

Change – The transformative power of citizen science

Shifting perspectives: collecting stories of post-extractive f*utures in a mining town

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Abstract

The shrinking town of Eisenerz lies at the foot of the Erzberg mountain, Austria's largest and best-known site of iron-ore extraction. The post-industrial town is experiencing a rural exodus, affecting women in particular. Within this complex field, the citizen science project Stories of Post-extractive F*utures focuses on intersectional feminist perspectives on an area of mineral extraction. It collates stories of care in order to broaden the perceptions of mining areas and focus future perspectives on feminist narrations. We ask: Which practices contribute to the continuance of the community? The collected material shows, discusses and negotiates the spatial practices of repair amid extraction of multiple actors.

We work with local associations and different age groups to reach diverse groups and profit from a lively network of local associations. Thinking and knowing with the diverse actors and their—often surprising—practices, the citizen scientists shape the project on several levels: they collect and locate stories of practices; they research private archives; they report and sometimes even organize. Mutual learning takes place in meetings and shared activities, and through the process of transformation into drawings by East Styrian artist Roswitha Weingrill. The collected knowledge will contribute to creating imaginaries of future stories of a liveable community.

Keywords: artistic research, care, citizen science, extractivism, gender, urban development

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Figure 1. Erzberg Mountain with the town of Eisenerz. Photo: Karin Reisinger, 2021.

Introduction

The shrinking town of Eisenerz lies at the foot of the Erzberg mountain, Austria's largest and best-known site of iron-ore extraction. The post-industrial town is experiencing a rural exodus, affecting women in particular (Weber 2012). Mining is predominantly narrated in male, heroic narratives, while counter-narratives of repair, care, reproduction and maintenance are mostly overlooked. With this thesis, and starting from an intersectional feminist approach within this complex field, the citizen science project *Stories of Post-extractive F*utures* rests on the presumption that in a shrinking town with the highest average age of the nation (StatATLAS 2023) the requirement for care is extremely high. First, the ageing population inevitably leads to a high demand for nursing care; and, second, the numerous vacant buildings (with long histories from the formerly thriving mining town) also require care to avoid decaying and becoming uninhabitable. The aim of our project was to understand the post-industrial situation from a feminist perspective in order to learn how to deal with losses and to adapt to changing environments.

Background and methodology

The citizen science project takes a feminist approach to knowledge production in order to “unlock the potential of embedded, diverse, and culturally sensitive knowledge” (Heinisch et al. 2021, 19 97). We have furthermore

learnt from participatory planning and artistic processes. The bottom-up feminist tradition of participation provides a rigid basis for the citizen science quality of expanding academic concepts of knowledge (Heinisch et al. 2021): feminist demands to rethink objectivity and inclusiveness and to understand knowledge as democratic, situated and shared (Haraway 1988; Longino 1990, 2002; Harding 2015; and many more) are strong guidelines for including the knowledge of citizen scientists. Responding to calls for, and insights into, epistemological pluralism (Ruphy 2016), inclusiveness and diversity, the project is strongly based on equity (see also Liboiron 2019). Locality and a multiplicity of perspectives are key for this project, in line with an ethical discourse in citizen science projects worldwide, which, for example, discuss a feminist ethics of care in citizen science (Fotopoulou 2019). Based on these intersectional feminist research perspectives, within a traditional area of mineral extraction, the decision was taken, together with the local citizens, to collect stories of care to broaden the perceptions of mining areas and to focus diverse narrations for future perspectives (see also Reisinger 2024). In order to get a fuller picture of the spatial practices (Rendell 2020) that are necessary in a post-industrial community with the nation's highest average age, and consequently a high number of vacant buildings, the central question was: *Which practices contribute to the continuance of the community?*

To obtain diverse contributions, we worked with various groups who were extremely supportive and sometimes even organized gatherings for us; the youth centre, the *Olle zoum* association, which runs a communitarian space for gatherings and second-hand shopping, *Jugend am Werk* (a local workshop for people with dis/abilities), *Volkshilfe* (the local retirement home), the *Vereinsgemeinschaft* (a local umbrella association) and the *Museum im alten Rathaus* (the local museum). Furthermore, the town's municipality supported the project with ongoing discussions about the methodology and with local organizations, especially Bianca Klapfer.

