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Constructing New Signifiers with Aesthetic Intervention: Using Coal in Design

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Abstract

This paper is based on the outcomes of the interdisciplinary project *Coal Story* conducted by the Faculty of Media and the Faculty of Design in Ljubljana (Slovenia), which was implemented in 2019 in cooperation with the graduate and postgraduate students of Media, Communication, Psychology, and Design, who were working under the mentorship of interdisciplinary researchers and designers. The central designer of the project was Marjeta Hribar with her innovative brand *KUOLMi*; she is known for her jewelry and object design made of coal found in her local Zasavje region, which has a rich history of industrial coal mining in Slovenia. Design as a form of visual arts is an important social formation with a potential for restructuring the attitude and strategies that we have towards the material culture around us. In this paper, we try to contextualize the findings of the project using two theoretical approaches: firstly, we use the study of signs, semiology, and secondly, the current study of material culture. The latter is introduced through the work of author Daniel Miller and is developed through the theoretical work of the avant-garde artist Vladimir Tatlin, who established the Department of Material Culture already in 1920s.

Keywords: Design; Coal; Semiology of Fashion; Material Culture; Organicism.

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Coal Story Project

The *Coal Story*[1] project was based on the idea that with the aesthetic intervention it is possible to reconstruct the important symbol of coal in the coal mining Zasavje region (cities of Zagorje, Trbovlje and Hrastnik) in Slovenia. This interdisciplinary project was conducted by the Faculty of Media and the Faculty of Design (Associate Member of the University of Primorska) in Ljubljana (Slovenia), and was implemented in the spring and summer of 2019 in cooperation with the graduate and postgraduate students of Media, Communication, Psychology, and Design, who were working under the mentorship of interdisciplinary researchers and designers. Under the supervision of mentors, students investigated past and present stories related to the rich history of industrial coal mining of the mentioned region. The project took its inspiration and the methodological approach from the local individuals and organizations, such as the association *Trbovlje Newmedia Setting*, *Virtual Museum of Coal Mining – 4th Dritl*, and annual festival *Speculum Artium* which is dedicated to the new media culture and research of the intermedia art.

The main motivation behind the project which propelled the project team's theoretical work and fieldwork was to present coal as a symbol of the past, which can be restructured in a new visionary mode of its own future. In addition to presenting the rich history of the various uses of coal and looking into how coal is represented in today's media as the most hated material or fossil fuel, which has taken a tremendous toll on human health and the environment, the central part of the project was dedicated to collecting and narrating personal stories of miners and young people of Zasavje whose lives and identity were shaped by coal. The project collaborators also presented examples of local and international design practices that find inspiration in coal as an unconventional means of artistic expression. The project results were collected in an e-brochure (2019) and presented at the exhibition in May 2019 at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana.

On the theoretical side, the project team was first faced with the problematization of the representative value of the coal in the present time in the Zasavje region. This region is one of the traditional industrial coal mining regions of Slovenia facing high unemployment and landscape degradation processes. With coal excavation, which has been the main driver of the region's development in the past, completely abandoned today, the consequences are evident not only in the economic sector but in all areas of the local community, where there is a belief that a new impetus for the Zasavje region is impossible as it was only suitable for mining and industry. The Zasavje region is also known as a polluted and unattractive region for tourism. Since its most important raw material is considered to be dirty and harmful, this poses relevant problems for tourism and creative development in the national and international contexts.

To present the story of coal in this region in its entirety, the project members first examined the history of the various uses of coal. Here, they highlighted the important historical facts, which show that in the 17th century, before the development of the coal mining industry, coal was used for medicinal purposes. The healing possibilities of coal became a sign that this raw material was not only suitable for burning and heating. To this positive aspect of coal another constructive element was added, acquired via conducting interviews with former miners. In these interviews, one thing was evident — for all former miners, coal represented a symbol for "bread," "safety," and "hard work." This research thus revealed that coal is, in fact, an extremely controversial symbol, as it represents, on the one hand, a means and source of life, and on the other, impoverishment and degradation, environmental pollution and disorientation of local young people.

