

Shannon Ebner,
THE FOLDING UP,
2003, chromogenic
print, 32 x 40 ½
inches. Ebner
images courtesy
of the artist and
Wallspace Gallery,
New York.

Shannon Ebner



Zoe Leonard,
installation view
100 NORTH NEVILL
STREET, 2013,
Chinati Foundation,
Marfa, Texas. Photo
by Fredrik Nilsen.
Leonard images
courtesy of the
artist.

and Zoe Leonard



SHANNON EBNER: As you know, I just returned to Los Angeles from Marfa, where I saw your installation, *100 North Nevill Street*. It's the fifth in a series of camera-obscure installations that you have made in the last two years. I visited the piece at three different times of day, and each visit was a distinctly different experience. The dawn visit brought out about ten to fifteen people and two dogs. We gathered at the Chinati Foundation's Ice Plant building at 7:30, in time for a 7:45 sunrise. As our eyes adjusted to the predawn light, the sun began to make an appearance on the far left side of a very long wall that made for a nearly panoramic view. It was exquisite to see the shape of the sun making its way down the wall and, eventually, onto the floor. It was extremely quiet in the Ice Plant with everyone rapt in the activities of close looking and close seeing. At some point a Union Pacific freight train barreled by. Can you talk about the role of the sun in your camera-obscure installations and your photographs of the sun? In both, on account of the apparatuses used, you're able to look at the sun without harming your vision. Sunlight is the source of lens-based images and photographic seeing, and yet we are not able to look at the sun directly, since it would burn our retinas.

ZOE LEONARD: I started both bodies of work around the same time, in 2010–11, and although they are different in approach, they are related. That's how most of my work begins; I often start out with a set of ideas that later begin to connect. It was a kind of transitional time. I had completed *Analogue*, which I worked on for over ten years and has a lot to do with photography as a changing medium. I had a retrospective show around then too, which meant I had looked back through masses of my old prints. I was making new work—some sculpture and works with found postcards—but I wasn't taking pictures. I wasn't sure how, or if, I would continue with photography. I have always shot and printed analogue, and the range of available materials is getting smaller as papers and film go out of production. I also started teaching then, and was thinking deeply about how to discuss the medium in a teaching context.

I was frustrated by many of the conversations I was encountering around contemporary photography. They often seemed defined by a series of binary categories: analogue versus digital, subject versus material, representation versus abstraction, conceptual versus so-called straight photography. I wanted a more expansive way to think about the medium and found myself asking what photography is, what its limits are, what defines it. Anyway, purely as an experiment, just as a way to get going, I made my studio into a camera obscura. Suddenly I was fascinated all over again by the process of sight, by what simple mediation does to our perception. Neither analogue nor digital, the camera obscura offers a state of looking, an experience that is not fixed. It opens doors between things, brings awareness into our looking.

I started taking photos of the sun a few months later, as a way to investigate the idea of the subject in photography. If I tirelessly photographed the same thing every day, would it be transformed or erased? Would we lose interest in the subject and turn our attention to the apparatuses around picture-taking—the point of view, the framing, the grain, the quality of the paper, the tone of the print, the scratches and irregularities—all those things that make this a photograph and not a painting or a film?

Liz Deschenes had taken photographs of the sun a few years ago. They were certainly on my mind, as were James Welling's light sources and Craig Kalpakjian's lens flare photographs.

On another level, starting the sun series was a pragmatic choice. No matter where I was, I could take a picture of the sun every day. I travel a lot for work and in the summer I teach upstate at Bard. I wanted to keep up my own practice while I was away, to do some work every day, even if it was just shooting a single frame. At the same time, taking pictures of the sun was a way to work both within and outside of the conventional logic of photography. What does it mean to photograph something that is impossible to really see? Maybe it was also a kind of defiance. Turning to the sun breaks every rule—it's not only the textbook "Don't shoot into the sun," but also a more primal rule, "Don't look at

the sun"—since, as you say, it will burn your eyes out. I was curious: What is this thing we can't look at? Traditional photography happens in a triangle: there's the photographer, the subject, and a light source. What does it mean to cut off this triangle and turn the camera directly onto the source?

