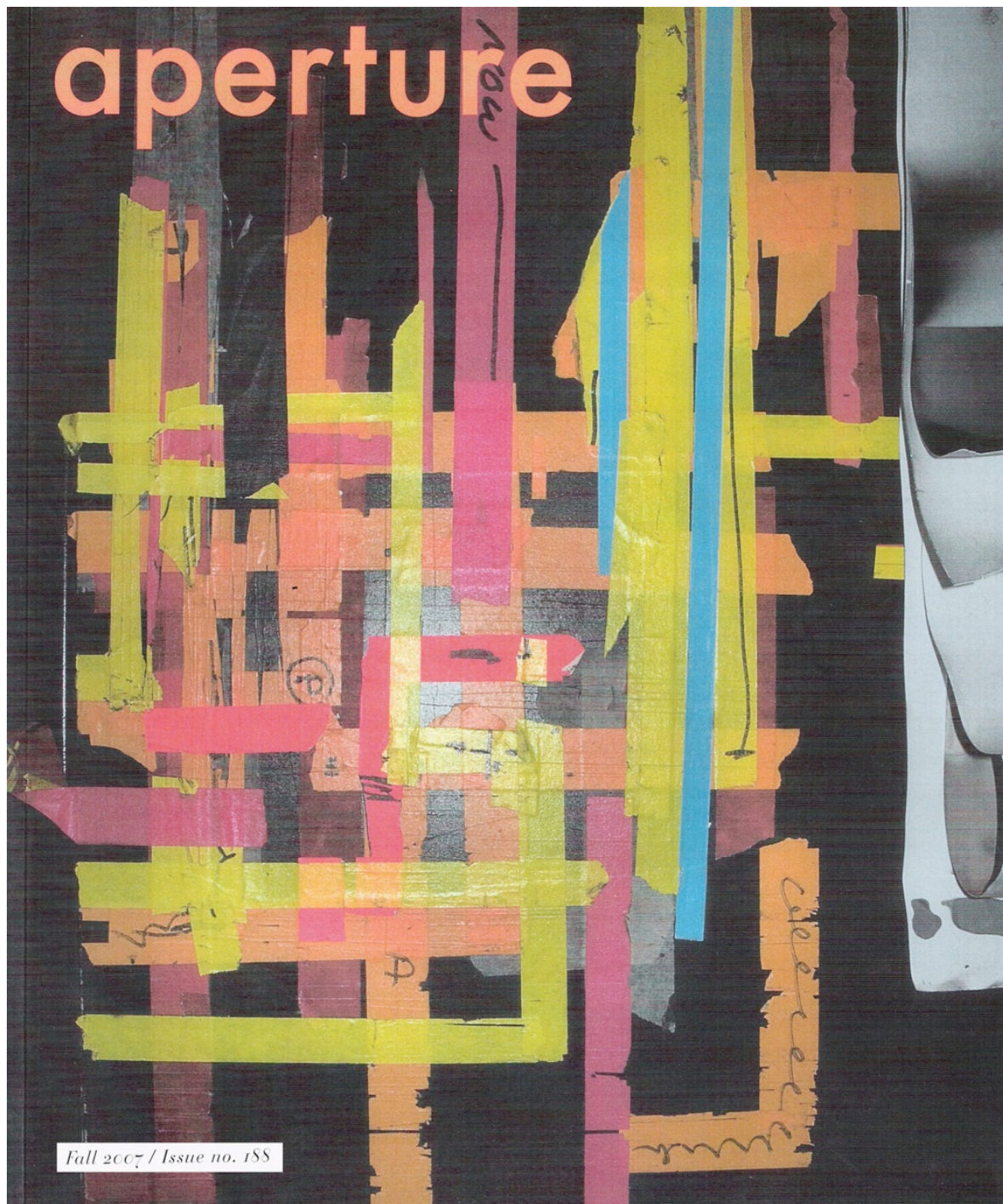


Shannon Ebner

Words, Words, Words: Photographs by Shannon Ebner

By Lisa Turvey

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WORK AND PROCESS

WORDS WORDS WORDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANNON EBNER

BY LISA TURVEY

Three facts about Englewood, New Jersey: 1) it was so named because it had been the first primarily English-speaking settlement on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River (in the seventeenth century, when the Tri-State area was still New Netherland); 2) the city was the location of the house that Gordon Matta-Clark famously cleaved in two and photographed for his 1974 work *Splitting*; 3) photographer Shannon Ebner was born there in 1971. No one of these facts, of course, is causally related to any other one. That Ebner

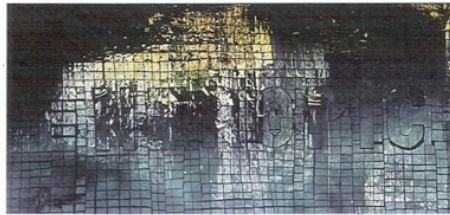
works with language, making sculpturelike signs of words and phrases, setting them in landscape, and documenting their temporary existence before dismantling them, is pure coincidence with respect to her birthplace. (Los Angeles, where she has lived since 2000, is a more telling influence.)

To begin with this constellation of data, though, is to suggest how such referential spirals—between past and present, words and things, reality and record—guide Ebner's practice.

