

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





Left:
Sbrouded Monument
2008
C-type print
103×123 cm

Below left:
Leaning Tree
2002/8
C-type print
75×112 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 graffitied 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.

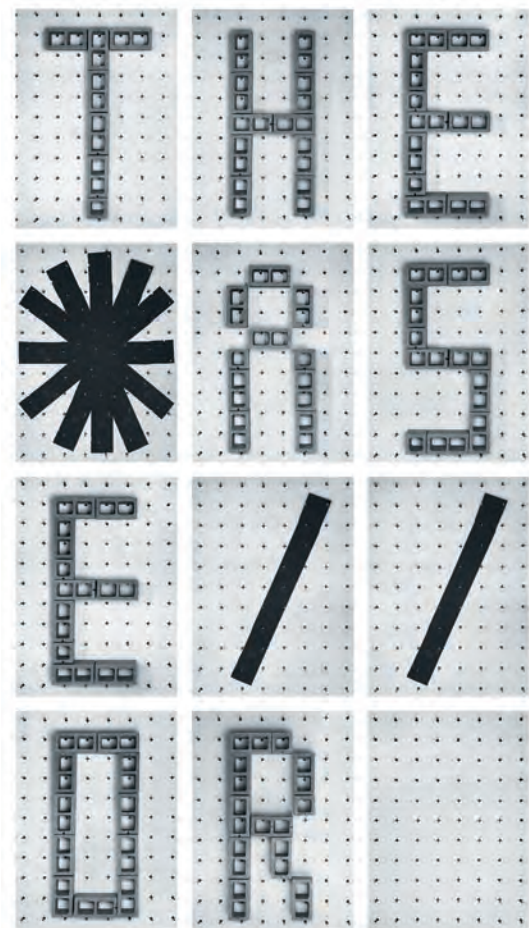
Ruscha is undoubtedly Ebner's closest forbear in her use of language in works such as *Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow* (2006) or *The Day Sob Dies* (2005). The way she imposes the words on a background full of nostalgic potential, as she does in erecting the word 'Nausea' on a bluff above the Pacific Ocean 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 2 as E//OR
2009
C-type print
83×47 cm

Below:
Left: *Involuntary Sculpture*
2006
Wooden box with casters and wheels, corrugated cardboard, rebar, water-based house paint and gesso
88×202×112 cm
Right: *STRIKE*
2008
C-type prints, aluminium and wood
381×394 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 knows' 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,





Below:
Leaf and Strike
 2009
 C-type print
 20×31 cm

Above:
RAW WAR
 2006
 C-type print
 52×61 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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