

ARTFORUM

Coleman, Charity, "Shannon Ebner," *Artforum*, April 2022



Shannon Ebner, *Fret*, 2022, ink-jet print, 9' 8" × 19' 9".

Shannon Ebner

KAUFMANN REPETTO | NEW YORK

One way to discern how something works is to take it apart, and Shannon Ebner does this dismantling well. For decades the artist has been exploring the materiality of language, but within very specific formal parameters across disciplines including photography and sculpture. Her variation on Conceptualism is both studied and subtle—her utilization of phrases, stanzas, or stand-alone letters situates us in the vicinity of content and asks us to take stock of its context and our own positioning. The torque is in the vagaries of meaning, and her show at Kaufman Repetto was a furthering of uncertainty.

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Non idae sed in rebus, 2021, is a black-and-white photograph of words inscribed in cursive on pavement. They read: TO WRITING IN THE FOREVER-WET CEMENT / OF GOOD WORLDS TO COME. The work's Latin title, which in English translates to "Not in ideas but in things," calls to mind the first line of a stanza from William Carlos Williams's epic poem *Paterson* (1945): "—Say it, no ideas but in things— / nothing but the blank faces of the houses / and cylindrical trees / bent, forked by preconception and accident— / split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained— / secret—into the body of the light!" Ebner's poetics are perhaps infused with an Imagist sensibility of direct language, yet the "forever-wet cement" of concrete poetry is more present here, and she always inscribes it anew. Lucidity is not the artist's goal, nor is it a trustworthy stopping point; instead, she wends a circuitous path of ideas toward an understanding of how the *thing* of language is built. As the Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström wrote in his 1953 *Manifesto for Concrete Poetry*: "Poetry can be not only analysed but also created as structure. Not only as structure emphasizing the expression of idea content but also as concrete structure."

In the gallery's press release, Ebner explains the structural development of *Fret*, 2022, ostensibly the exhibition's centerpiece: a large-scale layout of a poem in five columns (or perhaps stanzas) that was ambitiously installed on a wall, as if typeset in a scriptorium run by giants. She states: "FRET, acronym for the Forecast Reference Evapotranspiration . . . is a report generated by climate scientists to measure the rate at which water that falls to the ground will evaporate to the sky. . . . The alphabet was constructed with a set of paper letters approximately the size of an outstretched hand. To photograph the letters, I pasted them to the inside of a building with water. Handling the wet letters was a delicate act. By the time I would get from A-Z the letters would dry and fall to the ground. Sometimes a corner or edge might keep its grip, but most would succumb to gravity quickly, leaving the photographed environment looking like an alphabetic field in disarray, a vanishing act of language." One thinks of long-lost ancient tablets ravaged by the elements, or turned to dust.

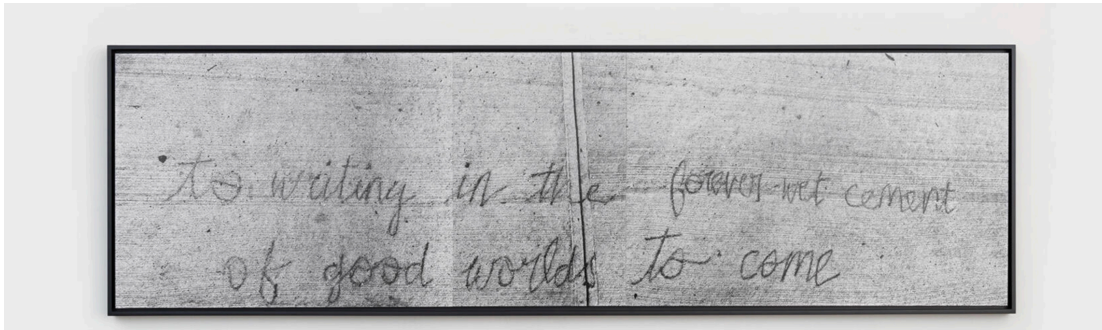
The act of photographing *Fret* suggests a framing device for a greater telling of disappearances. The informational content of a hydrology report on rainfall becomes unruly fragments, which are then brought to order by the camera's lens in creating a static image and by the literal framing of that image. In the print *Theatrical landscape*, 2022, a window reflects the artist's ghostly silhouette, partially caught mid-motion behind the camera and tripod. The image is captured, but just barely. Ebner's work here contends with obsolescence and the precariousness of both material and narrative forms, fixating on what is not fixed. What is being said and who says it is always obscured in Ebner's process of undoing and rebuilding. This is best evinced in the eerie nucleus of *Fret*, where a phrase emerges: WHOSE VOICE IS THIS ANYWAY.

FRIEZE

Kitto, Svetlana, "Shannon Ebner's Wet Alphabet," *Frieze*, February 9, 2022

Shannon Ebner's Wet Alphabet

At kaufmann repetto, the artist presents a set of photographic text-based works inspired by droughts and the streets of New York City



A Forecast Reference Evapotranspiration (FRET) report offers a prediction about the rate at which water that has fallen to the ground – ending up on the land itself, on bodies of water or taken up by vegetation – will via either evaporation or transpiration (being drawn through plants) return back into the sky. Used to help forecast different kinds of drought, these reports are imperative to the management of water resources. In the context of the world's increasing focus on the potential for future climate catastrophe (one element of which might be the Earth creeping towards a permanent drought), the title of Shannon Ebner's new exhibition at kaufmann repetto, 'Fret Scapes', has a ring of existential alarm.

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Shannon Ebner, 'FRET SCAPES', 2022, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York; photograph: Greg Carideo

The centrepiece of the exhibition – a work which Ebner describes as the ‘weather event’ in the show’s press release – is *FRET* (2021), a visual poem made up of 17 box-form stanzas that covers most of one large wall. The work uses Ebner’s ‘Wet Letter’ alphabet, a typographic construction that Ebner first introduced in her 2019 show ‘WET WORDS IN A HOT FIELD’ at Altman Siegel in San Francisco. Ebner takes a set of hand-size letter cutouts and then uses only water to paste them to the wall. She then has to race against the clock to photograph the letters before each sheet dries up and begins to peel away or actually fall to the ground, with the photographs then being arranged into groups to form words, with the results rephotographed and fixed to the wall as set of single sheets. In this process, the artist has created something akin to a FRET system: her field of letters diagram her attempts to measure and document an amount of moisture, as well as a language, that is fast disappearing. Taken as a whole, the letters of the ‘Wet Letter’ alphabet look like leaves of newsprint with flat, standardised typography. But on closer inspection, we can see the delicate labour that has created each letter-object: faint water drips underlining a ‘G’ or a blurred hand obscuring a ‘V’ – each one carrying a message about its own making.

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Shannon Ebner, *SNOW DRIFT*, 2022, archival pigment print mounted on aluminium, 55 x 37 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York; photograph: Greg Carideo

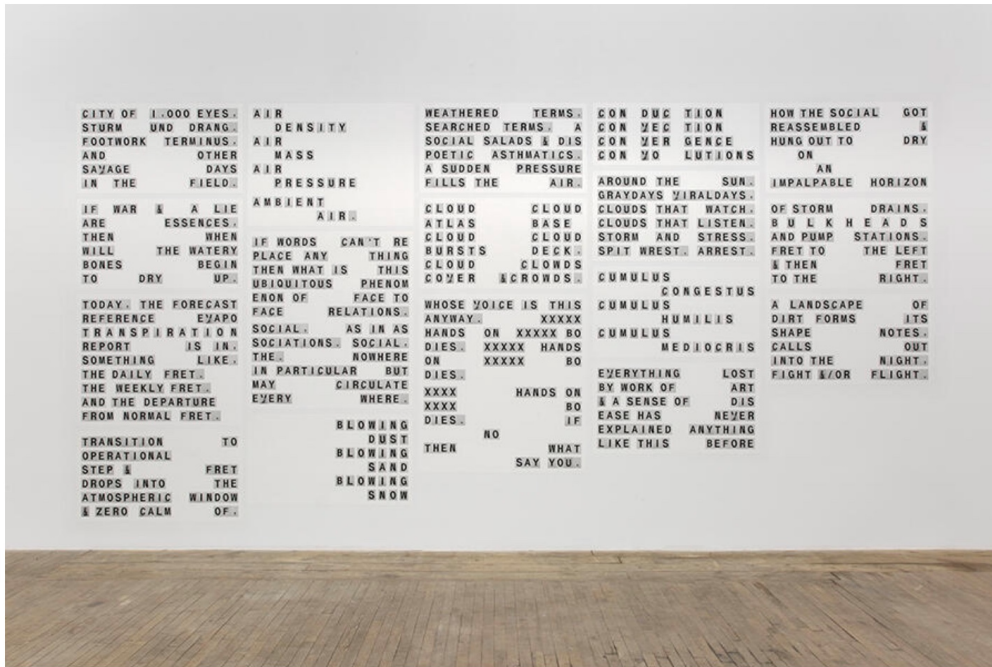
A suite of black and white photographs on the surrounding walls adjacent to *FRET* compliment its poetic language, picturing different objects and text-based signage: images often taken through (or capturing what is reflected from) storefront windows – each element of these pictures a subject in itself, asking us to reanimate the way we look at something. For instance, two matte photographs mounted on aluminum are experimental plays on New York City street photography: *Timbuk2* (2022), in which a window sign for a sample sale is transmogrified by tender scrutiny into a nuanced, hyper-dimensional object; and *Commercial Place* (2022), an image of a rolling gate that creates a phantom grid against an everyday street scene.

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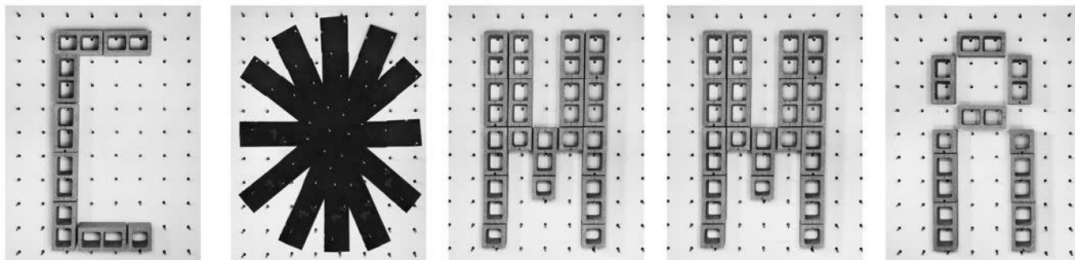
Shannon Ebner, *FRET*, 2022, archival pigment print on Photo Tex, 2.9 × 6 m. Courtesy: © the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York; photograph: Greg Carideo

Other photographs, such as *Campaign* (2022) – an image of two Manual Photo ads wheatpasted onto a construction site wall – harken back to the affixing gesture of *FRET*, the typographic style of which, on second viewing, recalls the ever-changing menu board in a traditional American diner, or a pre-digital arrivals/departures board in a train station. This concrete poem is a forecast in form and content, prognosticating states of unrest and agitation with phrases such as ‘Sturm und Drang’, ‘Zero Calm’, and ‘Fret to the left and fret to the right.’ Still, there’s a sense of alternative possibilities here – a chance to look closer and change direction. One photograph, *Non Ideae Sed In Rebus* (2021), which distinguishes itself from the others by being rectangular in format, seems to connect all the works in spirit, relaying a literal phrase engraved into the sidewalk that reads: ‘To writing in the forever wet cement of good worlds to come.’

HYPERALLERGIC

Packard, Cassie, “Your Concise New York Art Guide for January 2022,” *Hyperallergic*, January 2, 2022

Shannon Ebner: FRET SCAPES



Shannon Ebner, *C*mma*, 2011. Chromogenic print, 80 x 61 cm / 31.4 x 24 in, edition of 5 + 2 AP (courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York)

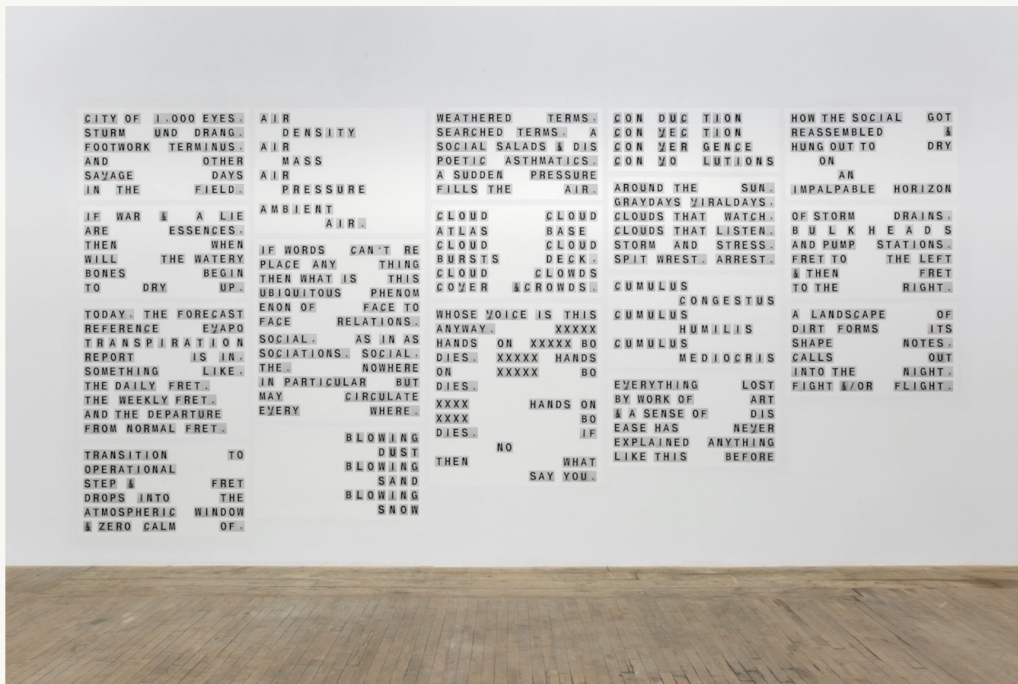
When: January 7–February 19

Where: kaufmann repetto (55 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan)

New York-based artist Shannon Ebner deepens her exploration of photographic text fields in *FRET SCAPES*, composing a “poem” from 17 screen compositions featuring photographs of a peeling paper alphabet that has been fragilely adhered to a building’s interior using water. Ebner describes the conceptual poetry, which is titled “fret” after climate reports on water evaporation rates, as a “weather event” that pushes up against socially coded images and signs.

Art in America

Nam, Hiji, “Day’s End in America: Shannon Ebner at Kaufmann Repetto,” *Hyperallergic*, January 2, 2022



Shannon Ebner, *FRET*, 2022, archival pigment print, 116 by 237 inches.

PHOTO GREG CARIDEO/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KAUFMANN REPETTO MILAN/NEW YORK

As a young MFA student at Yale in the late 1990s, [Shannon Ebner](#) set out on a pilgrimage to Nova Scotia to find her hero, [Robert Frank](#). The Swiss artist’s black-and-white photobook *The Americans* (1958) became a defining social-critical document of postwar American life, and the English edition often includes an introduction by Jack Kerouac: “After seeing these pictures you end up finally not knowing anymore whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin.” The tragedy of America often haunts Ebner’s pictures, as in her 2017 exhibition “Stray” at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in New York, where her images featured wry phrases she’d spelled out such as EX – PRESS / HOPE FOR THE ARTIST IN AMERICA (a line from Susan Howe) and AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS. That uneasy presence lingers in “Fret,” her recent exhibition at Kaufmann Repetto in New York, which included thirteen melancholic black-and-white street photographs. In *CODE OF FLAG BEHAVIOR* (2022), a United States flag is visible behind a round pane of partly frosted glass that reflects bare trees in the distance, though the logic of these pictorial layers is subtly off kilter. A cryptic manipulation of perspective seems to be at play; it permeates many of the photographs, formally conveying how personal and national narratives are subject to editorial interventions and translations. In *METRO PICTURE* (2022), a door is marked with two sets of handprints—another discontinuity, as the delightfully childish signature typically found on frosty car windows reads more as a cry for help on the handle-less door.

