

Graphite Tales John Phillips June 2012

For anyone born before 24 January 1984, a pencil was life's ubiquitous drawing and writing instrument. Low-cost, portable and sleek, millions were daily sliced, treasured and chewed by poets, milkmen, engineers, waitresses, Russian astronauts and small children. As fashion accessories, worn in, or through, the hair by women, or balanced on the ears of workmen, they outstripped everything subsequently styled by Macintosh. It is said that by the mid-nineteen fifties, 83% of the industrialised population was, on average, never more than 27 inches away from a pencil during their entire term on earth. And it is this important design icon, and our intimate relationship with it, that [David Rees](#)'s newly published manual, *HOW TO SHARPEN PENCILS: A PRACTICAL and THEORETICAL TREATISE on the ARTISANAL CRAFT of PENCIL SHARPENING*, seeks to satirize and celebrate.

Connoisseurs will scoff at the effrontery of a self-proclaimed 'world number one, #2 pencilsharpener', who fails exposition of the surgical scalpel, particularly the 4GS/S fitted with a #25A blade, as the discerning professional's sharpener of choice. Historians too will be disappointed at the omission of any reference to military sharpening technique or standards, for what was arguably the single most important weapon underpinning the British Empire.

However, for the general reader Rees has much to offer, including entire chapters on subjects as diverse as 'Warming –Up Exercises, Protecting Your Pencil Point, Novelty PencilSharpening Techniques, and most importantly, Psychological Risks Associated with PencilSharpening: Assessment and Coping Strategies. International police authorities are advised to look closely at the deceptively titled Chapter 13, in which, under the guise of advising on the use of the electric pencil sharpener, Rees lays bare an entire methodology for breaking and entry into private property for the sole purpose of capturing and destroying these machines.

Inspired by a 1940 edition of an unspecified ship builder's manual, which Rees purchased 'second hand', this delightfully designed, superbly illustrated hardback from Melville House Publishing, will, I am certain, never fail to raise the weary brows of latter-day pencil pushers, train spotters, water colourists and flange turners.

Despite being the highest grade of coal, graphite, from which pencil leads are made, is difficult to ignite and therefore unusable as fuel. However, put it under extreme pressure and diamonds emerge. Coal, on the other hand is too impure to become anything so precious. Unless of course you consider it to be, both metaphorically and actually, history's darkened mirror. This, in essence, is the premise behind Manifesta 9, which opened in early June in a large disused mine in Genk, Flemish Belgium.



The Grotto, by Marcel Duchamp, - transformation of an art gallery for the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, 1938, by hanging 1,200 coal sacks from the ceiling.

A nomadic biennial, with no space for 'Oligarts' to park their yachts, Manifesta is one of Europe's major visual art events and Manifesta 9 is a multifaceted diamond. Curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Dawn Ades and Katerina Gregos the project comprises three interrelated shows:

1) *The Poetics of Restructuring*, explores aesthetic responses to the global reorganisation of production through contemporary artworks.

2) *The Age of Coal* is an art historical show that explores ways in which coal, as a mineral and symbolic substance has influenced cultural production.

3) *17 Tons*, an exhibition of artefacts, archives documenting the everyday life of mining communities.

PDF's of newspapers accompanying the show can be downloaded from [HERE](#), and the catalogue, which is an encyclopaedia of both the biennale and all things linking art and coal will be available on-line from 1st July [HERE](#).