We located all stories with maps designed for the purpose; and the artist Roswitha Weingrill, who has roots in Styria, transformed the collated stories into drawings, which allowed for (at least) partial anonymity and emphasized the diversity of practices—and thus the agency of the citizens. All of the drawings were checked and agreed by the people who had contributed the stories, and they often had to be changed accordingly. Rethinking the relationship between the object and subject in research, we swapped the evaluators with those being evaluated, and the interpreters with those being interpreted, in order to reach a collective narration of a community that is often misunderstood or misinterpreted in newspapers and research.

Results

Based on around 115 drawings, a collage of a town was created by shifting the perspective, allowing for critical consideration of individual involvement in the care sector, as well as a broadened scope of infrastructure maintenance. Thus, we hoped to leave an imprint on the community and further post-industrial areas. Many of the collected stories are published on the *Mountains of Ore* website to display an altered understanding of town structures (<https://www.mountains-of-ore.org/en/pef/map/>). The map shows collected stories of care,

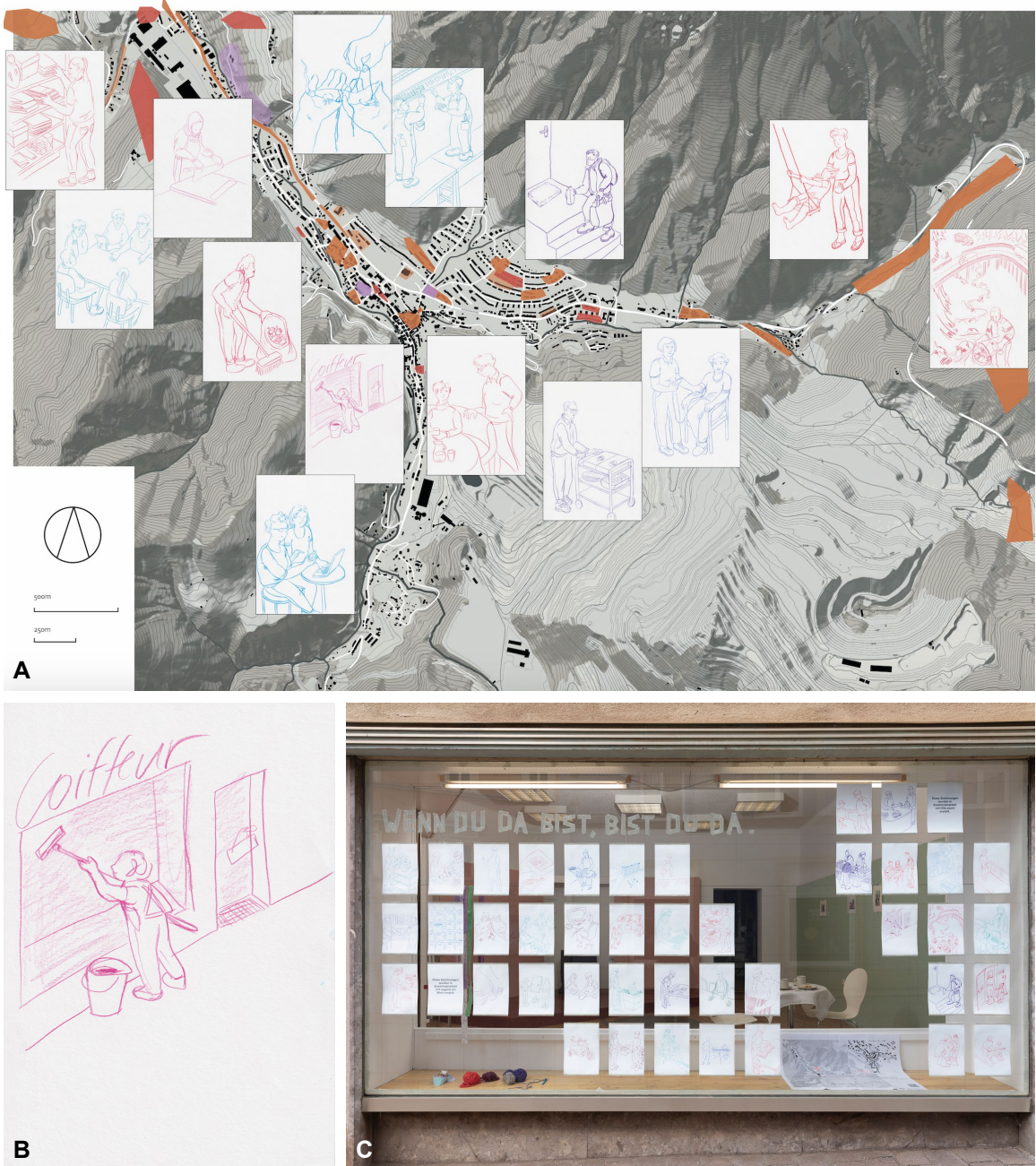


Figure 2. A Collage of a selection of the drawings and the interactive map, accessible at mountains-of-ore.org. The map displays both active (giving) and passive (receiving) care activities. Drawings: Roswitha Weingrill. Map: Mo Hartmann, Karin Reisinger and Larissa Zekl. With geo-information by GIS Styria, Digital Atlas. Interactive online version: <https://www.mountains-of-ore.org/en/pef/map/>. **B.** In one of the meetings with *Olle zoum*, we were told that a group of women cleans the shop windows of forlorn shops in the centre of town in their free time. The person who contributed this story also took care of passing on the drawing to the respective women after it was exhibited in Eisenerz. Drawing: © Roswitha Weingrill. **C.** Photo of the *City of Care* exhibition, taking place in Eisenerz, 22.3.2024–8.5.2024. Photo: © mani froh.

for example women who work together to clean the facades of forlorn houses, a family that runs a café with affordable food, a small group that runs the youth centre, and people who distribute cheap food to people in need — to offer a glimpse into the variety of often surprising contributions. The project also shows the care activities of people who are considered care-dependent.

