

## A DATE AT TETTERODE

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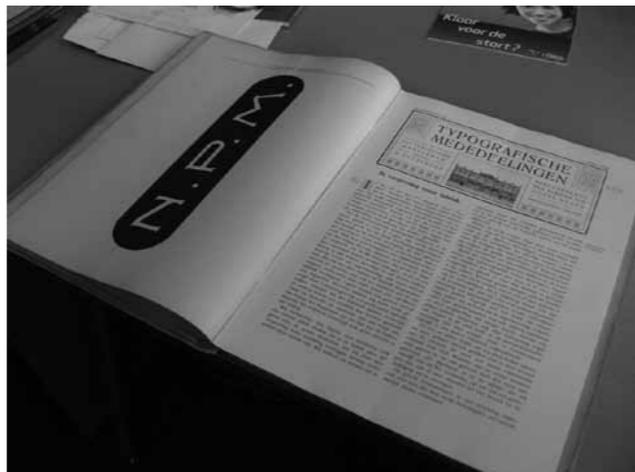


On the way out to Tetterode's current premises, located since 2011, in the Parkwijk area of Almere, I made conscious use of 10 electric signs and 4 non-electric signs to get from A -> B. These electric signs often make me think about the letter-objects journey to dematerialisation. Which, I also think, essentially began with the invention of electricity. Or, was it when Napoleon requested Captain Charles Barbier to come up with a code his army could communicate with silently and at night?



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In any case, it seems obvious to write, but it when a letter is dematerialised it is much more difficult to see what it really *is*. And now I was travelling to a place that has been instrumental in their becoming so. The Lettergieterij Amsterdam v/h N. Tetterode, [L.A.] built up by the merchant/entrepreneur Nicolaas Tetterode, started as a typefoundry and, shortly after, also began to handle



and supply printing presses. These printing presses would basically include set-lines of lead letters. These little objects, letters or groups of words, could then be printed as an impression or perversion on paper. These lead-letter-objects would be visible in the machine they were inserted. The letters were a part of the mechanical engine. Activated, or set in motion, at the stage of the mechanical cycle they were required. The letters didn't really affect the other parts of the machine at all and at the end of their job they were removed, recycled or melted. Like people working in a factories production line they could do their job essentially without interacting with the other parts of the machine, yet they were essential to a result. This was the material of S. H. de Roos' *Hollandse Mediæval* typeface, for example. *Hollandse Mediæval* was a popular product in the L.A. catalogue; from its release in 1912, up until post-WWII – when the company decided to no longer market it. A reason for its removal describes a time when a place [Europe] had to 'reset' and begin to rebuild. This particular type of rebuilding would eschew the 'arts and crafts' associations that de Roos' letter evoked – assigning it a new situation, where cultural connotation becomes essentially linked to calculation. The demand in this period of time – at least as indicated by L.A.'s promotional magazine *Typografische mededeelingen* – seemed to be for 'brisk' typefaces. Already this adjective seems to be too fast for heavy lead: "Get the lead out!" the phraseology predicts. And this would eventually happen – in a different guise than



Moholy-Nagy's utopian imagination of a unification between 'graphics and photography, so lettering and pictures would become one whole'. Letter production indeed made the move to optics. Developed as industry modernised, in the search for more efficient processes. Processes that would perpetuate themselves to be in service of speed and quantity (which they were) ... & mass production ... but on reflection also reveal themselves to a consolidation and hiding – into structures that would make it more difficult to directly experience these printing letters.



*Phototypesetting* machines were introduced to work with new offset printing machines. Letters now were images on a photo-matrix, a outline of a letter commanded in a computer-assisted process, exposed with light to produce strips of composed type. These strips output for paste-up... were still handle-able, visible and at a 1:1 scale; but lighter, more malleable and rendered onto a transparent film surface. Getting them ready for film with wax and glue, you would still have to get your hands dirty... There were still type-designers employed at the L.A. at the time, but commissioned freelance designers (who usually worked on a royalties system) or mergers with other type-image production companies were being forged... The designers and their letter-designs were being out-sourced, as the graphic machinery became a core part of the business. With these new machines there seemed to be a choice, or a predilection, presented within type-design: Towards designing types for the new machines (that weren't *about* the machines), exploiting their capabilities and features as a starting point, or adapting the traditional letters, their carried-over histories and connotations, to new imaging processes. These imaging processes that were simultaneously finding their way into civilian objects – like surveillance and entertainment equipment. Both approaches had advantages and drawbacks and both complicated a position, both requiring adaptation and compromise to work with the new machines. Paradox rules in the discipline of design, I usually think its saving grace. These optics, capable of prismatic and wild behaviours.



From the production – by no means the least amount – of 400,000 kg of lead letters in 1952 to less than 1,000 in 1988, the ‘lettergieter’ (the caster of lead letters) kept his job at Tetterode. Even during the integration of the photosetting machines. But neither process would endure the next stage of the letters development: Digitisation. In the mid-80s, when letters went truly digital, disappearing from our hands and concentrating them to our fingertips, graphics companies dealt with them with varying degrees of responsiveness. Tetterode’s then marketing manager, an advocate of this transition to digital, was connected for so long, he even had a digital typeface named after him. The new and latent programming language called PostScript, which no longer used the computer to command a photomatrix, but made the letters ‘describable’ by the computer steered us into our desktop design era. Letters that were once lead, then a negative – still realised as a physical object – would now never again become worn (only corrupted). The typeface, here, is transformed into a system that could now fit into many devices and facilitate (human) communication between them. They can even start to communicate within themselves. This allowing us to have a more circular, or reciprocal, relationship to the things we read and see and see and read and can use.



This transition to digital information (a file), connected to a concatenate computer language, implemented in complex integration and workflow systems perhaps turns the letter from a ‘tool’ into a ‘device’, a contrivance and a convergence of typical functions. Again, things disappeared, not to make things faster, but more integral, knotted. Potentially infinitely reproducible, at least once they are ‘activated’.

