Words by

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The *totally* *superfluous* catalogue essay

for Zach Lieberman's *Instagram* *account*

Instagram.com/
zach.lieberman
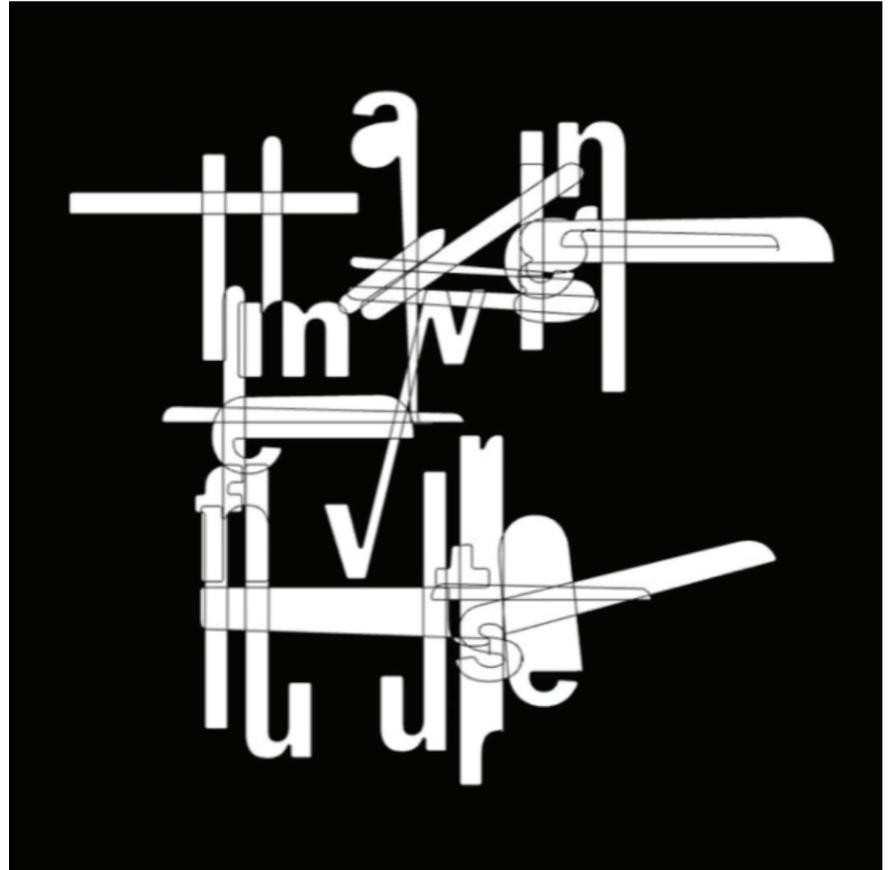
Facebook is where you are surveilled by marketers and your extended family. And Twitter is a wall of noise and cognitive dissonance—it's for masochists and self-promoters, mostly. In comparison Instagram is a simple pleasure; a pristine, highly aestheticized tiny universe where photographs of every interaction, group of friends sprawled across a modernist living room set, and mouth-watering hamburger are perfectly framed and composed. It's where you sink into infinite scroll, and lose yourself in a stream of moments culled from lives that appear more interesting than your own. For fun.

One of my favourite Instagram users is Zach Lieberman. On January 1st, 2016, the NYC-based artist stated his intentions for a freshly-opened account with a single word: love. In the short looped animation, beams of light shoot in from outside a black canvas, striking the constituent four letters and ricocheting shadows and reflections in all directions; while lacking the fanfare or three-dimensionality, the animated wordmark evokes the iconic spotlight-driven Twentieth Century Fox studio bumper —updating it for a new age of ray tracing and decentralized media. Beyond acknowledging the new year, Lieberman was signalling that Instagram itself was his resolution. He began sharing stills and animations there daily with the plan to work as quickly and efficiently as possible. In his words, "I sketch up until the point I think it's interesting, record it, post it, and clock out."[1] The strategy worked: in the 588 days and 1,243[2] posts since that first software sketch he's attracted an audience of almost twenty thousand followers.

The material Lieberman shares on Instagram is wildly varied. He gets an idea in his head for a few weeks, iterates a whole lot (with openFrameworks and other tools), and moves on He's posted scores of undulating blobjects, spinning pinwheels, enmeshed gestures, abstracted faces, and syrupy 3D splotches that my inadequate understanding of topology leaves me without a verb to describe. The sketches are generally in black and white, but every so often they explode with colour; a small percentage are produced with eclectic collaborators including David McLeod, Shantell Martin, and Rhizomatiks.

Typography has received considerable attention and Lieberman has made handy use of his 'deformation toolkit' to take apart characters, words, phrases, and even entire alphabets. It was the warped letterforms that raised eyebrows within the A-B-Z-TXT camp; they resonated with our mandate that type is not just a vehicle for transporting meaning but syntax to be explored —less humdrum logistics more experimentation, we say.

And how Lieberman has experimented: the phrase 'imagine new futures' distorts with a trombone slide stretch, letters shooting off in all directions and then returning to resting legibility; letterforms drift slowly in a vacuum, their lines slowly contour into quasi- three-dimensionality— and then morph into other characters' curves; a figure walks through a page of text, underscoring its left-to-right flow and making a distinct impression–they stop midway and wave to the viewer. These are just a few moments from a few dozen type studies. They are powerful because they ask improbable questions like: what happens when we introduce the body into semantic space? What would letters in zero-g look like? And, most importantly, what is the shape of type to come?

The fact that a visual artist would thrive on a platform where the written word is a second-class citizen is not surprising. Instagram is largely post-textual—nobody cares about the comments, they are literally a sidebar to the image—so it's been pleasing to see Lieberman foreground type there.

And so he goes on posting. One day it's pureed Charlie Brown, the next it's a shimmering array of colour that would have taken John Whitney six months to make a half-century ago—that's the speed his production and our consumption moves at. Beyond demystifying the artistic process by making 'the sketchbook' open, the triumph of Zach Lieberman's Instagram account is how it quietly subverts the platform. On a network synonymous with egregious personal brand construction, contrivance, and product placement, he's carved out a little zone of algorithmic delight. Unlike many artists he's not using his channel in a misguided bid to direct viewers elsewhere—'Link in bio,' the sad mantra of the desperate— the account itself is the payoff. While I am reticent to say many artists are using Instagram incorrectly, I will enthusiastically shout from rooftops that Lieberman is most certainly doing it right. ●

1. Quote culled from Lieberman's detailed reflection on his first year of Instagram: https://medium.com/@zachlieberman/daily-sketches-2016-28586d8f008e
2. These numbers were accurate as of 19:38 on 17/08/11—they will not be when you read them.

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