REMIXING INDUSTRIAL PASTS
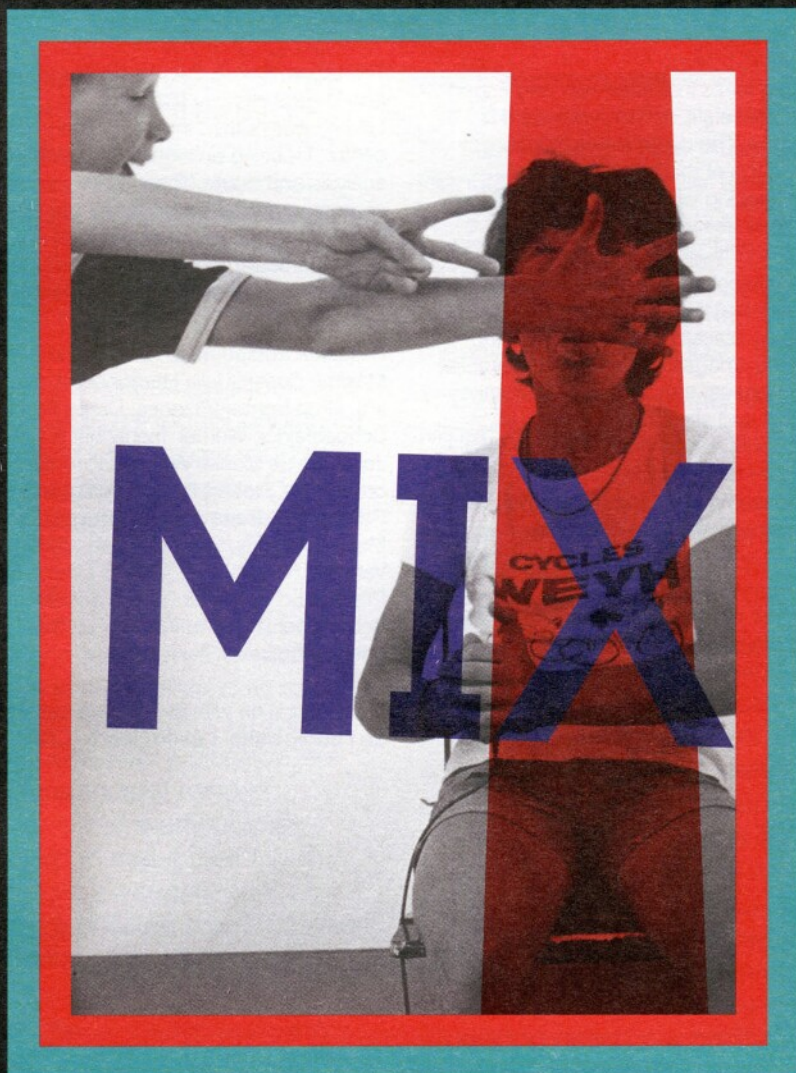
CONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY OF THE MINETT

MASSENOIRE / ESCH BELVAL

27.02. – 15.05.2022

MIX

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About

Dating from 1965, the **Massenoire** was used for the preparation of the sealant mass (based on tar) for the blast furnace taphole, known as the "black mass". In the eastern part there is a semi-outdoor space which served as a shelter for the casting ladle dryers. Following the introduction of backpressure tapping, production was abandoned and the workshop closed at the end of the 1970s.

The Massenoire building has barely changed and is striking for its industrial, raw and imperfect interior; the space still contains silos and a travelling crane. The deteriorated translucent sheets at the top of the façade have been replaced in keeping with the existing structure, providing the space with subdued light.

Tokonoma is a collective of multimedia artists and designers that was founded by Chiara Ligi and Mauro Macella in 2017. Combining stories, videos, images and sounds in complex narrative structures, they embrace interactivity, spatial design and story fragmentation to create immersive experiences such as video installations, interactive environments, theatrical projects, museums and exhibitions. Their works mostly focus on intangible heritage such as individual and collective stories and memories.

Concept, design and multimedia: Giorgia Borroni, Esther Chionetti, Alessia Fallica, Chiara Ligi, Mauro Macella, Micol Riva, Max Viale

2F Architettura is an architectural firm based in Milan and Alghero, established in 2006 by Ilaria Farina and Alessandro Floris. The studio works on different architectural scales, from interior design to landscape, with particular expertise in museums and exhibitions.

Design and scenography: Alessandro Floris, Dhaarini Rajkumar

The **Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH)** is the University of Luxembourg's third interdisciplinary research centre, focusing on high-quality research, analysis and public dissemination in the field of contemporary Luxembourgish and European history. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach with a particular focus on new digital methods and tools for historical research, teaching and public outreach.

Research and concept: Viktoria Boretska, Maxime Derian, Julia Harnoncourt, Stefan Krebs (PI), Irene Portas Vázques, Daniel Richter, Lars Schoenfelder, Werner Tschacher (Coordinator), Jens van de Maele. With the kind support of our colleagues: Robert Beta, Christoph Brüll, Sandra Camarda, Suzana Lopes Ferreira Cascao, Marco Gabellini, François Klein, Jacques Maas, Vanessa Napoletano, Andy O'Dwyer, Karin Priem, Audrey Sapet, Valérie Schafer, Noëlle Schon, Denis Scuto, Ricardo Tavares, Isabelle Voegeli, Susanna Zohrabyan.

In collaboration with the **Centre national de l'audiovisuel Luxembourg (CNA)**.

CONSTRUCTING THE MINETT

Stefan Krebs

What is the Minett? A term barely known outside Luxembourg? The well-known name of a mining district in the southwest of the country? The industrial heartland of Luxembourg for more than a century, from the construction of the first modern ironworks in Esch-sur-Alzette in 1870 to the steel crisis of the 1970s? A region where a few forward-looking entrepreneurs embraced modern iron- and steel-making technologies like the coke blast furnace and the Thomas process? The principal source of wealth and pride for the nation of Luxembourg? These are just some aspects of the prevailing master narrative surrounding the meaning and identity of the mining region that is also referred to as the "Land of the Red Earth". However, the Minett was also a place where tens of thousands of miners, steelworkers and many others worked hard to make their living – and many even sacrificed their lives. A dirty, polluted area that was looked down on by the inhabitants of Luxembourg City. A destination for thousands of migrants. A new home for some, a temporary home for others who were expelled from the country for socio-economic or political reasons. A bone of contention between German, Belgian and French industrialists. In short, the Minett has been a region with many names, faces and identities. These identities changed over time, and were transformed yet again when the mining industry declined and the steel crisis hit the region; when jobs, and with them an essential part of the meaning of life, were lost.

The economic prosperity of the Minett dates back to around 1850, when the minette iron ore began to be mined more intensely. In 1870, two modern ironworks were erected in Esch-sur-Alzette, followed by others in towns such as Dudelange, Differdange, Rodange, Rumelange and Steinfort. In 1911, one of the most advanced iron and steel plants became operational in Esch-Belval. After World War I and Luxembourg's exit from the German Customs Union, as stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles, the steel industry had to reorient itself towards Belgium and France. Despite the instability of the interwar years, Luxembourg became the largest iron- and steel-producing nation per capita in the world. Societal development in the 20th century was shaped by rapid

population growth, urbanisation and modernisation of small towns, as well as by the influx of thousands of migrants – both men and women – from neighbouring countries but also from Italy and Poland, and later from Portugal. The so-called *Trente Glorieuses* (1945-1975) were prosperous decades that not only increased the wealth of the nation, but also helped workers to make a good living – a living they had to fight for, especially when the economy started to stumble in the 1970s. Economic decline, deindustrialisation and a loss of perspective have shaped the region ever since, but recent years have also seen the transformation of mining districts into nature reserves and former industrial sites into urban areas.

