

SHANNON EBNER

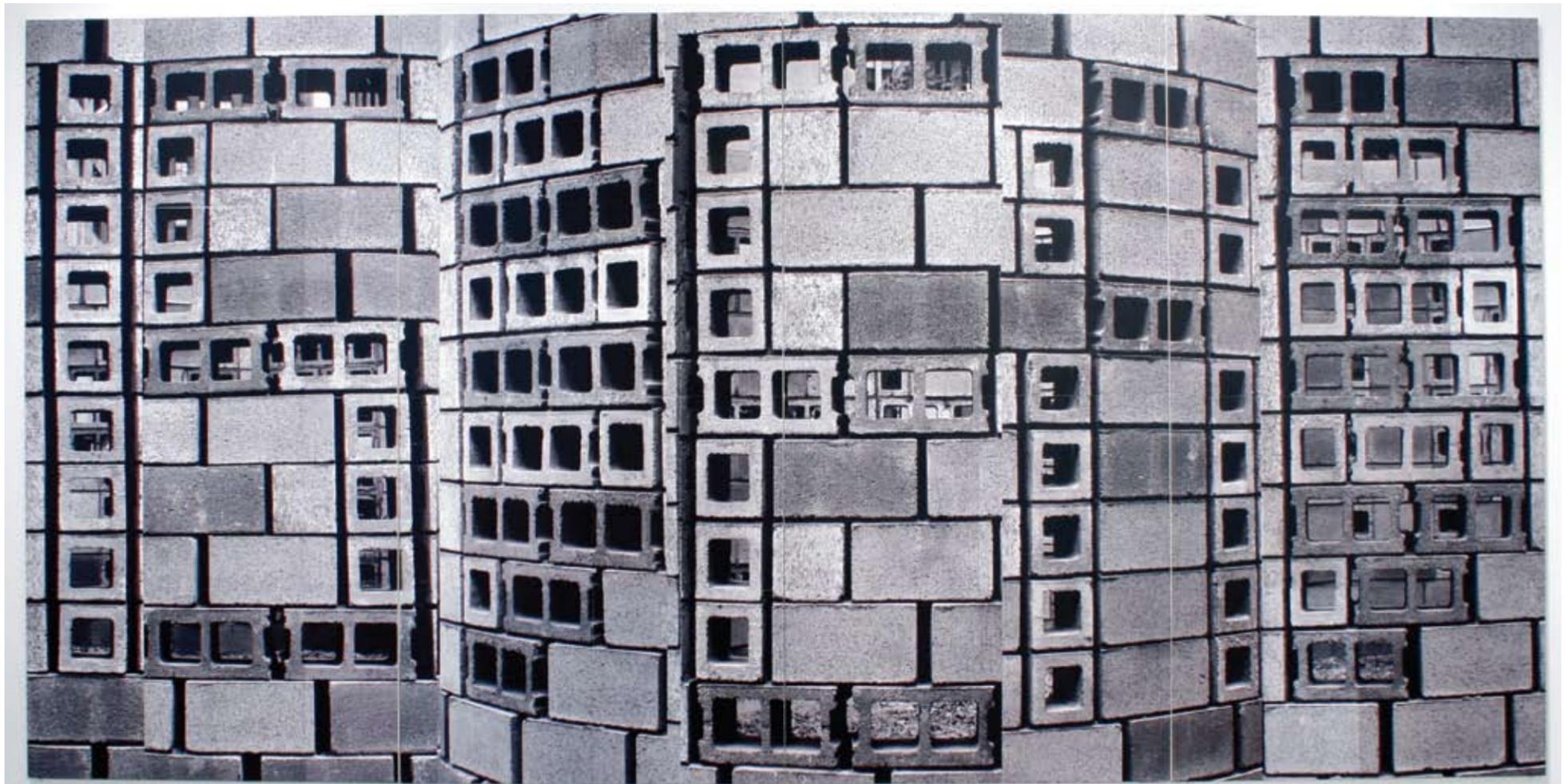
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I have to say that something about trying to introduce Shannon Ebner's work when it is right there on the same page as the introduction feels frivolous to me.

