

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 ideae 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.