For me, both projects also have emotional resonance. I don't think I would have made these works when I was really young. They have to do with wanting to be in the present moment, with an excitement about the possibility of a photography that is not premised in the past.

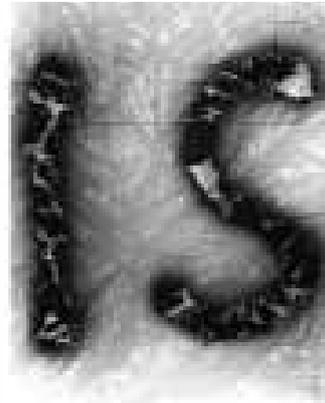
Talking about the sun photographs makes me think of your book, *The Sun as Error* (2009). In it you pair intense phenomena of natural beauty with the somewhat humble experience of daily living. Sunrise is a theme (a series of images spells out "IS RISING") and so is sunset, but you do not step back to get magnificent views. Instead, right from page one, you turn these events into language, folding the natural world into text. Your photographs seem to try to "read" the world as a text. On the one hand, you show us photographs of broken things and abandoned sites, but, at the same time, you reach for an almost metaphysical wonder, for something that feels almost sacred. For instance, in figure 148, there's the following quote: "Day done. Gone sun. Go lake. Go hill. Go tree. All good. Peace sleep. Great mystery here." Can you say something about the book's title, the asterisk, and your relationship to the sun in this work?

SE: A few things converged around that title—my interest in the sun as it relates to photography and writing, and ongoing questions about readability. I also became obsessed with the glyph of the yellow asterisk silk-screened on the cover. I started working on the book in 2007, after coming off a show at WallSpace called *The Sun & the Sign*, which was very much inspired by Francis Ponge's book *The Sun Placed in the Abyss*. It has always been one of those beguiling books that I return to over and over. There is an interview in the book between Ponge and Serge Gavronsky where they pay a lot of lip service to the fact that Euclidean

Shannon Ebner,
 spreads from THE
 SUN AS ERROR,
 2009, LACMA/
 Dexter Sinister.



129



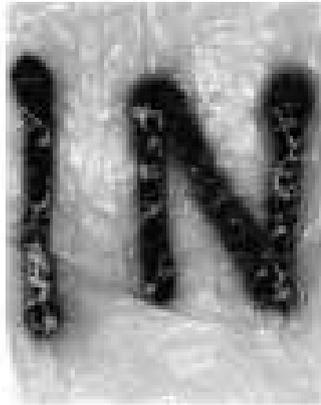
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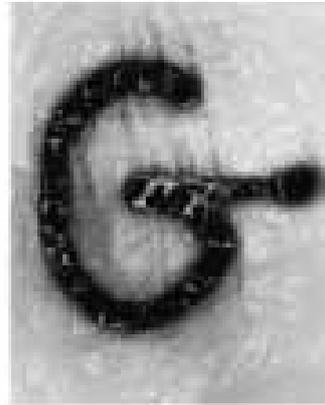
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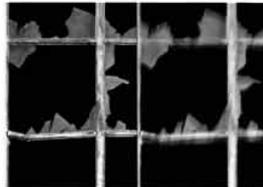
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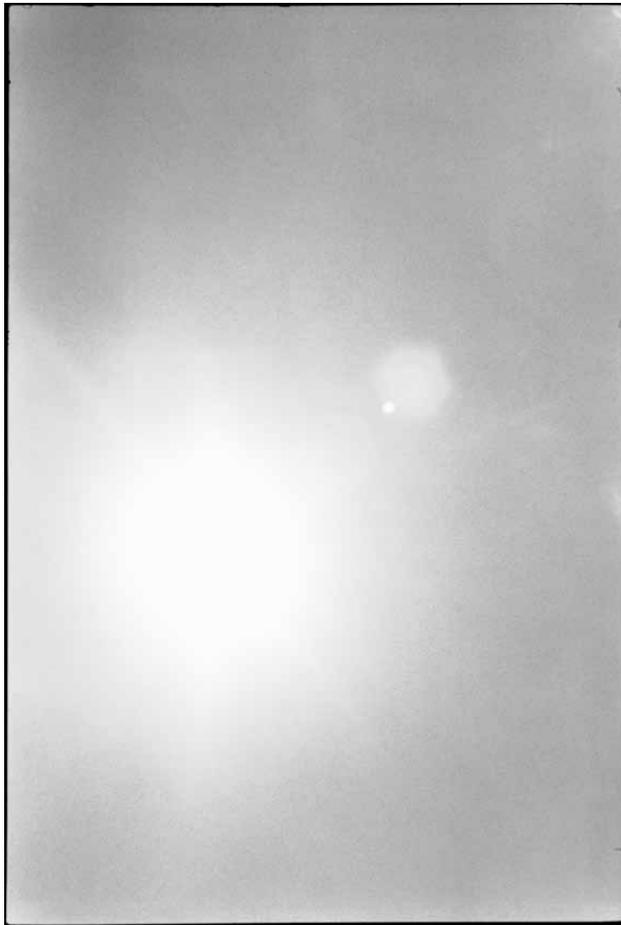
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136