A concluding exhibition called *City of Care* mirrors the results back into the community. The evaluation of the complex impacts is, as is mostly the case in artistic projects, beyond our scope. Despite the high number of drawings and collected stories, it should be noted that this project, despite its limited resources but nonetheless considerable diversity, has only scratched the surface of a complex network of voluntary work. It does not claim to be complete; instead, it offers a rich collection of partial and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), hinting at a fuller picture of rural and post-industrial specificities of extractivism.

Discussion

The collected material, comprising approximately 115 drawings and 10 maps and summarized in an interactive map on the mountains-of-ore.org website (Mountains of Ore 2024), shows, discusses and negotiates the spatial practices of repair amid extraction of multiple actors, paying special attention to actors whose roles and life worlds are often omitted in traditional knowledge production. The work with local associations and different age groups has reached diverse groups and profited from the very lively local network of groups. Thinking and knowing with the diverse actors and their—often surprising—practices, the citizen scientists shaped the project on many levels: they criticized and modified our initial project approach; they collected and located stories of practices; they researched private archives; they sometimes even organized. They also evaluated the gathered knowledge on smaller and larger scales and contributed to forms of knowledge dissemination. Depending on the involvement, engagement and also critiques of citizens, it is hoped that the work done so far will lead to suggesting possible next steps.

Mutual learning has taken place in meetings and shared activities, and through the process of transformation into drawings by East Styrian artist Roswitha Weingrill. The collected knowledge will contribute to creating imaginaries of future stories of a liveable community. With the help of artistic methods, these stories are illustrated and made accessible in multiple formats. Following an exhibition in the town of Eisenerz, the citizens received the original project drawings for future reflection and their individual uses. This is a crucial, yet modest, step in the process of giving back to the community and those who co-shaped the knowledge.

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