

GATHERING AROUND THE WRECKAGE

Today, the existence of the phenomenon of global warming is widely recognized. Since the pre-industrial era the average global temperature has risen 1,1°C. Due to decade-long governmental inaction the attempt to keep temperature below 1,5°C or even 2°C does not seem realistic any more. There is a worst-case scenario that by the end of the 21st century global temperature might go up to 5-6 °C, which means that large parts of the planet would become inhabitable. Hundreds of millions of people would lose their basis of living, which would result in waves of forced migration, and probably wars about the remaining resources. The rise of CO2 emissions in the last 30 years corresponds with the global domination of neoliberal capitalism. Catastrophic global warming is also an effect of deforestation, as trees are a major carbon sink. The loss of habitat along with pollution and pesticides lead to a mass extinction of species.

Oliver Ressler's solo-exhibition "Gathering around the Wreckage" brings together some of the artist's works dealing with global warming. The central piece, the five-channel video installation "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart" (2016-ongoing) is accompanied by a large-scale wall text and the photographic work "How Is the Air Up There?" (2018). "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart" focuses on successful forms of mass civil disobedience. Each of the five films addresses a direct action of the climate justice movement, bringing together different contexts, situations and people. The cycle of films merges voices of activists with a political, but at the same time poetic narration text written by the artist in collaboration with the writer Matthew Hyland. The films show how protest and alternative ways of living and organizing oppose the climate-destructive activities of corporations and governments. The photo series "How Is the Air Up There?" was shot at the Hambacher Forest near Cologne in Germany, where activists have occupied the century-old forest for years to hinder the company RWE to destroy the forest to extract lignite.

The exhibition "Gathering around the Wreckage" is taking place in Belgrade, one of the most polluted capital cities in Europe. The generation of electricity in coal-fired power plants is not only a major reason for the heating of the planet to unprecedented levels, but the poisonous air pollutants also cause the death of 6,000 people in Serbia every year.¹ While internationally huge numbers in climate demonstrations indicate people's rising awareness for the climate crisis, Ressler goes one step further focusing on actions that are usually regarded illegal, that are carried out by committed people in an attempt to obstruct climate-criminal activities.

EVERYTHING'S COMING TOGETHER WHILE EVERYTHING'S FALLING APART

A five-channel video
installation by Oliver
Ressler, 2016-ongoing

The title "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart" refers to a situation in which all the technology needed to end the age of fossil fuel already exists. Whether the present ecological, social and economic crisis will be overcome is primarily a question of political power. Despite the efforts of government and corporate PR to convince us otherwise, whether fossil fuels will be abandoned and when this will happen will be decided primarily by social movements and the degree of pressure they exert on institutions. In his films, Ressler follows the climate movement in its struggles to dismantle an economic system heavily dependent on fossil fuels. He records key events for the climate movement, bringing together many situations, contexts, voices and experiences. There is one film for each event.

In the first film "COP21" (17 min., 2016), activists contest the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, a city then under a *state of emergency*. Like twenty annual climate conferences before it, COP21 in Paris in 2015 proved the incapacity of governments to commit themselves to any binding agreement that would curtail global warming through a definite strategy for the end of fossil fuel use. The resulting Climate Agreement avoids any decision that would harm the interests of corporations.

The film on the "Ende Gelände" (end of the road) action (12 min., 2016) shifts the focus to a massive civil disobedience action at the Lusatia lignite coal fields (near Berlin). Around 4,000 activists entered an open-cast mine, blocking the loading station and the rail connection to a coal-fired power plant. The blockades disrupted the coal supply and forced the Swedish proprietor Vattenfall to shut the power station down. The action was part of an international "global escalation" against the fossil fuel industry, calling on the world to "Break Free from Fossil Fuels" and putting that imperative directly into practice.

The film on the "ZAD" (36 min., 2017) focuses on Europe's largest autonomous territory, located close to Nantes in France. The ZAD (zone to defend) emerged from the struggle against a new airport. In 2012 the French state's attempt to evict the zone was fiercely resisted by more than 40,000 people. The police have not set foot there since. Today 250 people in 60 collectives live permanently at the ZAD occupying the wetlands, fields and forests. The ZAD is a successful example of the way resistance and the creation of alternatives need to happen at the same time.

The film "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Code Rood" (14 min., 2018) highlights a civil disobedience action in the port of Amsterdam in June 2017. The blockade of Europe's second-largest coal port draws a red line against this important fossil-capitalist infrastructure facility. The largest single source of the coal shipments is Colombia, where coal is extracted under ecologically and socially devastating conditions.

The film "Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Limity jsme my" leads us directly into the blockade of Bílina coal mine in Northern Bohemia in the Czech Republic. In June 2018, climate activists entered the mine in an attempt to stop all activity there and to insist on the need to shut down climate-destructive mining operations. The blockade followed an action consensus that rejected property damage and sought to avoid direct confrontation with the police. Nonetheless, 280 of approximately 400 activists taking part were detained. The camera follows a group of activists awaiting deportation inside a police kettle, against the backdrop of a landscape defaced by lignite strip-mining. While the screen shows images filmed from inside a prisoner transport vehicle, we hear the voice of a semi-fictional character, reflecting on mass civil disobedience.