137



Zoe Leonard,
AUGUST 4, FRAME
9, 2011/2012, gelatin
silver print,
23 ¾ x 17 ¼ inches.

Zoe Leonard,
installation view
ST. APERN
STRASSE, 26,
2011, Galerie Gisela
Capitain, Cologne.
Photo by Lothar
Schnepf.



geometry was disproven during Ponge's lifetime. I read that this had a tremendous effect on Ponge's writing and his adamant distrust of language, since it too was prone to error.

The Sun as Error deals with the ways in which mistakes, slips, and glitches are as valid as truth or accuracy. The bit you quote, "Day done. Gone sun . . ." is from an Indian sign language book in a section called "Sign Language Exercises Suitable for Passing Tests." What tests? In this case, tests to get your Boy Scout badge. The book's illustrations demonstrate survival skills. I was interested in the fact that this language was meant to be tested, thus opening the inevitability of error—which is really just about the possibility of there being options different from the "correct" answers. It also seemed relevant that within the book there would be Anglicized representations of the language of the North American Indians.

As for the asterisk, it's always redirecting readers to some other part of the text. It can signal typographical errors or footnotes and indicates that there is more information *elsewhere*. This elsewhere became really important to the making of the book; it underscores the fact that the picture or diagram is only one aspect of the whole, and always comes back to photography too. An elsewhere is inherent to the medium, in most cases—the picture was then, and this is now, and so what's in it happened somewhere else.

ZL: There are images in the book that really stick in my mind. Figures 32 and 33 depict a sunny sky, with two backlit clouds, seen through some kind of dirty or scratched-up window. The sun and the sky are there behind the grime, not romanticized but seen through the worn-out fabric of our environment. It's a post-postmodern picture of the sun. You seem to be reconciling the quotidian with the ecstatic, and photography seems to be a way to dig through the detritus of living, to track a struggle to see, or to be.

The images of the setting sun over the Sea of Cortez evoke a sense of lost beauty. Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* immediately comes to mind. In the back of your book, where you acknowledge the source material,

you write that these images exemplify how light behaves and how the human eye operates in response. It's as if you are diagramming the world for us.

SE: There were only a few diagrams in the beginning, and certain words and phrases that started to loosely formulate the different strands that run through *The Sun as Error*. I had a couple of diagrams from my own books at home but I wanted to find more scientific examples of phenomena that my own images were addressing. So I started going to libraries and bookstores, looking heavily in the science and engineering sections especially. I'd wander for hours pulling materials off the shelves. As I gathered more material and my own images began to fall into place, it became clear that the images could do the talking and that the sources had to fall away—they were going to limit the work rather than expand it.

