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MOUSSE

“Shannon Ebner ‘A Public Character’ at ICA, Miami” Shannon Ebner interviewed by Rhea Anastas, December 2015



Rhea Anastas How did you begin working on the exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami? What were the working questions?

Shannon Ebner The show took a while to settle, mostly because I was working on two ongoing projects, and one thing they had in common were long, drawn-out periods of not-settling. So finding a way to bring the two projects together and represent them within the space of an exhibition became the challenge. The two projects I am speaking of are a series of works I have been making around photographs of the letter *A* and a long-form poem I was developing called “Auto Body Collision”. Part of the challenge was that I didn’t want to do a show that presented either of these projects definitively. I also knew that I didn’t want to create a narrative between older and newer works, like placing older works in

proximity to the two projects to set up that *type* of narrative in the work.

RA Holding myself back from asking something like, “Isn’t an exhibition a problem for you, something that you have to resist?”, I’ll narrow my focus to viewer experience and audiences, to receiving. A part of this is the discursivity that can result from combining projects.

SE I did know that I wanted to make an exhibition that would be in my time and that would be a new iteration of these projects based on new parameters. In this way, the ICA Miami and working with Alex Gartenfeld became for me almost a blank slate. The discursivity of combining projects is probably where the resistance—or is it more like trouble?—begins. That’s if trouble in its negative connotation is put to positive effect here. Exhibitions are problems because they become a problem about how to unfix or unrest work based on the challenges and conditions each occasion presents. So the ICA Miami presents different conditions from the High Line commission A HUDSONYARD or the Graphic Arts Biennial in Ljubljana or a commercial gallery space or Erika Vogt’s Performa project Artist Theatre Program, *Lava plus Knives*, which will feature more *A*’s, but different from before and different from what is at the ICA Miami.



RA I’ve wanted to ask for a while, what does black and white mean for you?

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SE It means a way of seeing the world that doesn't exist in reality; it's a way of seeing the world that is about difference. Working now with electronic images, there is every time this choice: keep color or discard that information. And so every time, the choice is really an act, an act of discarding the color information from the images. There has always been this whole "photography is writing with light" thing. I think more along the lines of the action—that I can write with black ink on a world that's in shades of gray.



RA What did you mean by the blank slate? The exhibition I can discern from the model, and being in your studio has a narrative texture, and so from the *Black Box Collision* A room to A HUDSON YARD is less a sequence and more a script or a trail—of crumbs—of A's? [laughs]



SE If you start out by saying that this show will exhibit photographs of the letter A and that is your template, then what goes into that form? The A's that are in *Black Box Collision* A place those images into a system, so now how do I take them out, how do I get my A's into a different jam, say, proliferate them into the streets of New York City for A HUDSONYARD where they can go back into the landscape of advertising and get into the mix in public. And what happens when the posters from A HUDSONYARD come inside and get pasted onto the

walls of the ICA Miami, displaced from the west side of downtown Manhattan but now in a city that is thick with its own real estate issues and debates? "A Public Character" is the title of the show; it's also a video that I am still finishing for the show (gasp)! The video is my version of an essay, and I say that pretty loosely. So this overlapping that you speak of, and the blank slate I mentioned, are just ways of asking, how do I complicate the logic and arrive at new and unforeseen ways of playing the work?



RA Or, how you can continue the logic in multiple ways. At the same time, your work may explode the categories, or containers, of book and exhibition. As a model for this, I could refer the reader to something like Dexter Sinister's idea of form as "a way of thinking", invoking your long-term collaboration with Dexter Sinister and David Reinfurt.



SE The book and exhibition have become very entangled for me, which can be liberating and confining, seeing that they are very different entities. While one may inform the other, it's difficult to bend an exhibition, to ask that it has the agility of layout in a book, and vice versa. One thing that has come up with the ICA show is that I just published the "Auto Body Collision" book with the Carnegie's Hillman Photography Initiative. By nature of

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being published, it is complete, and what that sense of completion has done for me is provided a way, through typography, that the poem can be published in its entirety alongside the images, as equivalents. The designer (Mark Owens) and I had to work hard to achieve that, but it was really important to me to find that balance where a font could sit alongside images and really hold its own. When I go to install the images from “Auto Body Collision” it is difficult that the poem is not in the same room as the work, and so this is a new and interesting problem.

RA I think you may be talking about the viewer or the reader in your work. In this exhibition, two bodies of work, two worlds, are made to have relationships to each other: “Auto Body Collision” and the work you have done around photographing the letter A. Is it really important that these come to the viewer directly and accessibly, without the aid of written mediating elements? As you say, “Auto Body Collision” the poem is not in the same room as the work. Still, I can point to concrete uses of form and scale, such as A SELF, the new print that started from book layouts of “Auto Body Collision” of near-human scale and through production and a going-back-into that is about pleasure and play, here is this vertical figural (anthropomorphic) print for the exhibition.

SE What I would call self-reflexivity acknowledges the position of the maker and thinker of the work as part of one and the same feedback loop. It’s true, I do derive a lot of pleasure from pieces that emerge from the work, and A SELF is really just that.