

A Seam of Clay and Coal

by Anna Francis



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Great Row, Hard Mine, Bowling Alley, Cox's Head, Peacock, Bassey Mine, Holly Lane, and Mossfield. These are the names of the seams which hold the city together.

This place of six towns and many more villages developed along the topography of *A Seam of Clay and Coal*. The discovery of the particular geology of the North Staffordshire landscape saw the development over five hundred years of a material identity centred around clay and coal, those natural resources which made this place ripe for the manufacture and development of industry. The seam running across North Staffordshire importantly revealed itself to contain the long flame coal types that are needed for firing pottery ovens.

'In Cobridge, between Burslem and Hanley, yellow clay two feet thick lay only seven feet below the surface with six feet of red marl immediately below that. Stoneware clays and fireclays were also found within easy reach. The geological strata of North Staffordshire are unusual and, with vertical faulting and extensive outcropping, a very great variety of clays and coals were available on the surface to anyone who dug a little deeper than usual'.

In 2012, a group of artists and academics came to the Spode Factory site in Stoke-on-Trent, at a particular time in its history—a moment of pause, between the declaration of bankruptcy and closure of 2008, and the re-imagining of the site that has happened and is continuing. The *Topographies of the Obsolete* project recognised this particular site for its role in worldwide ceramics since 1770, and in various ways, the fifty participating artists, historians and theoreticians that visited across six residencies used Spode as a trope to explore the 'landscape and associated histories of post-industry.'

The initial title of *Topographies of the Obsolete* troubled me when I first heard it, as it talks about something which no longer fits, which has not just gone out of fashion, but has become irrelevant. The fascination with the ruins of industry and the human evidence to be found across the site, I could understand, as an artist that had frequently visited Spode since it closed. But just like the phrase 'post-industrial' feels insufficient, and doesn't tell the full story of what this place is now, in focusing on

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the obsolete, and that which is no longer relevant, it may be possible to miss some of what this place is today, and what it might yet become.

Those that returned aimed to dig 'deeper than usual', and, just as the coal seam which built this place only reveals its rich resources with effort, like anything else, the deeper the dig, the more there is to be found. Since that initial period of intensive investigation of the Spode Factory, the artists of the Returns group have for over six years visited and revisited the city aiming to 'investigate Stoke-on-Trent, its urban landscapes, diverse communities, manufacturing and craft skills, and the material history that has made it so distinctive'.

I recognise something of the methods of the four *re-turning* artists, which are described as 'idiosyncratic' in the exhibition guide. Consisting of walking, looking, and listening, as an artist working in relation to place and site, I know the value of 'hanging around' in places to understand and get underneath the surface. For the *re-turning* exhibition, a *Listening Pot* was made with people of the city, as a way to open conversations about the migration of material, objects and people. The timing of this has been important, coming in another moment of pause for Stoke-on-Trent, where 69.4% of the city's voters in the EU referendum voted to leave. Since that vote, national media branded the city the 'Brexit Capital', and worrying levels of intolerance and racism have been reported. It would be easy then to join the dots, and label this place as unwelcoming of incomers, and intolerant of difference. Building a *Listening Pot* with local people feels like an important symbol to offer in a time of uncertainty, and a space to understand how it feels to live here at such a point.

There have been other moments of redefinition and upheaval, and it may be useful to look to the past, and to one artist's experience of this place. I want to understand something of the complexity of arriving and making a living here, and how at times this city can feel like a site of compromise, and forced 'groundedness'. I will try, via one woman's experience here, to understand where that may come from.

Grete Marks (1899–1990) found herself moving to inter-war Stoke-on-Trent in 1936, exiled from her native Germany after her Hael's Pottery Factory was forcibly bought by the Nazis, for a fraction of its true value. Marks had designed and manufactured pottery which epitomised the Bauhaus ethos of achieving a balance between fine art and craft. Although originally meant as an architectural approach,

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the Bauhaus aimed to achieve a marriage between art and industrial techniques, something which Marks held dear throughout her practice, and which still feel like worthwhile ideas to strive towards. She believed that it was important for the designer to be embedded and connected to the factory process, and so being based in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, she attempted to continue with the cutting-edge design work which she had begun at Hael's. The early works, made in Germany, are exquisite in their simplicity, perfect form is accentuated with careful glaze techniques which do not distract from the shape of the ware, and which encapsulate the Modernist ideal. Marks is documented as finding the conservative British design industry of the time much more difficult to work in, and these difficulties can be seen via the Stoke-on-Trent works.