In the next step, the project team searched for examples of good practices of coal usage in other areas, and discovered interesting findings about contemporary coal usage in art and fashion design. In particular, in Slovenia, jewelry designer Marjeta Hribar uses coal found in her local Zasavje region in her daily creative practice of object- and jewelry design under the brand *KUOLMi*. The design work of Marjeta Hribar raised an important question on which the theoretical grounds of this paper is built. Can designing

1. The project was co-financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, and the European Social Fund in the framework of the program "Public Call for Project Work with Economy and Non-Commercial Activities in Local and Regional Environment – Creative Path to Knowledge 2017-2020."

jewelry from coal restructure the negative sign of coal into a positive one, and can it be said that design is a certain form of communication or form of language? And if coal is understood solely as a sign, does it not lose its concrete material value — the value that comes from its own materiality? At the same time, it seems that through the process of design coal is not only a material but becomes a particular object of material culture. We will address these two questions below.

Restructuring a Signifier with Design

Because of the innovativeness of the project and the importance of its results, it became crucial to contextualize its findings in theoretical research. Already from the beginning, the *Coal Story* project was rooted in the understanding of fashion and wearable design as a complex system of communication, as a *form of language* with its meanings, signs and signifiers, which hold an immediate socio-aesthetic effect. Thus, the first chosen theoretical approach was the study of sign processes, semiology. A semiological approach to understanding the meaning of clothing and fashion system derives from the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure and his theory of sign, in which he researched the patterns and functions of language and according to which the "sign" consists of the "signifier" and the "signified," or the "referent." One of the first semioticians who explored the subject of fashion in this manner was the French post-structuralist Roland Barthes in his prominent book *The Fashion System* (1967). In this paper, we want to draw attention to another important academic — Malcolm Bernard, who explains some of the most influential and important theories on fashion in his book *Fashion as Communication* (1996). In chapter four entitled "Fashion, Clothing and Meaning," he applied the definition of de Saussure's theory of sign to fashion and clothing design. In this chapter, Bernard presented fabrics and clothing as specific signs which can be analyzed as signifiers that represent or present something other than themselves. A men's collar, for example, indicates informality when being open and without a tie.[2] The semiological approach also permits the application of the chain of signifiers to different elements and fabrics, out of which the garments are made. Thus, woolen tweed may indicate "rusticity and the countryside" and, on the other hand, high-quality worsted yarn is indicative of sophistication and urbanity.[3]

If, however, we take fashion items and wearable design as signs articulating meaning, it is then possible to also determine their denotational and connotational significations. Denotation refers to the generally accepted meaning, which is usually found in the lexical interpretation[4] and does not differ significantly between different cultures and languages. Connotation represents the second level of meaning that can be described as thoughts or feelings, which are triggered by a word or image, "or as the associations that a word or an image has for someone."[5] For Malcolm Bernard "[t]he understanding of connotation is an intersubjective and hermeneutic affair."[6] The author writes how astonishing it is that people of the same age and culture express almost identical connotations of certain words. As an example, he mentions the word "tweedy," which together with the connotation of cloth, usually evokes the association of something that is a bit old-fashioned and belongs to a higher class.[7] In the context of this fact which states that the relationship between a signifier and a signified is arbitrary the question is raised: what determines meaning in the first place. In his analysis, Bernard shows that producers of meaning are not designers or audience (users) or some undefined authority.[8] This meaning production happens with the act of "constructing" the meaning by using "signifiers from already existing structure over which

2. Malcom Bernard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 2002), 81–2.
3. Cf. Bernard, 82.
4. Cf. Bernard, 84.
5. Cf. Bernard, 85.
6. Cf. Bernard, 86.
7. Cf. Bernard, 85.
8. Cf. Bernard, 98-105.

the individual has no control."[9] The meaning is created by differences between the signs, which are socially established; so as to say that there is a social consensus, which in general allows communication to happen. And in this sense, this can be also said for fashion communication:

> So, meanings are a product of the difference or the relation between signs: as Saussure says, "in language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it," there are only differences "without positive terms" (Saussure 1974: 120-121). Moreover, meanings are the product of social agreement, they are the product of negotiation between people.[10]

Among the signs it is also possible to determine the "syntagmatic" and "paradigmatic" difference. In the case of the first, syntagmatic difference, the difference between the signs refers to the signifying row, conjunction (men's trousers are for example combined with a men's shirt), and in the case of the second, paradigmatic difference, the focus is on the possibility of substitution, disjunction, of things with something else (that is, for example, a difference which emphasizes a distinction in the style of a collar of a given men's shirt). Thus, in the syntagma, we have the relationship between the elements "this *and* this *and* this" and in the paradigm it is "this *or* this *or* this."[11]