As many of us are, I have been a fan following her output for a while now, and yet still, when we sat down to speak for the first time I had read little about her, save for her artist bios in the 2006 California Biennial and 2008 Whitney Biennial catalogs. And those are not long essays. All I really knew about Shannon was that she had created several substantial and undeniably immediate bodies of work now—*Dead Democracy Letters* being the one she is perhaps best known for—and I had already spent a great deal of time with everything of hers that I had been able to find out there. She knows how to create arresting, *iconic* images, and she knows how to complicate them in such nuanced ways that really dig into one's own experience of the larger collective instant. Perhaps the works are so strong for the fact that they take advantage of the implicit introduction that we *all* share, which is to say the experience of being a person alive and aware at this moment in time. Upon coming across them, the pieces take part in a dialog already in progress, expressing their own observations and—as some would argue, more *importantly*—positing their own questions.

When I caught up with her at her Highland Park, CA studio a few weeks ago I met someone as generous and engaging as she was busy—just then she preparing work for *Untitled (Vicarious)*, a fall group show at Gagosian Gallery built around the role of sculpture and staging in contemporary photography; and handling the vast beginning of the year school responsibilities that her job as head of the undergraduate photography department at U.S.C. entails. She puts as much thought and time into her working practice as one would imagine, and as such had as much to say about it in the following conversation, which we are so fortunate to present to you below... Of course the work speaks for itself, but here is a rather rare chance for you to hear what she had to say about it.



Brendan Fowler: Shannon, I know that you are working on a PowerPoint work that functions like sort of a guided tour through both some of your already known images—including *STRIKE*, which you exhibited in this year’s Whitney Biennial—and even some of your reference images for that piece. What made you decide to re-investigate this work in a new form?

Shannon Ebner: There are many layers of ideas that went into the piece from the Whitney which literally get *flattened* by the act of photographing. I am interested in how this functions and how the layers of ideas become embedded within the piece itself and so the animated presentation is a way for me to try and pull all of those layers or elements out.

BF: Embedded in ways that are not desirable?

SE: No, I wouldn’t even say that, actually. (Pointing to the work) For me the *STRIKE* piece is resolved and functions in the ways that I wanted it to function. It slows down readability, it completely deprives the reader of a location and punctum, and it becomes sort of like an aerial view of a landscape for me much in the way of a reconnaissance image or a kind of surface to air image, how that might function: locking coordinates and creating this topographical field—topographical/typographical—in this case. For me the [pieces] are separate but I hope that they will inform one another.

BF: How do you refer to this type system with the cinder blocks?

SE: I refer to it as a photographic modular alphabet.

BF: Did the interest come about based on an interest to reference military operations, constructions?

SE: I’ll show you through a progression in the work (we begin going through images on her computer and pass an image from the PowerPoint work in progress, which is called *Political Abstract*). I think so much of what I do in terms of my interest in language, and a lot of what has driven the work, has been the position that we have found ourselves in as Americans, and my interest in using language *obliquely* has, as time progressed, *become* a kind of political abstract. I was directly referencing military operations, yes.

BF: And in *STRIKE* you intended the backslashes in the piece to be read as “strike,” as they are traditionally referred to on the typewriter as in the “strike” key, so when someone goes through they will keep saying “strike?”

SE: No, I knew they never would. They just wouldn’t. I was using the strike key to break the 18 palindromes that comprise the piece. If I take to be self evident that language is an object, the palindrome for me, within language, becomes this really crystallized form that *demonstrates* the objectness of language. I used the strike symbol to continually break the palindromes. I wanted the readability constantly disrupted and kind of *impaired*, so the strike key became a way to break the palindrome and to impair the reader from moving through and to dictate a cadence, a way that they travel through the text. But I definitely didn’t think anyone would stand there and go “No—strike—as it can—strike—it is a war—strike...”

BF: So, back to the origin of the cinderblock lettering—

SE: Yes. So, I made this sculpture at Rockefeller Center that was made of cinderblocks that said “DEAD ON THE INSIDE.”