Related Articles



An Intimate Interview with Robert Frank: 'He Was Just What You Would Expect from a Description by Jack Kerouac'

Words as Pictures: Shannon Ebner in LA

Ebner's pictures are also full of familiar streets and neighborhoods surrounding the gallery: a SoHo construction wall, a Lower East Side phone-screen-repair shop, the Chase Bank on the Bowery—the gray matter of the city, a place where layers of history and language flow and converge. See *TIMBUK2* (2022), picturing a storefront that concurrently advertises a pop-up sample sale as well as retail space for rent, or *DAYS END* (2022), where the artist photographs **David Hammons's** 2014–21 work *Day's End*, a monumental metal building frame in Hudson River Park that serves as a tribute to **Gordon Matta-Clark's** 1975 architectural cuts out of the shed that once stood on the site, also called *Day's End*. Ebner seems to have double-exposed a picture of a chain-link fence over the image of Hammons's work. Within the larger context of her practice, these pictures seem to gesture to the alienation, discontent, and dissipation that have long been disavowed in romanticized and optimistic visions of American life. If such national mythologies were particularly powerful in

Frank's time, today it is clear that even the nostalgia for the “good old days” rings hollow.

For her 2019 exhibition at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, “Wet Words in a Hot Field,” Ebner constructed individual letters of the alphabet out of paper and pasted them onto a wall with water to photograph each separately; she then self-reflexively composed the prints of the letters into phrases borrowed from the instruction manuals of 35mm DSLR cameras. The same alphabet appeared in this exhibition in her visual-text poem *FRET* (2022), which occupied a gigantic wall in the gallery with a meditation on loss and anxiety: HOW THE SOCIAL GOT / REASSEMBLED & / HUNG OUT TO DRY / ON / AN / IMPALPABLE HORIZON / OF STORM DRAINS, / BULKHEADS / AND PUMP STATIONS. Her methodology remained promising, but the form (which carried traces of that mutable category of “concrete poetry”) was affected by a rather exhausting degree of pathos. In the exhibition text, the artist cryptically wrote that she conceived of the wall poem as a “weather event that is facing off with a group of images that are forecasting the social world.” Her words, there and on the wall, reminded me of Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia*, in which Earth, directly in the path of the titular planet's orbital death-dance, faces total annihilation. Ebner again: CONDUCTION / CONVECTION / CONVERGENCE / CONVOLUTIONS / AROUND THE SUN [. . .] A LANDSCAPE OF / DIRT . . . CALLS OUT / INTO THE NIGHT, / FIGHT &/OR FLIGHT. This biblical forecast is one of collapse and breakdown—of the social, of the self. Reasons enough to fret, but if contemporary life has made clear the fragility of America (not only a myth, but also a disease), the rupture of its triumphant arc might ultimately be a form of salvation.



Shannon Ebner, *COMMERCIAL STREET*, 2022, archival pigment print mounted on aluminum, 11 ¼ by 14 ½ by 1 ½ inches.

PHOTO GREG CARIDEO/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KAUFMANN REPETTO MILAN/NEW YORK

ARTFORUM

Kitnick, Alex. "Shannon Ebner," *Artforum*. September 2017: pp. 325.

Shannon Ebner

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

Since its beginnings, Shannon Ebner's practice has investigated language's structures, but where it once sought to make them objective by building words out of cinder blocks (among other things), it has now entered a more poetic, associative phase. Her recent exhibition, "STRAY," contained an LP with readings by poets Susan Howe and Nathaniel Mackey as well as photographs of verses of poems that had been wheat-pasted onto the gallery's walls. If these elements to some extent called to mind her earlier work, other moments—such as a snapshot-size portrait of Grace Dunham, or a flock of photographs, hung

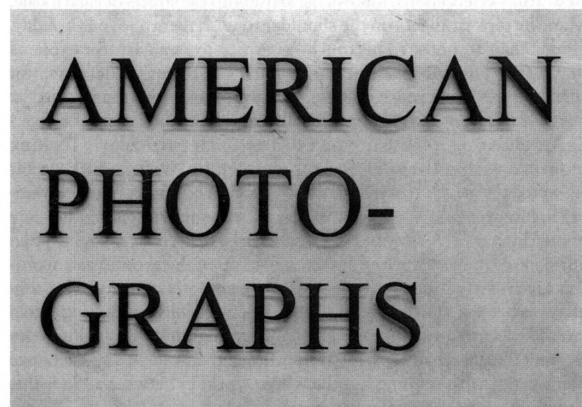
high on the wall, of birds in flight—felt like departures. Recalling a similar image by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, the latter works left one with a sense of longing, and yet at the same time the object of desire felt elusive.

Indeed, the show contained a slew of references that were often difficult to stitch together, but photography was clearly a central motif—more so than simply a way of working. A small photo at the gallery entrance displayed the words AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHS, lifted from the cover of Walker Evans's eponymous book, and certainly *America* functioned as a keyword, too. (One of the photographs of poetry contained the line: HOPE FOR THE ARTIST IN AMERICA.) At the back of the gallery hung a large black-and-white print, ostensibly introducing a museum exhibit, which spelled out PHOTOGRAPHY in capital letters. All the works marked memory in different ways: One photograph depicted tree roots that also resembled a woman's torso; another showed a roadside memorial made of two branches lashed together to form a cross, and tied up with a bit of fabric. Indeed, photography itself here appeared to be a kind of makeshift monument, a way of prolonging the past. As such, it was also connected to institutions, as in the piece comprising several images of an entranceway to the Friends in Deed House, a homeless shelter in Pasadena, California, which in many ways served as the central work of the exhibition.

But something else was going on here beyond mere depiction. There was a weird and interesting feeling that the exhibition was skeptical of itself, even as it cleverly used the space. (The smart placement of the photographs about photography, or at least the word *photography*, gave the show a kind of faux institutional aura). It was sparsely hung, and the prints themselves were fixed on sheets of aluminum, which undermined their object quality. The LP was probably best listened to at home. A really big poster, which featured reproductions of all the prints in the show, as well as snippets of texts by Howe and Mackey and related notes, was free for the taking at the reception desk. You wanted to get in a corner somewhere, with someone, and look at it.

In her notes for the exhibition, Ebner speaks of the word *stray* as a kind of deviation from the set path. While starting out as a photographer in New York in early 1990s, the artist wandered into a workshop held by the poet Eileen Myles—a stray across disciplines into other media. But the idea of stray in this exhibition goes even further: Ebner seems to want to leave the gallery, perhaps even to get outside of art. Whereas Seth Price once spoke of dispersion as a way for art to crack other cultural forms, Ebner's stray imagines an intervention into imaginaries, into ways of being and forms of life. It has a sway and a swagger to it—it's sexy in that melancholic way that crumpled sheets are. It will be interesting to see where it goes.

—Alex Kitnick



Shannon Ebner, *The Splay Anthem*, 2017, ink-jet print, 10 x 14".

MOUSSE

“Shannon Ebner ‘A Public Character’ at ICA, Miami” Shannon Ebner interviewed by Rhea Anastas, December 2015



Rhea Anastas How did you begin working on the exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami? What were the working questions?

Shannon Ebner The show took a while to settle, mostly because I was working on two ongoing projects, and one thing they had in common were long, drawn-out periods of not-settling. So finding a way to bring the two projects together and represent them within the space of an exhibition became the challenge. The two projects I am speaking of are a series of works I have been making around photographs of the letter *A* and a long-form poem I was developing called “Auto Body Collision”. Part of the challenge was that I didn’t want to do a show that presented either of these projects definitively. I also knew that I didn’t want to create a narrative between older and newer works, like placing older works in

proximity to the two projects to set up that *type* of narrative in the work.

RA Holding myself back from asking something like, “Isn’t an exhibition a problem for you, something that you have to resist?”, I’ll narrow my focus to viewer experience and audiences, to receiving. A part of this is the discursivity that can result from combining projects.

SE I did know that I wanted to make an exhibition that would be in my time and that would be a new iteration of these projects based on new parameters. In this way, the ICA Miami and working with Alex Gartenfeld became for me almost a blank slate. The discursivity of combining projects is probably where the resistance—or is it more like trouble?—begins. That’s if trouble in its negative connotation is put to positive effect here. Exhibitions are problems because they become a problem about how to unfix or unrest work based on the challenges and conditions each occasion presents. So the ICA Miami presents different conditions from the High Line commission A HUDSONYARD or the Graphic Arts Biennial in Ljubljana or a commercial gallery space or Erika Vogt’s Performa project Artist Theatre Program, *Lava plus Knives*, which will feature more *A*’s, but different from before and different from what is at the ICA Miami.



RA I’ve wanted to ask for a while, what does black and white mean for you?

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SE It means a way of seeing the world that doesn't exist in reality; it's a way of seeing the world that is about difference. Working now with electronic images, there is every time this choice: keep color or discard that information. And so every time, the choice is really an act, an act of discarding the color information from the images. There has always been this whole "photography is writing with light" thing. I think more along the lines of the action—that I can write with black ink on a world that's in shades of gray.



RA What did you mean by the blank slate? The exhibition I can discern from the model, and being in your studio has a narrative texture, and so from the *Black Box Collision* A room to A HUDSON YARD is less a sequence and more a script or a trail—of crumbs—of A's? [laughs]



SE If you start out by saying that this show will exhibit photographs of the letter A and that is your template, then what goes into that form? The A's that are in *Black Box Collision* A place those images into a system, so now how do I take them out, how do I get my A's into a different jam, say, proliferate them into the streets of New York City for A HUDSONYARD where they can go back into the landscape of advertising and get into the mix in public. And what happens when the posters from A HUDSONYARD come inside and get pasted onto the

walls of the ICA Miami, displaced from the west side of downtown Manhattan but now in a city that is thick with its own real estate issues and debates? "A Public Character" is the title of the show; it's also a video that I am still finishing for the show (gasp)! The video is my version of an essay, and I say that pretty loosely. So this overlapping that you speak of, and the blank slate I mentioned, are just ways of asking, how do I complicate the logic and arrive at new and unforeseen ways of playing the work?



RA Or, how you can continue the logic in multiple ways. At the same time, your work may explode the categories, or containers, of book and exhibition. As a model for this, I could refer the reader to something like Dexter Sinister's idea of form as "a way of thinking", invoking your long-term collaboration with Dexter Sinister and David Reinfurt.



SE The book and exhibition have become very entangled for me, which can be liberating and confining, seeing that they are very different entities. While one may inform the other, it's difficult to bend an exhibition, to ask that it has the agility of layout in a book, and vice versa. One thing that has come up with the ICA show is that I just published the "Auto Body Collision" book with the Carnegie's Hillman Photography Initiative. By nature of

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being published, it is complete, and what that sense of completion has done for me is provided a way, through typography, that the poem can be published in its entirety alongside the images, as equivalents. The designer (Mark Owens) and I had to work hard to achieve that, but it was really important to me to find that balance where a font could sit alongside images and really hold its own. When I go to install the images from “Auto Body Collision” it is difficult that the poem is not in the same room as the work, and so this is a new and interesting problem.

RA I think you may be talking about the viewer or the reader in your work. In this exhibition, two bodies of work, two worlds, are made to have relationships to each other: “Auto Body Collision” and the work you have done around photographing the letter A. Is it really important that these come to the viewer directly and accessibly, without the aid of written mediating elements? As you say, “Auto Body Collision” the poem is not in the same room as the work. Still, I can point to concrete uses of form and scale, such as A SELF, the new print that started from book layouts of “Auto Body Collision” of near-human scale and through production and a going-back-into that is about pleasure and play, here is this vertical figural (anthropomorphic) print for the exhibition.

SE What I would call self-reflexivity acknowledges the position of the maker and thinker of the work as part of one and the same feedback loop. It’s true, I do derive a lot of pleasure from pieces that emerge from the work, and A SELF is really just that.

ARTFORUM

Proctor, Jacon. "Previews: Shannon Ebner at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami," *Artforum*. September 2015.

Previews: Shannon Ebner at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami

By Jacob Proctor
September 2015

MIAMI

SHANNON EBNER

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART ·

October 8, 2015–January 17, 2016 ·

Curated by Alex Gartenfeld · For more

than a decade, Shannon Ebner has explored the shifting relationship between topographic and typographic form. Found patterns become accidental glyphs or pictographic systems, highlighting the simultaneity of seeing and reading, while homemade alphabets fashioned of cinder blocks or cardboard and wood probe the line separating sculpture from the written word. Ebner's exhibition at the ICA will focus on the ongoing series "Black Box Collision A," begun in 2013—thirty-one large-scale photographs, each depicting the letter A—shown all together here for the first time. Culled primarily from advertising and commercial signage, the isolated letterforms acquire formal and affective charges quite independent of their original communicative efficacy. Also on view will be a new video edited in collaboration with Erika Vogt and with a score by Alex Waterman, new cinder-block sculptures, and the artist's book *Auto Body Collision* (2015). The accompanying catalogue will feature texts by the curator, Bruce Hainley, Laura Hoptman, and Eileen Myles.

—Jacob Proctor

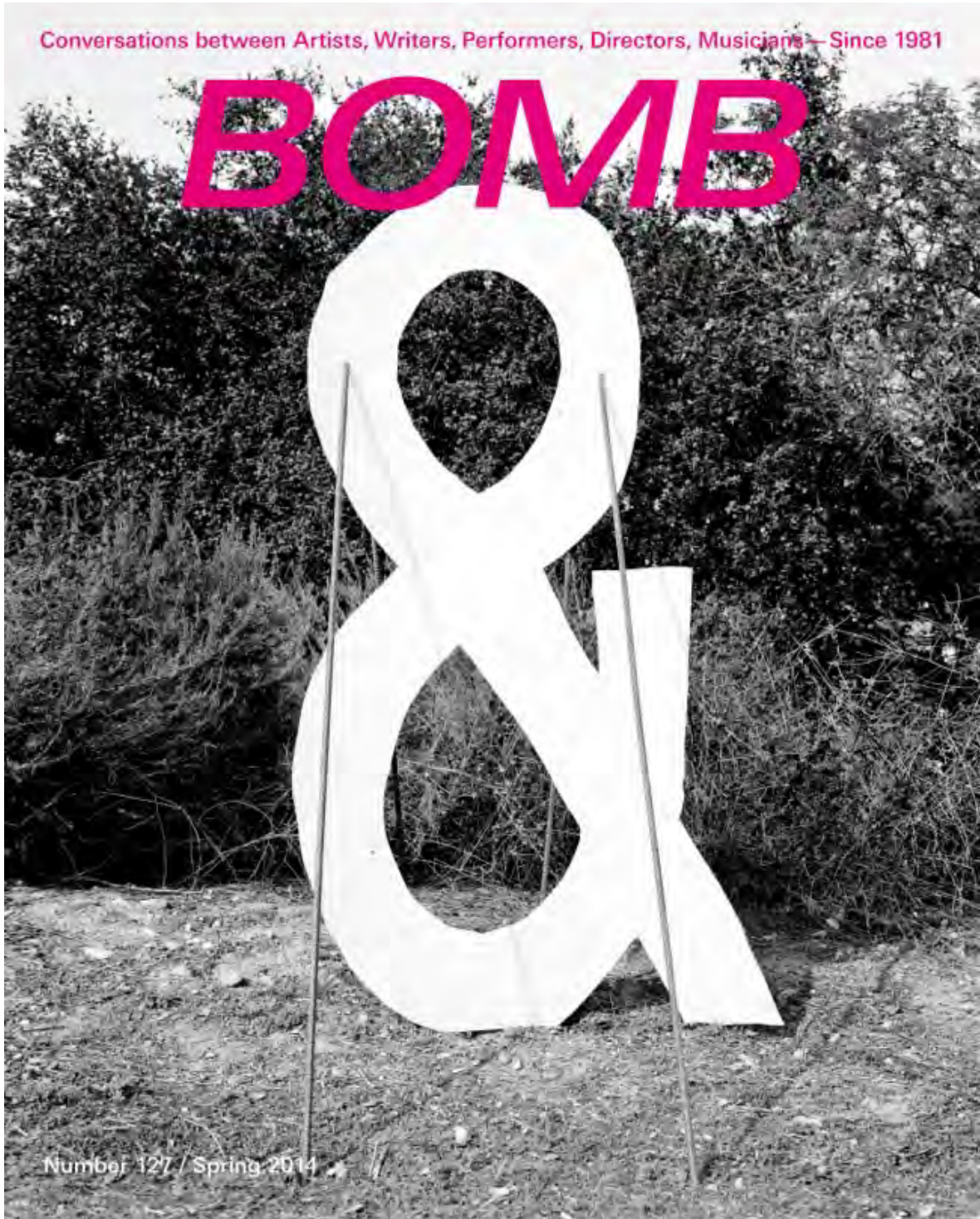
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Ebner, Shannon and Zoe Leonard, BOMB Magazine, Number 127, Spring 2014



