been politically active for years, while others just get started here. They are diverse.

The attention that Lützerath generates through social media makes the village a symbol of national interest. The village itself experiences a new meaning and becomes a centre of exchange and resistance. The activists strive for a system change and a post-fossil society and use the possibility of communication via the internet for their vision.

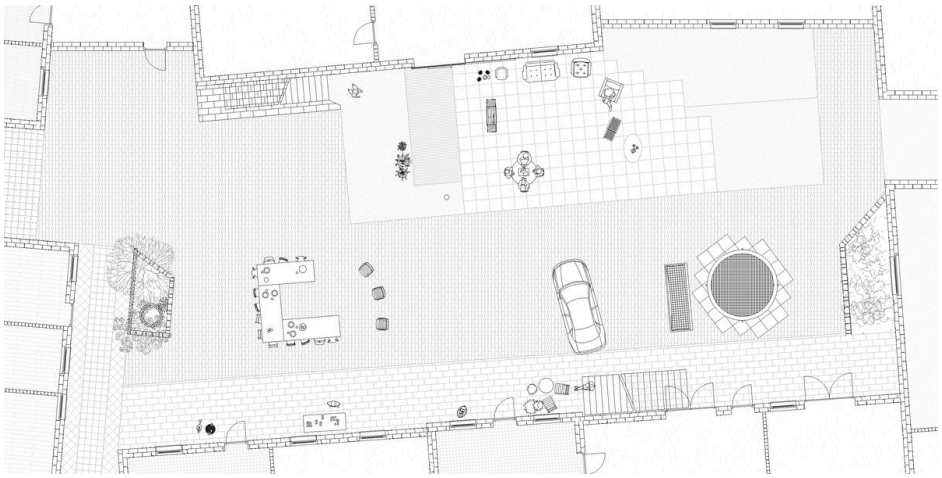
Third Case Study: Keyenberg

Keyenberg was one of the villages that was originally supposed to fall victim to the expansion of the Grazweiler mine. A federal decision in autumn 2022 will lead to the preservation of the village. The story of the resident Norbert Winzen is about the cooperation of activists and a local.

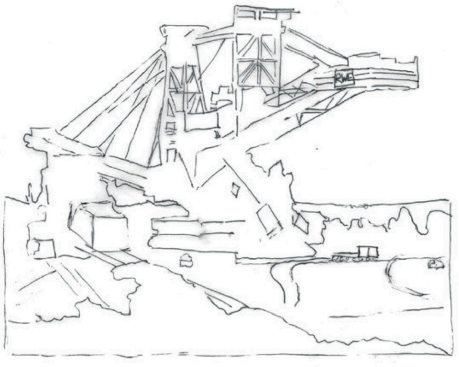


Keyenberg

Norbert Winzen's story



We met Norbert Vincent in his farm, in Keyenberg, where he was born. From the beginning he fought against RWE and refused to sell his farm. He said to us: «A farmer's son never sells his land!»



In the 1980's rumors started to grow in the village of Keyenberg that RWE would start to demolish it and to relocate the inhabitants or to give them financial compensation.

10 october 2016

Subject: Relocation of you farm

Dear Norbert Vincent,

We are sorry to announce that you will have to leave your house in the next eight years. The other villagers received the same letter as you, and some are already leaving. You will eventually receive a little financial compensation for your farm.

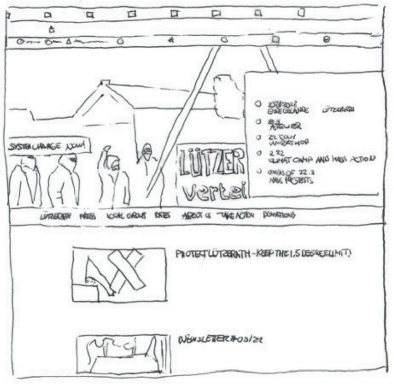
Sincerely,

RWE

In 2016, he recieved a letter from RWE saying that in 8 years he would have to leave from the village and he would be financially compensated. Some inhabitants of Keyenberg had already started to leave. And these news only made the village more divided.

But then, in 2017 : «It all started». People from Sweden arrived to Keyenberg to fight against the coal mining and protect the villages and the inhabitants from being relocated.

«It was the moment where activists from all around the world got together with the local people.»



Thanks to friday for future and different associations, that spread the information on Youtube, the fight became viral. «Protests went from 1'500 people to 8'000 people!»

