

the PARIS  
REVIEW

O'Neill-Butler, Lauren, "Shannon Ebner: The Continuous Present At Work," *The Paris Review*, October 4, 2011



From left: XSYST, 2011, 63 x 48 in.; EKS, 2011, 63 x 39.16 in.; EKSIZ, 2011, 63 x 42 in.; XIS, 2011, 63 x 48 in. All works black-and-white photographs. Courtesy of the artist and WallSpace, NY; Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco; kaufmann repetto, Milan.

Shannon Ebner is a Los Angeles-based artist known for using handmade letters, symbols, signs, and other means of representation to call attention to the limits and loopholes of language. Photographs and sculptures from her new project, "The Electric Comma," are featured in the 54th Venice Biennale and in a solo show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Two new public sculptures, both titled *and, per se and*, accompany these shows and are installed, respectively, on the Grand Canal in Venice and in Culver City. Audiences in L.A. can see the eight-foot-tall solar-powered work on the northeast corner of Centinela Avenue and Washington Boulevard until October 14. Ebner's pictures of "anti-places" and "anti-landscapes" (for instance, dust from emergency road flares that appears to spell out a word) are on view at the Hammer until October 9.

*In the essay she wrote to accompany your exhibition at the Hammer, curator Anne Ellegood describes your work as "manifestly American." How does American identity relate to your recent pictures, and how does landscape figure in?*

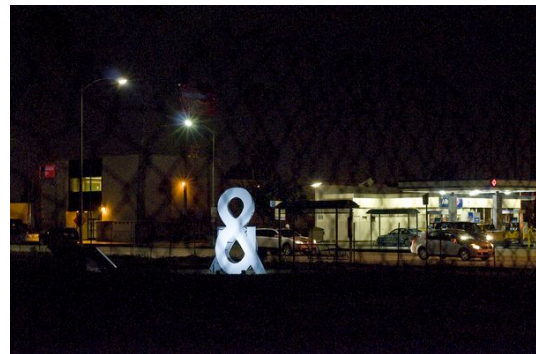
Robert Smithson once asked if Passaic, New Jersey had replaced Rome as the eternal city, with buildings that rise into ruin rather than fall. It makes me realize that my interest in landscape—for instance, in the work of an artist like Joe Deal, who made pictures from an elevated vantage point, with his camera high up on a bluff or hillside looking down at tract-housing neighborhoods—has to do with this idea of falling while rising. I think that there is a connection between Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Deal's vantage point. It seems to say that there could be some redemption, some possibility that the kids of those tract-housing communities could be saved from being an American, from rising to fall or, I guess I should say, rising to fail.

*How does the idea of the monument influence you? For instance, do you consider and, per se and a monument? And if so, to what?*

I don't consider *and, per se and* to be a monument. If anything I would say it is more of an anti-monument, in the sense that it is fundamentally about incompleteness and requires the viewer do some work to fill in the blanks. It exists in two different states—during the day, one can see the solar panel but not understand, or see, that it's storing energy so that the sculpture can be illuminated intermittently at night, like a signal. I had a number of other ideas about how the sculpture relates to photography and the sun, funny coincidental things like how the person who invented photovoltaic technology—a Frenchman named Alexandre-Edmond Becquerel—did so the same year that photography was invented, in 1839. But more than anything, what interests me about the sculpture is that it is never dormant and can exist in the continuous present, because it is either drawing energy from the sun or releasing that energy. And while I suppose one could have a monument that is living, as opposed to dead, I always think of monuments as being really super dead.



Shannon Ebner, *and, per se and*, 2011, plywood. Installation view, Culver City, CA.



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1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

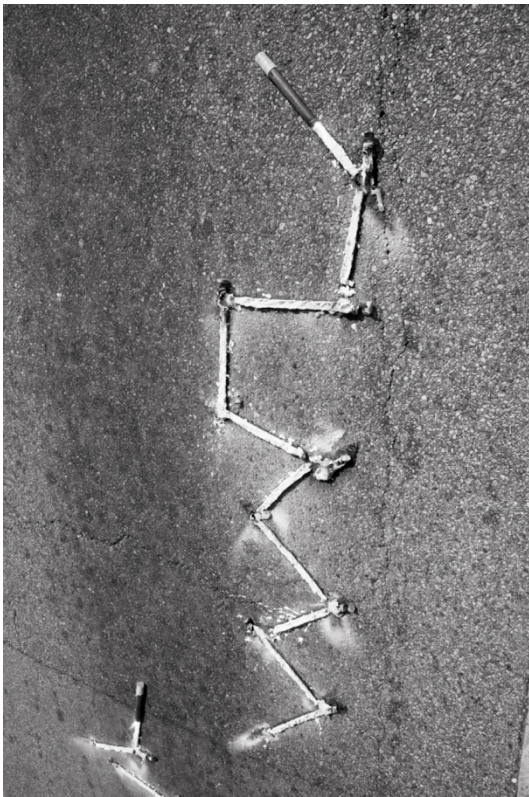
tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

Shannon Ebner, and, per se, and, 2011, plywood. Installation view, Culver City, CA.

*And then we have the strange history of the word ampersand. It was originally a phrase students recited at the end of the alphabet—"X, Y, Z, and per se and." In Latin, per se means "by itself." And in your sculpture, we have the symbol both by itself and continually renewing itself. But what about a photograph? Can it exist in the continuous present?*

The Oxford English Dictionary says that the ampersand is a "corruption of 'and per se—and,' the old way of spelling and naming the character &; i.e. '& by itself = and.'" When I worked with the translator Jen Hofer on making a bilingual handout for the Culver City piece, she translated the title of the sculpture in Spanish to "y, per se y. el signo &," which I thought was quite beautiful.



Shannon Ebner, Incendiary Distress Signal No. 6, 2011, black-and-white photograph. Courtesy the artist; WallSpace, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco; and kaufmann repetto, Milan.

As it turned out there is no term for ampersand in Spanish or, rather, the term used is "el signo &" (the sign &), meaning that the & becomes part of the term for ampersand. I wonder how it translates in French?

And as for your question about a photograph and whether it can exist in the continuous present, maybe it can't, but I am trying to figure it out regardless. I guess what I like about photographs of symbols is that they can redirect an image or create uncertainty and indeterminacy and suggest that one thing is two things or one thing is an incomplete thing, an incomplete picture. My hope is that the activity of thinking about a photograph or a word or an isolated symbol—literally, the time it takes one to think—places a person in the continuous present.