BF: Why cinderblocks? Why this departure from the cardboard letters?

SE: I was thinking a lot about this Rem Koolhaas piece *The Involuntary Prisoners of Architecture*, which is kind of a futuristic, sci-fi piece that deals with the psychological ramifications of a wall, or what it means to place a wall in a supposed site, ie: London, and what begins to happen to those inhabitants on either side of that wall. I was thinking about that in regards to the wall that was being erected to keep the Palestinians out of Israel, or things that were happening here between the border of Mexico and California and of course I was thinking about detainment and torture. I was thinking about extraordinary renditions and everything that was happening in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

BF: And it was a wall that was closed on itself?

SE: Exactly, it was meant to be something that could not be entered or exited. It was a cell.

BF: And the wall talking about itself, using its own structure to spell the words.

That was the beginning of cinderblocks for you?

SE: I made this piece [*Is Dead*] before that was cinderblock related. But I photographed *DEAD ON THE INSIDE (D.O.I.)* and made this piece for a show called *Trace* at the Whitney Altria that Shamim [Momin] curated.

BF: And that was an assemblage of photos?

SE: (pointing to it) This is comprised of four negatives and this is very much the point of origin for this idea of a grid supporting language— which came as a functional thing.

BF: But you are referencing literal architecture that is related to the current war?

SE: Yes I am. The cinderblock for me is a standardized language seen in advanced and developing countries. It is the material used for the foundation of a building and it is often what is left behind in the wreckage when something has been destroyed. As I mentioned earlier I am interested in this idea of “disaster capitalism” that Naomi Klein writes about. Halliburton’s contract in Iraq is a perfect example of this as is the privatized military Blackwater. But more to the point—the cinderblock as a material of wreckage or ruination is what I was thinking about in relationship to architecture and war. Oh yeah, and there was also something I read about three or four years ago that was about the way the Israeli army was applying Deleuze and Guattari’s theories to their military tactics. The army was in a very rhizomatic way busting through the walls, going from home to home in entire neighborhoods where they suspected Palestinian terrorists lived. It’s not that the streets were unavailable, just that the architecture was somehow seen as permeable. Going through people’s homes when you can use the street is a really terrifying notion.

BF: Oh my god—I hadn’t heard about that. It is *crazy*. So, in *Political Abstract*—the PowerPoint work which we unfortunately can’t show here—you have begun to include re-appropriated images from the internet, which look like they would have previously served as your reference but now are becoming actual elements of the work displayed. Were you searching for images of these phenomena, these acts of war, when you realized that you could integrate them, *literally*, into the work?

SE: Yes. I have become interested in the false sense of movement that is set up by the computer. When I think about photography historically, in terms of shifts that have occurred within the medium, and the way the photo essay, which was so prevalent through the earlier part of the 20th century, used to bring photographers out *into* the *world*, I think that has really changed now. Somehow that has become subsumed and new kinds of photography within the art world have impeded a certain kind of movement. Or, at least it’s impeded mine—I mean, not to say that it’s the *art world* making me make the artwork that I make, or anything ridiculous like *that*, but just realizing that a certain kind of agency that [for] a photographer would have been really the cornerstone of their practice, at this point it just seems that it’s less prevalent, which is not to be confused by less important.

BF: You mean as opposed to a studio based practice, such as your own.

SE: Well I think I fall somewhere in between. I definitely make things in the studio but then I also just happen upon things and or places too. But in terms of what I was trying to get at a minute ago...for me it’s like if I try to think about different vernaculars or strategies within the medium of photography and I think about seriality or indexicality, or I think about the photo *essay*, or I think about the status of the *document*, I’m not going to go out and embark on a photo essay that’s going to bring me out into the world to make images of a people—not that there’s anything wrong with it, it’s really important, but I’m just not [going to do that]. So my movement becomes greatly impaired and instead gets picked up by the computer. But I think it’s a false sense of movement where I sit on the computer and I begin to move around the world through images to places I have never been and know very little about really.

BF: So you’re observing that—and I agree with you—as a larger trend in contemporary art.