The exhibition "Remixing Industrial Pasts: Constructing the Identity of the Minett" explores these transformations, highlighting alternative and lesser-known narratives. It shows the violent erasure of natural landscapes by industrial sites, analyses the relentless growth and transformation of industrial towns, and reveals the contemporary perception of pollution. It looks at the housing and living conditions of the men and women coming to the area in the hope of finding a better life for themselves and their families. It investigates the self-perception, meaning-making and identity disputes that can be found in the region's rich visual heritage. And it highlights the sometimes tangible, sometimes intangible impact of the border on the flow of materials, people and ideas.

NARRATING THE MINETT

Chiara Ligi and Micol Riva

With its long migratory past, the Minett region is a complex urban society with visible hierarchies that is nevertheless characterised by a real social mix – a mix of cultures, nationalities and life stories. The continuous process of industrial, urban and social transformations that has shaped the region from the end of the 19th century to the present is at the centre of this multimedia and architectural project.

Drawing on the concept of "remix", as stated in the title of the exhibition, the Massenoire hall has been turned into a sort of time machine, with audiovisual narration unfolding around three main themes: industry, people and landscape. These three dimensions intersect, alternate and combine along the way, creating a complex mosaic of images and voices that offers insights into various aspects that played a part in shaping the identity of the Minett.

The concept of identity is somewhat elusive and includes many aspects and implications. It is always in progress and cannot be framed conclusively. From macro perspectives to micro-stories, the whole exhibition aims to represent

this complexity through fragments of stories rather than a sequence of historical facts and raise questions about the region's history instead of giving answers.

The spatial dramaturgy is led by the architectural context of the industrial "cathedral" that is the Massenoire. Images, sounds, technology and space merge to capture all the senses and turn the narration into an enthralling experience.

The central view and open perspective allow visitors' gaze to run along the whole space, embracing the entire exhibition at a glance. A series of three-dimensional wireframe spaces are outlined using essential architectural elements and meaningful objects that recall familiar spaces: two street corners, a photographic studio, a living room and a border.

Transparency and essentiality guide the design of the installations at ground level while mixing up the perception of indoor and outdoor spaces, shifting between solids and voids. This idea of permeability is reflected in graphics – evanescent words floating in the void – and in ephemeral projections of manipulated photographs. The analogue projections serve as windows on time, highlighting marginalised and forgotten issues and enhancing the audio collages of fragments of original interviews and documents that fill the spaces.

An explosion of screens seems to blast from the back of the hall towards the entrance, invading

the aerial space and surrounding
the visitors who find themselves
immersed in a changing audiovisual
landscape. The large immersive
multichannel installation, based
on a remix of moving images from
vernacular films, documentaries,
feature films and TV reportage,
modifies the perception of space by
means of rhythmical juxtapositions
and combinations. Hopping between
different time frames, the main
themes – industry, people and
landscape – are woven together
like threads on a loom, alternating
between a fragmented visual mosaic
and composite but unitary view.
The immersive experience of this
visual composition is amplified by
an original stratified soundtrack that
plays with the images, generating an
ever-changing soundscape.

THE MINETT
AS PALIMPSEST

Maxime Derian and Werner Tschacher

The landscape in some parts of the Minett can be considered as a kind of palimpsest. For historians and archaeologists, a palimpsest is a writing medium, for example a parchment, that is used several times by erasing the previous writing. The landscape of the Minett has also changed greatly over the centuries as a result of human intervention. The soil can tell many overlapping and entangled stories. Some things have been completely erased, while other traces of past times have been left.

A historical and archaeological journey through time highlights the many changes that have taken place in the region: from agriculture (before 1850), through the industrial period (1850-1970) and the steel crisis (1970s-1980s), to the post-industrial period (since the 1990s).

The transformations of the landscape are also reflected in the various names for the region that have been used over time. Like a palimpsest, some older names have been

forgotten, others have been added and some have coexisted since the industrial period. Some refer to geology, others to industrial companies or particular factories, and still others to metaphors.

Transforming the landscape

Human activity in the Minett has played a decisive role in shaping the landscapes of the region, which bear witness to a wide variety of land uses: agriculture, industry, housing, trade, transport, wasteland from past industrial activities, and more recently nature reserves.

Ever since Celtic and Roman times, southern Luxembourg had been an agricultural region. However, the presence of geological layers rich in iron ore in southern Luxembourg and neighbouring Lorraine contributed to the local expansion of the iron and steel industry at the end of the 19th century. The accessibility of the shallow ore deposit in Luxembourg was an asset for its extraction.

From the 1850s onwards, the region became an area of intense mining and heavy industry. With the advent of these activities the formerly rural and agrarian landscape changed drastically. The ground, like a palimpsest, was "rewritten", sometimes more than once: by large infrastructures, the holes and craters of underground and open-cast mines, the new hills formed by slag, and the iron and steel works themselves with their tall smoking chimneys. But this process did not stop with the industrial shaping of the

landscape; the drastic mutations in some areas of the Minett continued thereafter.

Two examples can help shed light on the transformation of the Minett as a palimpsest constituting its identity: the industrial site of Belval in Esch-sur-Alzette and the Haard open-cast mine in Dudelange.

Belval, located near the town of Esch-sur-Alzette, was a pastoral and wooded landscape that people from the surrounding towns visited to escape urban life and the hustle and bustle of industry. In a tourist guidebook from 1907 one could read: "Close to the forest, the ground begins to swell as if silently breathing; a delicious mild air blows towards the weary walker. The tall oak trunks stand motionless in the glowing sun of the summer afternoon, their broad crowns bathed in light; a tangy, pure scent emanates from the resinous bark of the firs, which tower over the forest edge, and mixes with the spicy smell of the lush thyme that flowers on the ground."

With the construction of the Adolf-Emil ironworks (1909-1911/12), Belval became one of the most advanced industrial sites in Europe. The area was deforested and the ground was levelled and covered with concrete, pavement, roads and railroads. The Belval iron and steel plant employed thousands of workers and produced hundreds of thousands of tons of cast iron, steel and rolled products.
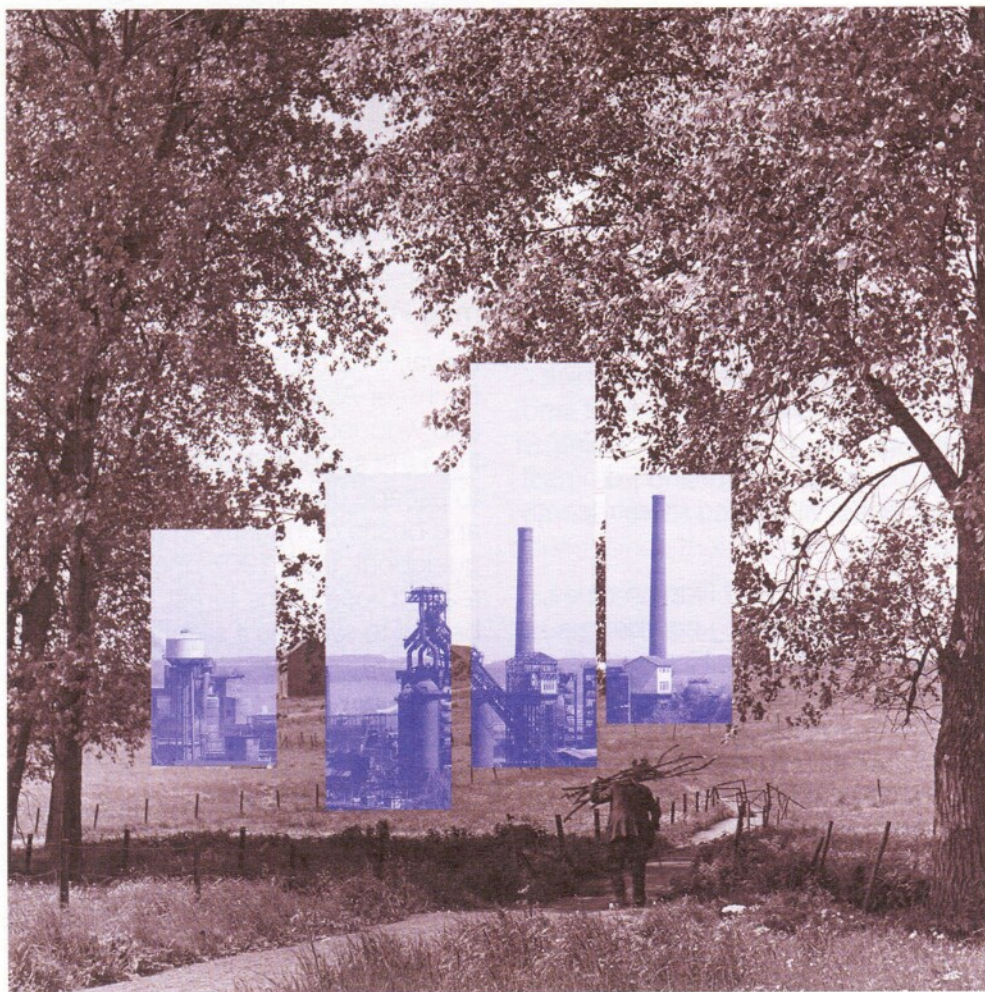
After the Second World War the industrial site was renewed and extended once more. The peak of the site's operation was in the 1960s and 1970s. Then a phase of decline began. The production of raw iron ended in August 1997 and the western part of the factory closed its gates. On the eastern part a steel plant with a rolling mill is still in operation today. The former blast furnace plant was left abandoned and took on a desolate appearance, with rusting industrial artefacts of varying sizes littering a large concrete surface.