As we see, syntagma and paradigm are dependent on the specific culture and the social context. In this sense, the specific meaning of fashionable clothing does not exist without this kind of contextualization. In connection to this, it is good to point out the notion of ideology which functions through the aforementioned denotative and connotative meanings. This was confirmed by Roland Barthes who emphasizes the role that connotation plays for ideology in the examples of myth and rhetoric (for Barthes, they represent only versions of ideology). As Bernard explains:

> Connotations were the result of one's class, sex, age, nationality and so on, and consequently changed from person to person as class, age and so on changed. It is on the level of connotation, then, that ideology is to be found. The feelings, associations and impressions that come to mind are the result of a person's class, sex, age and so on. They are the source, in a sense, of ideology.[12]

And if ideology works at the level of connotation, denotation only "naturalizes" it; it normalizes connotational meaning in the way that we do not notice that a specific meaning is a result of a specific ideology of some particular class, a particular age group, gender group, etc. Denotation therefore takes these meanings as literal and generally acceptable. Semiology can therefore be understood as a theory of general contexts, within which we can understand the meaning of clothing, and these contexts can be understood precisely through the analysis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships.[13]

In the case of the artistic and design practice of the above-mentioned jewelry designer Marjeta Hribar, which became a focal point of the *Coal Story* project, this would mean that by using coal as her material, she had to deal with the ambivalent significance of coal as a sign: in the present moment, coal indicates something dirty and harmful, as well as something that was once recognized as signifier of prosperity, enabling economic stability and growth of the Zasavje region, and connecting the local community. With her jewelry design, design of national and local souvenirs, and business gifts made of coal, this artist highlights specifically the representative value of coal which derives from the common local identity of the region. In one of her interviews, Marjeta Hribar explains:

> I am a jewelry designer, and I come from the Zasavje region, so it was natural for me that I took coal for my own material, and that, through different processes, I tried to transform it into something which would again obtain a value. In this way the jewelry under the spon-

9. Cf. Bernard, 89.

10. Cf. Bernard, 89.

11. Cf. Bernard, 90.

12. Cf. Bernard, 95.

13. Cf. Bernard, 94.

> taneous brand name KUOLMi was created. The brand name represents a phonetic transcription of the word 'coal' in Zasavje region's dialect.[14]

Jewelry made of coal creates an intimate bond for maintaining the relationship with the past in the name of the emancipation of local people in the present, and it allows the release of shame which emerged in Zasavje region when coal mines were shut down. The emphasis of this designer lies in the fact that the past can be invested in the future, no matter what this past was and how it is accepted today by the majority of people. Sign in itself can be translated into something else, it can (and for an integrated individual and society — it has to) be restructured into an affirmative and productive symbol. In this way, coal should not represent something dirty and harmful, but should first and foremost associate to a sense of belonging and connectedness:

> I live in the Zasavje region, where for the last 200 years almost everything has been revolving around this sedimentary rock. All of our grandparents' and great-grandparents' stories are connected to coal, also our whole history. Back then, even though life was hard and dangerous, people knew they were part of something. Recently, however, coal has become something ugly, dirty and harmful. In our minds, however, we are still emotionally attached to it, and as coal lost its significance, we lost ourselves a bit too ... One time an elderly lady came to visit me from Ljubljana, she came by train and she was using a walker. She wanted to buy a coal ring in the memory of her grandfather who was a miner. Another time a doorbell rang and there was a married couple from Germany who heard about my jewelry on the radio. Without knowing exactly who they were looking for, they found me with the help of neighbors who showed them where "the one with coal" lives, because they wanted to take with them a piece of their birth place.[15]

There is another interesting moment in the design practice of Marjeta Hribar. It can be said that her work is interesting not only because she perceives and co-works with coal as an actual sign, but also because she uses coal as a material that she takes through a special treatment to eventually form into an aesthetic object. This process shows the transformation of the usage of this material — from the exploitation of the material for other processes to revealing this material for what it is — black sedimentary rock. This allows her another level of play with this material and variety of usage which is not burdened with its history as a fossil fuel. The emphasis on coal as a material which is not being used for burning, but for shaping and forming is something that is not adequately covered by semiology, so a step in the direction of the theory of material culture is necessary.