SE: Yeah, for a while now. I think all the staged photography in the ‘90s was one iteration of that, which followed post-modernism which also made it difficult



to go out and document because there was so much speculation about what it meant to actually represent something. I feel like that lead to narrativity, which became *very* interior. Interiority became the kind of subject of that. And now I don't know where we find ourselves, but still I find that artists working in the art world seem to be going out in the world less. And somehow that's where the computer comes in.

BF: It's a trip, though. You're touching on a very interesting and contemporary phenomenon.

SE: It's something that I've been thinking about a lot—movement in regards to photography. Not a literal movement, like "I'm moving in front of the camera" but sort of—

BF: —moving out into the world.

SE: Exactly.

BF: You're not documenting flood victims.

SE: No.

BF: To back up very far: did you start with photography?

SE: I did. I studied photography in undergrad and when I went to New York in '93 I got really involved in poetry and the poetry scene that revolved around St. Mark's Poetry Project through working with Eileen Myles, who, at the time, was doing these kind of unaccredited poetry workshops in different artists' studios.

BF: So you were writing poetry.

SE: I was. For not a long amount of time in the scheme of things, but—

BF: —did you "give up" photography in that time? Did you swap?

SE: I did, actually. I totally swapped.

And then there was this one particular time—I will always remember it

vividly—when I was working for Eileen as her poet assistant and we took this trip—

BF: —wait, what does a poet assistant do?

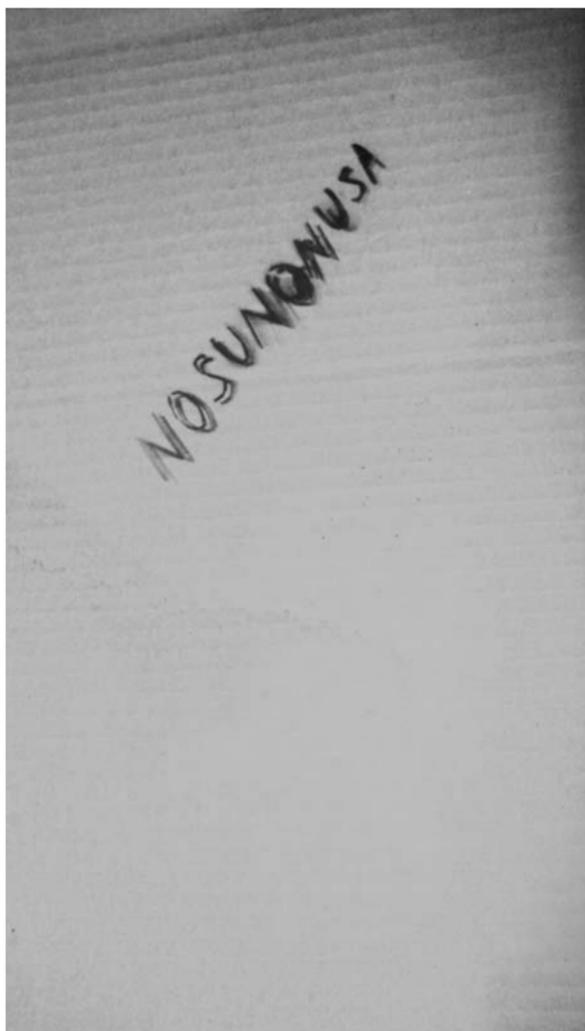
SE: (Laughs) You run errands, you know, it was pre-computer or rather pre-email and pdf attachments and all of this, so you know, I would do a lot of running to the copy shop, proof reading galleys, going to the post office and waiting in line, I was running lots of errands in the neighborhood more than anything. But with her it was also super casual. There might be Pasolini films at on at Film Forum and when I arrived at her apartment for a day of work we might go see a film instead—but put it this way, one day a week there would be this kid who would come in to run all your errands.

BF: And that was you, the young poet.

SE: That was me.

BF: The piece *Wallpaper Bankruptcy Sale* is called *Wallpaper Bankruptcy Sale for Eileen Myles* right?

