

ARTFORUM

APRIL 2010

T H I R D I N T E R N A T I O N A L I S S U E

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS

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SHANNON EBNER

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This page: Shannon Ebner, *RAW WAR*, 2004, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 20 1/2 x 23 1/2". 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 flâneur 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-

PEDESTRIAN UNION YOUR LOCAL CHAPTER 07-13

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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 1/2 x 8 1/2".
 This page, above: Shannon Ebner, USA, 2003, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 32 x 40 1/2". 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 1/2 x 11 1/2", overall 14 1/2 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.



dawn of the new century. With this series, Ebner announced the obsolescence of photography’s 1990s fascination with the anomic hovering about the middle-class home—a trend that had received official sanction at the Museum of Modern Art in New York’s 1991 exhibition “Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort” and that had been the dominant vocabulary throughout her time at Yale. While there, she had rejected the post-Pictures aesthetic of photographers like Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, with their high-production-value images of suburban malaise that were then so in favor among her colleagues. Instead, she drew inspiration from a tradition within modernism, spanning “from Atget to Ruscha,” that valued the

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.



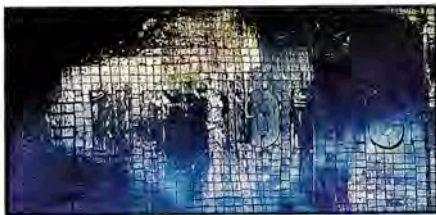
Opposite page, from top: Shannon Ebner, *Dismantled Peace Sign*, 2004, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 40 1/2 x 32 1/2". Shannon Ebner, *Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow*, 2006, color photograph, 32 1/2 x 40 1/2". This page: Shannon Ebner, *Democratizing*, 2006, black-and-white photograph printed on chromogenic paper, 26 1/2 x 40 1/2".

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

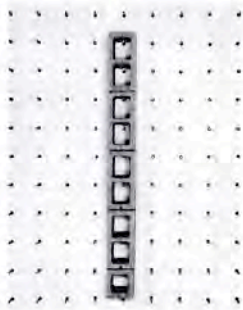
liquid word paintings of the late 1960s, with their strange dispersal of sense into noise as the structure of language breaks down in organic decay and gravity-bound spread.⁸ But here, too, we can see a further play in the title, which cuts off the first half of the word and rhymes, perhaps, with *scopic* 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



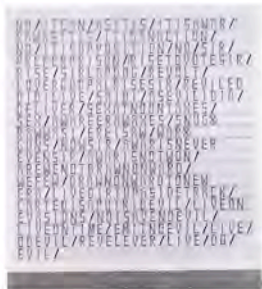
the death of the photographic *punctum* with the advent of new digital modes; rather, Ebner has wagered that such a materialist practice still offers the best means of working through the persistent abstraction of the contemporary world. While some of Ebner's most recent photographs are abstract (or 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 *Sbrouded 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/SIKLAPDOG/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, how-



ever, 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 ECSTATICPHABET* 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 *NUSA*, 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, 36 1/2 x 76 1/4". Shannon Ebner, *STRIKE*, 2007, 540 black-and-white photographs printed on chromogenic paper, aluminum, wood, each 7 1/2 x 5 1/2", overall 12' 6" x 12' 11 1/4". Shannon Ebner, *Untitled (f)*, 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, 31 1/2 x 44".



NOTES

1. On Neurath, see Nader Vossoughian, *Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis* (Rotterdam: NA1, 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>.