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**Shannon Ebner,
THE FOLDING UP,
2003, chromogenic
print, 32 x 40 ½
inches. Ebner
images courtesy
of the artist and
Wallspace Gallery,
New York.**

Shannon Ebner



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**Zoe Leonard,
installation view
100 NORTH NEVILL
STREET, 2013,
Chinati Foundation,
Marfa, Texas. Photo
by Fredrik Nilsen.
Leonard images
courtesy of the
artist.**

and Zoe Leonard



SHANNON EBNER: As you know, I just returned to Los Angeles from Marfa, where I saw your installation, *100 North Nevill Street*. It's the fifth in a series of camera-obscure installations that you have made in the last two years. I visited the piece at three different times of day, and each visit was a distinctly different experience. The dawn visit brought out about ten to fifteen people and two dogs. We gathered at the Chinati Foundation's Ice Plant building at 7:30, in time for a 7:45 sunrise. As our eyes adjusted to the predawn light, the sun began to make an appearance on the far left side of a very long wall that made for a nearly panoramic view. It was exquisite to see the shape of the sun making its way down the wall and, eventually, onto the floor. It was extremely quiet in the Ice Plant with everyone rapt in the activities of close looking and close seeing. At some point a Union Pacific freight train barreled by. Can you talk about the role of the sun in your camera-obscure installations and your photographs of the sun? In both, on account of the apparatuses used, you're able to look at the sun without harming your vision. Sunlight is the source of lens-based images and photographic seeing, and yet we are not able to look at the sun directly, since it would burn our retinas.

ZOE LEONARD: I started both bodies of work around the same time, in 2010–11, and although they are different in approach, they are related. That's how most of my work begins; I often start out with a set of ideas that later begin to connect. It was a kind of transitional time. I had completed *Analogue*, which I worked on for over ten years and has a lot to do with photography as a changing medium. I had a retrospective show around then too, which meant I had looked back through masses of my old prints. I was making new work—some sculpture and works with found postcards—but I wasn't taking pictures. I wasn't sure how, or if, I would continue with photography. I have always shot and printed analogue, and the range of available materials is getting smaller as papers and film go out of production. I also started teaching then, and was thinking deeply about how to discuss the medium in a teaching context.

I was frustrated by many of the conversations I was encountering around contemporary photography. They often seemed defined by a series of binary categories: analogue versus digital, subject versus material, representation versus abstraction, conceptual versus so-called straight photography. I wanted a more expansive way to think about the medium and found myself asking what photography is, what its limits are, what defines it. Anyway, purely as an experiment, just as a way to get going, I made my studio into a camera obscura. Suddenly I was fascinated all over again by the process of sight, by what simple mediation does to our perception. Neither analogue nor digital, the camera obscura offers a state of looking, an experience that is not fixed. It opens doors between things, brings awareness into our looking.

I started taking photos of the sun a few months later, as a way to investigate the idea of the subject in photography. If I tirelessly photographed the same thing every day, would it be transformed or erased? Would we lose interest in the subject and turn our attention to the apparatuses around picture-taking—the point of view, the framing, the grain, the quality of the paper, the tone of the print, the scratches and irregularities—all those things that make this a photograph and not a painting or a film?

Liz Deschenes had taken photographs of the sun a few years ago. They were certainly on my mind, as were James Welling's light sources and Craig Kalpakjian's lens flare photographs.

On another level, starting the sun series was a pragmatic choice. No matter where I was, I could take a picture of the sun every day. I travel a lot for work and in the summer I teach upstate at Bard. I wanted to keep up my own practice while I was away, to do some work every day, even if it was just shooting a single frame. At the same time, taking pictures of the sun was a way to work both within and outside of the conventional logic of photography. What does it mean to photograph something that is impossible to really see? Maybe it was also a kind of defiance. Turning to the sun breaks every rule—it's not only the textbook "Don't shoot into the sun," but also a more primal rule, "Don't look at

the sun"—since, as you say, it will burn your eyes out. I was curious: What is this thing we can't look at? Traditional photography happens in a triangle: there's the photographer, the subject, and a light source. What does it mean to cut off this triangle and turn the camera directly onto the source?

For me, both projects also have emotional resonance. I don't think I would have made these works when I was really young. They have to do with wanting to be in the present moment, with an excitement about the possibility of a photography that is not premised in the past.

Talking about the sun photographs makes me think of your book, *The Sun as Error* (2009). In it you pair intense phenomena of natural beauty with the somewhat humble experience of daily living. Sunrise is a theme (a series of images spells out "IS RISING") and so is sunset, but you do not step back to get magnificent views. Instead, right from page one, you turn these events into language, folding the natural world into text. Your photographs seem to try to "read" the world as a text. On the one hand, you show us photographs of broken things and abandoned sites, but, at the same time, you reach for an almost metaphysical wonder, for something that feels almost sacred. For instance, in figure 148, there's the following quote: "Day done. Gone sun. Go lake. Go hill. Go tree. All good. Peace sleep. Great mystery here." Can you say something about the book's title, the asterisk, and your relationship to the sun in this work?

SE: A few things converged around that title—my interest in the sun as it relates to photography and writing, and ongoing questions about readability. I also became obsessed with the glyph of the yellow asterisk silk-screened on the cover. I started working on the book in 2007, after coming off a show at Wallspace called *The Sun & the Sign*, which was very much inspired by Francis Ponge's book *The Sun Placed in the Abyss*. It has always been one of those beguiling books that I return to over and over. There is an interview in the book between Ponge and Serge Gavrinsky where they pay a lot of lip service to the fact that Euclidean

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Shannon Ebner,
spreads from *THE
SUN AS ERROR*,
2009, LACMA/
Dexter Sinister.



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02



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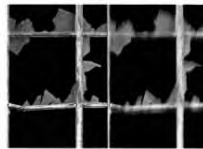
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**Zoe Leonard,
AUGUST 4, FRAME
9, 2011/2012, gelatin
silver print,
23 ¾ x 17 ¼ inches.**

**Zoe Leonard,
installation view
ST. APERN
STRASSE, 26,
2011, Galerie Gisela
Capitain, Cologne.
Photo by Lothar
Schnepf.**



geometry was disproven during Ponge's lifetime. I read that this had a tremendous effect on Ponge's writing and his adamant distrust of language, since it too was prone to error.

The Sun as Error deals with the ways in which mistakes, slips, and glitches are as valid as truth or accuracy. The bit you quote, "Day done. Gone sun . . ." is from an Indian sign language book in a section called "Sign Language Exercises Suitable for Passing Tests." What tests? In this case, tests to get your Boy Scout badge. The book's illustrations demonstrate survival skills. I was interested in the fact that this language was meant to be tested, thus opening the inevitability of error—which is really just about the possibility of there being options different from the "correct" answers. It also seemed relevant that within the book there would be Anglicized representations of the language of the North American Indians.

As for the asterisk, it's always redirecting readers to some other part of the text. It can signal typographical errors or footnotes and indicates that there is more information *elsewhere*. This elsewhere became really important to the making of the book; it underscores the fact that the picture or diagram is only one aspect of the whole, and always comes back to photography too. An elsewhere is inherent to the medium, in most cases—the picture was then, and this is now, and so what's in it happened somewhere else.

ZL: There are images in the book that really stick in my mind. Figures 32 and 33 depict a sunny sky, with two backlit clouds, seen through some kind of dirty or scratched-up window. The sun and the sky are there behind the grime, not romanticized but seen through the worn-out fabric of our environment. It's a post-postmodern picture of the sun. You seem to be reconciling the quotidian with the ecstatic, and photography seems to be a way to dig through the detritus of living, to track a struggle to see, or to be.

The images of the setting sun over the Sea of Cortez evoke a sense of lost beauty. Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* immediately comes to mind. In the back of your book, where you acknowledge the source material,

you write that these images exemplify how light behaves and how the human eye operates in response. It's as if you are diagramming the world for us.

SE: There were only a few diagrams in the beginning, and certain words and phrases that started to loosely formulate the different strands that run through *The Sun as Error*. I had a couple of diagrams from my own books at home but I wanted to find more scientific examples of phenomena that my own images were addressing. So I started going to libraries and bookstores, looking heavily in the science and engineering sections especially. I'd wander for hours pulling materials off the shelves. As I gathered more material and my own images began to fall into place, it became clear that the images could do the talking and that the sources had to fall away—they were going to limit the work rather than expand it.

Speaking of which, Zoe, your essay "A Continuous Signal" organizes a tremendous amount of research into an extremely fluid essay. It's almost a companion archive folio to your *Analogue* project. One of the subjects running through it is the historical relationship between photography, ownership, and colonization. You say that camera obscuras are about place; they are not able to make their "purchase" in the conventional sense. Is there some form of resistance for you with these cameras?

ZL: That's a great way to put it; there is a resistance to the idea of product or ownership. In these installations, the artwork is an experience rather than a thing and—because it cannot be fixed—it is impossible to describe, know, or own fully. There's something else, too. The camera reflects what's happening outside, so it asks us to engage with the world.

SE: I met you around the time you started traveling to Alaska. Over the years I have seen the photographs you made from your time there and also read about your experience there. It's clear that you were engaged with day-to-day activities of survival: feeding yourself, keeping yourself warm, and, in general, keeping attuned to the extreme weather and unpredictable nature of

living in the wilderness. While it may seem like a stretch, the camera obscura in Marfa also brings you to an extreme landscape, the desert, where you have to deal with the elemental. In Alaska you were living in the landscape and relying on it for survival, whereas in Marfa you have been making a tool that allows you to observe the landscape through close study. Can you talk about landscape in relationship to both of these places?

ZL: Landscape has been on my mind, not just with the installation here in Marfa, but also as I have been anticipating our conversation. I have been thinking about the camera obscura as a site rather than a device. It's a position, a space to be occupied. Or you could even say it's a condition—a state of mind—a situation of close looking and contemplation. We engage in looking all the time, but the shift the camera introduces—the inversion, the reversal—confounds us, and thereby draws our attention to one of our basic processes. This camera turns out no final product, no object to take away or hang on your wall; instead, the installation harnesses a phenomenology, and provides an experience in a specific time and place.

I keep returning to the idea of the camera as a place, not only in reference to my installations, but as a concern I see in your work too. Of course, your work always makes me think about the page and the written word, about language, but its particular relationship to site and landscape is very interesting. Your word constructions always happen *somewhere*. They are often made specifically to be photographed, but you don't photograph them in the studio. Instead, they are outside, on scrubby hills, in driveways, in a field, a parking lot, on the side of the road. On one level they're sculptures, but in each site or situation they mean something else. Your locations are a kind of edge space, a no man's land. Sometimes vaguely industrial, sometimes looking neglected or abject, they're more than backdrops. They are sites, or sets, where your word constructions—rusty, scrappy, crooked—stand their ground. I'm thinking of *Nausea* or *The Folding Up*, and especially *Ampersand*. The ampersand is a recurring character. You've spoken

beautifully about the glyph's place in language, at the end of the alphabet, as a figure unto itself by itself, but also as a symbol that connects two things.

SE: Some of the earlier work that you mention is from the Dead Democracy Letters [DDL] series (2002–2007) and some are from *The Sun and The Sign* (2007). When I was making DDL, I was new to Los Angeles at the very same time that our country was going to war. 9/11 happened within my first couple of months of living away from New York, and then came the preemptive strike and this new landscape of terrorism. In many ways, I thought that my daily vocabulary—as well as the landscape of language—was shifting. I spent a lot of time trying to imagine cities and landscapes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Due to the poverty of my knowledge and imagination, I would draw facile comparisons having to do with vast and unknowable desert and mountain regions in the Middle East and Southern California. So for the DDL series, I placed the letters in these nondescript landscapes that happen to be close to where I lived in East LA—except for a few locations where place is extremely specific, like the La Brea Tar Pits with its bubbling caldrons of oil and fumes or, for *USA* (2003), spelling “NAUSEA” on a mesa plain above the Pacific Ocean. One of the things that I loved about living in East LA was that it's built into a hillside, so you can see panoramic views and spot other areas in the near distance that have bald hills. I'd drive around and find my way to all of the bald hills, and for many years they became my images' backgrounds. Their blankness appealed to me. That was the starting point for a tendency in my work that has remained constant: the conflation between the blank sky and the blank page.

The Sun & the Sign is a transitional body of work that happened in between DDL and *STRIKE* (2008). It's far more materially engaged, and except for one or two images, I moved “off the horizon,” so to speak, and was using the camera very differently from how it functioned with DDL. With DDL I was hauling my whole roadside station into the field and then walking the camera far enough back to a fixed position. *The Sun & the Sign* led me back to the

garage studio altogether, though, so when I finally installed the system for the *STRIKE* alphabet in 2007, I'd taken myself out of the field for a long time. The grid steel peg system that held the cinderblocks became the landscape—including to a punctum-less field of vision, a militarized landscape, aerial views, and coordinate systems for missile projection. Cinderblocks are everywhere in this city too, they have an ugly kind of beautiful quality that I've come to love about Los Angeles. I'm thinking of these marginal zones of junk consumerism such as car parts shops (chop shops) in Sun Valley, or places for the demolition of metals, cardboard, and soda cans. By 2011, I'd finally made it out the other side of working with the *STRIKE* alphabet, and was hungry to reenter the world outside the studio.

When I drive around Los Angeles, which I love to do, I am looking at and for language—and it is looking at me. My relationship to landscape is about a relationship to language.

ZL: To go back to your earlier question about my own relationship to landscape. There are real resonances between Alaska and Marfa for me. I really like wild country—big expanses, open spaces. Here in Marfa, you have a 360-degree view. That is what defines Marfa—you're on a high plateau, ringed by low mountains in each direction, but the mountains are miles away, so even a slight rise offers up the most extraordinary view in all directions. To see a horizon all the way around is somehow mind-expanding. And then there's the deep quiet that lets you hear sounds as subtle as the rustle of birds in dry grass or a train in the distance. It is a luxury that allows for a different kind of concentration. But the desert environment is harsh. The range of plants and animals that can live here is small and specific since they have to be able to withstand both freezing and extremely hot conditions. You're sort of at the edge of what is habitable for a living being.

On the Yukon, I was a few miles away from the Arctic Circle, where the flora and fauna were at the northernmost edge of their range. There were only five species of trees. I liked that I could learn them all, and that the vegetation

and the animals explained the place to me. They revealed where the water was, the elevation, the contours of the land. It was also intensely beautiful, but the beauty was slow and quiet, like here in West Texas. At certain times of day, all you see here is a washed-out, yellowish dust. The blaring sun and nothing. But then, the sun shifts, and the whole sky lights up. The light hits the mountains from a different angle and they suddenly gain contour, color, presence. You learn to see things unfold. Time is part of vision here.

