

New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print

BY SHANYN FISKE

ANYONE WHO HAS ATTEMPTED TO FIX A typewriter has experienced the frustrations and ecstasies of working with a machine whose multiple moving parts and minute points of juncture can provide at various points a trial of patience, an index of competency, and a testament to failure. This intimate dialogue with machinery and the rich history of technology and craftsmanship to which it's tied often go unappreciated by the modern typist, who might use their garage-sale find to jot grocery lists or display their antique-store treasure as a hallway conversation piece. What differentiates the so-called "typospherian" of the modern age from the casual user is an understanding that before and beneath the entertaining, sometimes hypnotic, phenomenon of typewritten language is the intricacy and resilience of the machine.

A new exhibition at The Print Center in Philadelphia (1614 Latimer Street) is driven by an awareness of the complex relationship between human and machine. The six artists whose works make up "New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print" attempt in unique ways to restore the typewriter to the dignity of its machine roots, resisting its recent appropriation as a hipster prop while also adapting its function to contemporary modalities of meaning-making. There have been many displays of typewriter art in recent years, but, says exhibition curator Ksenia Nouril, "New Typographics" is the first to emphasize the primacy of printmaking in the typewriting process. "The works have their foundations in printmaking," Nouril explains, "but they also reconceptualize printmaking." All of the work on display in "New Typographics" begins with the typewriter's original function as a writing tool.

The keynote artist of the exhibit is James Siena, whose independent show "Resonance Under Pressure" currently occupies the second floor of the gallery. A former member of the Early Typewriter Collectors' Association, Siena began making his typewritten prints in 2013 while at

the American Academy in Rome, where he purchased an Olivetti Studio 44 at the Porta Portese flea market. "The typewriter is a machine, but a manual typewriter is inert without its user, and the pressure exerted by the hands of the user is variable and so the printed letters on the page have various densities," Siena writes of the concept behind his art. "These variable densities give the typewriter image a sense of life. It's most apparent in the images that consist of punctuation, since there's no narrative reference."¹

Siena's works embody his awareness of the struggle both with machinery and with language that goes into a typewritten piece. His pieces consist of repetitions of letters and numbers arranged in patterns that look entirely uniform when seen from afar but, upon closer inspection, are riddled with inconsistencies and typographical errors. In one of his untitled pieces, which contains patterns of repeating numbers, one can see how type slugs have hit the paper with varying amounts of force so that some numbers show fainter than others. Also visible are sections where mistakes were made and numbers are retyped over patches of Wite-Out. In another piece, the half-black, half-red letters speak of a malfunctioning color-selector or ribbon lift mechanism on the machine that produced the document. A third print of overlapping lines clearly came from a machine with line-spacing issues. Whether these errors were accidental or deliberate, they witness the struggle within the creative process as the writer works both with and against the sometimes independent will of the machine to produce the print. The uniqueness of each typewritten page—unlike the uniformity of computer-generated documents—is a result of this fraught dialogue between man and machine.

This concept of struggle is expressed even more poignantly in the work of Elena del Rivero, a Spanish-born artist who witnessed first-hand both the cen-

sorship of Francisco Franco's dictatorial regime and the devastating aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which did considerable damage to her Lower Manhattan home studio in 2001.² Her pieces in the current exhibition are nearly illegible typewritten prints on pieces of handmade abaca paper which have been torn apart and sewn together again with thick, black thread, rising in broken lines from the documents like ragged scars. The interwoven ideas of creation, destruction, and repair that resonate throughout her work speak palpably both to her personal experience of piecing together the fragments of her life after disruptive events and, more broadly, to the damage to language and other mechanisms of meaning-making in the wake of trauma.

All of the artists in the exhibition find ways to exploit and disrupt the typewriter's relationship to language. Dom Sylvester Houedard's carbon transfer prints use punctuation to create figural drawings that challenge the organizational structures of language. Lenka Clayton's typewriter drawings ask the viewer to make meaning out of minimalist paper canvases containing parentheses typed in the shape of a leaf or a feather, depending on the viewer's perspective. Alyson Strafella's colorful prints on pigmented abaca paper disguise language within geometrical visual patterns.

"I have an old Underwood typewriter which has a provenance of about 1945, which I acquired in the year 2000," writes Gustave Morin, one of the artists in the exhibition, whose work features paper so heavily perforated that it resembles a porous textile. "It features a really really sharp key, the O; and for years, whenever I would use it to type, it would literally cut the hole out of the centre of the O. By 2010 I gave in, and began to use this specific key because it yielded these specific results. At this point, it's one of the arrows in my quiver."³ Those of us who have spent hours and years laboring on a typewriter—whether as writer or mechanic—are all too familiar with these negotiations that come to resemble a kind of intimate dialogue. "New Typographics" is unique in its awareness of the complex ways that we relate to the machinery upon which we depend for the creation of language and meaning. The exhibit will be on display at The Print Center until July 27, 2019. ■



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