SE: Exactly. It's the title of one of my favorite poems by her from her *Maxfield Parrish* book. The poem is about grayness and war actually and that title of the poem just says it all for me, it's so amazing. So, anyways, I bought this disposable camera and we took this trip to South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—she was friends with the Mardens, actually, and they had this house there and they would let her go there and write and it was kind of this great little escape for her. And I bought this disposable camera and I took these *really* shitty pictures and I combined them with this poem and I stapled it into a book and it was this kind of breaking



point. I thought, “What am I doing? I studied photography, why am I using this shitty disposable camera,” and I picked my “real” camera back up. The poems had been very visual to begin with, but then I stopped writing as soon as I picked the camera back up, which was distressing in its own way.

BF: Distressing?

SE: Yeah distressing, just in the sense that as quickly as the language barreled in and replaced my need for a camera it barreled back out and I could no longer access the language that had seemed so permanent or fluid. I was so happy to be taking pictures again but I missed the language and had wished that the two could be more integrated.

BF: I think that I would not be alone in arguing that however many years later, your current practice has managed to fuse that language ability—or a different and surely equally great ability with words—with this advanced sensitivity to capturing or staging images. You must be at least somewhat satisfied with the synthesis, right?

SE: Yes, when I started making the *Dead Democracy Letters* series it was a kind of fusion of these two facets of my work.

BF: What kind of photography did you study in undergrad?

SE: I studied a lot of postmodern work and a lot of what had recently come out of New York at the time, people like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, I also studied with this artist Anne Turyn whose work incorporated language and I had a one-day-a-week gig with Carolee Schneeman who lived close to the college. This was late 80’s/early 90’s. I also worked closely with Stephen Shore.

BF: Where did you go?

SE: I went to Bard.

BF: And then you went to New York and made this book with the disposable camera.

SE: I went to New York, I made this book, or I don’t know what I would call it. It wasn’t a book, it was this xeroxed booklet, maybe ten pages or so where the poem and images were interspersed. It was called *Dakota’s Blues*, based on one of the characters

Wojnarowicz talks about in *Close to the Knives*.

BF: And then you’re, like, “Eileen, I’m outta here.”

SE: (laughs) Sort of—no I didn’t quit. I think I just started taking photographs more seriously again and then I got into grad school for photography.

BF: Where did you go?

SE: I went to Yale, so I was sort of in the den of all that narrative stuff and I came out here directly after.

BF: And that was?

SE: That was 2000.

BF: Were you thinking about the bubbling LA art scene and Chinatown and all of that?

SE: Not really, I was pretty clueless.

What happened was that my partner, Erika Vogt, got into Cal Arts for grad school and I had come out here a few times before graduate school and on one of those trips I kind of fell in love with the city. I finally got to the east side—I remember that really vividly, too—and thought, “Oh my god, it’s amazing here. I could totally live here.” And then when she got into school I was excited. I had lived in

New York for six years and then for the two years I was in New Haven for grad school I was always in New York with Erika. And then we moved to East L.A., to City Terrace, where I took a lot of my pictures for the *Dead Democracy Letters* series.

BF: I was driving around today, thinking about it and I don’t think of you as trying to make these critically romantic images of L.A., per se, but at the same time I feel like notice some aesthetic imprint on your work. Is that there? The light maybe?

SE: Yes, I would have to agree, the landscape and light and funny signage accidents that are so, well, everywhere, have definitely made an aesthetic imprint on me.

BF: I was really thinking about the foliage and the natural settings, like you see driving around the reservoir.

SE: Yeah, it’s so particular to Los Angeles and having grown up on the East Coast, I think it was something that really stood out to me.

BF: Or, like, in the two *Untitled* works that we are including, each an image of a person holding signs in the





landscape, the light could almost feel like a romantic “vintage California,” no?

SE: Yes, that is also the effect of the black and white print though and the lack of reference points in the image, there’s nowhere to really “locate” it.

BF: And where do those works fit in to the scheme of things?

