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Making Electricity Visible

I remember asking my parents, “How does a plug work?”. When they explained the concept of electricity to me, I wasn’t satisfied. First, because I didn’t understand the concept. Second, because it struck me as peculiar that a plug does not function as an enclosed entity. Then I continued by asking where electricity comes from. That question sparked many other questions, which left me more confused than I was at the beginning. And at exactly this point, my idea started to develop.

My childish curiosity raised questions focusing on highly complex chains of varying technologies, places and materials; many of which my parents were not even able to answer. Even though our collective way of life would not be possible without electricity, most people have little clue as to how it work. Highly developed technology is in fact something we mostly don’t pay attention to, until it stops working. Most of the German citizens (the country in which I grew up in), do not even know if they receive electricity generated through nuclear power plants, coal, or renewable energies.

Triggered by the extraordinary energy supply situation here in Iceland, I thought again of the questions I raised back then. The events concerning the Hambacher Forst inspired me as well to explore this theme in further detail.

Energy giant ‘RWE’, a German company, owns parts of the forest and plans on destroying it further with the intention of mining coal. Activists built tree houses a few years ago and lived in them to protest RWE’s plans of deforestation and raise public awareness. Recently, the police forcibly removed the activists as well as the tree houses they inhabited. Weeks after, the deforestation was forbidden by law, or perhaps merely delayed, until all arguments have been heard and a final decision can be made.

In Iceland almost everyone knows where their electricity comes from because there is only one source: geothermal energy. Iceland is, because of that, the only country in the world that covers their energy demand totally with renewable energy. I am aware of the fact that not every country is lucky enough to be in the position to use geothermal energy. Regardless, Iceland should be seen as a role model for the rest of the world when it comes to energy supply.

Looking at this project from a theoretical angle, the work of Hartwick and her text “Towards a geographical politics of consumption”, plays an important role in my chain of thoughts. Her paper is concerned with commodity fetishism. The layers of advertisements often cover dirty commodity chains. Hartwick states that it is necessary to make the chains visible from a consumer’s perspective to be able to judge products and develop to a more horizontal manner of buying commodities. She does not target energy supply chains directly, but this is an analogy that I immediately draw when thinking about it. This analogy is reasonable because the goal of the de-mystification of either commodity or energy supply chains aims at the same goal. That is the act of conscious decisions in contrast to passive behaviour and old habits.

If one would search for the origin of electricity in all countries of our planet, they would most likely end up in a place that is aesthetically and morally unappealing, but when practically following back the spatial electricity supply chain here in Iceland, one will find a geothermal power plant. The beauty of those highly developed technological devices built in the endless seemingly natural landscape was a very intense experience for me. This is why I chose to combine this project with the artistic approach of photography.

My photographs present the beauty of clean energy *and* address the uniqueness of it. They provide an utopian draft towards our actions influencing nature. In that way, they also underline the asymmetrical dependence of human culture to nature and the illusion of accurate boundaries between them.