In *Raw War* (2004), for instance, from her *Dead Democracy Letters* series, oversized cardboard letters spelling "raw" are shown perched on the edge of one of L.A.'s La Brea Tar Pits, nestled among tree trunks and sprays of vegetation. The photograph is formally striking, bisected into a landscape and its mirror image in the tar, and Ebner's feel for linguistic materiality is immediately in evidence: the word-sculpture and its reflection—"war"—are staged as the subject of the work. But other associations arise and multiply: between this propped-up sign and that other propped-up sign for which Los Angeles is well

known; between the Hollywood sign as a tourist attraction and the tar pits as tourist attraction; between the very word "raw" and the crude oil that formed the tar pits; between that oil and the current war, in which oil plays no small part; between the letter "A" and the Star of David created with its reflection (Ebner is Jewish, and notes that she meant for this symbol to "expose how this is fundamentally a religious war").

A quick skim through her body of work indicates numerous antecedents, from the site-specific interventions of Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman to the unsentimental landscapes of 1970s "New Topographics" photographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz. (A more senior forebear is Brassai, and his



notion of photographing tumbledown constructions as "sculptures involontaires"; Ebner spray painted the term on the wooden container used to store her letters and subsequently photographed it.) Her use of the photograph to document the momentary, and her simultaneous engagement of the indexical properties of both language and photography, also demonstrate an absorption of various Conceptual practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ed Ruscha is perhaps the most obvious lead. Ebner shares his conception of words as physical objects and his ear for those features of language—puns, palindromes, and words within words—that lay bare its thingness. In *USA* (2003), another work from the *Dead Democracy Letters* series, the word "nausea" contains one word that refers to its setting on grassy dunes overlooking the ocean, and a second





that names the country of Ebner's critique; the word itself describes the physical reaction that either the sea or the USA might provoke. These bleak landscapes bear a glancing resemblance to some of the terrains pictured in Ruscha's books, and Ebner's preference for shooting her word-sculptures at the horizon line summons his various renderings of the Hollywood sign on the crest of Mount Lee.

Yet identifying such affiliations is productive only to a point. Ebner, who earned her MFA from Yale in 2000, is less alluding to these predecessors than simply making art as part of a generation that is old enough to have internalized some of the most fundamental lessons of Minimalism and Conceptualism and young enough not to have to agonize over them. She seems sensitive to the risks of working at a moment when "the sixties" has become such a catch-all reference that it is in danger of losing its critical teeth (depicting "entropic," as she does in *Opic* (2007), at once evokes *Smithson* and acknowledges the ongoing *Smithson* frenzy). The source-hunter, moreover, would do better with literature than the visual arts in Ebner's case: she represents a line by New York School poet James Schuyler, "The day sob dies," in two photographs; and the title of another, *The Sun and the Sign*, was inspired by a book of poems by Francis Ponge. But despite such historical nods, Ebner's practice is resolutely contemporary, gesturing toward as-yet unexhausted arenas for photography and language. In terms of the former, her photographs are refreshingly free of analogue-versus-digital anxiety, and she works at the junction of several different media without compromising the specificity of her project. In terms of the latter, her work proposes polysemy as a mechanism for the coalescence of meaning, not its diffusion.

To cite one example: the beguilingly simple *MLK, Double-Horizon* (2003) pictures one of the artist's cardboard sculptures, of the number 74, positioned at the meeting of an expanse of grass with the sky. The horizon line is "doubled" by the crossbars of the numbers, which run parallel to it, but a double *temporal* horizon is also engaged: seventy-four would have been Martin Luther King Jr.'s age in the year the work was made. Ebner thus links the inevitable past tense of the photograph to a bygone historical moment, and folds both in turn into the present, into the instant (itself sym-

PAGE 66: *Opic*, C-print, silkscreen, 2007; PAGE 67: *Landscape Incarceration*, 2003; OPPOSITE: *The Crooked Sign*, 2006.

bolized by a makeshift sculpture) documented by the photograph and the conjuring of King in a time he did not live to see. A two-digit number comes to stand for the intersection of the visual and the textual and, relinquishing its possible use in quantification or calculation, becomes instead a figure of thwarted prolepsis.

Ebner knows that words and photographs convey temporary, and often false, realities, and her circumspection about both media verges on the pessimistic, even the fatalistic. She has photographed cardboard sculptures of the phrases "The Doom" and (in reference to a notion in the *Koran* about the sky swallowing up the earth) "The Folding Up." *Dead Democracy Letters*, she has said, was a direct response to the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—of landscapes torn asunder with not only tanks but words. More recent work, on view in her exhibition *The Sun and the Sign* at New York's *WallSpace* last winter, is less overtly polemic. In addition, Ebner has expanded her range of materials and started to make more elaborate setups: in one work, the word "democratizing" is composed in salt atop asphalt, with certain letters dissolving in water; in others, phrases are spelled out in spray paint and concrete. The words are becoming harder to read, and seem to be suffering more—decaying, disintegrating, becoming indistinct.

They are, that is to say, beginning to look entropic. *Opic*, the recent work in which Ebner represents this word, was particularly labor-intensive: she spray painted on acetate, cut the material into squares and letters, repositioned them on a sheet of corrugated cardboard painted black, and shot the construction with film that heightened its blue tones. As the figure of the word is formed in the same way as the ground of the grid, and as the photograph's surface glistens in areas and fades to black in others, "entropic" is hard to make out. Yet while in some ways *Opic* seems to enact the meaning of the word it depicts, in others it resists such a neat mapping. Ebner's process is as much constructive as destructive, a putting-back-together as much as it is a dismantling, and the word, having been briefly fractured and taken out of circulation, comes to suggest new ones ("pic," "enter," "scopic"). The word, like the moment captured by the photograph, is impermanent—and Ebner's work examines this condition as grounds for not only despair but promise. ●



MLK, Double-Horizon, 2003.



USA, 2003.



Raw War, 2004.



Yes Tomorrow, No Tomorrow, 2006.

Works courtesy the artist/Wallspace, New York