

## **Lead similes: On Sonya Lacey's *Dilutions and Infinitesimals***

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Lead has a blunt materiality. With the highest number of any stable element in the periodic table, it is soft and malleable, yet has a density that exceeds most commonly used materials. Perhaps this is why lead is often invoked in a metaphorical sense—a way to describe a feeling of heaviness and fatigue in the limbs, for instance. In the foreword to her book *Six Years* (1973), the American art critic Lucy Lippard leveraged this quality, writing “a piece of paper...is as ‘material’ as a tonne of lead”.<sup>i</sup> Her simile provided a disclaimer for her own use of the term ‘dematerialisation’ to describe a shift towards ephemeral and text-based artworks, acknowledging the circulation of written language was also firmly grounded in the material world.

Each letterform, as well as having a design process and a history, still has a material anchor—even as new publishing platforms and technologies coalesce well beyond the physical page. As I type this sentence in 2017 with Google docs open on my laptop screen, individual letters seem to appear seamlessly on the display. The banal letterforms of my default typeface Times New Roman were originally designed to be cast in metal and used to transfer ink onto newsprint back in 1931.<sup>ii</sup> Now they are populating a string of networked, digital communications stored in the Cloud. And, although our text messages, emails and conversations on social media are frequently discussed as if they are ‘dematerialised’, a growing field of discussion reveals the Cloud—rather than occupying a nebulous, indeterminate area of cyberspace—has a physical infrastructure and environmental impact of its own.<sup>iii</sup>

It's this space between the cultural, technological and physical aspects of language that interests Sonya Lacey, underpinning her installation *Dilutions and Infinitesimals* at The Physics Room in April 2016. Often employing sculpture, text, film and spoken word, Lacey's practice revolves around communication and its material politics. Her black-and-white film *Infinitesimals* explores an imagined scenario where a diluted lead alloy from a metal typeface is transformed into a homeopathic remedy, combining clinical shots of a well-lit laboratory with footage filmed in one of the few remaining metal type foundries in the world.<sup>iv</sup> Presented as a three-channel

video with accompanying audio, *Infinitesimals* was played on three individual flat screen monitors. Mounted on steel poles that stretched from floor to ceiling, they were arranged near the gallery entrance facing in on each other.

This work was paired with *Dilutions* (2016), two glass-topped steel vitrines bisecting the gallery space on a diagonal. Both displayed metal-type specimens: one filled with clean, brass letters and the other with blue-grey letters made from a corroded alloy of lead, tin, and antimony. During installation, the artist applied a chemical substance to the lead alloy that caused it to break down at an accelerated rate, leaving a salt-like layer over the forms of each letter. Walking into The Physics Room's front gallery, where cool LED lights were installed for the duration of the exhibition, the metallic sheen of each surface and display mechanism was subtly heightened.

*Infinitesimals* is narrated by a female voice reading a script. One of the first shots is from inside the foundry: a piece of cast metal type—the number '2'—floats in a vat of molten metal encased in heavy machinery. Later, this metallic soup is stirred, an individual letterform emerges from a metal cast, and letters are shaved into regular blocks. This footage is interposed with scenes from the laboratory: a clean stainless steel workbench, a technician's radio, the transfer of unknown liquids between small brown glass bottles, and, at times, disorienting closeup footage that appears to have been taken from under the lab's microscope.

At one stage, the accompanying voiceover outlines the following method for preparing the typeface remedy:

Use sellotape to lift a layer of metal from the surface of a character ... press with the thumb to stick the tape down, then slowly peel it back to harvest thin layers of metal. Molecules come away in terraces. Dilute one part of your alloy with ninety-nine parts water and succuss ... then measure that solution into another ninety-nine parts of water ... continue diluting well beyond the point where any atoms of lead could possibly remain.

The instructions are accompanied by an extreme close-up as microscopic fragments are stripped away from the metal with clear tape. The word 'infinitesimals' means an indefinitely small quality, a value approaching zero, something so small it is impossible to measure—in this case, the result of something being diluted again and again. This process, according to the narrator, transfers lead's abstractions to the water 'and commits them to memory. It's the pattern, the structural information that is transmitted, not the material.'