In 2000, an ambitious urban development project was launched in Belval. The contaminated soil was removed and some industrial structures were preserved as relics of Luxembourg's industrial heritage. As of 2022, the Belval site is visited daily by thousands of people. It is home to the Cité des Sciences, a campus structured around the University of Luxembourg and other research institutions.

The second example of transformation is the "Haard", an area of 600 hectares stretching across the three municipalities of Dudelange, Rumelange and Kayl-Tétange. The Haard was once an open-cast mine where iron ore was exploited from the 1880s to the 1970s.

A visitor in 1924 noted that "crumbling red-glowing rock walls, with sparse pines and stunted firs crouching above their crests, accompany the most impossible gorge formations. Here we see how the world becomes unnatural when man dares to shape it. Screes without mouths and basins that wind their way back to their starting points; miniature mountain ranges through which transverse valleys are being formed: wherever you look, it's wrong according to our natural laws." The area became so disrupted by mining (both above and below ground) that it began to resemble a devastated, desolate, lunar-like landscape. After the mines were closed in 1972, nature started to reclaim the area.

"Es zeigt sich hier, wie die Welt unnatürlich wird, wenn der Mensch sie zu getalten sich erdreistet." (1924)

As a result, fauna and flora gradually returned and in 1994 the Haard was classified as a nature reserve. It is an area where animals and plants are protected and very few buildings are allowed. It is now part of the first "Biosphere Reserve" in Luxembourg, designated by UNESCO in 2020. The formerly devastated landscape has been revived and is now a popular site for leisure and tourism.

(Re-)naming the region

Regional identity is defined as a sense of belonging to a region by people living in that region. Names of landscapes and places play an important role as reference points. In southern Luxembourg, these

Unsern Gruss den Arbeitern der roten Erde!

Morgen werden sie in der Metropole der roten Erde zusammenkommen, die so schicksalhaft an diese rote Erde gekettet sind, die Berg- und Metallarbeiter.

LUXEMBURGER WORT   Samschdeg, den 26. Januar 1946

Sei gegrüßt mir, Land der roten Erde!

An das Land der roten Erde!

Sei gegrüßt mir, Land der roten
Erde, Land der Arbeit du!
Früh schon wallt von deinen Schloten
Mir ein Wink des Willkomms zu;
Deine stummen Wetter säumen
Abends meines Friedens Land
Und bei Nacht in meinen Träumen
Spiegelt sich ihr Glutenbrand.

Mögen andre nach den Bergen
Fliehn zu Grün und Rauscheklust,
Oder sich im Kahn des Fergen
Schaukeln durch den Rebenduft;
Mir behagts in dem Gefilde,
Wo der Mensch mit eigner Kraft
Diese Erde nach dem Bilde
Seiner Wünsche neu sich schafft.

Nicht die Flur kann ihm genügen
Für die Saat der Gegenwart;
In die Tiefe will er pflügen,
Wo das Erz der Ernte harrt;
Seine Knappenheere brechen
In das Reich des Todes ein
Und in dunkeln Segensbächen
Sprudelt Leben aus dem Stein.

Hügelauf und querfeldnieder
Rings die Luft ist voller Klang
Wie von Adlersturmgefieder
Wie von Hammerglockensang;
Mannesfleiß mit lauten Händen
Füllt den Tag mit Hall und Braus
Und löscht nachts mit Nordlichtbränden
Das Geleucht der Sterne aus.

Sei gegrüßt mir Land der roten
Erde, Land der Arbeit du!
Freundlich blitzt von deinen Schloten
Mir ein Schein der Schönheit zu.

Wolken der Erfüllung schweben
Schimmernd über deinem Tag:
Aus den Steinen hör ich beben
Deinen stolzen Aderschlag.

Nimm mich auf im Zauberwalde,
Wo die goldnen Quellen sprühn;
Wo au grauer Schlackenhalde
Breite Feuernelken blühn;
Wo die stahlgewordnen Träume
Wie gebannte Helden gehn;
Wo versteinte Riesenbäume
An der Zukunft Heerweg stehn.

Wie die Urweltsichten ragen
O so kahl und ohne Zier!
Doch als Ehrenmasten fragen
Sie der Arbeit Truppanier;
Ihre grauen Flaggen fliegen
Und ein Rauschen ruft es weit:
Wohl in diesem Zeichen siegen
Die Gedanken unsrer Zeit!

Dörfer werden, Städte wachsen,
Wo des Rauches Schatten fällt;
Auf des Fortschritts Eichenachsen
Rollt das Mitleid um die Welt.
Aller Brauch wird umgegossen,
Neu geprägt wird Recht und Pflicht;
Mit der Liebe Feuerrossen
Fährt der beßre Mensch ans Licht.

Sei gegrüßt mir, Land der roten
Erde, Land der Arbeit du!
Wachs mit deinen hundert Schloten
Einer freiern Zukunft zu!
Zu der Heimat Glück und Glanze,
Fern den Bahnen blut'gen Ruhms,
Krön die Stirn mit dem Kranze
Eines reinern Menschentums!

Nik. Welter.

names have changed several times in relation to the industrial transformation of the landscape. Before industrialisation the whole southern region of Luxembourg, including the Minett, was part of the broader region called "Gutland" (good land) because of its fertile soil and agricultural potential. When iron ore mining started in the mid-19th century the region was known variously as "Erzbassin" (ore district), "Minettsgégend" (Minett region) or "bassin minier" (mining district). These terms referred to the "minette" (the local iron ore, characterised by its low iron content) and the mining activities.

A new name, "Rote Erde" (Red Earth), slowly began to emerge in the 1870s. Often this name is associated with the red colour of the soil in the iron ore mining areas. However, it was a coincidence that the colour red became so strongly associated with the naming of the Minett. In 1892, the German company "Aachener Hütten-Aktien-Verein Rote Erde" acquired ironworks belonging to the "Société des Hauts Fourneaux du Luxembourg" in Esch-sur-Alzette. The Esch plant, formerly known as the "Brasseur Schmelz", was now referred to in the press as "Aachener Hütte" (Aachen ironworks) and occasionally also "Rote Erde".

