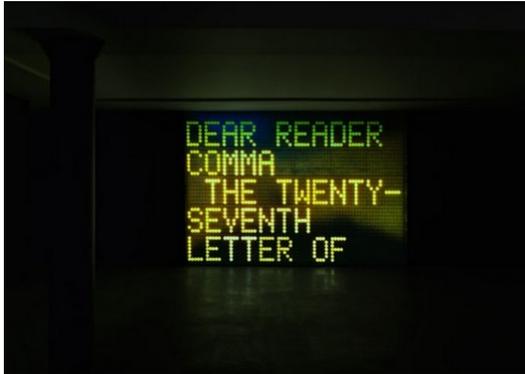


ArtReview

Shannon Ebner: *The Electric Comma*
 Sadie Coles, London
 By JJ Charlesworth, December 2013



Conceptual art may have successfully made the case that art doesn't have to have a physical manifestation – art can be an idea. But ideas can become text, which means a physical manifestation of some sort. And when that happens, all kinds of possibilities open up, since text appears all over the place – in books, on screens, on signs, on billboards, on walls, in the landscape. Signs become objects, and back again.

Los Angeleno Shannon Ebner thus mines a rich seam when she turns her camera on text *in situ*. Photographing letters as they appear in vernacular, everyday usage (street signs, graffiti) while snapping her own form of sign-making, in the shape of cut-out and propped-up lettering, Ebner presents photo-assemblages that tangle the act of reading with that of looking; while we're reading, we're also aware that we're looking at a dissociated photograph of a letter as it appears somewhere out there in the world. At the same time, Ebner's texts tend to play with the mechanics of language, in narrative streams that unravel and disintegrate, and the overlooked conventions of written form – the visual presence of punctuation marks and what they attempt to represent.

The Electric Comma is easily described yet labyrinthine in its implications. A short text, turning on the elusive nature of the comma (in a looped video projection and in a series of framed monochrome photographs), appears as displayed by a mobile traffic-warning display board – a matrix of rudimentary LED lights, bold and basic. In the video, the 70-odd words flash by at barely legible speed; in the photographs, black-on-white fragments of the text appear as negatives of the original illumination.

Ebner's text – in digital capitals – haltingly starts out: 'dear reader comma the twenty-seventh letter of the alphabet is a blank comma delay, a language of exposures a dear reader photograph in your mind comma eye, the liquid treatment causing ecstatic delays'. There's no simple sense to it, but paying attention to the comma – the odd 'pause' in spoken language it supposedly represents – points us to a meditation on both the presence of the physical body and the nonlinear nature of thinking, which written language tries to represent in the form of punctuated asides and ellipses.

So if the comma represents a gap, an absence, then what is it an absence of, exactly? Text and image are both representations, and Ebner's text-as-image seems keen to flee the static, conclusive fixity of the written or photographic record – 'now go outside this time and plug in some really long chord this will make your photographic dance the electric comma and promptly disarrange the photographic universe', the text exhorts. Text, photograph, language, body, performance and physical site all swap places in Ebner's vertiginous fusion of fixed sign and unmediated, dynamic materiality. There's an obsessive, cover-every-angle energy to her investigation, but at a time when art debate is full of phoney virtual-versus-material oppositions, Ebner's work maps out a more complicated in-between, where concept, subjectivity and reality play out in an open, always-unfinished dialogue.