14. See https://govori.se/trendi/marjeta-hribar-oblikovalka-premog-oblikuje-v-nakit/.

15. See https://govori.se/trendi/marjeta-hribar-oblikovalka-premog-oblikuje-v-nakit/.

Figure 1: Bracelet and Earrings KUOLMi, Handmade Coal Jewelry

Figure 2: Cufflings KUOLMi, Handmade Coal Jewelry

Figure 3: Bracelet KUOLMi, Handmade Coal Jewelry

Autonomous Logic of Material

A different understanding of fashion and design which differs from the semiological approach[16] can be found in the theory of material culture, especially in the version offered by Daniel Miller. For Miller, semiology is a theory that provides an understanding of things according to the way how we are represented by these things. And fashion items and clothing are actually the most common way with which semiology explains the representational value of things. "Clothes was a kind of pseudo-language that could tell us about who we are," writes Miller on the theory of semiology, and continues with a warning: "As such, material things were a neglected adjunct to the study of language: an apparently unspoken form of communication that could actually speak volumes once we had attuned ourselves to this capacity."[17] Restrictions that Miller notes in semiology can be unified and expressed in one main consequence: semiology changes clothing and fashion items "into mere servants whose task it is to represent [...] the human subject."[18] According to Miller's theory of material culture, which stems from the theoretical foundation of Pierre Bourdieu, as well as Hegel's theory of "objectification" (Miller's term), objects don't need to be continually reduced to subjects.[19] In general, Miller takes a dialectical methodological approach, which can surpass the most common difference between the subject and the object. In this sense, Miller's analysis of materiality shows that materiality usually wants to be dematerialized. In it is a paradox that the practices that are the most radical in advocating the immaterial (as in the case of religious practices) usually use the most material things (embalmment in Egyptian culture, bread and wine in Christianity, etc.) in their own implementation.

Materiality, including clothing, is usually understood as something that by itself has no value (the value

16. Miller originally uses the term "semiotics."

17. Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 12.

18. Cf. Miller, 13.

19. Cf. Miller, 78.

and importance of it depends only on the subject) as it is merely an inanimate thing so a serious interest in it is usually understood as trivial and superficial. While the subject as a carrier of the internal self is seen as the one that assigns the value to something that does not have a value in itself. This means that the new material approach, which is not focusing on the subjective value of the material, provides the following: "(1) it rethinks dualisms and (2) it interrogates the notion of material agency. New materialism endeavors to rethink dualisms between, for instance, the natural and the social, the human and the non-human, the material and the immaterial."[20]

The emphasis on the material as such is of paramount importance also for the designer Marjeta Hribar, who points out: "I would like for everyone to find their own style and above all their own material, because I think that in this way a person can really feel the material of their own work, and can show their own style and creativity."[21] Jewelry made of coal in her artistic work also retains the organic shape and the natural color of coal. In the process of making these objects and jewelry, Marjeta Hribar does not create any waste material, giving respect to the material and also emphasizing the ecological approach in her work:

> The jewelry is presented under the slogan: "Wear it, don't burn it!," which means that if we look at something from a different perspective, we can create a better world together. In the age of plastic that we live in, it is very pleasant to be able to ware something natural ... From something that was a synonym for old, ugly and harmful, I created something that is new, beautiful and represents a new ecological way of thinking. The thing is that we don't need to throw away things that we already have. If we look at them from another angle, we can recognize their other qualities, which we have not noticed so far, reuse them, and thus change something invaluable into something valuable. This is an eco-friendly and innovative approach ... Miss Eco Slovenia had a wish to wear a crown made of coal, because it emphasizes the principle of ecology very well, and is magnificent in its form ... Coal jewelry is imaginatively designed and, above all, a piece of Slovenia travels with Miss Eco Slovenia Tamara Fišter around the world and presents Slovenians as innovative and ecologically minded people. All this is contained in the message of the crown.[22]

And despite the fact that we are today witnessing an interdisciplinary "material turn," which is carried out by the theory of material culture against the "linguistic turn,"[23] the idea of an autonomous logic of material can be found already in the 1920s in the work of the avant-garde artist Vladimir Tatlin.

20. Anneke Smelik, "New Materialism: A Theoretical Framework for Fashion in the Age of Technological Innovation," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 5, n. 1 (2018): 38.

