

THE HEADLINE IS THE EPITAPH

Headline writers are the shadows of the newsroom. They exist, of course, but a reader never sees them, never knows their names. They work nights and mark up pages with stubby pencils, smoothing out mistakes or finding tops for pieces. They are older, usually: faces etched with the whisky and cigarette smoke of newsrooms past, minds deep with wordplay and hours spent puzzling out cryptic crosswords. They go their entire careers blissfully anonymous.

I remember one who was rumoured to ask for phone sex late at night when he called up with queries on a story. Another kept a bar fridge stocked with beer under his desk. They had a language of their own, hewn from typesetting guides and proofreading manuals – a kind of pidgin for the harried nervous hoping that goes into bringing a newspaper to life each day. Somewhere, in the hours after deadline, they would find titles for every piece. They would put a face on the news.

A journalist has no control over the headline on their piece. This surrender is well established and unquestioned. And yet the headline is the most important part of a story. More than anything, it decides whether a piece will be started or not. In a world with a deficit of attention, headlines are how we read.

This is one of the things I like about Agatha Gothe-Snape's work, *Untitled*. She is putting a face on the internet. Like a journalist to a headline, the Berlin Biennale has surrendered to

her kōans. Her word fragments have an odd potency, a sense that somehow they might relate to or unlock all else you see in the Biennale. They will not, of course, but we look instinctively for these clues. They have the strange poetry that comes from headlines, from their wit and the limitations forced on them by space: "Headless Body Found In Topless Bar", in *The New York Post*, 1983; "Bin Bagged", in *The Sun*, when Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011.

A headline lives on the edge of truth. It pushes further than a reporter might – its purpose not so much to find the news as to sell it. But there is more to this than economics. Headlines distil into a few words that which is around us, rendering news into its most essential form. This is where the headline intersects with art: it is an attempt to interpret, to recast, to make sense of that which would otherwise pass us by.

The headline is the last thing to happen. Always it is rushed up against deadline. And yet, the headline is for most stories what becomes its clearest legacy: "Hitler Dead", "Men Walk on Moon", "Gotchal", "U.S. Attacked", "Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster".

The American columnist Jim Bishop produced one of the great descriptions of newspapers: "A newspaper is lumber made malleable. It is ink made into words and pictures. It is conceived, born, grows up and dies of old age in a day."

The headline holds on, though. The headline is the epitaph.

Erik Jensen