SE: I made those for a book project that Shamim did with Olga Adelantado. The collections of books were called *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast* and Shamim’s book was dealing with the impossibility of translation. The pictures I contributed were meant to deal with blankness. That’s my friend Arthur Ou in the photographs holding up blank signs in a blank landscape. I was curious to see how the two might function together and what blankness might say, if it could “say” anything at all.

BF: Would you two have moved here if Erika hadn’t gotten into grad school here?

SE: Probably not, no, I don’t think so.

BF: But you’re here now.

SE: We are here. I really kind of long for the East Coast, though, and I do sometimes feel like I get a little bit tired of all the brownness in the landscape. I’m much more comfortable in that greenness of the East Coast, as opposed to here where it’s kind of arid and things need to be watered. I’d prefer to be somewhere that’s actually lush.

BF: Totally. It’s funny, my girlfriend’s mom grew up here and then moved to Philadelphia in her twenties and she talks about how she misses the brown. (both laugh) She’s like, “I miss the dead brown hills.” It’s funny.

SE: (laughing) It is.

BF: Did it take you a while to get rolling once you got here?

SE: Yeah, I guess so. I mean I didn’t show work for five years, which I think is really normal, though, just being out of grad school and all.

BF: Did you plan to teach in the beginning?

SE: I’d hoped to teach, and I wanted to, now I’m at U.S.C. full time. I’m directing the undergrad program and teaching two days a week.

BF: Do you love it?

SE: Yeah, I really like the students. They’re amazing.

BF: Okay, wait, *Dead Democracy Letters*, was that the first body of work that you showed?

SE: Yes. Yes. (motions to *Sculptures Involontaires*) that was the start of thinking about the infinite potential of modularity, because in that box are all of the letters from the *Dead Democracy Letters* series. I became interested in the infinite potential that, upon the author’s command, you could conceivably go back into that box and say anything again. And so that kind of became the impetus for the *Strike* piece, that the alphabet is the potential. But the beginning of it was this *Distressed Holy* image. This was kind of the first test. I’ve grown really attached to it, at the time I very much wasn’t because, you know, it’s a little *easy* in terms of the Hollywood sign. But it was the first thing I made following the attacks, when we went into Afghanistan. I was really thinking about Allen Ginsberg and Holy War, Jihad, and things like that.

BF: Did you make the box right away?

SE: No, the box came right at the end. *Dead Democracy Letters* started in





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2002 even though I showed it not until 2005 I continued to make them into 2006 and *Sculptures Involontaires* was 2007. So I kept making them little by little.

BF: Obviously, you have shown the individual letters in many photographs, and you've even shown the box in a photo, but you have shown *Sculpture Involontaires* as an object—although that seems like an exception. Are you interested in showing the actual objects, the sculptures that appear in any of your works?

SE: The originals? Hell no.

BF: Because that's the point.

SE: The point is that it's so private. There's a real kind of perversion to all this which is [that] I make these things in private, it's my language, and then I photograph them and the photographing kind of tames it somehow and makes it possible for me to share them with you. (laughs)

BF: Back to *Dead Democracy Letters*, did the name come about in the very beginning?

SE: No, I didn't have the title right away. I made a bunch of images and then realized that I needed to call it something but I did arrive at the title fairly early on in the series.

BF: And you conceived of it as a series.

SE: Not really, no. (laughs) Not in that kind of true Conceptualist fashion, (in gruff voice) "There will be ten images, all cardboard." (both laugh) No definitely not. I was really kind of just driven out into the landscape, to make these in response to just feeling utterly powerless. I just felt like I had more to say and that I had to say it. The work satisfied my need to be saying something.

BF: One of the things to me that is so exciting is that the use of text feels so literal, but then it can be so open-ended or even kind of obtuse at times. The

sheer scale in the images is screaming, but then it is kind of just not entirely clear what it is screaming.

SE: Yes. It has a lot to do with the kind of language that is being directed towards us from the Bush administration, the kind of *hijacking* of language. I don't think I ever would have been interested in generating language that was going to be really didactic. This one (pointing) is called *MLK, Double Horizon, 2003*, and it's how old King would have been in 2003. And this one is called *The Folding Up*, which is from the Qur'an, it's a translation from one of the titles of one of the chapters about the end of the world and the hemisphere folding up on itself. *The Doom* is also from the Qur'an.