The letterforms in Lacey's vitrines belong to the hand drawn typeface MOT Serif. Designed by David Kindersley in 1956, MOT Serif was created for submission to the UK Ministry of Transport, who wanted new lettering on road signs to adapt to the increasing speed of automobiles. Kindersley created his typeface for legibility at speed and invented an optical

spacing machine that could recreate the position of lettering on signs and in print that was most satisfying to the eye.<sup>v</sup> The Ministry, instead, chose another design by Jock Kinnear and Margaret Calvert, which now appears on road signs across the UK and several other countries, including New Zealand.

Kindersley's design process exemplifies an underlying trope of typographic design—the notion that the perfect typeface should transmit information in the most clear and efficient way possible without us specifically noticing the typeface itself. This utopian desire for readability and instant communication reveals something about the way we think about language. In a 2012 interview, Graphic designer David Bennewith described a typeface 'not simply as a tool (which perhaps avoids/refuses responsibility), but as a kind of device—a thing adapted for a particular purpose.' He elaborated:

Although a tool and a device share many qualities, a device can—more specifically—refer to a desire or intention in a design. Something more purposeful and telling than functional or passive. That a letter is an abstract sign, I would say, already makes it “tool like” ... [yet] in application, in ubiquity, a typeface could be considered a material that reflects that circular relationship we have with it (in a cultural sense) through language production.<sup>vi</sup>

This way of looking at a typeface as a device suggests there is not only a functional but intangible quality to the letterforms we often take for granted, an idea that is echoed in discussions of the continuing appeal of print media itself.

In a post-industrial digital society, it could be argued that movable metal typography is now relegated to enthusiasts and that print itself is on the brink of obsolescence due to digital technologies. The idea that a technology is ripe for artistic examination when threatened with obsolescence is something of a cliché. Yet, in Lacey's work, moveable metal type lays the foundations for a broader cultural metaphor: as many others have already argued, our relationships with print and other 'old media' have never been static;<sup>vii</sup> they have always been undergoing constant renegotiation as technologies that allow us to make meaning.

Through a certain chain of events, I ended up returning the metal letters to the artist in Wellington following the exhibition. I took them on the plane in my carry-on bag, tightly packed in two cardboard boxes. Curious to see what they would look like under the security scanner, I watched the screen as my bag went through the machine. Unlike the pale and transparent forms of the rest of my belongings—headphones, keys, laptop, iPhone, wallet, notebook, which looked like jellyfish floating around on the digital screen—the letters were alarmingly opaque and black. As I was promptly ushered to the side of the queue and asked to unpack my bag for inspection, I wondered how to explain why I had these letters in my possession and why some of them were covered in a white crust.

It's not necessarily truths about specific materials or media that are transmitted through Lacey's suite of work presented in *Dilutions and Infinitesimals*, but reflections on language and how it circulates in the world. Attempting to work with typeface in its most tangible and physically dense—or diluted and abstracted form—questions an ever-shifting cultural and technological space of human communication.

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<sup>i</sup> Lucy Lippard, ed. *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966-1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Typepedia, "Times New Roman", <http://typedia.com/explore/typeface/times-new-roman/>, accessed 23/1/17.

<sup>iii</sup> A growing field of research examines this subject. See, for example, Tung Hui-Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> Available to view as a single-channel edit on the artist's website: <http://sonyalacey.net/dilutions-and-infinitesimals/>

<sup>v</sup> "Obituary of David Kindersley", *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituariesdavid-kindersley-1571426.html>, accessed 12/1/17.

<sup>vi</sup> David Bennewith interviewed by Kelly Carmichael, *EyeContact*, 25 December 2012

<sup>vii</sup> Alessandro Ludovico explores this in his book *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing Since 1894* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2012). He argues the role of print has been undergoing constant mutations since the second half of the 19th Century, where its demise was originally predicted due to the advent the telegraph, the first medium to allow the electrical transmission of content across long distances in real time.