Politics started to get more involved and the green politicians met with the inhabitants. «Politics are not going to do something for you if you don't tell them what to do!»

Even Greta Thunberg eventually came to the Keyenberg.

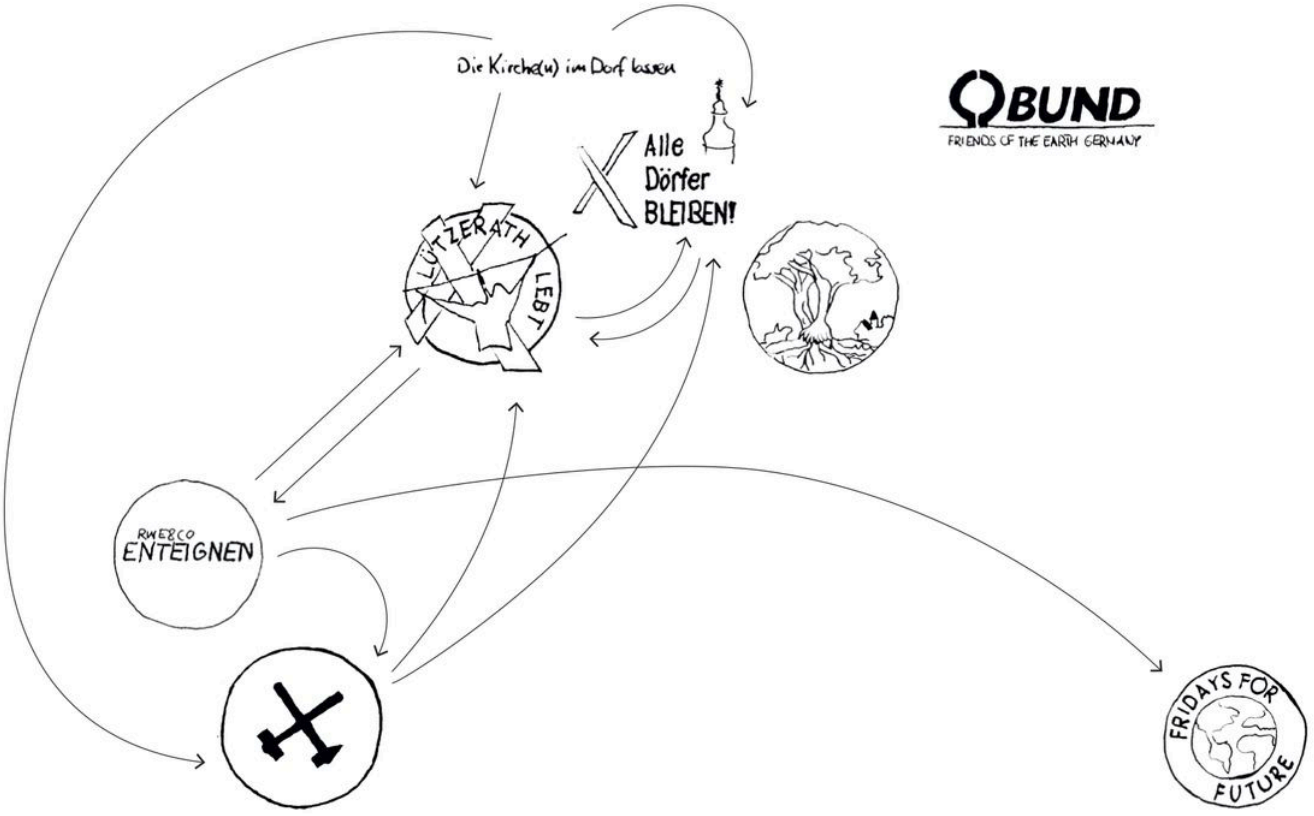
Norbert told us many times that he was really thankfull that the activists came in his village. «To get what you want, you need people in the trees, ...»

«... And normal guys like me to talk to the politicans.»