Another starting point for the characterisation of southern Luxembourg as the "land of red earth" and "land of work" in the early 20th century was the literary output of Luxembourg poet Nikolaus Welter (1871-1951). Welter's 1906 German poem *An das Land der Roten Erde* (To the Land of the Red Earth) describes the southern region with its mines, blast furnaces, rolling mills and other industrial plants in terms of their technical functions, and glorifies their importance.

« Toujours plus haut, toujours plus loin / que le crassier au front d'airain, / aux gueules rouges qui charbonnent, / à l'haleine qui empoisonne, / »

Paul Palgen, *Les crassiers*, 1931

Germany's defeat in the First World War led to a change of ownership in the iron and steel industry in southern Luxembourg; in 1919 the new company "Société Métallurgique des Terres-Rouges" (Metallurgical Company of the Red Earth) based in Esch replaced the former German companies. With the term "Terres Rouges", the French translation of the colour red entered the public discourse, appearing for example in the names of the steelworks and in a new street name in Esch. While the literature of Nikolaus Welter lived on, the poems of Paul Palgen (1883-1966) popularised the notion of the "Terres Rouges" for Luxembourg's French-speaking population. Guidebooks and tourist advertisements marketed the term "Terres Rouges" to promote

an image of the beauty of the industrial landscape in southern Luxembourg to an international audience. With Harry Rabinger's (1895 -1966) monumental painting "Les Terres Rouges", exhibited in the Luxembourg Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair, the idea of the Minett as the "Land of the Red Earth" reached the international stage. This image portrayed southern Luxembourg as the economic and cultural bearer of progress in the now highly modernised country. The term "Red Earth" persisted in the intense industrial period after 1945 and even continues in today's post-industrial era.

The physical transformation of the landscape and individual places in the Minett went hand in hand with the region's changing economic, social and cultural significance. The sometimes drastic changes in the appearance of parts of the landscape, as well as the renaming of the area by its inhabitants, contributed to the formation of a distinct regional identity that seems to have outlived the industrial activities from which it originated.

THE (VISUAL) IDENTITY OF THE MINETT

Viktoria Boretska

Almost a century has passed since the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy uttered his famous phrase: "It is not the person ignorant of writing but the one ignorant of photography who will be the illiterate of the future." The future that he spoke of already seems to have been here for some time, together with an increasingly visual culture that characterises the contemporary epoch. Images, and especially photographs, are now generally considered as one of the most important dimensions of our relationship with the world. Photographs seem to create, contrast, crop, include, exclude and reflect the "bits and pieces" of the realities we inhabit. Photography itself has become a place for (self-) reflection – reflection on what it does to us, its spectators, the ways in which it shapes visions and constructs identities, and the processes that enable these identities to be negotiated through space and time.

« Le Luxembourg est un don du fer, comme l'Égypte est un don du Nil. »

Carlo Hemmer, 1953

The making of the regional identity of the Minett through photography is a long story of transformations. The visual "monopoly" of the steel industry in shaping the overall image of the region lasted for most of the 20th century. The steel company ARBED fostered a strong association between the region and its industrial grandeur, with workers portrayed as integral components of its giant complexes. Whether standing next to large-scale equipment or operating machinery, workers were shown to be embedded into the industrial setting. Some images depicted workers roaming around vast industrial sites as if they were their natural habitat. In these photographs, the men were often seemingly included as a point of comparison, to illustrate the sheer scale and size of the industrial machinery and elicit public admiration: the workers were a mere sideshow to the triumph of industry.

The visual integration of workers' bodies into the industrial setting was also reflected in a similar human-industry coupling in language. The industrial age saw the emergence of all sorts of metaphors that expressed the workings of industry by comparing them to the human body and its function. As the steel industry grew in the first decades of the 20th century, ARBED was referred to as an industrial organism whose "hand was united with the brain". This created a bond between the human body and the body of industry, one becoming indispensable to the other. Through images and language, the affiliation of workers to industry both mechanised human beings, showing them in proportion with the huge machines they were operating, and humanised the steel industry, turning it into a living and breathing being.

During the *Trente Glorieuses* (1945-1975) – the heyday of the iron and steel industry –, the distance between photographers and their subjects was reduced. The camera got closer, but the portraits often showed strong, healthy, handsome and enthusiastic young men as the archetypal image of the steel industry worker. This particular image became an exemplary vision of the entire region and its people. Most of the time, the region's advanced multiculturalism, migration and other themes remained beyond the scope of the identity fashioned by the steel industry, with social documentary photography becoming popular only later on. The period of industrial prosperity thus focused solely on documentary evidence that supported a belief in the unity and harmony of humans and industry.
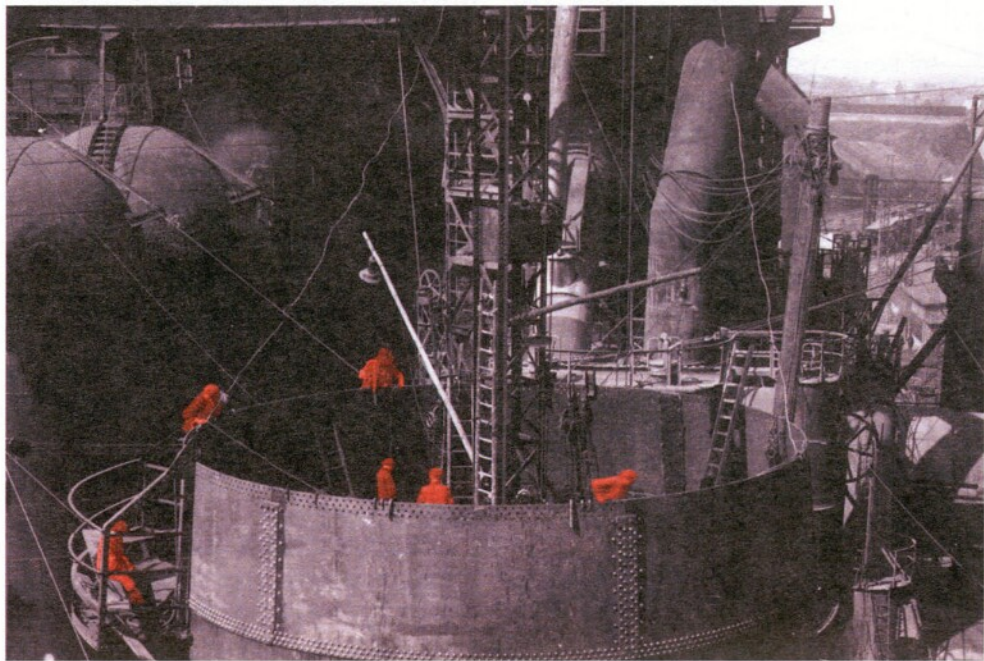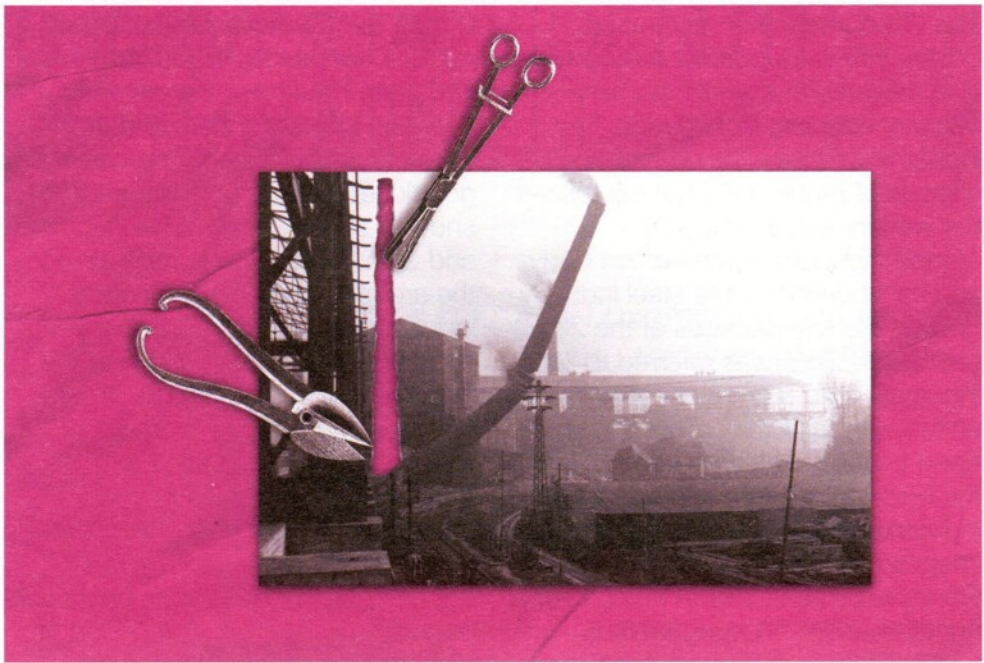
"Aber irgendwann haben alle Märchen ein Ende…"

