Transkription des Interview mit Júlia Pontés: „Mega mines in Brazil“ (gekürzt und geglättet)

Júlia Pontés (geboren 1983, Minas Gerais, Brasilien) ist eine brasilianisch-argentinische Fotografin und Künstlerin, die zu den ökologischen und sozialen Folgen des Rohstoffabbaus arbeitet. Ihre multimedialen Projekte thematisieren Menschenrechtsverletzungen und Umweltzerstörung durch extraktivistische Industrien, vor allem in Brasilien. Sie studierte unter anderem an der Columbia University und wurde international ausgestellt und ausgezeichnet. In ihrem Projekt „Colonial Veins“ macht sie koloniale Machtstrukturen im globalen Rohstoffabbau sichtbar.

TMW: How did you start working on mega mines?

Júlia Pontés:

Mining takes shapes and forms in so different ways in Brazil currently. You have the issue that is happening in the Amazon of illegal mining in indigenous lands. You have the mega mine corporations that are taking over and it's just expanding. Before it was pretty much concentrated in two states, Minas Gerais, where I come from, and Pará, where a great part of the Amazon rainforest is located.

But then I started because first, my home state translates, Minas Gerais translates to general mining, and there is not a clear understanding if that is just because of the amount of mines, or if it is also because there are two parts of the state. The mining area, and also the one that is more rural, that is called Serra Gerais, that starts in Minas Gerais and goes into Bahia. And so basically, my entire culture is based on that, right? The rural living on one side, and the mineral exploitation on the other.

However, in 2015, when we had the first dam collapse that happened in Mariana with, was the, up to today, the largest environmental disaster in Brazil's history, everything changed. And it also changed for me, although I had started doing this research in 2014, because I moved out of the, of Brazil in that area. And then when I was coming back, I was like, oh my God, I had no idea how huge the holes were becoming. And I started thinking that my home state looked like a Swiss cheese. So that led me, and I was just starting in the photographic practice, transition careers from, I was working for the Argentinian Government back then and the Government of Buenos Aires and then I was transitioning to a photo career. And that's when that concern over the size of the mines actually became a pro, an idea, a research idea, and concern, I would say.

So, in 2015, when finally mining got attention, and actually the consequences of that kind of level of land exploitation were happening, I was finally able to kickstart doing the project and really flying over and having more support for it. And then what did happen is that when I started flying, I realized, and really looking with the critical eye was that there's no way that there are not people impacted by this. So, we were only talking about the impacts of people that were affected directly from the dam collapse right in 2015. But we - almost no one was talking about the consequences in an everyday life and this slow violence that was happening in the community surrounding those mega mine corporations. So that's how the second part of my practice started.

TMW: What are the effects of the mega mines on people, on the landscape, on everything living in the area?

Júlia Pontés:

We have a high, very high rate of respiratory diseases because of the particular elements. We also have water issues in many of those regions. So this was also a lot of the, a lot of the rocks are intertwined with the water. So when you explode the rock to get the iron, you're also blowing the water or that water is also going away. And we also have huge dams that need water and the water process and the entire processing of the mineral making. It requires a lot of water. So, we have extreme droughts that are happening in areas that were historically eco tourism locations.

We also have the underlying social consequences of like whenever a mega mine corporation installs itself in a low in a place like what happened in Conceição do Mato Dentro. We have a town that used to have eight around 8,000 people and suddenly we have 8,000 men, workers, coming. So, violence against women. We have gentrification happening in a very, very high rate. All of a sudden the population couldn't afford housing anymore because the company came and started raising the rent price, you know, paying more than the locals could pay. So, everyone started being kicked out.

And then you have the trauma level, right, right now, ever since the first the tragedy, you have the trauma level of people living surrounding those mines, because they all of a sudden they realize their lives could be at risk, especially if they have a dam. And, and basically what happens with that, those environmental legislations is that they have been under attack, right, for the past, I would say, especially the past ten years. So the idea is, that those communities are now facing, also heaving the responsibility to defend themselves, right, with very very little resources, but they have to go and rely on the justice system to do whatever they can to protect themselves. And basically, what I'm going back to the “dam terrorism”.

It's so hard to get a license and the community is able to have their voices heard through grassroots efforts, right and using the legal, the resilient legal system that drags those processes forever.

And what happens is that with the fear that was generated with the 2015 dam collapse followed by the 2019 dam collapse is that people are now afraid as I mentioned before, suicidal thoughts, a lot of depression, a lot of extended fear of people living underneath those dams.

So, what happens now, there is this strategy that companies are using of saying this dam is under the risk of collapse, it can collapse in any moment so they evacuate and displace people that can never go back. So now they don't have the population there again. And by the use of fear, you're able to evacuate extensive amount of areas that now could be mined and can be researched.