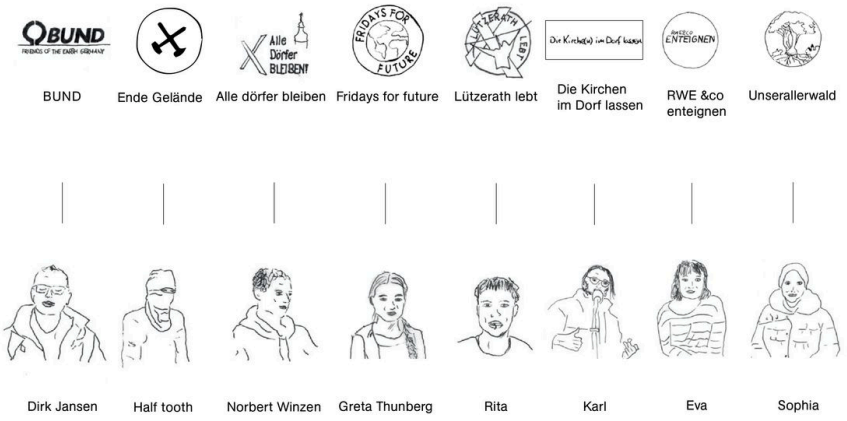
Two weeks ago, after forty-two years of struggle, RWE decided that the village of Keyenberg would not be demolished. Norbert told us that it was a good thing but that in a way, the harm had already been done: Most of the inhabitants have left the village, and the psychological pressure that the ones who stayed had to live cannot be forgotten. His goal now is no more to protect the village, it is now to stop the mining. «I have no idea how we will manage in the future, but I am not very positive.»

The story shows how the locals could learn new tools and organisation for resistance from the international activists. Norbert Winzen later became a co-founder of the association “Alle Dörfer bleiben”. At the same time, the activists benefit from him by supporting them. Sometimes with a shower or, on cold winter days, perhaps with a place to sleep.

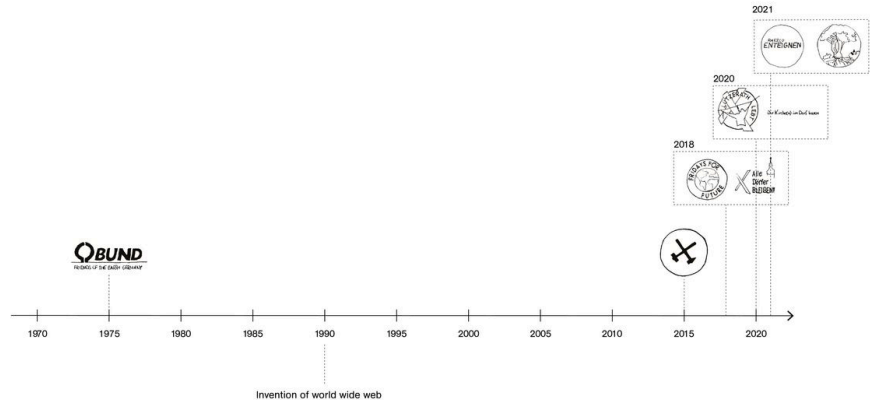
Goals, Tools and Networks of Resistance



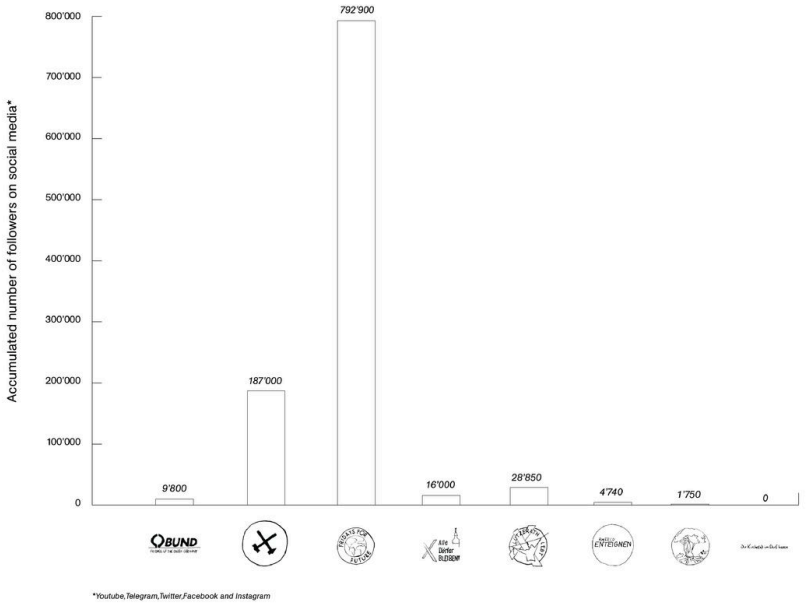
The case studies of Hambach Forest, Keyenberg and Lützerath reveal that different kinds of activism have intertwined and enhanced each other. Locating the groups and associations they belong to, a complex web of activism unfolds.