21. See https://govori.se/trendi/marjeta-hribar-oblikovalka-premog-oblikuje-v-nakit/.

22. See https://govori.se/trendi/marjeta-hribar-oblikovalka-premog-oblikuje-v-nakit/.

23. Cf. Smelik, "New Materialism," 36.

Figure 4: Crown of Miss Slovenia 2019, KUOLMi, Handmade Coal Jewelry

Material Culture and Aesthetic Intervention in Design: Vladimir Tatlin

Russian avant-garde artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin was focusing on experimenting with new materials and redesigning everyday objects as a member of the GINKhUK (the State Institute of Artistic Culture), where he established the Department of Material Culture and directed it from 1922 to 1924. He "described [the program] as a 'composite experimental-research design-centre or design-workshop [with] its own productive base and its own office for publicizing a new sphere of activity."[24] His interest in material culture becomes obvious also in titles of his articles, such as *Material Culture* (1923) and *Culture and Materials* (1929).

Tatlin is regularly marked as a constructivist, even if he proclaimed his independence from all art movements.[25] He is mostly known for his unfunctional designs of the flying apparatus *Letatlin* and the *Monument to the Third International*, and for his redesigns of everyday objects such as teapots, working clothes and other goods that were never mass produced. His avant-garde work and experimental approach to materials in which he paradoxically "sought a harmony with nature and a connection with a past,"[26] is characterized by concepts of organicism, craft and "humanized technology,"[27] with which

24. Laurel Fredrickson, "Vision and Material Practice: Vladimir Tatlin and the Design of Everyday Objects," *Design Issues*, vol. 15, n. 1 (1999): 60.

25. John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 98.

26. Cf. Fredrickson, "Vision and Material Practice," 49.

27. Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, "Tatlin, the Organizer of Material into Objects," in *Tatlin*, ed. Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 134–54.

he "proposed to transform daily life through redesign of everyday objects."[28]

In all of his texts, Tatlin claimed that art influences society and man. In the program article *The Work Ahead of Us* (1920), he argues that the real revolution is a truly aesthetic (sensory-perception) revolution:[29] "What happened from the social aspects in 1917 was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914, when 'material, volume and construction' were accepted as our foundations."[30] In constructivism, the sense of touch is added to the sense of seeing; hapticity is, according to Tatlin, called upon to control the eye: "We declare our distrust of the eye, and place our sensual impression under control."[31] Through his artistic endeavors, Tatlin seeks to analyze the qualities of new materials, iron and glass, in order to later use them for "uniting purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions."[32] He continues describing his program, in which he refers to art as the process of creation of new forms of material culture, which will change everyday life: "The result of this are models which stimulate us to inventions in our work of creating new world, and which call upon the producers to exercise control over the forms encountered in our everyday life."[33]

In the next two texts *The Artist as an Organizer of Everyday Life* (1929) and *The Problem of the Relationship Between Man and Object: Let Us Declare War on Chest of Drawers and Sideboards* (1930) Tatlin expresses that "new life" needs "new objects," which need to be redefined and redesigned to serve the modern man in both appearance and functionality: "It is imperative for old artistic thinking to take on a new form — a culture of material."[34] In these texts, Tatlin addresses domestic objects in the human environment, such as furniture, which forms and conceptualizes man who it is not even aware of this process. "Our whole life, and indeed our production, is burdened by things, and mainly by those things that store other things. And we strive to destroy them, to take only separate parts from them and insert these parts into the architecture of the building."[35]

In her article entitled *Vision and Material Practice: Vladimir Tatlin and the Design of Everyday Objects* the historian of contemporary and modern art Laurel Fredrickson writes:

> Tatlin held that design should derive from exploring and exploiting a material's intrinsic qualities, and by considering how it might combine with other materials. As the art historian Yve-Alain Bois points out, Tatlin believed that there was a "natural" way to treat each material: "a metal sheet must be bent, hence curved; glass must be cut; and so on." To force something to take a form it would not take in nature was antithetical to his approach.[36]

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that with his work and theoretical approach to design Tatlin stands firmly against the Western or the American aesthetic practices, which were already taken over by artists and designers in Russia at that time. According to Tatlin, they were focused solely on the appearance of the designed object, they were "unnatural" and he characterizes them as "chaotic individualized production" and "implicitly innovative for innovation's sake."[37] Instead of mimicking the trends of the

28. Cf. Fredrickson, "Vision and Material Practice," 49.

29. The root of the aesthetic value lies in the sensual experience, and this is reflected already in the etymology of the word itself — the term "aesthetics" (derived from the Greek word *aísthēsis*) means "perception by the senses." In his work *Aisthesis* (2011), philosopher Jacques Rancière wrote: "Social revolution is the daughter of aesthetic revolution." In this sense change in aesthetic value has social and political implications, it is the ground for new relationships and new structures to grow and take place in the society.

