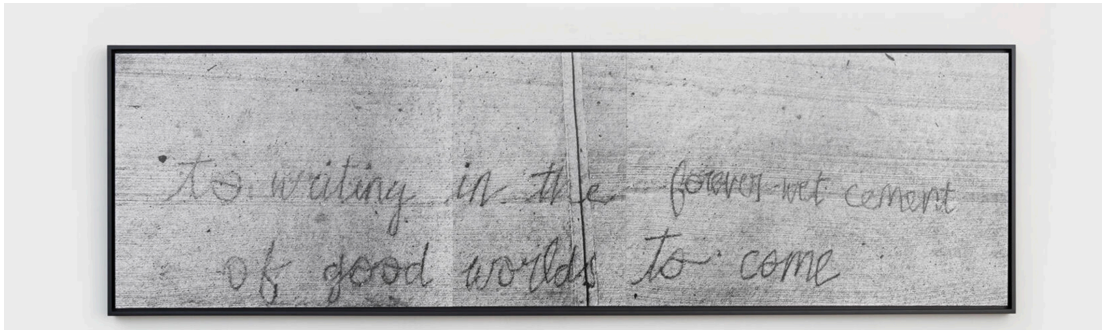


FRIEZE

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

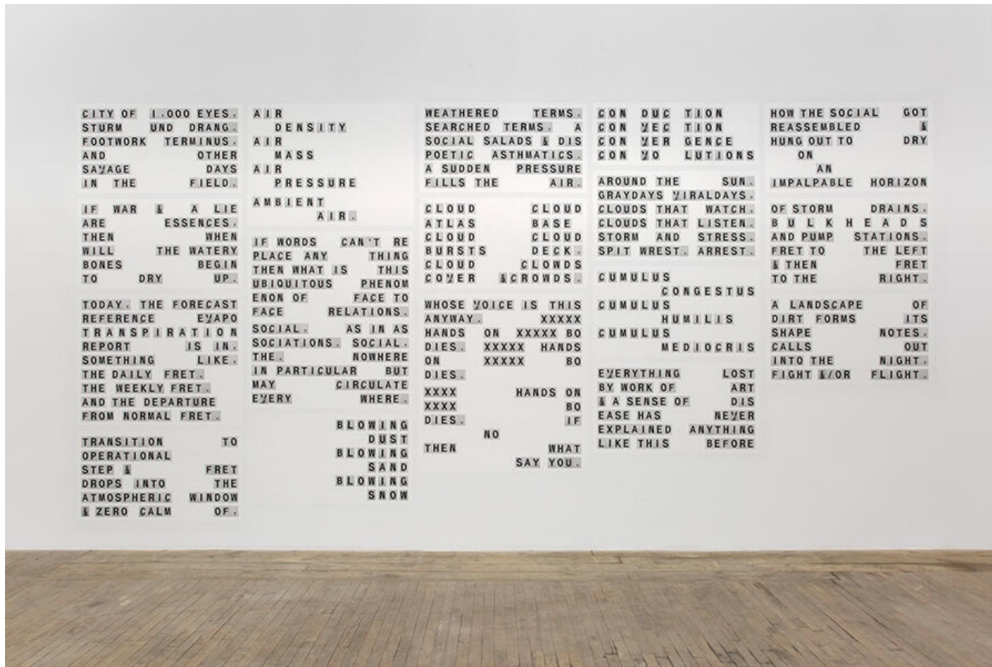
A suite of black and white photographs on the surrounding walls adjacent to *FRET* compliment its poetic language, picturing different objects and text-based signage: images often taken through (or capturing what is reflected from) storefront windows – each element of these pictures a subject in itself, 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 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.’