BF: When you're conceiving of your audience, are you picturing that people will ideally get all of the references?

SE: No, no way. It's impossible that they could. I mean, with the MLK one I'm hoping that they *might* do the math through the title, but that would take a lot of generosity on the part of the viewer. There's actually what it means, but then I *hope* that there's just something to what it says that just sort of transcends the reference.

BF: They are intrinsically poetic statements. There's a lot to pull apart. Do you think of them as puzzles?

SE: I definitely think of them as layered. What making this body of work kind of led me to define for myself is an interest in how one reads a photograph. One thing I tried to kind of move away from after making these images was the way that you could just look at it and read it. That, to me, is not interesting. To me that's a way that a photograph functions that's become sort of so codified that it's utterly exhausted and I began working against that to the point that I made the *Strike* piece, which slowed down the reading so dramatically that it became almost

unintelligible. For me—and maybe this arrives back at your initial question—complicating readership and complicating meaning became very much a kind of reaction to the overly simplistic use of language that was being taken up by the administration. Although the funny thing is that these are kind of equally as vague. I mean, these kind of engage in their own weird sort of doublespeak and coded messaging.

BF: Which, in a way, is maybe saying, "We the people, the artists, the non government, can do it too."

SE: I don't know.

BF: Or maybe a way of exploiting how ridiculous it is.

SE: I'm not sure. I've definitely had a kind of restless relationship to how these might function politically, if they are political and if they are political what makes them political or are they in fact *not* political because they don't directly address the various complexities of the war. I'm not sure.

BF: They *do*, though. They're such complexities unto themselves that they are their own dialogues.

SE: I'm not sure though, they're very aesthetic, so in the end I don't really know how that functions and how that might really dilute any sort of politic that is inherent to them.

BF: At the very least there is *some* dialogue so to say that there is nothing political happening it would be—

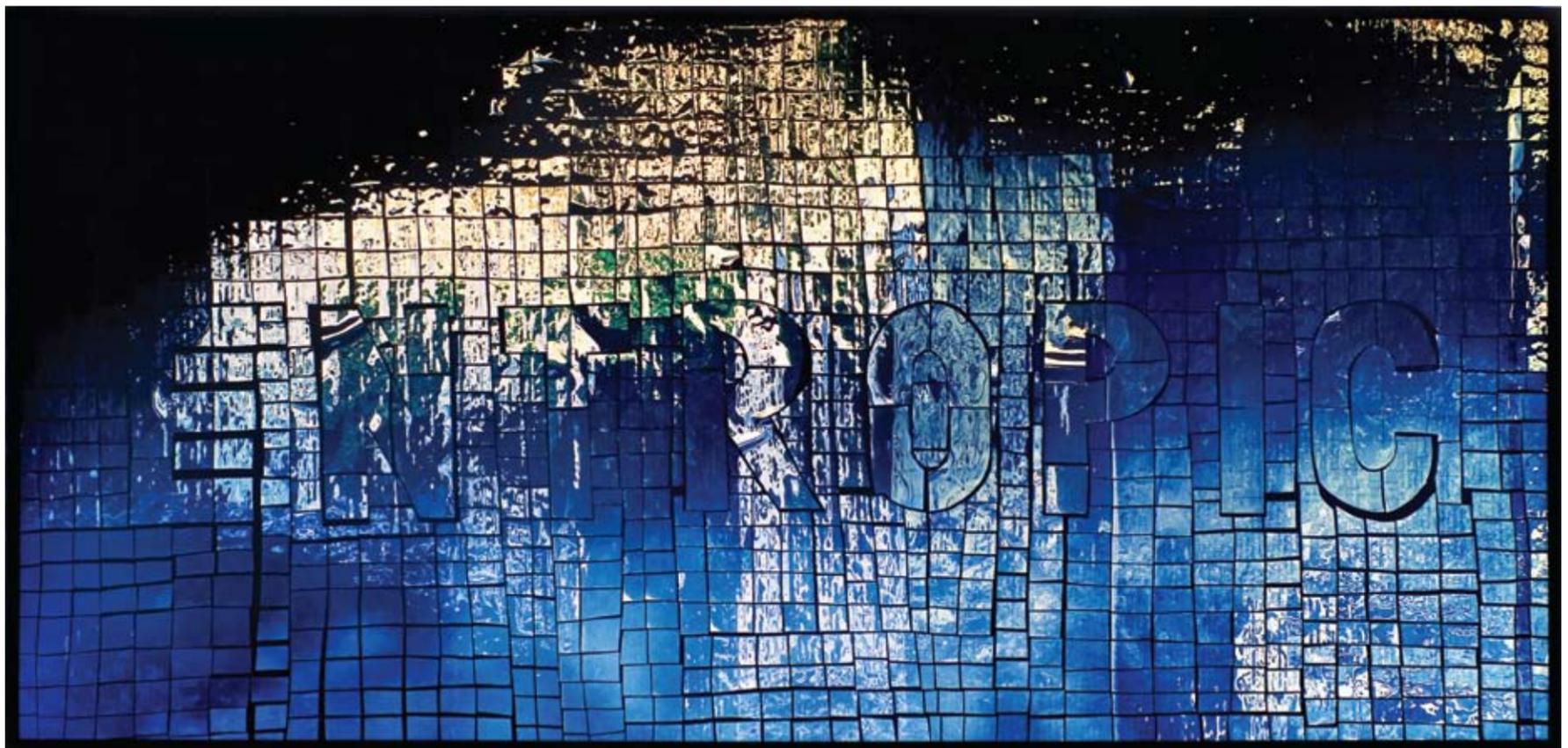
SE: —not fair to them.