¹ According to World Health Organization director for Serbia, Marijan Ivanuša, <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/444090/U-Srbiji-godisnje-6-000-ljudi-umre-od-zagadenja-vazduha>

HOW IS THE AIR UP THERE?

A series of photographs by Oliver Ressler, 2018

The photographic series "How Is the Air Up There?" was shot in April 2018 in Hambacher Forest, the scene of Europe's longest ever tree-top occupation. For 6 years now, around 100-200 people have lived in this forest near Cologne, Germany, preventing its planned destruction by clear-cutting. The last surviving section of the highly biodiverse 12,000-year-old forest was supposed to be sacrificed to the Hambach open-cast mine, where the coal-dependent energy company RWE intends to exploit lignite until 2045. RWE is well aware that the end of coal is near, but it wants to make the felling of the forest an irreversible matter of fact, allowing it to go on turning a profit from destruction by burning the coal beneath the trees in its nearby power plants.

The situation has changed dramatically since September 13, 2018, when 3-4,000 police were moved in to evict the occupation, tearing down barricades, tree houses and kitchen facilities in a nonstop, day-and-night assault lasting two weeks. This operation led to the death of a 27-year-old journalist and provoked heated debate on Germany's hypocritical climate policy. Although Germany is still sometimes seen internationally as a pioneer of successful ecological transition, it is highly likely to miss its own climate targets in 2020.

On October 5, 2018 a German court ordered the suspension of the Hambach Forest clearance. It may take months or even years now for the court to decide whether RWE has the legal right to extract the coal beneath the forest as it intends. This huge victory demonstrates that people acting collectively with commitment are capable of protecting a forest. It proves that meaningful, effective action against the catastrophic warming of the planet is indeed possible.

The photographs in the series "How Is the Air Up There?" were taken from below, using a wide-angle lens directed towards the canopies. The protesters remain invisible in the photographs (as a precaution against repression and other unwanted consequences), but their tree houses, their rope bridges and the banners strung through the branches and leaves seem to constitute a visual representation of one of the slogans of the climate movement: "We are nature defending itself!"

Oliver Ressler lives and works in Vienna. He produces installations, projects in public space, and films on issues such as economics, democracy, migration, the climate catastrophe, forms of resistance and social alternatives. He has completed thirty-three films that have been screened worldwide in thousands of events of social movements, art institutions and film festivals.

He had comprehensive solo exhibitions at Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporaneo - CAAC, Seville; Wyspa Institute of Art, Gdansk; Lentos Kunstmuseum, Linz; MNAC - National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest; SALT Galata, Istanbul.

Ressler has participated in more than 350 group exhibitions, including Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven; MASSMoCA, North Adams, USA; 49th October Salon, Belgrade; the biennials in Prague (2005), Seville (2006), Moscow (2007), Taipei (2008), Lyon (2009), Venice (2013), Quebec (2014), Jeju (2017), Kyiv (2017), Gothenburg (2019), Stavanger (2019), and at Documenta 14, Kassel, 2017 (exhibition organized by EMST).

Ressler directs "Barricading the Ice Sheets", a research project on the climate justice movement, funded by the Austrian Science Fund.

He was the first prize winner of the Prix Thun for Art and Ethics Award in 2016.

<http://www.ressler.art>

<https://vimeo.com/oliverressler>

<https://www.instagram.com/oliver.ressler>

Dejan Vasić is an art critic and an independent curator based in Belgrade, Serbia, currently working as a visual arts program adviser at the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade. He is actively publishing critical writings, and works as co-editor in Beton (cultural propaganda kit). In the past, he acted as a member of Kontekst Collective (2009-2013), the Culture of Memory platform (2010-2014), and the Working Group Four Faces of Omarska (2010-2015). The focus of his interest is art as a critical and political practice, while revocation of critical thinking as a public issue and re-contextualization of public space as a public good.

His research and curatorial projects were part of public events and exhibitions (selection):

Art as Critics and Politics (CZKD Center 2017-ongoing); Performance, performativity and document (SULUV Galery, Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, 2018); Traveling Communique (Museum of Yugoslav History, Belgrade 2014); Forensis (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2014); Four Faces of Omarska (Dokufest, Prizren 2014; October Salon, Belgrade 2013; Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo 2013; Urban Festival, Zagreb 2012; Center for research Architecture, Goldsmiths University of London, 2012; Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade, 2010; SpaPort Biennial, Banja Luka, 2010); The Culture of Memory (GPL Contemporary, Vienna 2014; Gallery PM, HDLU Zagreb 2014; Mediterranea 16, Young Artists Biennial, Ancona 2013; Biennial of Visual Arts, Pančevo 2012; Cultural Center, Šabac 2010).

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OLIVER RESSLER Gathering around the Wreckage

↳ 14. 1 – 13. 2. 2020.

Curated by
Dejan Vasić

1. Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: COP21, 17 min., 2016

2. Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Ende Gelände, 12 min., 2016

3. Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: The ZAD, 36 min., 2017

4. Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Code Rood, 14 min., 2018

5. Everything's coming together while everything's falling apart: Limity jsme my, 10 min, 2019

6. How Is the Air Up There? photographs, 2018

7. Break and Enter, wall text, 2016