Jean Back-Hoffmann, 2021

With the industrial decline in the 1970s, things began to change. In the images produced during the times of industrial crisis, workers' bodies were gradually dissociated from the industrial setting, from the body of industry. The latter, unsurprisingly, was still conceived of in human terms, as a patient undergoing surgery. As the local newspaper Escher Tageblatt stated in 1979: "The steel sector suffers hopelessly from overcapacity, and requires a painful but effective surgical intervention. The diseased parts either have to be removed or, where possible, replaced by new organs as part of a balanced, future-oriented operation. (…) Which organs are healthy or can become healthy and fully operational again through suitable treatment?"

One by one, the blast furnaces were dismantled, taking with them significant aspects of regional identity that had been carefully and persistently forged for decades. To document this period, the Luxembourg Ministry of Culture commissioned a photography project called Liewen am Minett (1986). The project resulted in a book containing a selection of black and white photographs by 17 amateur and professional photographers on the theme of transforming the Minett.
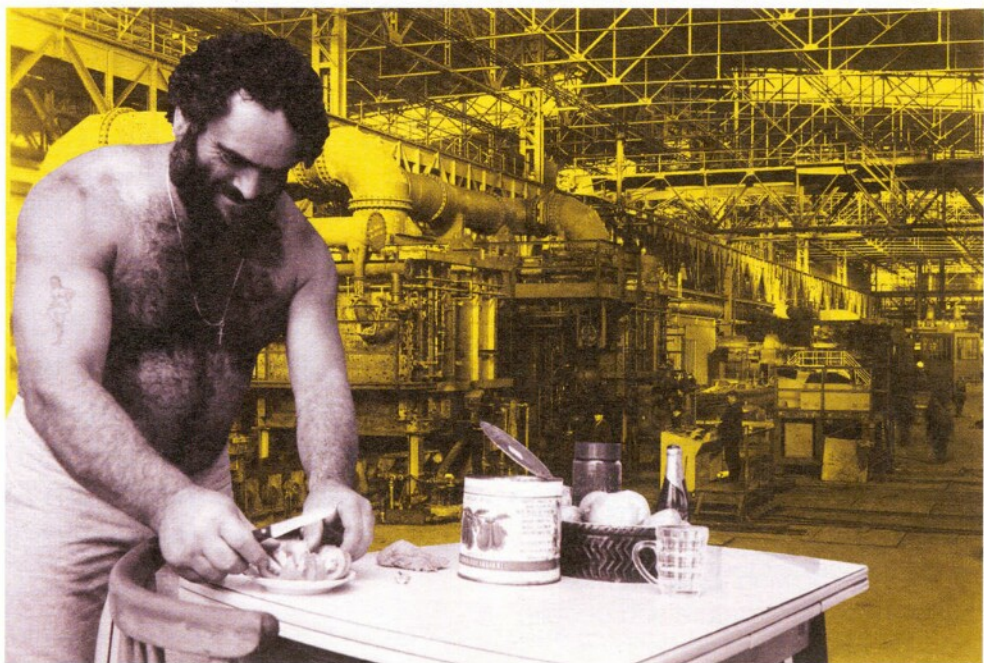
However, the photographs ultimately not only documented the declining industrial region, as was intended; they also pulled on deeper strings about self-image and its ownership. Not everyone liked what they saw being depicted as "life in the Minett". The book sparked a heated public debate, with some calling its photographers "Moralzersetzer" (decomposers of morality) in search of "dirty corners" and "outcasts of humanity", and some referring to it as a "testament to the underdogs" who were finally regaining their dignity.

Indeed, most of the photographs in *Liewen am Minett* seemed unusual to the public, which was accustomed to more formal representations in photography. Here, the people of the Minett were shown in work and leisure contexts; the public were given a glimpse of their private lives, and women and children were also included. Seemingly mundane objects and practices were given attention and value. The exposure of the everyday lives of workers and their families, households and domestic routines certainly made the general image of the region and its people more fragile and vulnerable, compared to the former "people of steel". The exhaustion etched on the faces of workers changing in their locker rooms after their shifts, the quiet intimacy of households or boisterous leisure times in local taverns photographically exposed human sides of identity that had previously been unnoticed by the eye of the camera. The photographs

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unearthed the human dimension of massive steel plants, inviting people to learn to see themselves and the Minett without the Minett.

The industrial decline and simultaneous weakening of the steel industry's "monopoly" in the making of regional identity was followed by the rise of social documentary photography. As well as shining a light on humanity, this offered a more inclusive view of the region, with social problems, industrial pollution and poverty all now displayed in photographs. Well-known picture-postcard views of the Minett, showing idyllic harmony between industry, nature and people, were contrasted and sometimes compromised by photographs of migrant homes or unkempt neighbourhoods. At the same time, the rise of social documentary photography laid the foundations for a new aesthetic and perception of photography, in dialogue with the polished performative images of the region. This dialogue, a negotiation that is still ongoing, is a continuous process of constructing a multilayered and complex (visual) identity of the Minett region.

THE MINETT: DIRTY OR BEAUTIFUL?

Jens van de Maele

« Les cheminées d'usine, hampes géantes et paradoxales, lèvent haut dans le ciel leur misérable et minuscule drapeau de fumée grise. »

Guide touristique, 1926

Industrial regions often get a bad press. The German Ruhr, the Belgian Borinage or the Luxembourgish Minett: in the eyes of many outsiders, these places are synonymous with doom, gloom, dirt and ugliness, and should therefore be avoided at all costs. Of course, such clichés are grounded in historical realities. Certainly in relation to the environment, industrial regions have borne a heavy burden. It would be wrong to assume, however, that inhabitants of such regions have been completely insensitive towards the environmental problems surrounding them. In fact, people living in industrial towns have usually been quite aware of the detrimental impact of factories on their health, as well as on local natural resources (water, air and soil). This awareness is often as old as industrialisation itself, for many regions dating back to the second half of the 19th century.

In other words, local environmental concerns were already on people's minds long before the advent of the present-day environmental movement.

Being aware of harmful environmental transformations did not necessarily imply, however, that factory workers or even members of the middle class were always prepared to actively protest against pollution. In the 19th century, as well as for much of the 20th century, criticising powerful interests of industry could be a risky affair indeed. Workers in particular were in a very weak socio-economic position to speak up against their bosses: after all, in factory towns, everyone's livelihood depended in some way on the omnipresent industry. Moreover, when the working did raise its voice, it usually had concerns that were more acute than the protection of the local environment. This resulted in the prioritisation of social struggles for wage increases, reduced working hours and occupational health and safety improvements.