In part, that's why I wanted to site a camera here, and have it up for at least a full year. With the camera, the longer you stay, the more you see. First it's dark. Then there's a dim image. Then a panorama. If you stay longer and walk around you'll see tiny details—a blinking light, a car going by, a flock of birds circling. A landscape like this one asks for this kind of sustained attention. Other aspects of this site are also key. There's the railroad, with all it implies about a history of photography and a history of commerce. The nineteenth-century European-American expansion that brought both the camera and the railroad out to the West was violent. The building of the railroad is inextricably tied up with commercial exploitation of the land, its mineral resources, and many human lives. Of course that's a sweeping over-simplification of westward expansion, but it's all still here in some way. The Mexican border is not far from Marfa, and there is a huge Border Patrol station in town. Chinati occupies the grounds of an old fort. The view outside *100 North Nevill* is not a “pure” or idealized landscape; it's a view of a railroad track, a group of warehouse buildings, some oil tanks, and an electric power station.

The other important aspect of the location is, of course, Chinati, and the artworks by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, Roni Horn, and others sited here. That the museum was conceived by an artist is no small thing; Judd had a clear vision of a situation in which artwork, architecture, and landscape would all be of equal importance, and understood in concert with one another. I fell into an unexpected conversation with the place and these works. Living on campus for several months, it

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Zoe Leonard,
ANALOGUE (detail),
1998-2009, 412
C-prints plus gelatin
silver prints, 11 x 11
inches each.



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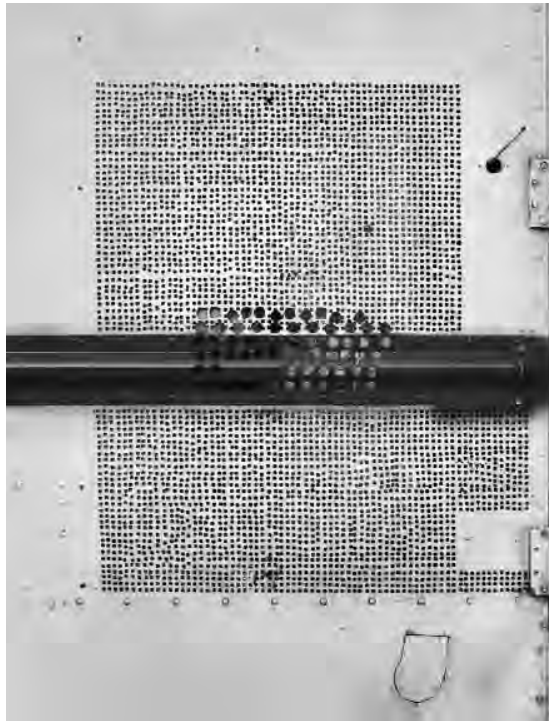
Shannon Ebner,
ELECTRIC COMMA
TWO, 2013, Epson
print, 48 3/4 x 60 inches.



Shannon Ebner,
PUBLIC SURFACE
PATTERN, 2013,
Epson print, 96 x 8 1/2
inches.



Shannon Ebner,
IMAGE PATTERN
GRATIFICATION,
2013, Epson print,
45 x 34 1/2 inches.



When I drive around Los Angeles, which I love to do, I am looking at and for language—and it is looking at me. My relationship to landscape is about a relationship to language.
— Shannon Ebner

was great to watch how Judd's works respond to light and weather. Although often described as monumental, his *15 untitled works in concrete* actually seem modest in this enormous landscape. They cannot dominate it. Antelopes graze by them, birds shit on them. This variability is exciting.

For me, Roni Horn's installation is a pivotal part of the collection. Hers is one of the most understated in terms of scale. It takes up one relatively small building and succinctly offers two identical objects in different positions. This simple repetition reveals the difference perspective makes in perception. A turn of the head changes everything. The work's title *Things That Happen Again: for a Here and a There*, could describe this whole place.

Shannon, I'm always intrigued by the many different ways you move from sculpture to photography. You'll make an object to be photographed or you'll make a sculpture that is then documented. Some of your words appear on T-shirts or signs of various kinds. People then become agents performing in your work. One could say bluntly that your work is always interactive. It steps right up to the viewer and asks to be responded to. What is your decision-making process around object-making, photography, and performance or actions? Do you see certain images distinctly as works and others as documentation?

SE: My answer to this question is ever-evolving. You mentioned *On the Way to Paradise* (2004), which features a group of friends wearing T-shirts I designed, each with a letter on it that together spell "SELF IGNITE". The piece was about agency and mobility, and its implications are somewhat gruesome. I made it within the context of the DDL series and it's the beginning of exactly what you're asking about: the work started to fan out in these different directions when I began considering various ways to carry the language

materially. The material registers have specific implications. For example, using a plastic sheet as the surface for *Dismantled Peace Sign* might signal total dystopia and wipeout, I guess, but also a thin and synthetic material that you can see through, quite literally.

To address your larger question, the first time I showed an object in an exhibition that could have just as easily been a graphic element in one of my images, was in 2009. I showed a small piece called *not equal* in a show called *Invisible Language Workshop*. I tried that piece as an image first, which taught me a lot because the frame of the image defined the object too narrowly. That's when I decided to have the object exist in space, so it would have greater autonomy. In a way, that entire show was trying to negotiate this same phenomenon. But not to get off topic. For an upcoming show in Rome called *Auto Body Collision*, I've started writing a poem in long form using six-foot-tall cardboard letters. I've come full circle, since the letters spell out words that will be in the exhibition space along with images related to the topic.

Starting with the show in 2009, I made a video called *Ecstatic Alphabet* that poses the riddle: When is a photographic sentence a sentence to photograph? I've been trying to muse on that riddle for a while now and the project in Rome is an attempt to do that. I am curious about what will happen if I document the exhibition and then eventually publish the work as the culmination of a poem that first existed in space.

ZL: The politics in your work seems to be at play not only in the words you choose, but also in the structures you disrupt. I find your work dark and dystopic—in an almost post-apocalyptic sense—but, at the same time, uplifting or hopeful. The act of speech implies a listener or, in your case, a looker. There's some kind of subversion and call to action. Do you agree?

SE: Yes. That might reside in the element of the work that slows down the readability of the image. Even when I am going to great lengths to communicate, as with the *STRIKE* piece, it takes the viewer a lot of time to work through the text. And that's probably one of the most directly political works I've made. Shifting the temporal register of an artwork can be an act of resistance in some form, though this is also an open question that bears further thought or discussion.

The political content in my work can be very overt, but it can also disguise itself. With *The Electric Comma* (2011–13), I like the implied urgency of using portable changeable message signs—the solar LED signs of our highway and roadway systems alerting us to an emergency or delay or collision ahead. For the photographic part of my project, I drained the safety orange color from the letters and programmed the computer with my own writing, so it addresses a "dear reader" directly. But the message is too long to be urgent, so the language functions more as a kind of public surface pattern. I am, in a sense, calling to you, the reader, but the message falls apart.

ZL: When you were here in Marfa you mentioned a work that you wanted to show me. You thought it might have a connection to the work I made here.

SE: Oh yes, I was talking about the *Dear Reader* video (2013), which is part of this same *Electric Comma* project. It's a silly comparison in many ways, because your camera obscura moves rather slowly and my video has this poem I wrote on the portable changeable message sign, with the language zooming by. The connection had to do with the idea that the observer of a system also becomes the maker of a system. It goes back to second-wave cybernetics, when the scientists and engineers and the great Margaret Mead had this crisis about how to perform good science.

Can scientists be objective or does their interference disqualify their findings as science altogether? Something about the *Nevill Street* camera, and the fact that you can look at the lens from either inside or outside of the building, intrigues me. In my video, I am recorded on the surface of the image as a shadow on a hillside. The portable changeable message sign rotated 360 degrees from a base, and so did the camera, the photographer, and the computer that was capturing all of the images live. The landscape kept changing as the sign changed position, so different reflections of the landscape's surface appear on the video as well. And the programmed poem was also being recorded in each frame, so we're all kind of spinning in the video.

ZL: *Dear Reader* is amazing in that it really happens in two temporalities. The text is so fast, but the shadows and reflections on the surface of the sign change slowly, almost elliptically. This is exactly the kind of disjunction we are asked to navigate on a daily basis as we move around our cities.

Do you ever think of yourself as a poet or writer? Does that identity matter to you?

SE: The work itself functions as a form of writing for me, except that it can take me a disproportionate amount of time to complete a project. It started to get really absurd with *The Electric Comma* project: it took three years to make an artwork from a thirteen-line poem. It took me that long to find the right form for the language. Often I am asked about my relationship to the Concrete poets because of the role that form plays in my work vis-à-vis the imagery. I am always trying to shift that dialogue a bit; there's a distinction to be made between Concretism and its history, and something that's actually about self-reflexivity. I am more interested in a conversation about form as a manifestation of self-reflexive thinking. I am not sure how to reconcile that with poetry, even though I am consistently engaged with words, their visual appearance, and what they mean or don't mean. This often finds me reading *about* poetry more so than poetry itself. I do think about the question of identity—I've had to,

since the question does come up. I have been reluctant to identify as a poet and I am not sure what that is about. Maybe I've always felt like an outlier. This question of identity does matter to me, even though I am unresolved about it.

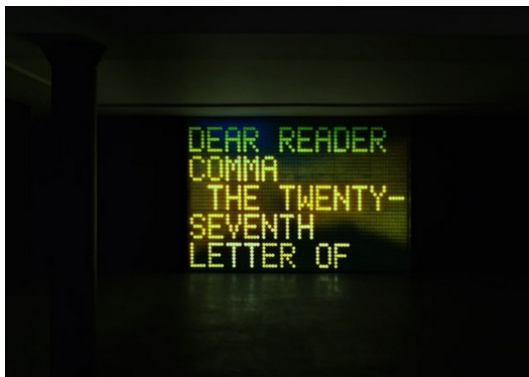
I have this one thing nagging at me and it has to do with Alaska. What you said about the landscape and time being part of vision was profound. In my own faint memories, around the time we met, you were always in perpetual motion—riding a bike or jogging! Then you were gone to the Yukon. We did not know each other well then, but I've always wondered about this chapter of your life. It seemed extreme in terms of the remoteness, but also remarkable and extremely personal. What were the circumstances that led you to Alaska and then brought you back to New York? I guess I am asking you to talk more about the '90s. There is a lot of revisiting of this decade lately: you participated in the 1993 show at the New Museum and also in *Take It or Leave It*, which just opened at the Hammer Museum. You're in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, but you also participated in the '93 Biennial. It was a deeply political time and the stakes were very high in terms of the AIDS epidemic, ACT UP, institutional critique, and identity politics. Was your decision to go to Alaska related to any of these things?

ZL: This question opens another whole conversation. It maps a huge terrain of ideas, time, and geographies—both internal and external. I'm not sure I know how to address this succinctly; it's such a big set of issues, memories, ideas, politics, emotions, and art-making. There's so much to talk about here, I'm not sure I want to try to compress it. Maybe this means we have to meet again for part two of this conversation? What I can say for now is that I am the kind of artist who likes to work around the edges, the places in-between things, where one place runs out and another begins. This is not only about actual places—cities or types of landscapes—but it's also about queerness, politics, language, and a certain kind of art practice. I'm not looking for the monumental or the majestic; I'm looking for situations in which something about ourselves is revealed. In the small village where I spent time in

Alaska and in the desert here in Marfa, you can see the beauty of the land—the land as it was millennia ago and also a land we've used. The marks on the land are visible—in their ugly beauty, as you said so well—and show us so much about our culture, about who we are and how we live. I grew up in New York, which is its own kind of extreme place. The edge of town, the city limits, the border, no man's land—these phrases also describe states of mind and states of inquiry. It's situations where one culture meets another, where one medium combines with another, where one voice overlaps with another. These kinds of influences and exchanges interest me. They keep me going.

ArtReview

Charlesworth, JJ, "Shannon Ebner: The Electric Comma at Sadie Coles, London," *ArtReview*, December 2013



Conceptual art may have successfully made the case that art doesn't have to have a physical manifestation – art can be an idea. But ideas can become text, which means a physical manifestation of some sort. And when that happens, all kinds of possibilities open up, since text appears all over the place – in books, on screens, on signs, on billboards, on walls, in the landscape. Signs become objects, and back again.

Los Angeleno Shannon Ebner thus mines a rich seam when she turns her camera on text *in situ*. Photographing letters as they appear in vernacular, everyday usage (street signs, graffiti) while snapping her own form of sign-making, in the shape of cut-out and propped-up lettering, Ebner presents photo-assemblages that tangle the act of reading with that of looking; while we're reading, we're also aware that we're looking at a dissociated photograph of a letter as it appears somewhere out there in the world. At the same time, Ebner's texts tend to play with the mechanics of language, in narrative streams that unravel and disintegrate, and the overlooked conventions of written form – the visual presence of punctuation marks and what they attempt to represent.

The Electric Comma is easily described yet labyrinthine in its implications. A short text, turning on the elusive nature of the comma (in a looped video projection and in a series of framed monochrome photographs), appears as displayed by a mobile traffic-warning display board – a matrix of rudimentary LED lights, bold and basic. In the video, the 70-odd words flash by at barely legible speed; in the photographs, black-on-white fragments of the text appear as negatives of the original illumination.

Ebner's text – in digital capitals – haltingly starts out: 'dear reader comma the twenty-seventh letter of the alphabet is a blank comma delay, a language of exposures a dear reader photograph in your mind comma eye, the liquid treatment causing ecstatic delays'. There's no simple sense to it, but paying attention to the comma – the odd 'pause' in spoken language it supposedly represents – points us to a meditation on both the presence of the physical body and the nonlinear nature of thinking, which written language tries to represent in the form of punctuated asides and ellipses.

So if the comma represents a gap, an absence, then what is it an absence of, exactly? Text and image are both representations, and Ebner's text-as-image seems keen to flee the static, conclusive fixity of the written or photographic record – 'now go outside this time and plug in some really long chord this will make your photographic dance the electric comma and promptly disarrange the photographic universe', the text exhorts. Text, photograph, language, body, performance and physical site all swap places in Ebner's vertiginous fusion of fixed sign and unmediated, dynamic materiality. There's an obsessive, cover-every-angle energy to her investigation, but at a time when art debate is full of phoney virtual-versus-material oppositions, Ebner's work maps out a more complicated in-between, where concept, subjectivity and reality play out in an open, always-unfinished dialogue.

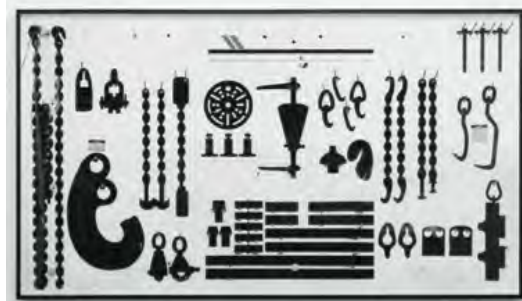
ARTFORUM

Artforum, April 2013
Shannon Ebner, Wallpaper
By Lauren O'Neill-Butler

To some extent, Shannon Ebner's work has always played with thresholds of legibility. A case in point, the large-scale print *Instrumentals* (all works cited, 2013) was hung in the back room of her recent exhibition at Wallpaper, where it spellbound the viewer into bewilderment. This flat-toned depiction of seemingly unusual (but in fact quite common) objects appeared to carry some indexical trace, although the connection to a source was left ambiguous. Taken in an auto-body shop in Los Angeles, the photograph is a to-scale representation of a stark white wall, onto which silhouettes of tools have been carefully painted in black, presumably to indicate to workers where the various implements—rulers, pliers, and the like—should hang after they've been used. The idea to depict this scene likely came naturally to Ebner when she stumbled upon it, as the striking array of painted shapes bear some resemblance to the various works for which she is best known. Suspended between photographic depiction and graphic illustration, *Instrumentals* offers up these silhouettes, these images, as words. Ebner's meanderings through her local LA neighborhoods, where she sieves the landscape for "language," suggest that these thresholds of legibility reside latently everywhere.

