

# Public Parking

A journal for storytelling, arguments, and discovery through tangential conversations.

The landscape of language in Shannon Ebner's exhibition *FRET SCAPES* is weathered multiple times over. The show has two main parts: a floor-to-ceiling poem entitled *FRET* and a series of thirteen black-and-white photographs. The poem is composed using what Ebner calls a "wet letter alphabet"—photographs of paper letters pasted with water onto an anonymous white wall. In Ebner's photographs, the dampened characters work against the natural forces of time, evaporation, and gravity which have caused the letters to slip and wrinkle. The photographs that make up Ebner's wet-letter alphabet are sheathed in individual Photo-Tex sleeves and mounted on the wall of the gallery to create the seventeen stanzas of *FRET*. In the second part of the exhibition, we see photographs of street scenes with wheat-pasted advertisements, windows filled with reflective and haunting digital tablet screens, and sidewalks of drying concrete.

Ebner uses the word "fret" as an anxious verb, a noun with musical and architectural connotations, and as a meteorological acronym standing for "forecast reference evapotranspiration report," a measurement of the rate at which precipitated water will evaporate to the sky. These multiple meanings are repeated in the formal qualities of Ebner's verses and photographs, for *FRET SCAPES* meditates on the fluid interplays between photography and language. In doing so, the exhibition draws our attention to how both of these media are constituted by matter as well as by something more intangible. This duality is echoed in the natural process of evaporation, a transition during which discrete liquids are transformed into impalpable gases. For Ebner, photography and the written word share a similar liminality.

Ebner's invocation of the dual nature of language recalls the sentiments of Robert Smithson. In his essay, "Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read," the artist wrote, "my sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas."<sup>1</sup> Smithson insisted upon language's physical presence, remarking how some "banal words function as feeble phenomena that fall into their own mental bogs of meaning...words constantly shift and invert themselves without ending, these could be called 'suspended words.'" Ebner's exhibition elaborates on Smithson's musings, further demonstrating how language takes a physical shape that informs its reception and affect.

Ebner notes how the wet-letter alphabet enacts "a vanishing act of language" in an "alphabetic field of disarray."<sup>2</sup> The letters in Ebner's verses scrunch and wobble away from a linear typeface, falling after their exposure to the air and the light of the sun. The first line of Ebner's verse reads, "CITY OF 1,000 EYES, / STURM UND DRANG," similarly reflecting a sense of unrest via the translation of the German phrase "sturm und drang" or "storm and stress."



Shannon Ebner, *THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE*, 2022. Archival pigment print mounted on aluminum. 55.1 x 37.3 x 4.1 cm / 21.7 x 14.7 x 1.6 in (framed). Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York. Photo: Greg Carideo.



*METRO PICTURE*, 2022. Archival pigment print mounted on aluminum. 55.1 x 37.3 x 4.1 cm / 21.7 x 14.7 x 1.6 in. Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York. Photo: Greg Carideo.

Ebner's photographs extend this milieu of tension. In the image *THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE*, the shadowy silhouette of a camera tripod can be seen in the glassy exterior of a window, recalling one of the one thousand eyes cited in the first line of *FRET*. These one thousand eyes are perhaps the lenses of human pupils or the viewfinder of Ebner's camera. In the reflection of a store window, this eye looks back on itself amidst the turbulent atmosphere of the city sidewalk. An already eery atmosphere is heightened by the inclusion of background details, such as a full trash bag lying next to the street and shuttered storefronts with paper-covered windows.