Some of the wares made in Stoke-on-Trent retain the identifiable Bauhaus form, but have acquired floral embellishments which see them lose something of their essence, and she found the UK ceramics market to be extremely conservative. There were arguments to be had, in relation to the authorship of her work, which she wished to retain, and she was reported as being "difficult to work with" which may have been a misreading of the confidence she had in her design practice.

The confidence displayed by Marks, and the discomfort which it seems to have engendered in the largely male managers of the Potteries in Stoke-on-Trent, make visible a particular unease with artistic creativity, which has been an uncomfortable, if under-articulated aspect of the city's cultural life. Though a city of creative industry, it seems that the artistic part of this identity has always been underplayed, at least in relation to the individual. The designer, the mould maker, the pourer, the fettler, the dipper; all take a hand in transforming a material which is dug from the ground into a work of art, but are viewed modestly as part of the factory machine.

The artists visiting Spode back in 2012, and the Returns group, have sought to find the human amongst this machine. This explains, for me, the fascination with the human detritus, and the evidence of individualism which preoccupied some of the artists who had been involved in *Topographies of the Obsolete*, as they trawled through the ruins of an abandoned pottery, searching for clues about the nature of a place and its people built on clay. Perhaps then it makes some sense, when seeking to understand the role that clay may have in the

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genius loci of this city, to visit a still operational pottery, and so, let me share the experience of a tour of Middleport Pottery, in constant production since 1888.

As an artist based here, but not from here, it is not all second nature to me that something solid and lumpen, pulled from the ground can, by passing through the hands of men and women, be transformed into a beautiful object. In this Model Pottery, the factory is laid out in process order, to make the manufacturing of wares smoother, and resulting in the transformation being viewed in real time. The clay end, where, traditionally, the men worked (and the roles are still today very gendered) is as dusty as it ever was, and I am enthralled at the notion that liquid clay is being transported around the factory by pipe.

I meet a fettler; her job is to clean the edges off the plates, and she lets me have a go. Fascinated, I ask her what is it like, working in such a historic, beautiful heritage factory. It must be so wonderful; isn't it? 'Not really duck', she says. It is my romantic view of the industry here, which sees art where others see work, and I want to say something to her about the importance of this work she is doing with her hands, but I have worked in factories myself, and being from Kent, learnt the hard way, that picking strawberries isn't the same as it was in *The Darling Buds of May*. This distinction is important, and says a lot about this place, and how it talks about itself, the work can be dusty, and boring, but rarely does it feel creative on the factory floor.

Next along the factory line I meet a dipper; he shows me a tool he has fashioned himself, from what looks like packing materials. Throughout the tour I see handmade tools, the making of which has been passed down through history, an army of tiny machines which do the one thing needed to perfection.

There is something about this particularity which is only useful in this one place, along the line. It explains a lot about the city today, and its people, who, for a few hundred years, refined their roles within the machine, creating tiny apparatus to get the job done better. Working in dusty and well-used buildings around the city, they used their hands to transform something dug from the earth into beautiful gleaming works of art to be shipped across the world. Their three hundred years of creative endeavour have largely been anonymous, coming down to a few great names: Spode, Wedgwood, Moorcroft.... So, what about the next three hundred years?

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Perhaps those *re-turning* artists might have felt a possibility as I do, from time to time, that the city could be changing. That maybe some of the skill, and haptic knowledge which is still in abundance here, but which is in danger of being lost, could be gathered up, and transformed into something which recognises the individual and their talents, while still working together to make something worthy of global attention. Perhaps Stoke-on-Trent could become the sort of place where people like Grete Marks could now make an uncompromising go of things?