Spanning two adjacent walls in the gallery's first room, *The Man in the White Hat Dropped It* consists of eighteen framed prints depicting cardboard letters forming broken-up words and (already nonsensical) phrases or tags culled from various paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ebner displays these fragmented painted words—beginning with the titular phrase—with several empty or blank spaces between the letters, implying pauses and breaks. To read the work, one must participate in a jagged choreography of falling and rising: eyes moving right, slightly down, slightly right again, down—repeat—and then back up to the top of the next section, or next picture. Another fusion of image and language, this photographic found poetry is a gentle and surprising homage to an artist whose oeuvre has, for some, taken on a patina of kitsch. In this gesture of reclamation, Ebner points to a radicality and rigor that have perhaps lain dormant for too long under Basquiat's otherwise bombastic popularity.

Erasing or crossing out words and fragmenting figures was a way for Basquiat to be both present and absent in his work, which is yet another compelling strategy that Ebner integrated into this show. At least that's what I thought as my mind was melted by *An Unrested Image*, a very short looped video showing a rapidly rotating photograph Ebner took of a friend's scarred, post-op FTM torso, the spinning nipple turning into a seeing eye, continuously trying to find a point of focus. This unceasing movement of the stilled body serves as a counterpoint to the ubiquity of language in Ebner's work, perhaps revealing an allegorical portrait of the artist herself—searching unendingly for her own place within the limits of language, and therefore the world.



Shannon Ebner, *Instrumentals*, 2013, ink-jet print, 75 x 42.5"

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Shannon Ebner

Hammer Museum

By Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



Los Angeles X marks the spot. X emotes as a kiss, an expression of affection. X forbids, blocks and negates. X represents some unknown, a numeric variable in an equation to be solved. Symmetrical across both axes, X brings the graphic and the linguistic into remarkable alignment.

X was repeated four times in a row across two walls of Shannon Ebner's first solo museum show in her adopted city of Los Angeles. Each X spanned a lush black-and-white photograph at approximately human scale. Ebner found two of the Xs on the street—crisscrossed lines of glue on plywood, and black spray paint on a police-car door—and two were constructed in her studio, one with cinder blocks hung on rebar stuck into white Peg-Board, and the other with cardboard painted black and adhered to that impaled surface. The grid of rebar exaggerates perspectival depth, giving the shallow space of the shots a subtle but gripping vertiginous quality.

Four double-height lightbox photographs that hung in the windows on the exterior of the gallery also employed this stark formal template, spelling out "ASTER/SK" in cinder blocks. Ebner breaks down language into discrete and emphatically concrete building blocks—what she calls her "STRIKE alphabet," suggesting a relationship to protest and aggression of some kind—making us feel the weight of the text in the heft of her utilitarian materials. Her cinder-block letters have a jagged, angular bulk that conveys both the manual, bodily effort behind their arrangement and the now-retro, boxy look of low-resolution digital bytes and pixels. The graphic letters manage to stir glamour and romance, seeming on the one hand monumental and iconic like the nearby Hollywood sign, and on the other cinematic, recalling stills of title cards from a Godard film.

Much of the work on view is part of a larger body based on Ebner's poem—or, as she puts it, "photographic sentence"—titled "The Electric Comma," an ode to the photographic condition as an ecstatic experience plugged into the electrifying power of the pauses, delays and suspensions (or,

in textual terms, the commas) that help punctuate and define perception and expression. Electricity literally coursed through the lightbox photographs outside, making them flash and pop continually in pulses. Inside, similar luminous combustion was evidenced by Ebner's "Incendiary Distress Signals" (2011), a series of seven street photographs picturing the remains of emergency flare sticks whose fire has burned out. Each ashen remnant resembles a hieroglyph, a linguistic element falling just short of legibility and beyond comprehension. Throughout the show, Ebner beautifully materialized language by applying a sentencelike logic to her images as multivalent syntactical units, effectively creating both grammatical photographs and photographic grammars. [Ebner's first public art project in Los Angeles, *and, per se and*, was on view concurrently with the Hammer exhibition in a vacant lot in Culver City. It was organized by LAXART.]

Photo: Shannon Ebner: XSYST, EKS and XIS, all 2011, C-prints, 63 by 48 inches each; at the Hammer Museum.



Piero Golia,
Untitled #1,
2010–11, concrete,
3½ x 9½ x 9½”.

These impressively dimensional paintings (bordering on sculptures) are full of such ready-made protrusions as bent chair legs, knobs, handles, and the disembodied lollipop limbs of a broken Memphis coatrack: Golia offers tangible things to grasp onto, to hang your hat on, even as elsewhere, in works such as *Constellation Painting #8*, 2011, the viewer is pushed away by jagged slats of splintered wood that stick out sharply and demand a more distanced perspective. All the flotsam and jetsam fixed in the paintings’ solidified plastic ooze are the salvaged remains of the artist’s domestic possessions and art collection that were destroyed in a bizarre collision that occurred one August night in 2010, when a Beverly Hills cab driver incredibly crashed

his vehicle headfirst into Golia’s house following an argument over a fare. The driver was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon.

If constellations are aesthetic rationalizations of haphazard stellar events, then Golia’s paintings take stock and make sense of circumstance with a similarly mythic motive. Yet by consolidating and formalizing the archaeology of trauma, suspending its stuff in inky blackness, these paintings rhyme as closely with the muck of the La Brea tar pits as they do with imagined star fields glittering somewhere across the cosmos. Their undulating pitch surfaces—alternately caked and placid, wrinkled and smooth, roiling and oily—have pooled and puddled like vats of congealing primordial goo. We stand in front of a strange and dense abyss, our silhouettes reflecting merely as shadows breached by the twisted, fragmentary artifacts of the artist’s increasingly legendary life.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Scott Benzel

HUMAN RESOURCES

On a boxy monitor in an upstairs gallery at Human Resources—a young Chinatown space dedicated to performance and nontraditional exhibitions—footage from a 1969 TV show played in a perpetual time-coded loop: Beach Boy Dennis Wilson crooning for the camera, sloe-eyed and benign, his lips falling in and out of sync with three takes of the same song. The piece, 1. *The Beach Boys perform “Never Learn Not to Love” live on the Mike Douglas show, 1969*; 2. *Charles Manson, “Cease to Exist,” 1968*; 3. *The Beach Boys “Never Learn Not to Love” studio version, 1969* (all works 2011), was one of twenty-seven objects that comprised LA-based artist Scott Benzel’s solo exhibition “Maldistribution,” a meticulous collection of popular artifacts chosen for their veiled cultural histories, uncomfortable associations, and protracted afterlives. In the video, Benzel’s straightforward juxtaposition of sound and image (and of versions of songs) demonstrated how an unsavory original tune (a gritty number written by a murderous cult leader) was repackaged—with softened lyrics, sunny harmonics, and a pert double-negative title—into a product more palatable for a mass audience.

The indexical stockpile of objects that Benzel accumulated for this show—easily reproducible and in widespread circulation—seemed unified by how easily they lent themselves to consumption. But the inverse was also true, as each object could similarly be defined by its suppression,

the likelihood of it being used for something other than its initial intentions. Among the items on view were a counterfeit pair of Nike SB Dunk high-tops, which the brand stopped producing when they were found on the feet of every corpse of the Heaven’s Gate cult; three posters for the 1967 film *The Trip* with covered-up tag-lines that, at the time, the movie’s own PR firm deemed inappropriate, and a doctored image of a nude Princess Diana. Between the poles of mass production and mass dissension, Benzel located a captivating (even tawdry) value that connects and presents these seemingly dissimilar items with an almost didactic confidence. For example, in one of the show’s three horizontal glass vitrines, a selection of “high” and “low” items was assembled into an orderly display: pipes (disguised as lipstick, encasing fake flowers, and as a mock highlighter); a Kmart-distributed album by psychedelic rockers Silver Apples; Lynda Benglis’s notorious 1974 *Artforum* advertisement; and the first issue of *October*, which had been catalyzed in part by *Artforum*’s decision to permit the artist to run that scandalous ad. The tight combination implicated object as outlaw, discourse as censor, and viewer as consumer.

Approaching these relics with the same studied proficiency and weird invention as his musical scores, performance, video, writing and sound installation, Benzel activated connections between disparate pop histories with wit and fascination. In musical projects like his 2010 commission *Music from The Trip (1967) in the style of a Schoenberg-Gershwin tennis match observed in passing by Dr. Oscar Janiger*, the artist imagines a hypothetical yet fact-based scenario (as the title describes), using it as an entry point for the work. The aura of heaviness



View of “Scott Benzel,”
2011. Foreground:
Counterfeit Nike
“Heaven’s Gate”
SB Dunks, 2011.
Background: Original
posters for *The Trip*
(1967) with original
stickers, 2011.

surrounding some dusty hall of infamy may resurface in Benzel’s upcoming works like *La Bas*—a new composition, based on the work of J. K. Huysmans, Olivier Messiaen, and Malcolm McLaren, to be presented in part by the American Composers Forum this fall—and *Funhouse*—which will reference both the Stooges album of the same name as well as the fun-house setting in Orson Welles’s *Lady from Shanghai*, and will be performed during the Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time festival. Less an “object maker” than a collector, fan, researcher, or archivist, Benzel nimbly traces the narratives of how objects come into being and eventually how (at least in the popular consciousness) they cease to exist.

—Catherine Taft

Shannon Ebner

HAMMER MUSEUM/LAXART

For nearly a decade, Shannon Ebner has developed a quickly recognizable approach—one at the unruly convergence of photography, sculpture,

and language—that insistently frames the space around and (especially) between things. Most often, these voids or breaks occur between letters and other linguistic symbols that provide the ostensible subject matter. In an earlier series of defining black-and-white images, the artist photographed words, in all caps, constructed out of flimsy cardboard and placed in desolate settings that read as literally blank fields: In *USA*, 2003, for example, the word NAUSEA leans woozily on a cliff above the ocean, and upon repeated viewings one might be as struck by the wild and matted chaparral occupying the foreground as the blunt word occupying the middle.

Ebner's ongoing body of work, titled "The Electric Comma," 2011–, which recently appeared in various manifestations at the Hammer Museum and LAXART in Los Angeles (as well as this year's Venice Biennale), furthers the artist's investment in the potential of such voided spaces, with an intensified focus on the structure and syntax of language. Many of these black-and-white pieces employ a modular alphabet first devised by the artist in 2007, in which letterforms are constructed with cinder blocks arranged on a pegboard grid and photographed, with a cardboard slash symbol ("/") or asterisk ("*") occasionally appearing as a graphic substitutes for a letter. Several works using this method were on view at LAXART. In *C*MMA*, *PAUSE*, and *DELAY* (all 2011), each word indicates space (or time) between words, and each work consists of five framed photos—one for each character—but the three works are hung along a single horizontal line, paradoxically denying punctuation its place.

Agitate, 2010, also at LAXART, operates to similarly contradictory ends. Here, Ebner assembles the titular word with her familiar cardboard letters, which she casually propped against a concrete wall with rebar rods and photographed singularly. (*A* and *T* are duplicate constructs.) Subsequently, the word AGITATE is broken across four discrete, framed images; the primary agitation proposed by the piece thereby being the disruption of legibility, of reading itself: A sign with such a command—"agitate"—is a possible call to arms, with unavoidable political implications, but in this case the potential action seems pinned against the wall, cut, and voided.

Such frustrations, so elegantly choreographed, point to the instability of language as a signifying agent. Whether the words are constructed of concrete or flimsy cardboard, their assumed solidity quickly gives way to fragmented letters and the spaces between them. In the courtyard of the Hammer, Ebner repurposed four large light boxes to display *ASTER/SK R/SK R/SK*, 2011, in which the word *ASTER/SK* is written in the cinder-block alphabet and broken into two lines, with the light



Shannon Ebner, *Agitate*, 2010, four black-and-white photographs, each 63 x 48". LAXART.

boxes intermittently flashing, illuminating, and negating individual characters. In an adjacent gallery, a series of four photographs focused on the letter X, as constructed by the artist (variously using letters of cinder block and cardboard painted black) and as "found" (spray-painted on a police-car door and tracing a residue of glue). The works' titles—*XYSYST*, *EKS*, *XIS*, *EXSIZ* (all 2011)—all play on the word *exist*, with X acting as both a primary act of inscription ("X marks the spot") and a marker of death (e.g., the crossed-out face of Osama bin Laden on the cover of *Time* magazine).

Another grouping of seven pictures, collectively titled *Incendiary Distress Signals*, 2011, documents arrangements of road flares on asphalt, some still smoldering, with a rock partly slathered in white paint serving as a "period" in the far right image. In context, it's nearly impossible to resist reading these forms as letters, albeit illegible ones. (Curiously, the work also recalls Lawrence Weiner's *THE RESIDUE OF A FLARE IGNITED UPON A BOUNDARY*, 1969—an important example of that artist's use of signs *outside* of language.) If Ebner is signaling distress, it is the continual distressing of language that consistently fires the ignition for her singular, ongoing project.

—Michael Ned Holte

LONDON

Tracey Emin HAYWARD GALLERY

I don't think I've ever seen quite so much pussy in an art exhibition. Tracey Emin's retrospective "Love Is What You Want," curated by the Hayward's Ralph Rugoff and Cliff Lauson, could make even Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* seem almost neuter by comparison. In what is by now a vast oeuvre, represented here by 160 works, the most recurrent image is of a woman with her legs spread, showing her vulva, often masturbating. Emin wants her art to originate from the essence of her being, and, like any good 1970s gender essentialist, she believes the essence of her being is in her sex. At the same time, though, she also senses that the expression of this essence can never be direct or immediate but must always take a detour—must always be mediated. Thus, for instance, her handwriting, a direct expression of the body, is not typically presented as such—it appears in a distanced manner: reproduced in neon, embroidery, or monoprint, which, in spite of its resemblance to straightforward drawing, is the reversed trace of a mark that was made on a plate rather than on the paper itself. One of the most remarkable manifestations of Emin's drawing is the DVD projection *Those who suffer love*, 2009; the nervous, shuddering quality of her wiry, scribblelike lines is amplified by the spasmodic rhythm of the animation, which perfectly communicates a sense of the work's subject: masturbation. And again, the actual drawing is put at a distance.

"My emotions force the drawing out of my hand," Emin has said; but whether she acknowledges it or not, what comes out of her hand is also out of her hands—in the sense that it is ultimately detached from herself. Expressing the inner self means giving up its inwardness; its traces become what Norman Mailer once called "advertisements for myself"—a shift embodied here by neon slogans, for instance. It's not surprising that from the beginning, Emin has shown an ironically unironic belief in herself as an entrepreneur as much as an artist, or rather, an entrepreneur insofar as she is an artist. (See, for example, her project from 1992–93, for which she offered collectors the opportunity to invest in her "creative potential" almost before she'd even had a chance to show promise, let alone accomplishment.) As autobiographical as her work may seem—and much of it consists of collected memorabilia of a life lived—it is less about the empirical Emin than about the

ARTFORUM

Tagliaferro, Marco, "Shannon Ebner," *Artforum*, 2014

MILAN

Shannon Ebner

KAUFMANN REPETTO

Shannon Ebner's "Black Box Collision A," 2013–, is a series of large-scale photographs, all depicting the letter A. Seventeen of these images dominated her solo show "Black Box Collision A: Gasoline & Auto Electric." The many reiterations of the same letter constituted a clear invitation to reflect on the language of photography and on the legibility, even authenticity, of its subjects. The framed Epson ink-jet prints, all approximately sixty-four by forty-three inches, seem to find their subject in a wide range of situations, often advertising. They oscillate in their presentation of the letter they depict. Some are emotional, dramatic renderings that turn A into a quasi-totemic image, while others offer an organic presentation, in which the letter seems to form a mass or landscape. Explicating their syntactic, rhythmic, spatial, and plastic qualities, Ebner turns these characters into expanded forms, fragments of an exaggerated reality, superimposed in a pulsating and atmospheric density.

