

Carbon Data Mining

Sarah Bodman talks to Caroline Saltzwedel of Hirundo Press, Hamburg about her new works exploring the histories of coal.

I spoke with artist Caroline Saltzwedel from her studio in Hamburg about her recent large-scale project *King Coal*. Saltzwedel was born in England (both parents were from Yorkshire) and has lived in Hamburg since 1995. She studied German at the Universities of Durham, Oxford and Bonn and printmaking at the Ruskin School of Fine Art in Oxford under Jean Lodge – a student and colleague of Stanley William Hayter at Atelier 17 in Paris. In 1998 Saltzwedel founded the Hirundo Press for artists' books in small editions. She has also spent the last twenty years volunteering in the letterpress studio at the Museum der Arbeit (Museum of Work) in Hamburg, which has an important working collection of metal type and one of the last two wooden type cutting machines left in Germany, which she demonstrates regularly to the public. During lockdown Saltzwedel occupied herself by producing a wonderful letterpress artist's book tribute to the museum, *Querschnitt durch die Schwarze Kunst*; you can view images and info on her website.

Saltzwedel describes her themes as “a fascination for the elements – fire, ice, water; I have made artists' books in response to these and to the story of Icarus who flew too close to the sun (fire and air). So now my attention has naturally been drawn into the earth and what is inside it. My new artist's book is a result of my thinking about ecological and social history and my fascination with idiom. With roots in both the UK and Germany, I have an affection for the idiosyncrasies of the English and German languages.”

King Coal explores the practical and social histories of coal mining in Germany and England. Coal is still very present in Germany. There are so many sayings that come from this industry. “Sie haben Kohle”, for example, means “They have money”, or “Where there's muck there's brass”, a Yorkshire idiom, refers to the ‘dirty’ job of mining. Coal is also associated with good luck. In the UK it is one of the gifts brought by the first footer on New Year's Eve (for warmth), it's given to newlyweds for good luck, and Saltzwedel fondly remembers the late Stefan Bartkowiak presenting each exhibitor at the BuchDruckKunst event he organised in Hamburg with a wrapped coal briquette as a memento of the fair.

It has taken Saltzwedel nearly three years to finish this project. One year researching in Germany and the UK, with trips including a tour of the National Coal Mining Museum in Overton, Wakefield, led by a retired miner, and going down the mineshafts at the Big Pit National Coal Museum in Wales. She was inspired by reading *Sylva Subterranea* (1693), an economic mineralogy reference book by Philipp Johann Bunting describing coal regions of Germany. Saltzwedel notes: “He argued even at that time for the careful use of the Earth's resources in order to prevent deforestation due to industries such as shipbuilding. This positive environmental aspect of coalmining is forgotten today.” Two years of design and production followed, resulting in a work with four possible titles: *King Coal*, *The King is Dead*, *The Forest Underground* and *Coal – An Obituary*. There is reference to the mythology around coal, from the Middle Ages to Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, with Siegfried's sword forged anew with coal. The high points of the 1800s–1900s are also represented. There is the text of a traditional song, *Das Steigerlied* (whose first word *Glückauf* translates as good luck), which is still sung traditionally in the Ruhr area and the Erzgebirge, along with English miners' songs of the Bridgewater and Manchester trading canals, all letterpress-printed by the artist. To reflect the historical nature of the book, the artist used handmade papers from

France and Mexico, which she dyed with black pigment and printed her etchings on whilst still damp. A timeline of coal mining from ancient times to the cessation of the coal industry in Germany in 2018 runs along the bottom of the book's pages in the shape of a coal seam.

King Coal offers an artist's interpretation of the key moments in mythology, social traditions and industrial histories of this material, reflecting on how coal was extracted, valued and utilised, and the lives that mining sustained and ended. A true labour of love, the book was produced in an edition of 10 copies and launched at CODEX in California earlier this year (a copy was winging its way to the Linda Hall Library in Kansas City when we spoke). It will be launched in Europe at the Buchkunst Weimar Biennale this autumn.

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