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Dirt

In the Minett too, pollution was part of life. In their heyday during the *Trente Glorieuses*, steel plants not only provided work for thousands of people; they also had a severe impact on the local environment. The history of air pollution provides a compelling case in point. The steel manufacturing process is a source of various pollutants, including the invisible and odourless carbon dioxide. While we know today that this greenhouse gas is at the root of the ongoing global climate crisis, the problem of global warming was not yet well understood before the last decades of the 20th century. Day in, day out, the people of the Minett nevertheless lived with a more tangible form of atmospheric pollution, namely dust, soot and smoke. A by-product of various steps in the iron and steel manufacturing process, this pollution was as omnipresent as the factories themselves. It could often be seen and smelled; some inhabitants would half-jokingly remember that it could even be "tasted in the mouth". In many ways, smoke and dust were banal facts of life – and as such, people accepted their presence to a considerable degree. In her book *Für die Katz'* (1998), the writer Nelly Moia observed that the inhabitants of the Minett were "rather hard-boiled with regard to air pollution". "How could this possibly be any different," she wondered, "when one is raised in a region where the skies take on a dark brown colour?"

Throughout the decades, municipal authorities actively encouraged this hard-boiled attitude by claiming that the people of the Minett were exceptionally strenuous workers who did not like to complain. In 1950, for instance, the deputy mayor of Esch stated that this stoic attitude was a source of pride for his citizens. As late as 1972, a local newspaper signalled that "the breath of the factories, which colours our skies and makes our cities dusty […], is the spice of our lives". Here, one might also invoke the words of an elderly woman whose granddaughter was interviewed some years ago: "All [was] well with the people of Dudelange, as long as the chimneys [smoked]."

Beauty

Hard work was not the only source of pride for the inhabitants of the Minett. Public discourses continually emphasised that Luxembourg's factory towns were not of the depressing and drab type that could be found in other countries. In tourist brochures, places like Esch-sur-Alzette were catalogued as "worth a visit" given the many marvels they had to offer: prestigious civic architecture, impressive state-of-the-art factories and, last but not least, lush urban parks and forested areas. Rather than being seen as in conflict with one another, the spheres of industry and nature were effectively believed to be complementary. A
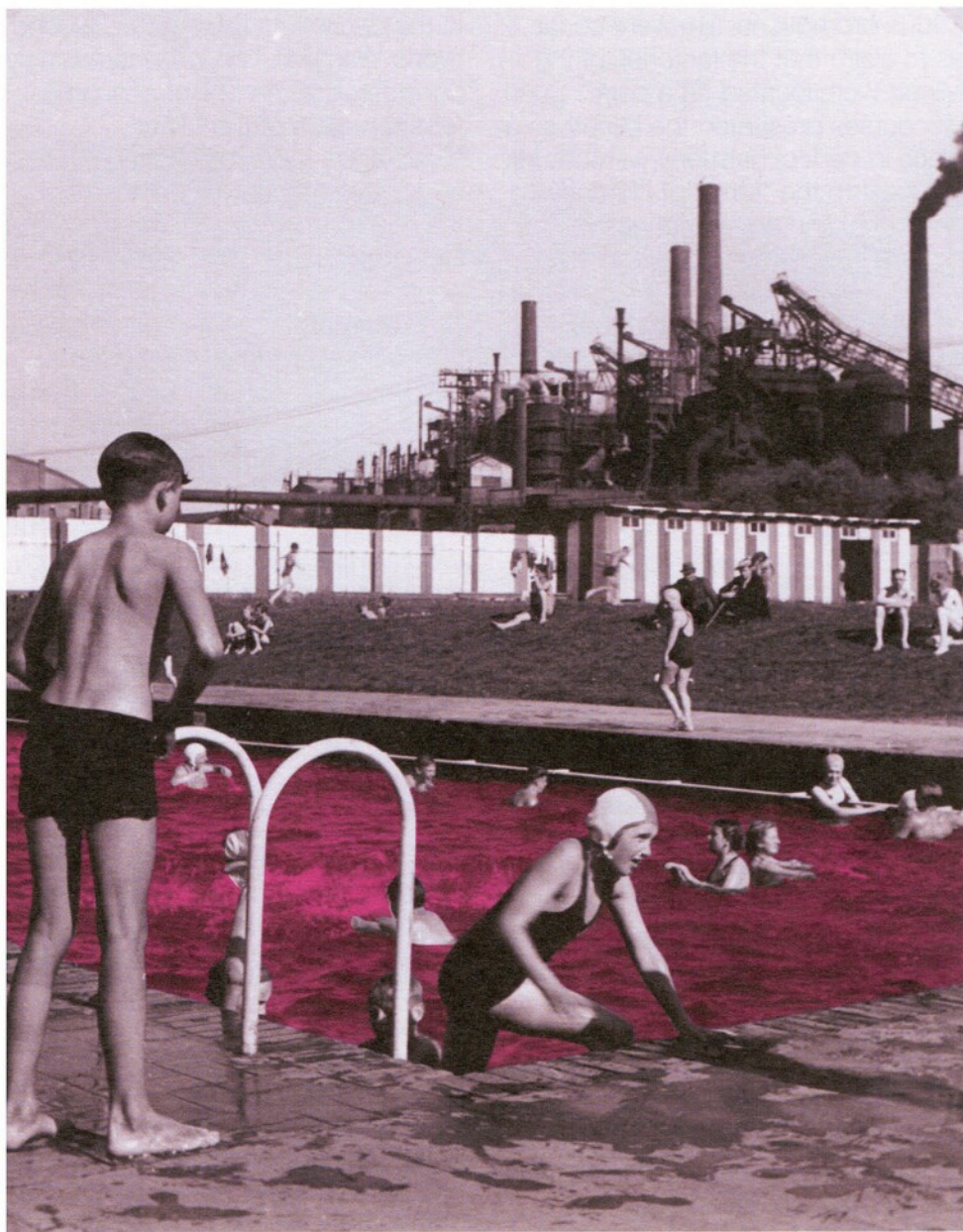
1960s promotional film went so far as to claim that the factories of the Minett were located "in a park". Such discourses presented the Minett as a place in perfect harmony with nature: just next to the "forest of chimneys", one could find an abundance of both real forests and pastoral idyll. In this way, the Minett also appeared as a microcosm of Luxembourg itself, whose national identity was based on the idea that the country's uniqueness lay in the rare combination of beautiful landscapes and world-class industry.

Dirt again

Despite powerful feelings of civic pride on the one hand and official narratives promoting peaceful coexistence between people, industry and nature on the other, the environmental pollution of the Minett did not always go uncontested. In the interwar period, local newspapers regularly made mention of the "dust plague" that affected the lungs and eyes, soiled façades and drying laundry, and invaded living rooms. In this context, the notion of a "plague" carried almost biblical connotations, and seemed to refer to an unavoidable fate. Yet even in the early 1930s, some politicians (such as the socialist member of parliament Adolphe Krieps) recognised that environmental pollution was not just a nuisance. Since the working class was hit harder by industrial emissions than other groups, pollution was also seen as a source of social injustice.

In the decades following the Second World War, pollution was increasingly considered as an object of shame for the people of the Minett. "Blackened roofs, blackened streets and blackened gardens: those are the sad symbols of Differdange!", a local newspaper observed in 1950. It continued: "Paris has its Eiffel Tower, […] Differdange has its dust." The national government responded to this dissatisfaction by commissioning a first scientific investigation into the "dust plague" in the mid-1950s, even though the Minister of Health would emphasise in 1960 that the "pollution problem can only be tackled step by step, since we have to protect our national economic interests". Later, the communist party would use air pollution as a political weapon, linking it to anti-capitalist criticism. In 1972, for instance, a communist newspaper noted: "Wherever ARBED chimneys smoke, huge profits […] fall from the sky, and so do dust and dirt – but it is clear that the first […] go to the iron barons who live on the Riviera […], while the latter go to the working population." By the time this article appeared, the Western world had begun to realise that environmental pollution was a problem of truly global proportions. Yet while most of the factories in the Minett have gradually disappeared since the 1970s (thus leading to a significant improvement in local air quality), the global environmental crisis has, unfortunately, all but dwindled.

