Cette montagne c'est moi

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— Text by Hinde Haest

Cette montagne c'est moi (2006–2011) is a celebration of craftsmanship and materiality. The series consists of 68 extraordinary carbon prints depicting slag heaps from the largely dismantled coal mining industries in Belgium, France, Wales, Germany and Poland. Dutch photographer Witho Worms photographed the mountains and produced his images using the now obsolete carbon printing process. The process was mostly used between 1864—when it was perfected and patented by Joseph Wilson Swan—until about 1930. It owes its name to the emulsion of gelatin and carbon pigments with which the paper was coated. The process was—and is again increasingly—celebrated for its capacity to achieve exceptional detail, nuanced texture, subtle colour hues and sooty grey scales. It proved to be highly stable and therefore durable, and facilitated black-in-black printing, one of the greatest challenges in printing. For this reason it became a favorite amongst Pictorialists—the first artistic 'school' of photography—and was widely used for art reproductions.

The carbon printing process is also complicated and labour-intensive. It requires craftsmanship and special materials, not the least of which is a large format camera. The carbon print is the same size as the negative, *ergo* the larger the print, the larger the camera. Though contemporary developments have made enlarging less challenging, Worms still shot his images with a 11×20 inch large format camera, which he carried with him to 68 different sites in five different countries. The physical strenuousness and lengthy duration of this five-year endeavour gives the project the air of a pilgrimage. Even more so given the fact that Worms accumulated coal from each respective slag heap he photographed and used it as pigment for his prints. This makes the subject physically integral to the object that is to represent it—enshrined in a paper relic.

With this, the work goes beyond the nostalgic reminiscence of a disappearing landscape or the revival of a discontinued analogue process. It becomes a metaphysical reflection on the relationship between the real and the imagined. In the photographs of Worms this relationship is both literal—the image consists of what it depicts—and metaphoric; coal was the catalyst of European industrialization and all the socio-political consequences that followed in its wake. It also lay the foundation for the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the predecessor of the European Union. The raw material for Worms' prints at once embodies war, peace, wealth, poverty, inequality, climate change, and the list continues. Working mid-crisis, the artist described the significance of European industrial heritage sites as not merely historic, but as contemporary and immediate; 'Now that the Western economies are wavering, the black pyramids can be seen as the burial mounds of an effectively bankrupt capitalist system.'

Reproducing the work of Witho Worms in this magazine—or any—is effectively impossible. The prints are unique and their physicality is pivotal to their esthetic and meaning. Worms cleverly and patiently manages to circumvent the inherent characteristic of the photograph—its reproducibility—by reproducing it. Worms' conceptualism is consistent throughout his work, testify his subsequent project *1 Two Tree* (2015). The first part, called *1: A Clean Sheet (White on White)*, consists of a series of 30 carbon prints, each consisting of three layers of titanium white on single weight baryta paper. With his minimalist white-in-white printing, Worms both masters and inverts the quintessence of the carbon printing process—and the long-standing proof of a photographer's proficiency—the capacity to print black-in-black.