Portraits of activists and their groups



Timeline of creation of activists groups



Because all the people in our case studies are linked to a group, we took into account their agenda as an organisation of activists to analyse them. To better understand in which area of action the activist groups play a role, we placed them on a timeline, accumulated the number of followers on social medias and defined their goals. Thus, we created *ID activist cards* that enabled us to compare them. This also allows us to understand which tools they use according to their scale and goal.

Bund

Description:

BUND sees itself as the driving social force for an ecological and social sustainable development in Germany. Its vision is a future-proof country in a socially just and peaceful world – a goal it pursues on a local, regional, national level.

Goal:

BUND NRW was recognized under the Federal Nature Conservation Act in 1981. This translates into special opportunities for participation and legal action in planning processes that affect nature and landscape. The board of directors of BUND NRW works on a purely voluntary basis, as do the members of the specialized working groups.

Tools:

Political engagement

Organization of events

Protests

Lawsuits

Year of founding:

1975

Memberships:

9' 800

Ende Gelände

Description:

„We are a broad alliance of people from the anti-nuclear and anti-coal movements, the Rhineland and Lausitz climate camps and the Hambacher Forest anti-coal campaign. We are from grassroots climate action groups, large environmental organisations, left political groups and many other campaigns, groups and networks."

Goal:

„We all share the belief that to stop climate change we need to take action ourselves, using civil disobedience as a powerful signal for real action to put our climate before profit."

Tools:

Documenting the success

Organization of events

Protests

Create a strong worldwide Ende Gelände Network

Timeplacy occupation

Informatic Security Systems

Sabotage

International visibility through social media

Year of founding:

2015

Memberships:

187' 000

Fridays for future

Description:

or FFF, is a youth-led and -organised global climate strike movement that started in August 2018, when 15-year-old Greta Thunberg began a school strike for climate. In the three weeks leading up to the Swedish election, she sat outside Swedish Parliament every school day, demanding urgent action on the climate crisis.

Goal:

1. Keep the global temperature rise below 1.5 °C compared to pre-industrial levels.
2. Ensure climate justice and equity.
3. Listen to the best united science currently available.

Tools:

Documenting the success

Organization of events

Protests

Create a strong worldwide Ende Gelände Network

Timeplacy occupation

Informatic Security Systems

International visibility through social media

Year of founding:

2018

Memberships:

792' 900

Alle Dörfer bleiben

Description:

We are a Germany-wide alliance in which affected people from all lignite mining areas, the climate justice movement and citizens in solidarity fight together against forced relocation and climate destruction.

Goal:

„It is clear that we cannot solve the climate crisis with „business as usual" or „middle ground. We need a change in our economic system and way of life - away from competition, profit and growth to cooperation and a good life for all. This change can only come from below. But the new federal government can show that it understands the climate crisis by taking concrete and immediate action."

Tools:

Documenting the success

Organization of events

Protests

Create a strong worldwide Ende Gelände Network

Timeplacy occupation

Creating a sense of community

Sabotage

International visibility through social media

Year of founding:

2018

Memberships:

16' 000

Lützerath lebt

Description:

We are the initiative "Lützerath Lebt" and have been active in Lützerath for about two years now. Our protest began, when RWE demolished the road L277 between Lützerath and Keyenberg in June 2020. Spontaneously protesters got together and started a vigil, which has been a point of arrival and encounter in the region since.

Goal:

Lützerath is a village in the Rhineland that is to be destroyed for the benefit of an international company. RWE wants to demolish the village in order to burn 650 million tons of brown coal. Germany would thus break the Paris climate agreement. We will prevent this. Here on the ground, we join age-old struggles around the world: we rebel against a colonial system that destroys the very foundations of life in the world.

Tools:

Documenting the success

Organization of events

Protests

Create a strong worldwide Ende Gelände Network

Timeplacy occupation

Creating a sense of community

Sabotage

International visibility through social media

Year of founding:

2020

Memberships:

28' 850

Die Kirche im Dorf lassen

Description:

The initiative „Leave the church(es) in the village" fights for the preservation of the threatened churches in the Rhenish lignite mining area and considers this commitment to be inseparably linked to the fight for global climate justice.

Goal:

The initiative arose from local resistance against the hostile open-cast mining in the threatened villages. The pictures of the destruction of Immerather Cathedral went around the world, and still, according to current plans of RWE and the federal government - and contrary to the recommendations of the coal commission - four more churches are threatened with demolition.