LIVING IN THE MINETT

Julia Harnoncourt and Daniel Richter

The prospect of paid employment and the hope of finding a spot for themselves and their families in the new and seemingly ever-growing industrial sector attracted tens of thousands of people to the Minett region. From 1870 until the dawn of the First World War in 1914, the population of Esch increased tenfold, with similar trends being observed in other towns like Dudelange, Differdange and Rumelange. Living in the Minett during the industrial boom could mean many different things. The mines and ironworks were only one of the lasting influences on the identities taking shape. Adapting to the new challenges, limitations and expectations imposed by various authorities and by the workers themselves forged characters. Living conditions and social norms in the household were part of a process that continues to influence self-perceptions even today. As history is often written from a male-centred perspective, specifically looking at women and the roles ascribed to them offers a new view of the industrial past.

The railway network covering Europe transported young men and women who brought with them not only their personal possessions and work tools but also their experiences, ideas, cultures and expectations.

Industrial centres absorbed people when workforce was needed and released them again when the winter months slowed down the pace of the economy or when economic crises struck. Industrial workers and miners were not the only ones to come; craftsmen and -women, unskilled labourers, bookkeepers, innkeepers, secretaries, merchants and engineers also found their way to the Minett. Local authorities and inhabitants faced new challenges associated with a densely populated, fast evolving urban area, where people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds had to live alongside each other.

Housing problems

Life in an industrial town is not only characterised by work. By the turn of the century, a multitude of associations had been set up, offering opportunities for socialising and sharing interests with others. Apart from leisure activities, individuals also needed a place to retreat from the public space, spend time with friends and family and ideally regain energy in an environment that they themselves considered to be comfortable. Debates took place throughout

Population

de la ville d'Esch s. Alz. depuis l'année 1821.

40   Esch

Année de recensement	Population
1821	1310
1839	1967
1843	2046
1849	2087
1852	2055
1855	1985
1858 ✓	1963
1861 ✓	2107
1864	2260
1867 ✓	2669
1871	4.406
1875	6.203
1880	6.101
1885	6.772
1890	6.871
1895	8.339
1900	11.097
1905	11.985
1910	16.537
1916	20.672
1922	21.208
1927	27.143
1930	29.369
1935	27.217

Europe about how urban populations should live, how to plan for city expansions and how housing conditions influenced values and behaviour – although workers themselves were rarely given a say in the planning.

In 1922, an internal communication about the population census summarised: "The housing shortage has reached unheard-of proportions. In the better districts, there are more and more cases of families with 3-4 members living in homes with 9-14 rooms. The working-class districts, however, are thoroughly overpopulated; many families of 10 or more people, male and female, are living crammed together in 2- or 3-room flats, with no consideration for hygiene and decency."

The housing situation, portrayed by contemporaries as miserable for a significant part of the population, was perceived as the root of many problems. It was feared that the cramped, unsanitary living conditions of low-income workers and their families would lead to the brutalisation of society and encourage moral decay and crime, and of course there was the ever-present danger of outbreaks of deadly infectious diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis that could spread rapidly in densely inhabited environments. A common concern in industrial towns was that harsh living conditions combined with hard work would drive poorer inhabitants "into

the arms of the alcohol devil" and lead men to abandon their families.

« Comme le problème des taudis est en premier lieu une question d'éducation, il serait indiqué d'initier déjà dans les écoles primaires les enfants aux dangers que présente le manque d'hygiène dans le logement […]. »

Service des Logements, 1933

Some families or widows shared their house and stove with so-called sleepers or boarders, most of whom were young men who stayed for several weeks or months, which raised the suspicion of deviant sexual behaviour in the public eye. Often, the women in the hosting household offered to wash clothes, change bedsheets and cook meals for their tenants for some additional income, effectively turning their homes into semi-public hostels. In more extreme cases, single beds were rented out twice, meaning that some workers had to sleep in shifts and were homeless for half of the day. Without a home to turn to, working seven days a week became a "worthwhile" option.

Despite the changes in household structures and the dire need for living space, the single-family house was still held up as the ideal housing type in the Minett, rather than the "barracks" of rental

properties seen in big industrial cities in neighbouring countries. There was a distinct tendency to cling onto traditional ideas of what a home was, even though for a large part of the population this remained unachievable.

Towards the end of the 19th century, industrial companies started building entire streets with houses that would be allocated to some of their highly skilled workers and employees, often free of charge. These parts of towns soon became known as "colonies", referring to their peripheral location and slight separation from the rest of the town. Employees could live almost or entirely rent-free in one of a series of similar houses that offered desirable living conditions. One of the main goals of the companies was not to counter the housing crisis, but to oblige these families to stay put and to identify themselves as part of a community that was centred around the company, thereby discouraging them from changing employers. The focus on the construction of detached or semi-detached houses with gardens, with only company-owned or approved shops in the neighbourhood and no pubs or bars, could be seen as an experiment to create a model family that was bound to industry in every part of life – the aim was to shape a new worker identity. In this model family, the role of women was to stay at home and care for her family.

Women in the Minett

"Because whoever comes into the world as a woman brings with her the most important profession: in time, to run a household, or at least to support one," stated a doctor in a Luxembourgish newspaper in 1893, while criticising the housekeeping school in Esch that was run by nuns. Young women should only learn how to take care of their prospective family; all other skills (like mathematics or languages) would be torture for them and would lead to nothing, he claimed.

After the age of 14, only women from better off families would continue in education, and this would invariably be provided in a religious context. A first state-led housekeeping school opened in Differdange in 1924, followed by a second in Esch two years later, both aimed at women from low-income families. Here these young women learned how to cook healthier meals for less money, how to sew, how to keep food, and many other tips to help them save money for the household. One of their teachers was the subsequently well-known cookbook-writer Ketty Thull. Her 1937 book about conserving foodstuffs strongly stresses the important role of the housewife in keeping the family healthy and the household budget in check, and even in keeping the household and therefore the state at peace.

"Wir fordern! Gleiche Moral für beide Geschlechter"

Action féminine, 1927

Similarly, the two most important women's movements that developed in Esch, *Action Feminine* in 1924 and *Femmes Socialistes* in 1927, emphasised the important role of women in the household. In order to help women fulfil their many roles, both groups ran courses on hygiene, childcare, sewing, making toys, home remedies, etc. While *Femmes Socialistes* was part of Luxembourg's socialist party and was therefore particularly interested in women's labour rights, *Action Feminine* was an independent women's movement that claimed to represent all women – even though its founders were financially relatively well off, a fact that undoubtedly complicated this aim. As most of the founders of *Femmes Socialistes* were teachers and therefore also part of the educated classes, it must be presumed that all the courses it offered were also taught with a somewhat "paternalistic", top-down approach.

Women's education at the housekeeping schools, the courses run by the women's movement and various newspaper articles suggested that women had to sacrifice themselves for the good of the family. As the centre and heart of the family, they were considered to be responsible for the psychological, financial and physical health of this entity, and

their own wishes and needs had to be relegated to the background. At the same time, both movements defended housework as being an important, dignified and hard form of labour. There was therefore an understanding that women were the ones who enabled men to be in paid employment, as one of the members of *Action Feminine* wrote in 1928 in the movement's bulletin: "What? Women do not produce value through their domestic work? When the skilled hands of a young woman make baby clothes, when a mother produces stockings, dresses and socks for the members of her household, when a housewife grows vegetables in the garden year in and year out and maybe even looks after the potato field herself – soon to be a seamstress, a milliner, a dairy farmer – no one will doubt that the housewife's work produces new value [...] Would it even be possible for men to fully carry out their profession [...] without the help of their wives?"