The installation reflects the artist's observation that ordinary life is the result of a jumble of daily epiphanies and encounters. Any one of these particular letters might be encountered, for example, on a city street by a commuter on the way to work or home. "Auto Body Collision," 2014–, which made up the second part of the show, includes a group of cardboard letters covered in gray auto-body paint. The letters compose the words GASOLINE and AUTO, but they were juxtaposed with three photographs of found bits of graffiti and other such spontaneous inscriptions. The latter look almost like ancient hieroglyphics, seeming to come from rupestrian carvings or archaeological digs, although in fact they might be found on walls in the more run-down areas of towns anywhere in the world today. They are simultaneously archaic and modern, sometimes even futuristic, both fragments of a dead language and fossils of a civilization yet to come; they seem to contain both recollection and premonition, memory and mirage.

Soiled yet also aseptic, this show was truly a place where opposites coincided, floating in a precarious but plausible equilibrium, oneiric yet pregnant with meaning. Ebner's work is an exquisite abstraction of wisdom that becomes not only taste, detachment, irony, affection, desecration, but also an awareness of humankind that, in the final analysis, means benevolence and therefore poetry. Indeed, the second part of the show was the continuation—and a significant portion—of an exhibition of the same name, "Auto Body Collision," which was presented this spring at the Fondazione Memmo in Rome. The complete version reveals what the artist refers to as a poem but is in reality a work of prose, one that uses a colorful language we might very likely define as vernacular, to express, in writing that also exploits the word's potential for conveying images, the lexicon and above all the atmosphere of automobile scrapyards. Collecting fragments from the most undervalued semantic and semiological realities, the artist creates her poetry from those quotidian meanderings that are too often overlooked, forgotten, and omitted.

—Marco Tagliaferro

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.



View of "Shannon Ebner," 2014.

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?

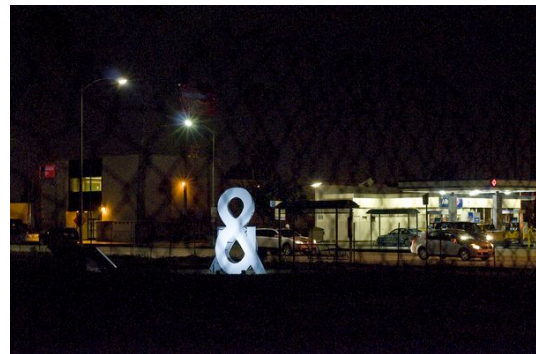
Robert Smithson once asked if Passaic, New Jersey had replaced Rome as the eternal city, with buildings that rise into ruin rather than fall. It makes me realize that my interest in landscape—for instance, in the work of an artist like Joe Deal, who made pictures from an elevated vantage point, with 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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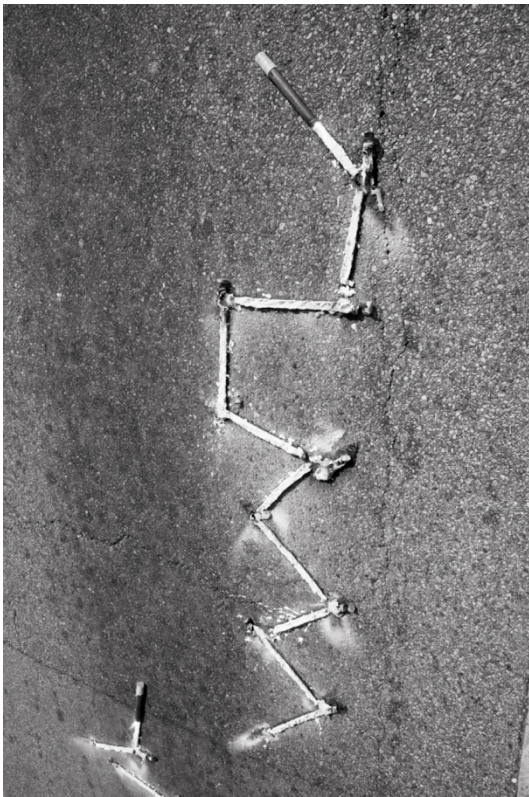
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Shannon Ebner, and, per se, and, 2011, plywood. Installation view, Culver City, CA.

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.

frieze

Lange, Christy, "No End in Sight," *Frieze*, April 2010

Politics, poetry and the legacy of black and white photography come together in **Shannon Ebner's** explorations of language and sign systems
by Christy Lange

No End in Sight



All images courtesy: Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco, and Wallace, New York



Left:
Shrouded Monument
2008
C-type print
103x123 cm

Below left:
Leaning Tree
2002/8
C-type print
75x112 cm



'Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language,' wrote Robert Smithson in his 1968 essay, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind'. The same could be said now about photography. Shannon Ebner's work is as much about the expanding and contracting possibilities of poetic language as it is about those of photography - its processes and its legacy - which are, since the advent of digital photography, both visibly dying and manifestly not dead.

While a graduate student on Yale's MFA programme in 1998, Ebner placed a portrait of her ex-girlfriend in a jar of water and left it there while she embarked on a road trip to Nova Scotia, where she hoped to track down Robert Frank. Her pilgrimage to meet an icon of American photography was also an effacement of the very same medium. When she returned and took the lid off the jar, the result was the blurred *Portrait of My Ex-Girlfriend* (1998). In 2009, for *Paging Walter*, Ebner subjected a portrait of Walter Benjamin to the same process, submerging a photographic print in a Perspex case filled with water. The photograph's emulsion sloughed off like dead skin, leaving behind a ghostly trace of the original print.

Both works suggest Ebner has a melancholic relationship to the heritage of black and white photography, a concern also evident in her recent show 'Signal Hill' at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco. To most Californians, Signal Hill is a small enclave of Long Beach, named as such because the Native Americans who first settled there lit signal fires on its peak. For Ebner, it is 'a place to receive error messages in the wild', a fictional location for misfiring signals and for common codes to become faulty or contingent. It is not a coincidence that the photographer Robert Adams immortalized the location with his 1983 photograph *On Signal Hill*, a deadpan black and white print of two spindly trees leaning precariously on the cusp of a hill. For Adams, *On Signal Hill* represented human damage to the American landscape, but, like many of his works, it also reflected his ambivalent relationship to the decidedly Romantic photographs of his (unrelated) predecessor, Ansel Adams.

With her own tenuous, sometimes iconoclastic relationship to the history of landscape photography, Ebner calls Adams' photograph of Signal Hill 'a false Romantic'. Her reply, in the exhibition 'Signal Hill', is the image *Leaning Tree* (2002/8), a pine tree - even more

off-kilter than Adams' - standing alone on a rocky outcrop in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Ebner's tree is askew, but not yet fallen flat. The diagonal shape it defines against the white sky echoes the shape of a 'slash' or 'stroke'. In works such as *Leaf and Strike* (2009), she pairs a photograph of a leaf with a black strike on a white grid, combining a common symbol of the natural landscape with the typographic symbol for cancellation, a break between lines of poetry, or a choice between two words (although the label 'strike' suggests something more violent). The work is a simultaneous confirmation and cancellation of what Ebner calls the 'typographical/topographical field'. It is both an homage to and a nullification of the heritage and codes of landscape photography, as well as an attempt to develop another alphabet for the medium.

Though she often takes symbolic or linguistic signifiers - such as the strike - and detaches them from their usual contexts, Ebner does not do this as a strictly academic, post-Structural exercise. More often, she uses language in unexpected and multi-layered ways, with puns, palindromes and borrowed phrases. Between completing her undergraduate degree at Bard in 1993 and entering Yale in 1997, Ebner stopped photographing and identified herself mainly as a poet, participating in the St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York and working for the writer, poet and downtown cult figure Eileen Myles. Later, Ebner made a work titled after Myles' 1995 poem 'Wallpaper Bankruptcy Sale', which was a tribute to the colour grey ('It's crazy / to be grey / in the / maw of / the monster, / grey in / a war.') Ebner's print, *Wallpaper Bankruptcy Sale for Eileen Myles* (2008) shows the words spray-painted like a graffiti slogan on a cinder-block wall.

Even if Ebner describes herself as someone who 'stopped writing poetry', she found a way literally to insert it into photography with her best-known series, 'Dead Democracy Letters' (2002-6), which she began after moving to Los Angeles. Ebner created an alphabet of large cardboard letters, which she arranged in the landscape to spell words that appeared as banners on the horizon. One of her first works in the series, *Landscape Incarceration* (2003), was constructed on a dry lake bed in the Mojave Desert for Andrea Zittel's 'High Desert Test Sites' (2002-ongoing) and photographed

from behind, so we see how the letters are propped up with sticks. Ebner exploited the possibilities of the otherwise barren landscape by literally inserting language into it, creating a photograph that can actually be 'read'. But works like these also document a performative act, using the blank landscape as a background for a conceptual series, like Ed Ruscha did in 1967 when he drove into the Nevada desert and threw a typewriter out the window of a moving car, recording the results in the publication *Royal Road Test*. Ebner's photos incorporate the patina of historical works like this, as well as Robert Smithson's 'Mirror Displacements' (1969), suggesting someone who has absorbed the history of Conceptual art through its black and white documentation.

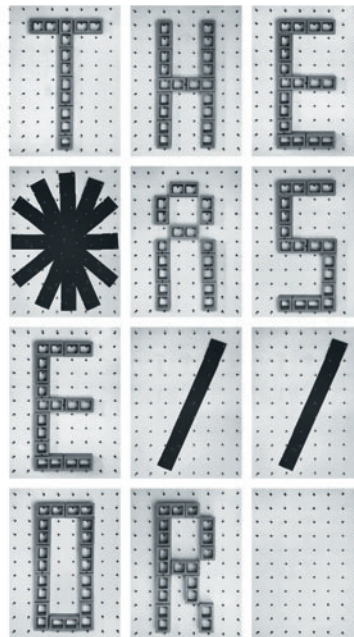
Ruscha is undoubtedly Ebner's closest forerun in her use of language in works such as *Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow* (2006) or *The Day Sob Dies* (2005). The way she imposes the words on a background full of nostalgic potential, as she does in erecting the word 'Nausea' on a bluff above the Pacific Ocean for *USA* (2003), recalls Ruscha's surreal linguistic combinations and their placement in dreamlike landscapes such as the Hollywood Hills or the Alps. While both artists allude to charged political language, Ruscha's *Lion in Oil* (2002) or *Wall Rockets* (2006) are more freely associative, while Ebner's *RAW WAR* (2006) and *Democratizing* (2006) point more vigorously and directly toward the language surrounding current political events, in particular America's involvement in the Iraq War.

The political content of Ebner's work, seen in pieces such as *Shrouded Monument* (2008), in which the letters 'USA' are trapped in plastic as if wrapped in a body bag, can seem incongruous with her more conceptual interests. Though she insists they are direct responses to the politicized language of war, this inflammatory content could also be a red herring; aren't the radical slogans and political protest signage invoked in 'Dead Democracy Letters' - such as *Self-Ignite* or *Is Exploded* - just as historicized aspects of the 1960s and '70s as the images of performance art from the same era? The work, *MLK, Double Horizon*

The cinder block can refer to third-world architecture and military fortifications, or to 'the last thing left behind in the wreckage when something is destroyed'.

Right:
*The * as E//OR*
2009
C-type print
83x47 cm

Below:
Left: *Involuntary Sculpture*
2006
Wooden box with casters and wheels, corrugated cardboard, rebar, water-based house paint and gesso
88x202x112 cm
Right: *STRIKE*
2008
C-type prints, aluminium and wood
381x394 cm
Installation view of the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York
2008



(2003), in which Ebner placed the number '74' on a hillside in east Los Angeles, refers to the age Martin Luther King Jr. would have been when the work was made. Such concerns can seem too disparate and are treated too coolly here to function as active political statements. Ebner reckons that she will probably be put on 'artist's trial' for the political content in 'Dead Democracy Letters', but the series can be read more productively in relation to the malapropisms propagated by the Bush administration, as they recall its strange and unfortunate poetry such as 'the unknown knowns' and 'I'm the decider'.

Ebner conspicuously took the 'Dead Democracy Letters' out of circulation in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, when she displayed her cardboard alphabet in a coffin-like wooden box spray-painted with the words 'Sculptures Involontaires' (*Involuntary Sculpture*, 2006). Ebner refers to this exhibition as 'the beginning of my ideas about interchangeability and modularity, and the alphabet as potential', as she coupled the old letters with *STRIKE* (2008), a new, self-created font made with concrete cinder blocks arranged to form letters on a pegboard grid of nails. But the content of *STRIKE* retains Ebner's political, poetic approach to language, reading like a poem made of broken palindromes: 'NO / IT CAN / AS IT IS / IT IS A WAR / RAW AS IT IS / IT IS AN ACTION / NO / ...'

Since 2008, Ebner has increasingly adopted the solid, sculptural *STRIKE* alphabet. The unit of the concrete block used to spell out poetic lines also functions as a pun on 'concrete poetry', the term used for poems in which words are used as material. The cinder block proves to be a surprisingly flexible symbol; for the artist, it can also refer to third-world architecture and military fortifications, or to 'the last thing left behind in the wreckage when something is destroyed'.

Ebner has recently continued her explorations into the mutability of language and sign systems in 'Signal Hill' and 'Invisible Language Workshop' (2009) at Wallspace in New York. Both installations saw her techniques applied equally to black and white photography as to sculptural and found objects, wallpaper and video. *Between Words Pause* (2009) is an animated video using a cinder-block alphabet so that letters,



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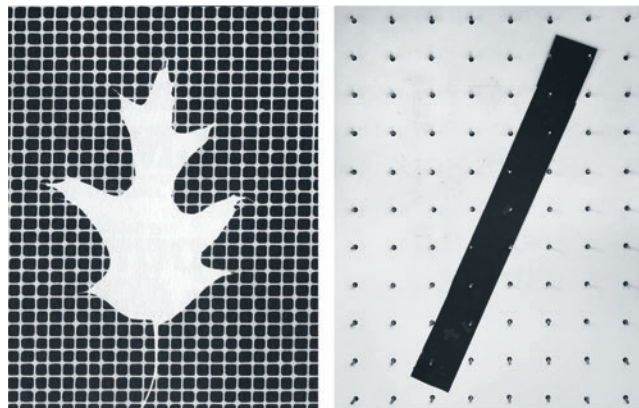
Below:
Leaf and Strike
2009
C-type print
20x31 cm

Above:
RAW WAR
2006
C-type print
52x61 cm

strikes and asterisks fly past too quickly to catch what they spell out. The animation is composed of single black and white photographs, so Ebner hasn't abandoned the medium – she has re-animated it literally.

Ebner's practice can be seen as a continuing investigation into the ways a photograph can denote something different than what it depicts and, similarly, how language can be read outside of its literal possibilities. Her works speak of the dying legacy of directly representing something, as straight photography once did. But as those possibilities are constantly dying and being negated, they're constantly being regenerated. Ebner's combinations of words and signs echo Myles' poetic description of 'the tree coming back in the crack', or what Ruscha once called, 'No End to the Things Made out of Human Talk'.

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ARTFORUM

APRIL 2010

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

JOHN STEZAKER

SHANNON EBNER





This page: Shannon Ebner, *RAW WAR*, 2004, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 20½ x 23½". From the series "Dead Democracy Letters," 2002–2006. Opposite page, from left: Shannon Ebner, *Symbolic Command Signal No. 1*, 2009, color photograph, 63 x 45". Shannon Ebner, *Symbolic Command Signal No. 2*, 2009, color photograph, 63 x 45". Shannon Ebner, *Symbolic Command Signal No. 3*, 2009, color photograph, 63 x 45".



