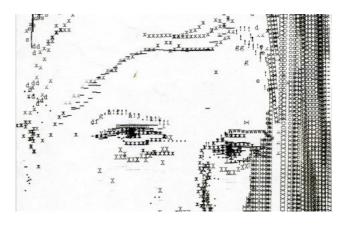# typo-graphics

An Introduction to the Work of Maxim Lichtenwald

One day I found an orange Robotron typewriter at a street sale in Weimar. Although 10€ seemed to me to be too much for this mechanical relic from the 80's, I really loved the GDR colour and bargained the lady down to 8.50€. I bought a new ribbon at a neighbourhood shop for writing supplies and installed the retro-hip machine at the Galerie Eigenheim where we used it as a guest book. Sometimes people wrote actual messages about the exhibition at the time of their visit, but usually we ended up reading line after line of typo-strewn drunken sexual perversion. One night, however, a group of local post-reunification teenagers stormed into the gallery. Whereas they had no interest in art whatsoever, they were enthralled by the "old school laptop" we had sitting on a pedestal in the front room of the gallery. None of them claimed to know what it was, how it should be used and why we had such a thing. I made a demonstration, and one of the more adventurous in the clique asked if he could give it a "try".

I showed him how to roll in a new sheet of paper and type a few words. I slid the carriage back to the right, made a few line breaks and turned the typewriter to him so he could try. The group crowded around, the girls laughed at his line full of mistakes as the boys jeered him on. Once everyone (except the one girl who couldn't be bothered to stop texting on her mobile) had their turn and they laughingly disappeared into the night, I looked at the sheet and was amazed to find not only the l33tspeak sentence "OMG U SUXXOR LOL" among the gibberish the teens had written, but also an ASCII-like drawing of a dog.

In l33t (a new pidgin-like language that has arisen from the internet, gaming and hacking scenes) this could be interpreted as meaning: "Oh my god you are a sucker. Ha ha ha." l33t originated as a kind of insider code of symbol substitution and purposeful misspelling. It is a way to write words for which the author could be censored. Much like the comic drawing of Jesus shouting "HOLY SH!T" when scooping up after his dog, l33t has developed into an auxiliary written language with its own structure of playfulness and willingness to experiment for the sake of laughs, or LULZ as l33t would put it.

ASCII art, like l33t, is a subversion of written language that recontextualises the letter. ASCII is a technical name for the set of characters available to a computer for the display of letters, numbers and symbols. While l33t subverts the letters and spellings of common English to make continuously

morphing codes that are thereby impenetrable to outsiders, ASCII artists subvert the letters by capitalizing on the variety of shapes and "densities" of various characters in order to make drawings ranging from the simple to the complex. Instead of words on a line, the ASCII drawing of the dog placed letters and symbols on line after line, building the picture in a post-pointillistic way that is very much dependant upon the structured need for lines of text.

This idea of lining up symbols in rows is not a new one, and its millenia-long progression from clay tablets to illustrated manuscripts to the Gutenberg press to the Linotype machine to typewriters to lightsetting to graphic design software is a story intricately tied to the development of social structures and industrial development. For the printsetting journeymen from the 19th century, their "line o' type" was less a kind of information content than it was a measuring stick for the payment of their wages. With the introduction of steam-powered printing presses and the hunger of the literate masses, these workers were among the first pre-Fordian humans to face the brutal paradigm shift that required them to increase their tempo to match the pumping pistons and hardened steel of the machine age. The status quo became long, sweaty hours of backbreaking work feeding the machine with content so these tradesmen could feed their families. A century later not only has the pace of modern life become faster, it has also become more fleeting. Today our line o' type is about 140 characters: the length of an SMS or tweet.

All the more refreshing is it then to witness a return to slowness as can be seen in these works of Maxim Lichtenwald. This young artist that I befriended during his studio residency above the Galerie Eigenheim constructs his images using type, he resorts neither to the degeneration and disenchantment of l33t nor the strict line and grid-based flatness of the limited ASCII palette. He uses typewriters with different letters from different languages and he inks the ribbons with tints of his own choosing. He turns the paper while typing, he types over type and he keeps a steady musical rhythm.

Instead of writing sentences and stories in a neat and common way as one "should" use a typewriter, he writes drawings that tell stories of forced smiles and dirty landscapes. It becomes a portrait of a Russian family when he chooses the Cyrillic alphabet just like using letters from the German typewriter asks us to understand the landscape as Germanic. In this sense, he has found a way of subverting letters and symbols from different languages to actually "tune" his images to the character of the respective culture as represented by the letters worn on the keys of their machines. I believe I am justified in claiming that the sound of the letter "ч" is different from that of "ß", because the typewriter that can print the latter cannot print the former. Every machine has a different mechanical composition, and must therefore make different sounds and as a result different echoes. In the case of the typewriter, the echo is not just an acoustic one, but also a physical and visual one. Perhaps it is a stretch to imagine the sounds of the typewriter keystrokes and hammer-strikes through the ribbon as still being present in these pieces of paper, but the echo of the action of pressing the key is undeniably there.

Knowing what we do about their method of creation, we might consider these drawings to be muted

soundtrack-like documents of their own genesis and their completion a tragically doomed and sentimentally narcissistic memento mori. If it is possible for artworks to have something like a memory in this age of digital reproduction, Maxim Lichtenwald has also found a way to refute Benjamin's notion of aura by glorifying the voice of the machine with the soul of the artist. In a foreshadowing of things to come, these seemingly simple works have begun a post-humanistic chant, where I start to understand myself as a mere shadow of the machine and am somehow still able to find beauty therein.

Perhaps the melancholy I feel when confronted by these small pieces of paper with thousands of marks comes from their utter acoustic silence. Those among us lucky enough to have been witness to Maxim Lichtenwald's unique typewriter concerts at his exhibitions in Weimar must surely know what I mean when I say that seeing his works haunts me with the imagined memory of the song of their creation. If only it were possible to close your eyes when looking at art…

Daniel Caleb Thompson, Berlin, November 2011