Even though both of these women's movements seemed to be focused on educating housewives, they also defended women's rights, for example the civil rights of married women. For both movements, the discrepancy between women being allowed to vote since 1919 but not having any civil rights in the 1804 Civil Code was a problematic issue. Under this code, women had to ask their husbands for permission to work outside the home, to open a bank account or to enter into a contract;

they had no rights over their children and no right to postal secrecy. The husband alone could decide on the family's place of residence, and while female adultery was penalised with a prison sentence, in some cases male adulterers were only fined. The law was gradually phased out, but women in Luxembourg were only granted full legal equality in marriage in the 1970s, much like in many other European countries.

The working people of the Minett were seen as politically strongly opinionated, inclined to alcoholism and often getting into trouble, but they were considered to be hard workers. It was generally felt that the role of their wives and of the household in a broader sense was to keep them in check; the women were intermediaries of what might be termed a "civilising mission" for the Minett, and they therefore had an important part to play in developing a modernised form of workers' identity.

Service des Chaudières

(THE) MINETT ACROSS BORDERS

Irene Portas

Often claimed as the source of Luxembourg's national wealth, iron ore deposits stretched over the country's south-western border; the mining region also covered parts of France and, to a lesser extent, Belgium. Iron ore did not know national borders, and neither did mining extraction or industrial production. What is more, a wide variety and density of translocal and interregional exchanges occurred in this area: iron ore and other materials, merchants' products and farmers' foodstuffs, kin and social ties. Yet a national line still ran through the Minett, affecting and affected by the rhythms of industry and agriculture and the nature of migrant communities. What role did borders play in this peculiar setting? What kind of borders were they and how were they experienced? A closer look at the French-Luxembourgish border during the interwar period uncovers a number of tangible and imperceptible facets of national boundaries.

Tangible borders

There is a widespread belief that national borders are clear-cut, static lines that divide countries. Yet if we observe their historical evolution, borders seem highly mobile. In contemporary history, Lorraine and Alsace are two of the most notorious cases. Both regions swung from France to Germany in 1871, only to be subsequently reannexed by France after World War I. The end of the latter conflict also resulted in Luxembourg's exit from the Zollverein, the German Customs Union, and the creation of the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union. Before 1918, movements of any kind between industrial towns such as Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg) and Audun-le-Tiche (German Reich), or Rumelange (Luxembourg) and Ottange (German Reich), were not subject to any regulations or taxes. From one day to the next, national boundaries drastically changed and institutions, companies and individuals had to adapt their everyday habits.

Let us take the example of the primary "national gatekeepers": customs agents. Their role was to oversee national boundaries, keeping smugglers at bay and ensuring the payment of export and import taxes. With the changes brought about by the Treaty of Versailles, the Luxembourg customs

FUNICULAIRE DE DIFFERANGE A OTTANGE
ET FRONTIÈRE FRANCO–LUXEMBOURGEOISE

administration underwent a series of adjustments because of the shifts in national borders. Luxembourg customs agents had to carry out their work over a border they were not familiar with; they struggled to speak in French instead of German. Being out of the Zollverein and sharing customs boundaries with what was now France's Moselle region, the significance of the border had substantially increased for a small nation such as Luxembourg. It is worth remembering that the country was in a difficult economic situation as it was still recovering from the impact of the war. It was no surprise then that the difficulties experienced by the customs administration, together with other factors, contributed to the emergence of petty smuggling across the border. From tobacco and alcohol to household items and foodstuffs, many benefited from insufficiently guarded borders to save some money or resell goods. By focusing more closely on borders in periods of change, we can see how such transformations impacted life in border zones in different ways depending on one's relationship with the border.

> « Il est en effet hors conteste que nos frontières sont actuellement insuffisamment gardées […]. »

Intangible borders

Beginning in the late 19th century, the mass influx of migrant workers to the mining region resulted in a series of immigration policies that were implemented in the early years of the 20th century. However, the pre-World War I era was mostly defined by a liberal approach to immigration that reflected the prosperity of the steel industry. The interwar years saw the emergence of economic instability, the rise of totalitarian regimes in certain countries, and protectionist measures enforced by various democracies. A new kind of border was progressively making its way through Western Europe. From holding identity papers and communicating residency status to engaging in burdensome procedures to access employment and enduring the introduction of identity cards for foreigners, migrant workers were forced to comply with complex administrative procedures if they wished to live and work abroad. However, the greatest emphasis within this intangible border was repeatedly placed on the repression of any acts carried out by migrants that threatened the public order. Often described as "undesirables", "troublemakers" or "dangerous", those engaged in political activities leading to strikes were expelled from the country.

Among this heterogeneous group, foreign communists seemed to be in the spotlight of police officers in the Minett. These revolutionary networks operated underground for fear of expulsion, carrying out the dictates of their communist agendas using clandestine methods. The aim of communist militants was to stir up the working masses. They believed that the masses would revolt against the capitalist-industrialist system, which they saw as the root of workers' exploitation and suffering. With orders of expulsion threatening their livelihood, communist circles in the Minett began to employ the borderland as a safe space. They were organised in committees and cells, and many set up bases in mines and industrial sites with cross-border pathways, such as the "Blechwies cell" (referring to the mine of the same name) or the "Terres Rouges Esch cell" (named after the ironworks on the Luxembourg border between Esch and Audun-le-Tiche). Italian militants established cross-border networks to smuggle and distribute illegal communist press outlets such as *Il Riscatto*. They would also hold secret meetings in woods located at the border; if the police appeared, they would simply run to the other side of the line to avoid being caught. Subversive underground networks across the France-Luxembourg border learned

La force du prolétariat réside dans son organisation (LÉNINE)

to make use of national boundaries to serve their own agendas. The use of the natural landscape, the iron and steel infrastructure and translocal links made (migrant) communists resourceful borderland inhabitants.

When looking closely into the history of the Minett, we begin to realise that a border is not simply a line that divides two nations, but a microcosm enmeshed in mining extraction, industrial production, migratory waves and political currents. Just like cell membranes, frontiers are semipermeable. In other words, they function as separations between two or more nation-states while also demonstrating fluidity in allowing through certain "molecules" such as iron ore, merchants and farmers, vehicles, communists, smugglers, customs officers, immigration police, etc. Zooming in on some of these lived experiences can help us to step into the shoes of these individuals, to understand their struggles and goals, to grasp their interconnected relationships and to acknowledge the heterogeneous socio-economic fabric composing this borderland, the Minett.

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Publics programme

PhotoWalk/PhotoTalk
26.03., 16:00–20:00

Konscht ouni Alter
06.04. & 20.04., 14:30–16:00

Génération BD
01.05., 15:00–17:30

Atelier Lightpainting
07.04.–09.04., 09:00–17:00

Balades contées
16.04., 10:00–10:30

Finissage weekend (free entry)
14.05. & 15.05.

Information & registration
esch2022.lu / reservation@esch2022.lu

Selected projects in Belval

Exhibition I **Hacking Identity –
Dancing Diversity**
27.02.–15.05., Möllerei

Performance & Exhibition I **Cecilia
Bengolea**
14.05. Performance, Socle C
15.05. Performance, Mudam Luxembourg
14.05.–29.05. Exhibition, Mudam
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REMIXING INDUSTRIAL PASTS

CONSTRUCTING THE IDENTITY OF THE MINETT

27.02. – 15.05.2022

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Closed on Tuesday

From April
11:00 - 19:00
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Closed on Tuesday

Tickets
Visitor Centre
3, avenue des Hauts-Fourneaux
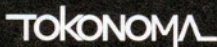L-4362 Esch-sur-Alzette

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