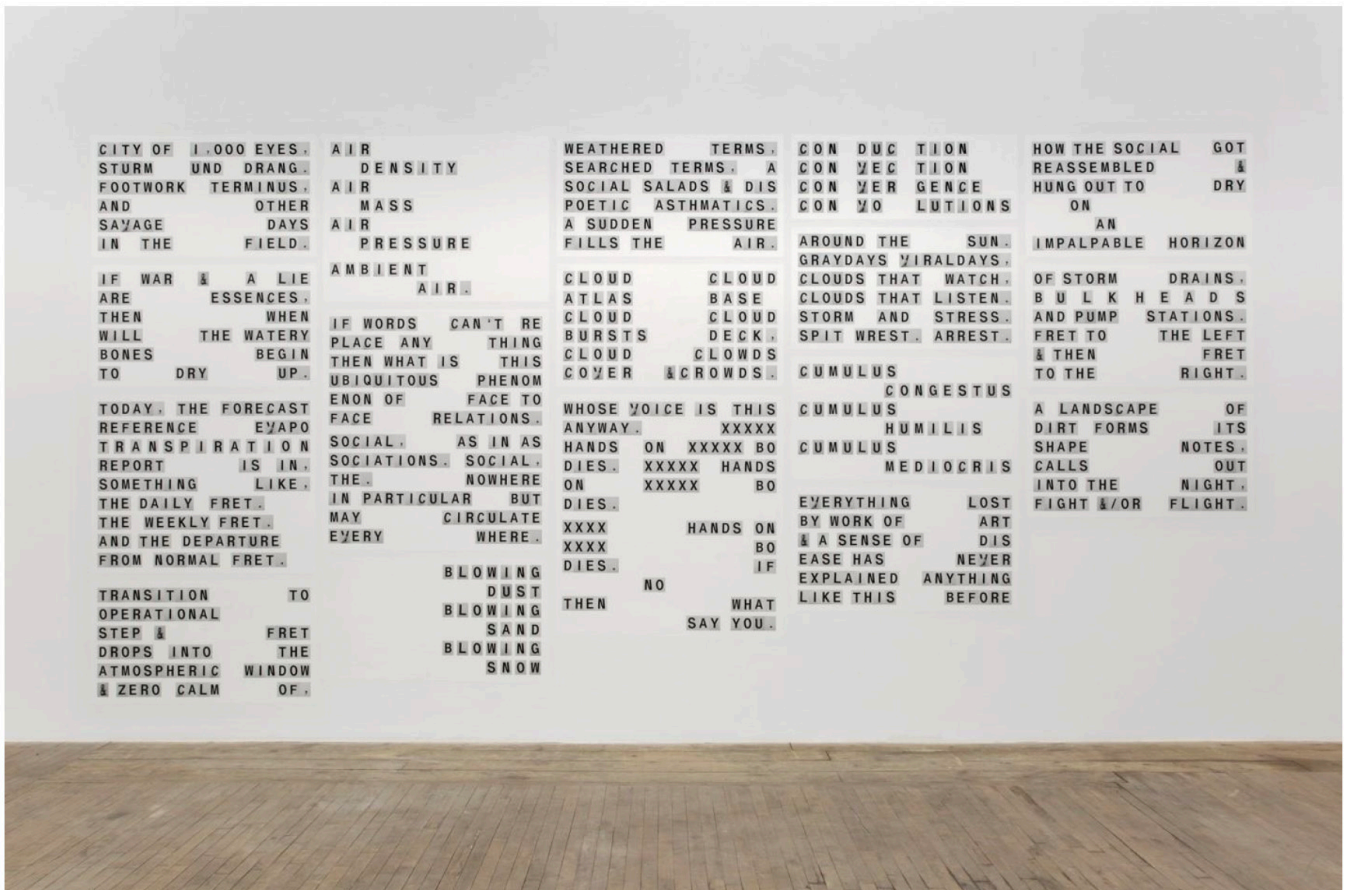
Water intrudes and then dissipates in *FRET SCAPES*. In the poem *FRET*, the characters of Ebner's "wet-letter alphabet" are idiosyncratic units soldered together to form words and verses that are drenched, heavy in their waterlogged state. Ebner's text evokes droplets from "CLOUDS THAT WATCH, / CLOUDS THAT LISTEN/ STORM AND STRESS. / SPIT WREST. ARREST." In the photograph *SNOW DRIFT*, Ebner's camera records a shapely bit of snow on a wall, freezing a brief moment amidst the flakes' melting and vaporization. *SNOW DRIFT* complements Ebner's verse, visually articulating a quality of ephemerality that is inherent to moments of flux.

Water's errant nature has been considered in relation to the camera before. Famously, Jeff Wall pointed to the "liquid intelligence" of the medium, opposing "the glassed-in and relatively 'dry' character of the institution of photography," the troublesome history of seeking to capture, or fix, a subject through the apparatus of the camera<sup>3</sup>. For Wall, water is a kind of essential "archaism," which is central and yet antithetical to the processes and practices of photography.<sup>4</sup> Ebner leans into the indeterminate quality of liquid photographic practices described by Wall, veering away from a definitive depiction of street scenes. Instead, her works layer moments of reflections, deflections, and symbols. For example, in the photograph *CODE OF FLAG BEHAVIOR*, an American flag is suffused by melded outlines of trees, a row of brownstone rooflines, and the filmy shape of another circle. In relation to this highly recognizable emblem, a singular "code" of behavior is indiscernible, remaining wantonly ambiguous by way of Ebner's camera.

A kind of precarity runs through *FRET SCAPES*, stemming from the exhibit's tense climate of sagging letters and shadowy streets. There is a preoccupation with attempting to grasp that which is fleeting, redolent in the camera's attempt to capture quickly falling water-bounded letters or fix an image of the ghostly outlines of two pairs of palms on a dusty door of the subway.

Yet, despite the abundance of transient moments passing through Ebner's exhibition, there is a call to pay attention to the physicality of things. The show prompts us to turn our gazes and thoughts to the matter which constitutes these spectral photographic moments of everyday life and the words used to describe them. As Ebner's poem *FRET* ends, the impalpable voice of a writer on the horizon calls to all of us, "FRET TO THE LEFT / & THEN FRET / TO THE RIGHT. / A LANDSCAPE OF / DIRT FORMS ITS / SHAPE NOTES, / CALLS OUT / INTO THE NIGHT, / FIGHT &/OR FLIGHT." In *FRET SCAPES*, words take on a physical shape, expanding beyond immaterial meaning. To pay attention to this matter is to take heed of Ebner's verse.

In the wet cement of the photograph titled *NON IDEA SED IN REBUS*, or "not by ideas but by things," the anonymous words "to writing in the forever wet cement of good worlds to come," are inscribed. The photograph is representative of *FRET SCAPES'* overarching meditation on the nature of language as being made up of both "matter" or "things" as well as "ideas." The image also offers some relief from the tense climate weighing on the rest of the exhibition. The words first set in the cement of a sidewalk and then later in the archival pigment ink of Ebner's photograph are a forecast which will become permanent as evaporation occurs and the paste sets. Hardening in the sun and wind, these concrete words are an enduring kind of hope that insists, even as the moisture disappears, a determination to keep writing of, and believing in, good worlds to come.



Shannon Ebner, *FRET SCAPES*, 2022. Installation view, kaufmann repetto, New York. Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York. Photo: Greg Carideo.



Shannon Ebner, *SNOW DRIFT*, 2022. Archival pigment print mounted on aluminum. 55.1 x 37.3 x 4.1 cm / 21.7 x 14.7 x 1.6 in (framed). Courtesy of the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York. Photo: Greg Carideo.