30. Vladimir Tatlin, "The Work Ahead of Us," in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 206.

31. Cf. Tatlin, 206.

32. Cf. Tatlin, 207.

33. Cf. Tatlin, 207.

34. Vladimir Tatlin, "Hudozhnik — organizator byta," in *Formal'nyj metod. Antologiya russkogo modernizma. Tom III. Tehnologii*, ed. S.A. Ushakin (Moscow, Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyj uchyonyj, 2016), 879.

35. Cf. Tatlin, 881.

36. Cf. Fredrickson, "Vision and Material Practice," 53.

37. Cf. Fredrickson, 54, 61.

capitalist countries, Tatlin advocates the necessity of understanding and using materials that are in line with the specifics of thinking, economics, available raw materials and climate in his local country, Russia. For this artist, the consideration of the listed factors, the specificity of the human body and the results of the analysis of the used materials and their interrelationships were essential for the design and construction of any new object. This demonstrates the importance of "organic" and "organic form," which Tatlin places as the beginning of the new art. Organicism is the principle of coherence of various fields in the creation of artwork, art and technology, as well as man, nature and technology. Tatlin was producing for the future with the means of modern technology, but he always stayed connected with nature and the past. As theoretician Fredrickson writes, following the prominent Russian author Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova:

> For Tatlin, as aspects of a transcendental order, the man-made and the natural were correlates: "the universe, society, the individual, cosmic and everyday objects, natural organisms and the technical tools produced by man, their supreme manifestation, were of identical value." According to this perspective, object-making might be considered a significant way for humans to emulate nature's creativity. This implies that Tatlin may have thought that, in order to be utilitarian, an object needed not only to serve practical needs but also to evoke a greater unity and thereby connect the user with forces greater than himself, making him aware of his place in a collectivity that transcended the social community.[38]

Tatlin sought to put objects in dialogue with their surroundings, he wanted to "make them part of a living whole, give them a dialogical character."[39] He devoted his work at the Department of Material Culture to the creation of new forms that would result from precisely this analysis of the relationship of an object with its environment man and his body, as well as the collective past.

These characteristics of interconnectedness, openness and dialogue between objects represent the base of the mentioned principle of organicism, which is a starting point of Tatlin's work. Organicism refers us both to "naturalness" and "living" and, for Tatlin, organicism is also closely related to the concept of "organization."[40] Tatlin sees every object as a unit that is always utilitarian as it performs a certain function. For this artist and designer, a particular object has its role and function, its agency, much like the subject. It is in this way that we need to understand Tatlin's idea that the artist must become the organizer of everyday life with the production of new forms that will emerge from the study of relations between materials in themselves and in relation to their particular local environment.[41]

Similar to Tatlin, Marjeta Hribar's design derives from the deep past and is addressing a problem in the present. For both, the problem that is being solved is of regional or local nature. They take the identity of locals and the local material with its characteristics to transform the often-uncomfortable modern world, which is causing psychological and social anxiety and insecurity. In Marjeta Hribar's example, these are the enduring patterns of industrial coal mining past in the regions where it is difficult or even impossible to let go of the past.

The *Coal Story* project was able to track the different meanings of coal in the local Zasavje region, i.e. "industrial processing," "black," "non-organic" and "backwardness" on the one side, and echoes from the past about coal representing "bread" and "prosperity," on the other side. With the help of the local designer, we were also clearly able to see the possibility of transformation of this specific signifier, which was achieved by the *aesthetic intervention* and resulted in creating a *new story* of the material. This new narrative provides a solid support for the formation of a renovated identity of the region and people, which is aligned with new values such as ecology and awareness. In the *Coal Story* project and Marjeta Hribar's work, coal was able to speak for itself as a material that was not being destroyed or burned, it became a subject in itself that can influence its surroundings once again as a literal "black gold."

38. Cf. Fredrickson, 67.

39. Julia Vaingurt, "Vladimir Tatlin: kul'tura materiala," in *Formal'nyj metod*, 871.

40. Cf. Vaingurt, 873.

41. Cf. Vaingurt, 874.

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