Concrete Poetry

TOM McDONOUGH on the art of [Shannon Ebner](#)

IF YOU'VE EVER CROSSED A STREET, driven on a highway, or visited a public restroom, you've likely encountered those little stylized icons that guide us through public space, abstracted human figures that help to identify functions and direct our movements. They have become so omnipresent, so nearly naturalized, that they hardly seem to have been designed or to have a history. But of course, like all cultural artifacts, they do. These ubiquitous images are descendants of the Isotype communication system, developed by Austrian sociologist Otto Neurath in the years following World War I as a kind of "picture Esperanto," intended to provide a readily comprehensible and easily manipulated language of signs for conveying information. Neurath envisioned his iconographic language as a socialist tool to spread rational, scientific thought to the working classes of interwar Vienna. These grand ambitions would soon be frustrated by the rising tide of totalitarianism, but the Isotype system thrived outside Central European collectivism to become the lingua franca of capitalist signage, from airports to street corners around the globe.¹ Whatever Neurath's utopian aims, in fact, the effect of his pictograms was to reduce the semantic complexity of human language to a purely quantifiable substrate—a standardization of communication through its collapse into the graphic.

Lately, artist Shannon Ebner has been investigating this rationalized vocabulary in its most quotidian form: Three of Ebner's most recent works are large-scale color prints of pedestrian-crossing signals. *Symbolic Command Signal No. 1*, *2*, and *3*, all 2009, show tightly cropped vertical segments of the signal's plastic lens in three possible states: unlit in *No. 1*; displaying the familiar lunar-white walking-person symbol in *No. 2*; and showing the imperative Portland-orange upraised hand in *No. 3*. The prints are immediately striking not only for their size, which defamiliarizes the usually modest-scale sign, and for the use of color by a photographer who has made her name with largely black-and-white imagery, but also for their "figurative" quality. They are among the very few works in Ebner's oeuvre to depict the human form: Since she began exhibiting her photographs almost a decade ago, she has been better known for her play with language, so the appearance of the body, even in this mediated form, comes as something of a surprise. But of course to call the walking character and the hand "figurative" is a misnomer: These are graphic symbols—symbolic commands—meant to encode, in the simplest terms, a binary alternative of "Walk" and "Don't walk" for the hapless pedestrian in the contemporary metropolis. While these are beautiful photographs—Ebner has clearly reveled in the pebbled

grain of the plastic lens, in the way that light and shape lie somehow behind that plane, in the superimposition of the command images over each other, and in the artificiality of the bluish-white and glowing red-orange colors—they do not set out to reconcile us with the urban landscape. They instead seem determined, by an act of close attention to the surfaces of signification ubiquitous in that setting, to unsettle our vision and break down such instrumentalized language—such expressions of symbolic command—in all its forms. And in this, these three recent works can be said to be emblematic of Ebner’s project in its entirety.

THAT PROJECT HAS EMERGED gradually over the past two decades. After graduating from Bard College in the early 1990s with a degree in photography, Ebner moved to New York City, where she immersed herself in the downtown poetry scene, working closely with author and poet Eileen Myles. Her camera was set aside, at least temporarily, in favor of experimental text-based projects. *Pedestrian Union*, 1996, for example, which took place under the auspices of the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church, consisted of a one-night, Fluxus-like event and a booklet that urged its readers to explore the crowds of passersby on the city’s streets. Poetry was deterritorialized, freed not only from the confines of the page but also from the confines of the interior, and made public, at least provisionally. Or perhaps it would be better to say that *Pedestrian Union* sited poetry at the border between public and private, the city and the individual, positioning the poet as flaneur once again. This intermingling of public and private is a dynamic that would reappear several years later, informing photographic works like *On the Way to Paradise*, 2004, in which Ebner shot friends walking through settings both urban and rustic, wearing T-shirts inscribed with a single block letter. When assembled in a row, they read SELF IGNITE. By 2004, Ebner had been living in Los Angeles for four years—and before that had been in New Haven, at Yale University, having returned to school for her MFA—but the influence of her time in New York is still apparent. Indeed, what those years seem to have pro-



vided Ebner is not only, as one might expect, an education in the avant-garde poetics of the New York School but also, perhaps even more significantly, a sense of language as perched in the liminal space separating collectivity and self. That sense seems, moreover, bound up in some complicated fashion with her identity as an out lesbian—not that Ebner’s work can in any way be reduced to or read transparently as a reflection of that identity, but rather that her awareness of language as always political, in its ability to demarcate inclusion as well as exclusion, has been shaped by her particular experience of the social landscape.

Her breakthrough body of photographs, “Dead Democracy Letters,” 2002–2006, was fundamentally marked by this paradigm. This series documents temporary outdoor installations of six-foot-high cardboard letters, propped up to spell words and phrases of “ominous and urgent” import: NAUSEA, RAW, LANDSCAPE INCARCERATION, etc.² Although the letters approach billboard scale, their resolutely handmade quality, and the rickety scaffolding that holds them up, pulls them back into a space of more private speech. And—since Ebner most often installed these words in the scrubby landscape on the edges of LA—who would have seen them in any case? The images situate us on the border of urban development, in a space, neither nature nor city, that doesn’t promise much in the way of traffic. As the title of the series suggests, these works develop a response to the state of the nation following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a response whose tenor it is fair to call pessimistic, even angry. Ebner has spoken of an alienation that drove her “into the landscape” in these years.³ But that move to the landscape was not simply a retreat into privacy; her signs, in their isolation, give form to lack: to the very absence or silencing of public speech. When she photographs

the word NAUSEA, the letters propped in the middle distance on dune grass, the ocean visible behind, she titles the work *USA*—playing with language to indicate a visceral revulsion more topical than the existentialist echo of *nausea* might suggest.

“Dead Democracy Letters,” on one hand, documents Ebner’s performative acts, her creation of these fugitive constructions out in the world. Her use of straight black-and-white photography for this series only reinforces the echo of early-1970s Conceptualist strategies.

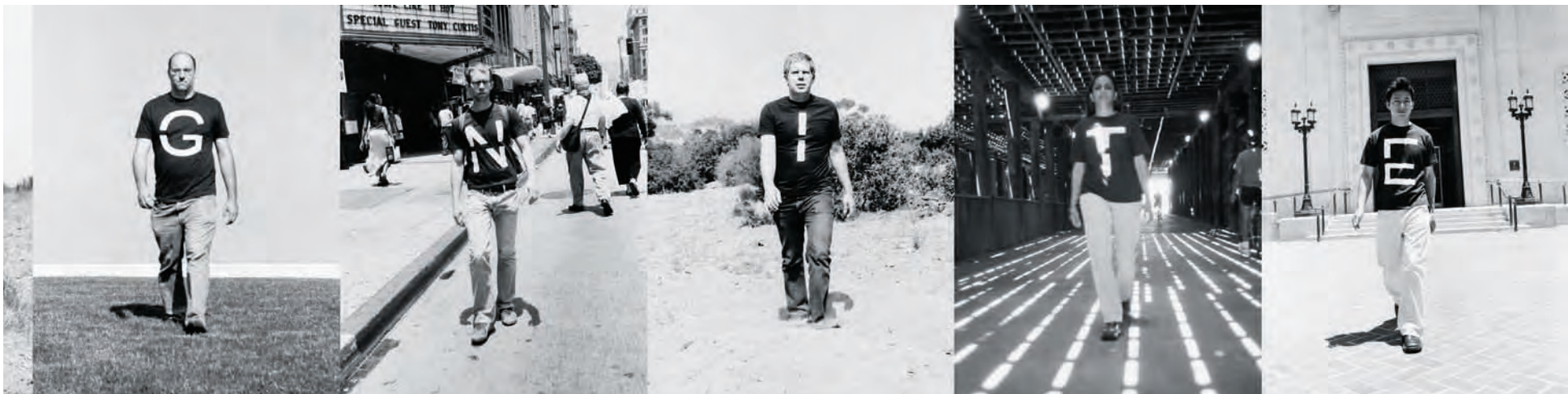
Ebner’s traffic-signal photos seem determined to unsettle our vision and break down such instrumentalized language—expressions of symbolic command—in all its forms.





Opposite page, above: Shannon Ebner and Lilah Friedland, poster for *Pedestrian Union* at St. Mark's Church in New York City, 1996, ink on paper, 14 ¼ x 8 ¾".

This page, above: Shannon Ebner, *USA*, 2003, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 32 x 40 ½". From the series "Dead Democracy Letters," 2002–2006.
Below, this and opposite page: Shannon Ebner, *On the Way to Paradise*, 2004, ten black-and-white photographs printed on chromogenic paper, each 14 ½ x 11 ½", overall 14 ½ x 115".



On the other hand, however, the works are also insistently constructed as photographs—which is to say, as images whose primary reality lies on the page rather than in the landscape. Ebner remarks that black and white create a “purely photographic world, removed from our reality.”⁴ This becomes evident in a work like *RAW WAR*, 2004, in which RAW is spelled out in linked black capitals propped against a wire fence that stands between a murky black lake and a thicket of prehistoric-looking tropical foliage. Many critics have remarked on how the horizontal stroke of the *A* extends beyond the letter’s two legs, so that when seen in conjunction with its reflection it forms a Star of David. Given the fact that the photo was shot at the La Brea Tar Pits, an ancient petroleum deposit, this has been taken as a comment on the imbrications of religion and oil in America’s current overseas adventures. (Referring to the backdrop of the US invasion of Iraq, Ebner in fact remarked at the time, “Being Jewish, I wanted to expose how this is fundamentally a religious war.”⁵) The message of the photograph is rather obvious—that the truth of the “raw” material becomes apparent only when we come to see its place in the “war” on terror, a perception problematically hinged on the six-pointed Jewish star. But our hasty search for meaning behind the image perhaps obscures the complex play with perception enacted on the surface. For the image is nothing if not flat, and we might do well to read it as such. The title gives us an important clue: *RAW WAR* does not, as so many observers have claimed, simply transcribe the word and its reflection in the pond, but rather the word and its mirror image *when seen upside down*. After all, RAW inverted—its reflection as we see it in the photograph—doesn’t really spell anything. Only on our turning the *photograph* upside down do the reflected letters spell WAR (albeit with, still, a reversed R). That is, to see WAR we must rotate the photo 180 degrees, as with a sheet of paper in our hands.

In *RAW WAR* we see the alignment or layering of photographic print and printed page for the first time in Ebner’s work—an affiliation made explicit in such later works as the ten prints of *Notebook Pages*, 2009, which picture blank, ruled composition pages in grayscale fading to black. Previously, her letters were most often seen against a deep space—a format echoing Ed Ruscha’s paintings of the Hollywood Sign, an evident source for her photographic practice. Like Ruscha, Ebner frequently chose to place her words in close alignment with a horizon line, as in *MLK Double-Horizon*, 2003. In the following year’s *RAW WAR*, however, the horizon disappears and space is squeezed out. The message pays homage to Bruce Nauman’s 1970 *Raw-War* neon, but whereas his sequential illumination of the letters in the sign works to meld the two words together through time, Ebner conflates them in a single space. From this point forward, the surface of the photograph, or some close substitute for it, from the lens of the traffic signal to the floor of her garage, is treated above all as a plane of inscription.

Of course, such images are more than the sum of these formal strategies. “Dead Democracy Letters” constitutes one of the most profound cultural responses to the particular impasses faced by American art and society at the



Ebner’s “Dead Democracy Letters” constitutes one of the most profound cultural responses to the particular impasses faced by American art and society at the dawn of the new century.

photograph’s documentary function over its ability to construct allegories or fables.⁶ “Dead Democracy Letters” resituated alienation as a public affair: By 2002, “home” had become “the homeland,” ever under threat by an unseen enemy, and language had been conscripted into the battle—or rather, the language and image economies were fully mobilized in the conduct of spectacularized warfare.⁷ We cannot compete with this deployment of the apparatus of a hypermodern production of appearances, Ebner seems to suggest, but the photographer can register her refusal to join the fight and can even, perhaps, work to scramble the messages emanating from that machinery of spectacle.

But all this makes the series sound like so much political art, which it is not—at least in any straightforward way. One does sense some subterranean link between these handmade linguistic constructions and the protest signs carried by millions around the world in the antiwar marches of 2003; *Dismantled Peace Sign*, 2004, which shows the ghost outlines of the spray-painted symbol on a clear plastic sign supported by the kind of simple wooden poles Ebner uses to hold up her letters, would seem to point in this direction. But it is the emptiness of the placard that is crucial—the absence of the meaningful emblem. The politics of “Dead Democracy Letters,” and the lessons it passed on to future work, lie precisely in this play of the absence and presence of meaning. In 2006, Ebner packed the six-by-three-foot letters into a wooden box on casters, jokingly labeled *SCULPTURES INVOLONTAIRES [sic]* in spray paint. She photographed it in a 2006 work of the same title, in which she revisited the

outskirts of Los Angeles, shooting the box in the middle distance, rhyming with the horizon line, just as she had once shot the letters themselves. If formerly the letters spelled out their enigmatic messages in this space, now they are held in reserve, mutely filed in their ramshackle container. The reference to Brassai’s 1933 photos of discarded bus tickets, bread, and other refuse was hardly the point; what was central was the idea that the letters had been retired from circulation in order to become both a sculptural object and a storehouse of potential meanings.





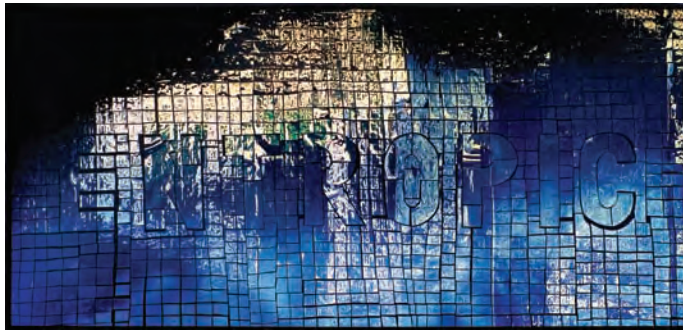
Opposite page, from top: Shannon Ebner, *Dismantled Peace Sign*, 2004, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 40½ x 32½". Shannon Ebner, *Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow*, 2006, color photograph, 32½ x 40¾". This page: Shannon Ebner, *Democratizing*, 2006, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 26¾ x 40¾".

EBNER ALSO CONTINUED TO EXPLORE LANGUAGE through the interposition of a surface parallel to the camera lens, a surface that functions like a sheet of paper and thus naturally invites writing. But that writing is of a particular sort: Now words seem to be under duress, flickering between visibility and invisibility. We see this in the color print *Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow*, 2006, whose titular phrase is just barely apparent, traced within a haze of black spray paint on a transparent plane, behind which we glimpse a green, hilly landscape. Photographs like *Democratizing*, 2006, in which the title, spelled out in sand on the asphalt of the artist's driveway, is partly washed away by running water, indicate the direction her work was taking. She was moving toward the deliquescence of language, the erosion of meaning, and an attention to the materiality of the signifier—while also insisting on the sociopolitical context in which such a labor of indifferenciation becomes necessary.