And that - I can give an example, that's what happened in Barão de Cocais. So, a siren came off on February 8, 2019, right after the second dam collapse in Brumadinho. 492 people were evacuated overnight at two o'clock in the morning. They haven't been able to go back to their homes up until today. Nothing happened, that dam never broke. And, and still they are, what they call decommissioning, they're emptying that dam. And they are just buying out everyone.

We're talking about, maybe 1000 people in total and they're all in surrounding communities sitting on top of a $60 billion or more project. You know, in a capitalist world, those communities are just disposable and they're being relocated and completely dismantled, separated from each other.

TMW: So, this means the mega mines are still expanding?

Júlia Pontés:

Now it's just expanding to an unknown rate. Well, the lithium megamines in Vale do Jequitinhonha, in Brazil, are now mining those areas of the Gerais that I first mentioned, like that were the rural communities. And they don't even have that much water. So, I don't even know what's going to happen with those communities. It's really sad because it is just an expansion unprecedented for us. We…And it's not only us, right? It's Argentina, it's Peru, it's Bolivia. A lot of those companies have a substantial amount of European money coming.

And this idea, what I'm, my newest project is about is really challenging the notion of progress. Because what happens is that those mega mines come because they say, oh my God, we're going to bring so much development for this area. But you're not recognizing that that area was doing pretty well. Oftentimes.

Oftentimes those mines do not deliver high-quality health care or high-quality education or a public university. People that are hired in those mega mine companies are usually only the ones that are called “terceiriçados”. They are the ones that are going to be the cleaning people and doing very, very low paid jobs. The engineers, the high-level technicians, they're all coming from other towns. And many of them coming from other countries. So it's not that they are really educating local communities to have that kind of very, very high skilled work level. No, they're bringing those workers from other places and just use the locals for the base line that is very kind of basic pay.

TMW: Can you tell us about resistance against those mega mining projects and mega infrastructure projects?

Júlia Pontés:

In my experience, which is, as I mentioned, it's very based on Minas Gerais, the beauty is that the resistance is very often, women are the ones that are really able to be on the streets, they close the roads, they demand for more …many of them have been in trouble, because man can be usually… their husbands are usually working, they're the ones that are suffering the everyday with their children. So, a lot of the resistance in Brazil done, not only in mining, but also related to other kinds of popular movements and social movements, it has a lot of female presence, which is really beautiful to see the sorority that is created in this way.

It's interesting because historically, a lot of the resistance gets erased. History sells as if we didn't resist, we are always resisting, it is just not known.

So, for that reason, I love what I do and I love being a photographer, but I have been trying to push my medium to further reach than its limits. And therefore, in my personal archive, you will find, I don't even know - dozens, dozens of people's voices and their stories that I later on translate through texts. I translate through maybe other kinds of videos or more of a documentary practice that leaves there and those stories can be told with their own voices because they have voices. They often just didn't have the opportunity to be heard. And because their resistance can take shape and form, they, a lot of times they don't, they know that they're not going to be able to win the war, but they just don't want to have the feeling that they just gave it away.

So, there is this beautiful song about the ants and I have it at the end of one of my short documentary videos that I made for the community. And it says, about the resistance of the ants and the collective resistance. So, sometimes it will be by protesting, by, as I said, closing the roads, by going in the front of the court when something is happening, by pushing the judges.

It is, but it is also hard because those communities are being dismantled. Whenever you have like the 492 people that were removed from their homes, each one is now located in a different part of town. So, and that is also an element that reduces the possibility of local resistance, just because when you're breaking down the community, you're also breaking down their force.

TMW: Is 'decolonial ecologies' a term that you would say fits Brazil and how socio-ecological transformation should take place?

Júlia Pontés:

It is so interesting because you, you also asked about decolonial ecologies, which definitely meets Brazilian standard, what I feel is that, I don't live in Europe but that's a feeling that I have from a distance that the colonial impacts are not truly discussed.

And the one thing that I always refer to is this kind of ancestral knowledge and the one thing about the decolonial ecologies and the thought behind it is really also to have other kinds of thoughts taking into consideration. Right, and one that I think like if you have now like Davi Copenawa and you have Ailton Krenaki that are thinking about the relationship with the land, right, and the relationship with the land as something that is beyond you.

When you go to the indigenous thought it is mostly something that you're thinking about you as a point in a line. You are part of something so much bigger and all your ancestors and all the people that are going to come after you. So, it's not only you. And when you have a vision that your presence is not only limited to 80 years but maybe thousands and thousands of years, you can finally see that the mountain is a living being.

So going back and opening our minds to other kinds of thoughts, it is really important and I think that's the first step to create empathy and understand that there is no such thing as a overwhelmingly right way of doing things and keep imposing the way just by imposing again, a climate industry transition and an energy transition industry again on us. When we are the ones that are going to really provide all the materials necessary for that to happen. So, I guess that's one thing that I would say, empathy and respect to other kinds of knowledge.