Tools:

Documenting the success

Organization of events

Protests

International visibility through social media

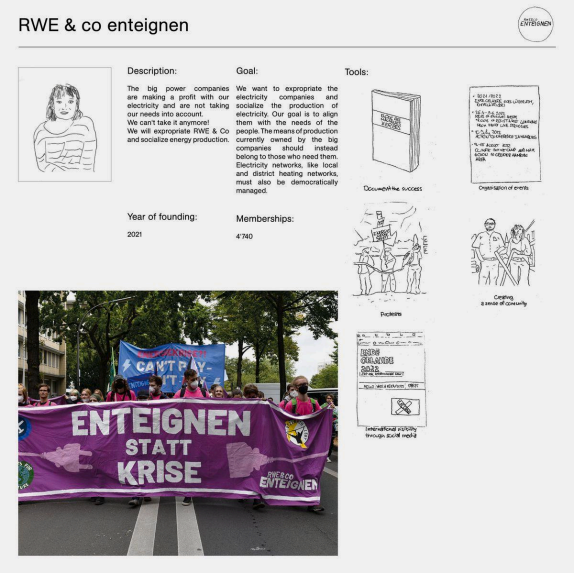
Creating a sense of community

Year of founding:

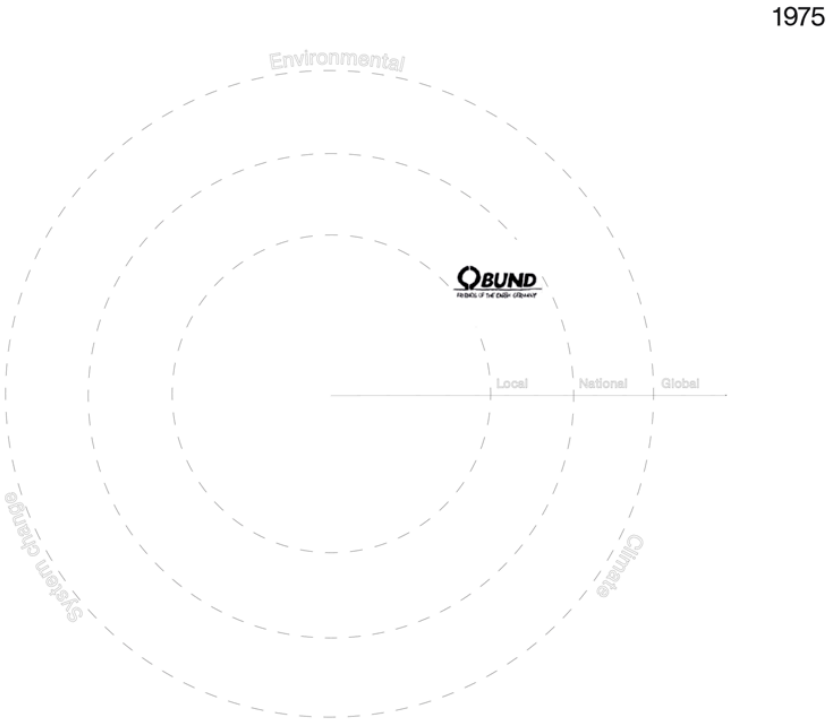
2020

Memberships:

No social media



What we could also observe, is how the global activist organisations have enabled the revitalisation of the local struggles and have made them matter. If certain groups of activism had not used social media in order to raise awareness, some of the goals set by the local organisations would not have been achieved. This shows that it is by having a variety of scales and tools working together that a change by the people could be achieved.



In conclusion, we observed that in order to achieve sustainable change it is necessary to work towards the goal on all scales. Regionally and physically as well as internationally and immaterially.

Furthermore, we can see that successful activism is made up of a wide range of actors. It needs radical forward thinkers who draw attention to critical issues through extreme actions. But it also requires people who work with legal means within the system. However, change will only be achieved if it is embraced by society as a whole.
Despite democratic structures, the people in the Rheinland could not successfully defend themselves for a long time against the supremacy of the energy company and its interconnection with the state. It is the global activist organisations that have enabled the visibility and revitalisation of the local struggles.

Activism is a strong and constructed network that builds an alternative structure on its own. It contains strong system criticism and makes us think about how equal our system really is.

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Architecture of Territory
Professor Milica Topalović

TEACHING TEAM
Muriz Djurdjevic
Dorothee Hahn
Milica Topalović
Jan Westerheide

Prof. Milica Topalović
ETH Zurich
ONA G41
Neunbrunnenstrasse 50
8093 Zurich
Switzerland
+41 (0)44 633 86 88
www.topalovic.arch.ethz.ch