The tenor of such works might best be summed up in *Opic*, 2006, its title short for ENTROPIC, a word seen emerging from a field of shimmering blue squares. As do many of Ebner's photographs from this moment, *Opic* looks back to Ruscha's

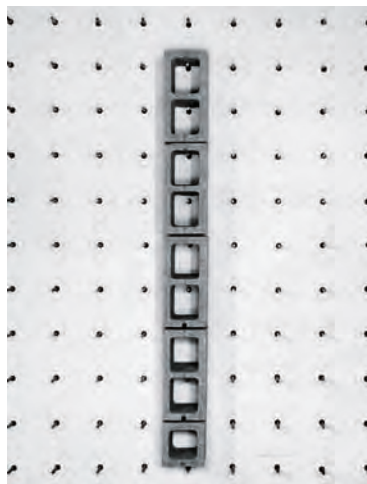
liquid word paintings of the late 1960s, with their strange dispersal of sense into noise as the structure of language breaks down in organic decay and gravity-bound spread.⁸ But here, too, we can see a further play in the title, which cuts off the first half of the word and rhymes, perhaps, with *scopic* or *optic*. Indeed, the other thing at stake in these photographs, beyond the disintegration of language, is visuality itself. If vision is normally our most distanced sense, the one most separated from the physicality of touch, in Ebner's work it becomes ever more materialized, taking on a nearly haptic quality in its encounter with her objects. This was already suggested in her "Fire Bottles" series, 2002, for which she photographed fragments of glass bottles that had been warped by the intense heat of forest fires in the Sierra Nevada; they are studies in the reflection and refraction of light, but they are also resistant objects whose "piercing and violent gaze" has been directed back at the photographer.⁹ The sense of a tactile threat to vision—an almost primal fear of injury to the most vulnerable sense organs—is apparent in these scattered shards, and that threat is mobilized precisely to point up how profoundly imbricated visuality is with the substance of things.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, as digital technologies were exerting their dematerializing force, Ebner insisted on the photographic print and on a kind of materialist photography that addresses our sense of touch almost as much as our visibility. This is not to say, however, that she was engaged in a nostalgic practice of mourning



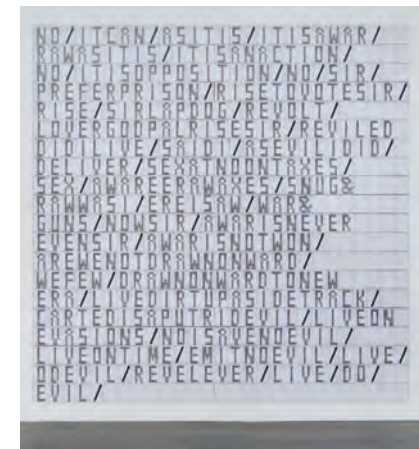
the death of the photographic *punctum* with the advent of new digital modes; rather, Ebner has wagered that such a materialist practice still offers the best means of working through the persistent abstraction of the contemporary world. While some of Ebner's most recent photographs are abstract (or nearly so, as in the case of *Some Clouds*, 2009), we could say that, instead of embracing the approach of abstract photography as a number of artists have in the past few years, she has undertaken the photography of abstraction—that is, a practice that explores the material textures of a social world *made abstract* by the forces of spectacularization. It is not surprising, then, that such a focus on materiality drew her art increasingly toward the sculptural, a move already implicit in the found-object quality of *Sculptures Involontaires*. If that piece was a kind of transitional work, “containing” the two-dimensional “Dead Democracy Letters,” an invitation in 2006 to produce a work for Rockefeller Center in New York led to her first emphatically sculptural piece. *D.O.I.* is a closed circle of cinder blocks in which the phrase DEAD ON THE INSIDE is spelled out by facing the hollow cores of blocks outward to form letters. Vaguely reminiscent of military blockhouses, the work is perhaps best described as a mute, cylindrical antimonument; as such, we could say that it makes semipermanent the ephemeral “Dead Democracy Letters,” in keeping with its transposition from the urban periphery to the core.

That same year, she photographed *D.O.I.*, flattening out part of its curved surface onto four conjoined negatives, so that the message now reads IS DEAD. That phrase, which is also the title of a Gertrude Stein prose poem, had appeared earlier that year in *Is Dead*, a late reprise of the language-installation photographs, the letters here positioned halfway up a steep hillside, propped against one of several cinder-block retaining walls, the phrase seeming to comment on the wracked landscape surrounding it. With *D.O.I.*, however, the concrete blocks that had appeared as part of the informal Los Angeles scenery in *Is Dead* and in other photographs became the very materials of her photographic-sculptural-linguistic practice. Other assemblages of concrete blocks followed, but these were specifically intended to be photographed: Weightier versions of “Dead Democracy Letters,” they include works like *Shrouded Monument*, 2008, a temporary arrangement of bricks into letters spelling USA, the whole thing draped in clear plastic sheeting. If taggers have long seen the cement walls of the city as pages on which to write, why not take these ubiquitous building materials as so many components of an alphabet? Ebner would soon construct a wall-size pegboard in her garage-studio on which she could hang cinder blocks to form letters that were then



photographed. The hundreds of resulting prints were arranged into a massive wall of words that formed *STRIKE*, 2007, her contribution to the following year's Whitney Biennial. Thematically, the language of the work continued to refer to the psychic conflicts attendant to wartime America; formally, it was characterized by mirroring, reversibility (shades of *RAW WAR*), and palindromic play: RISE/SIRLAPDOG/REVOLT/LOVEGODPALRISESIR, reads one segment. The title refers both to the forward slash, indicating something like a line break in Ebner's prose, and also to a sense that language here has ceased to work for its ideological employers and has turned in on itself in logorrheic protest.

The choice of material for these new works is entirely logical. Not only are cinder blocks modular, which allows them to be arranged in myriad configurations, but they also have a sculptural weight and mass that remains evident even in the face of the diminished scale found in her photos. Cinder block also, however, has important metaphoric significance here: It is a building material invented early in the twentieth century, at a moment when American suburban life was first being marketed on a mass scale and when construction was becoming increasingly rationalized; what began as a means for the hasty assembly of modest home foundations, however, would become a kind of global lingua franca of capitalist encroachment on the built environment, its silent, obdurate masonry perhaps the true “international style” of the past half century. Cinder blocks are a degree zero of architecture, a minimalist material that Ebner adopts



and subverts simultaneously: “I have enjoyed using it to emote through language,” she has written, “to autonomize it (automate and express my autonomy as an individual), and I have enjoyed its material residue. The background of the blank field (the empty or blank pegboard) has indexical marks all over it, traces of where language had been formed, material evidence of the hand's crafting of language, material evidence of the ‘author.’”¹⁰

The modularity of cinder block and Ebner's configurations of the blocks into letters recall digital typography, while the blunt physicality of her materials and the evident labor involved in assembling these arrangements push back, offering a tenuous position from which to assert linguistic autonomy. She confronts that “world of signs” diagnosed by Henri Lefebvre, a world “where the Ego no longer relates to its own nature, to the material world, or even to the ‘thingness’ of things . . . , but only to things bound to their signs and indeed ousted and supplanted by them. The sign-bearing ‘I’ no longer deals with anything but other bearers of signs.”¹¹ Within this hall of mirrors, the cinder block in its abstraction offers a possible means of reasserting the “thingness” of language—nothing less than the potential for poetry—by plumbing the reification of our communication in all its depth.

This is precisely the direction adopted in some of Ebner's most recent works. We find her animating the *STRIKE* alphabet in looped videos such as *THE ECSTATIC ALPHABET* and *Between Words Pause*, both 2009. In each, the letters come quickly, flashing on the wall at a speed almost too fast to process;

repetition and telegraphic language help the viewer grasp the message. In the latter, photography as writing with light seems evoked and annulled in an opening alternation of the word ASUN (A and SUN run together) and the “strike” symbol, and indeed the video as a whole announces its concern with undoing signification and its relation to subjectivity. Words are once again reversed (as in NUS~~A~~, which perhaps places the A in USA under erasure), and the phrase SELF-CANCELATIONPROCESS, followed by a series of struck-out I’s, appears prominently toward the middle. Ebner would apparently seek to undo our frozen language, and our “sign-bearing ‘I,’” by rematerializing communication and our perception in an ecstatic procession of frames. A twelve-armed asterisk—a graphic developed by Muriel Cooper, a designer at MIT in the 1970s—repeatedly punctuates *Between Words Pause*. Ebner has written, “I have become obsessed with this

graphic symbol, not only because of the beauty of its form but also because it is the symbol for *elsewhere*.”¹² True, but we might also note the similarity between this asterisk and an abstracted lens shutter: The instrument of attaining an elsewhere is none other than the camera itself. At the close of the video we read the enigmatic phrase ANASTERISKSPOTTEDWILLNEVERBESEEN, after which a blurred black asterisk (previously seen in *The Sun as Error*, 2009, and in her book of the same title) dances around the screen for several frames, like a reverse flash. It has become a symbol of language’s potential to escape frozen meaning and unequivocal certainty; it is the line of flight created by the conversion of the photograph to a site of inscription: It is error, invisibility, and the possibility of change.

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For notes, see page 218.

Opposite page, clockwise from top: Shannon Ebner, *Opic*, 2006, silkscreen on color photograph, 36¾ x 76¾". Shannon Ebner, *STRIKE*, 2007, 540 black-and-white photographs printed on chromogenic paper, aluminum, wood, each 7½ x 5¾", overall 12' 6" x 12' 11¼". Shannon Ebner, *Untitled (I)*, 2009, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 63 x 48". This page: Shannon Ebner, *Some Clouds*, 2009, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 31¾ x 44".



MCDONOUGH/EBNER continued from page 155

NOTES

1. On Neurath, see Nader Vossoughian, *Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2009).
2. The characterization comes from Michael Ned Holte, "Shannon Ebner," in *2006 California Biennial*, exh. cat. (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2006), 82.
3. Shannon Ebner, in conversation with the author, New York, February 21, 2010.
4. Ebner, conversation.
5. Ebner, quoted in Rebecca Cascade, "Character Building," *Elle*, November 2005. Two years later, another critic—in a generally laudatory article—would single this work out for what he saw as its "sloppy expressions of ideology." Dan Torop, "Shannon Ebner," *Modern Painters*, July–August 2007: 46.
6. Ebner, quoted in Todd Alden, "Shannon Ebner," in *2008 Whitney Biennial*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 122.
7. See Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005).
8. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 60–80, an essay Ebner has cited as being of particular importance to her thought. Ebner, conversation.
9. Ebner, quoted in press release, "International and National Projects Fall 2007–," P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, October 21, 2007–January 14, 2008.
10. Ebner, e-mail message to the author, February 22, 2010.
11. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 311.
12. Shannon Ebner, as told to David Velasco, "500 Words," *Artforum.com*, March 5, 2009. <http://artforum.com/words/id=22213>.

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was a shaman himself, in the sense that he concealed his sleights of hand—only his moves were tricks of language, tricks that his obsessively semiotic theories would never admit to. One of the more glaring ones, which appears in his essay "The Effectiveness of Symbols" (in *Structural Anthropology* [1963]), and is basic to his entire method, was his notion of "inductive property," by which "structures," salt crystals as much as myth—affect one another through what I can only call their "structuration." The example brilliantly worked through was that of a Cuna Indian shaman in the San Blas Islands off Panama and Colombia in the Caribbean who is able to coordinate his nightlong song with the transformation of the heaving body of a woman laboring in obstructed childbirth such that her body is "restructured" and the baby is born. In reality, what this inductive property amounts to is anyone's guess, yet the ethnographic material—the story, if you will—is so heady that such mumbo jumbo on the part of the writer goes unseen. (Let it not pass unnoticed that Lacan said he got his understanding of the unconscious from this essay.) In other words, the natives' magic is used to propel your own—structuralist—magic.

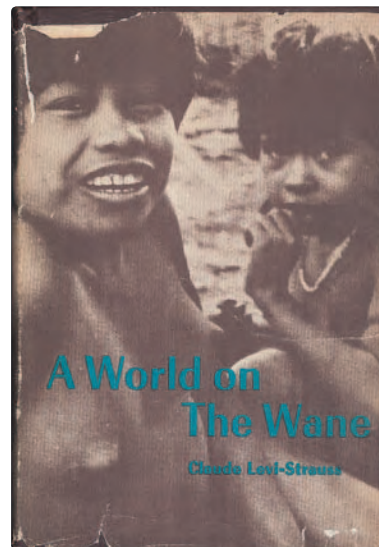
But oh, what joy it was then to be alive! An offshoot of the exuberant '60s, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism had more than a tangential relationship with what came to be called the literary turn in the human sciences. Together with the influence of Antonio Gramsci, the literary turn demolished the economic determinism of regnant Marxism and opened the floodgates both to a passionate interest in culture as a force in its own right and to taking the idea of structure the full hog, as with *Homo ludens* Roland Barthes and with Derrida's Nietzsche-inspired vision of what it means to have a structure of relationships with no center.

Finding one's way through this potent stuff was wonderful and wonderfully confusing. I doubt there has been an intellectual and emotional revolution of this profundity since the advent of the "historical avant-garde" in the early twentieth century. My own path was guided as much by this intellectual ferment as by my fieldwork, first on the impact of agribusiness on peasant economies in western Colombia and then on the attribution of magical powers by colonists—rich and poor—to the Indians of the eastern foothills of the Andes, which drop

off into the swirling mists of the Putumayo River basin, where William S. Burroughs had drunk *yagé* with shamans in the early 1950s. My issue with Lévi-Strauss was that his approach could only straitjacket the blooming, buzzing confusion of the all-night rituals involving hallucinogens, the sinuous quality of the shaman's wordless singing coming out of nowhere, the opening out of the body into multiple selves and organs, and the immensity of the fear and incandescent beauty—all experienced within an aesthetic of stops and starts and, of interruptions in speech, mood, and music, in the ongoing battle with sorcery. With its obsessive stress on signs to the neglect of emotion and ambiguity, structuralism has little purchase on the affective and aesthetic power of such experiences, which, if anything, turn structuralism on its head—a Dada-esque creative cacophony, as applicable in my opinion to the violence of the metaphysical struggle with one's body, imagination, and sorcery as to the atrocities of the early-twentieth-century rubber boom in the same area, as reported by Roger Casement to the British government. The underlying rhythm of order and disorder in ritual and colonial terror does not allow for structuralist magic bent on nailing things down but calls for a far more unstable and destabilizing confrontation, testing our writing to the full in an endless give-and-take with the elusive reality depicted.

Anxiety of influence, you ask? A predictable, even Oedipal, reaction to the master, as we see with Deleuze and the riches of poststructuralism in general? Of course. But so what? For so long as there is mystery, churned up as much by our own mad pursuits as by the world at large, we will be as alive and bug-eyed as was the face I still recall of that young man in Ann Arbor devouring *Structuralism* in Dominick's café way back when. □

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NOTES

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 25.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 42. Following the passage I have just cited, Strauss goes on to bunch together with this "logic of totemic classification" not only magic as "the science of the concrete" but also the work of the alchemists of antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as the writings of the legendary Hermes Trismegistus. Thus in one stroke we are catapulted into thinking hard about the coming science wars and global meltdown, ecological and financial—Green Hermeticism being in my eyes the most interesting philosophy of science available as an anarchist alternative to capitalist-generated systems of classification (for which see Peter Lamborn Wilson, Christopher Bamford, and Kevin Townley, *Green Hermeticism: Alchemy and Ecology* [Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2007]).

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order on the entire *civilized* world. For this, Lévi-Strauss had to prove the existence of a kind of "logic in tangible [sensible] qualities," which obeyed specific procedures and laws. It is a logic of this kind that he put to the test a few years later, with *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964). He then extended it, in a spiraling movement, to his second volume, *From Honey to Ashes* (1967), which involved a superior "logic of forms" (honey is over-raw, ashes overcooked). The third volume, *The Origin of Table Manners* (1968), explored the logic of qualities and the logic of forms through a civilizing process meant to establish the passage from nature to culture. And yet, moving from transformation to transformation, what remained of the initial cosmological relations dramatized in the myths was the human spirit—*The Naked Man* (1971), as he titled the fourth and final volume of his *Mythologiques*. In the end, qualities and forms got depleted, manners turned into mannerisms. Entropy kicked in. Myths collapsed and fell silent, leaving behind weakened forms—novels, historical works, or soap operas—their original