BF: Not fair to the viewer, you know? The fact that people are having conversations.

SE: That's true.

BF: A work like *Is Exploded* is pretty hard to see completely removed from *any* political framework.

SE: Yes, that was the point of those images really—to





go to Washington, D.C., to go to the source, the home of the administration responsible for the preemptive strike and to enter the "political landscape" quite literally.

BF: And I wanted to ask you about *Entropic*, you are referring to entropic explosives, right? How did you create that work, structurally?

SE: No, I am not referring to explosives in that image. That image's title is *OPIC* which is a play on the words optic or scopic as is scopophilia. That image was my attempt to take an overused word out of circulation and to reinvent it through the act of photographing. My interest in that word in particular had a lot to do with Robert Smithson and an essay about Ruscha's work by Yves Alain Bois in which he talks about words having a temperature and that when they get too "hot", too overused, that they subject themselves to an entropic process, an absolute breakdown.

BF: And I think this would lead well into a whole other facet of your work, which came up just a little before with the works that are untitled, but you have created many images that are in fact *wordless*, or depleted of traditional letters. The hanging string/line work and the MLK schoolyard work. In place of *words*, there is always a primary object, almost like a code letter or symbol you are documenting, finding, exposing.

SE: There are many ways to inscribe and to infer and refer to language without directly using language.

BF: This war has been going on for so fucking long. It's crazy to think that this body of work has happened within the time of the war and this body of work is going on for years now.

SE: I know, it will be ten years, easily.

BF: It's a generation. And then to think of all the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder people that are going to be coming back.

SE: It's really frightening, I think about that all the time, the psychological damage of war. We will be dealing with it for a long time I am quite sure because I have little confidence that the government will provide the resources to properly counsel so many damaged psyches.

BF: It's amazing to think that this thing has lasted this long that it is a part of culture. It warrants this work, people have to navigate it.

SE: The ways in which it impacts us are so problematic in and of itself, too. I mean, now of course with this huge stock market crash we're definitely going to be feeling that, but what are we really feeling or seeing or experiencing compared to all of the complete destruction and lives that we've ruined in the Middle East. As Americans we will now have to live with the pain and destruction that we've inflicted. These are very real things that have happened over the past eight years. The world is a changed place and we are changed people. It seems almost easy to think that our economy's fucked now for the next however many years. I just hope the Democrats can win this election.