Speaking of which, Zoe, your essay "A Continuous Signal" organizes a tremendous amount of research into an extremely fluid essay. It's almost a companion archive folio to your *Analogue* project. One of the subjects running through it is the historical relationship between photography, ownership, and colonization. You say that camera obscuras are about place; they are not able to make their "purchase" in the conventional sense. Is there some form of resistance for you with these cameras?

ZL: That's a great way to put it; there is a resistance to the idea of product or ownership. In these installations, the artwork is an experience rather than a thing and—because it cannot be fixed—it is impossible to describe, know, or own fully. There's something else, too. The camera reflects what's happening outside, so it asks us to engage with the world.

SE: I met you around the time you started traveling to Alaska. Over the years I have seen the photographs you made from your time there and also read about your experience there. It's clear that you were engaged with day-to-day activities of survival: feeding yourself, keeping yourself warm, and, in general, keeping attuned to the extreme weather and unpredictable nature of

living in the wilderness. While it may seem like a stretch, the camera obscura in Marfa also brings you to an extreme landscape, the desert, where you have to deal with the elemental. In Alaska you were living in the landscape and relying on it for survival, whereas in Marfa you have been making a tool that allows you to observe the landscape through close study. Can you talk about landscape in relationship to both of these places?

ZL: Landscape has been on my mind, not just with the installation here in Marfa, but also as I have been anticipating our conversation. I have been thinking about the camera obscura as a site rather than a device. It's a position, a space to be occupied. Or you could even say it's a condition—a state of mind—a situation of close looking and contemplation. We engage in looking all the time, but the shift the camera introduces—the inversion, the reversal—confounds us, and thereby draws our attention to one of our basic processes. This camera turns out no final product, no object to take away or hang on your wall; instead, the installation harnesses a phenomenology, and provides an experience in a specific time and place.

I keep returning to the idea of the camera as a place, not only in reference to my installations, but as a concern I see in your work too. Of course, your work always makes me think about the page and the written word, about language, but its particular relationship to site and landscape is very interesting. Your word constructions always happen *somewhere*. They are often made specifically to be photographed, but you don't photograph them in the studio. Instead, they are outside, on scrubby hills, in driveways, in a field, a parking lot, on the side of the road. On one level they're sculptures, but in each site or situation they mean something else. Your locations are a kind of edge space, a no man's land. Sometimes vaguely industrial, sometimes looking neglected or abject, they're more than backdrops. They are sites, or sets, where your word constructions—rusty, scrappy, crooked—stand their ground. I'm thinking of *Nausea* or *The Folding Up*, and especially *Ampersand*. The ampersand is a recurring character. You've spoken

beautifully about the glyph's place in language, at the end of the alphabet, as a figure unto itself by itself, but also as a symbol that connects two things.

SE: Some of the earlier work that you mention is from the Dead Democracy Letters [DDL] series (2002–2007) and some are from *The Sun and The Sign* (2007). When I was making DDL, I was new to Los Angeles at the very same time that our country was going to war. 9/11 happened within my first couple of months of living away from New York, and then came the preemptive strike and this new landscape of terrorism. In many ways, I thought that my daily vocabulary—as well as the landscape of language—was shifting. I spent a lot of time trying to imagine cities and landscapes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Due to the poverty of my knowledge and imagination, I would draw facile comparisons having to do with vast and unknowable desert and mountain regions in the Middle East and Southern California. So for the DDL series, I placed the letters in these nondescript landscapes that happen to be close to where I lived in East LA—except for a few locations where place is extremely specific, like the La Brea Tar Pits with its bubbling caldrons of oil and fumes or, for *USA* (2003), spelling “NAUSEA” on a mesa plain above the Pacific Ocean. One of the things that I loved about living in East LA was that it's built into a hillside, so you can see panoramic views and spot other areas in the near distance that have bald hills. I'd drive around and find my way to all of the bald hills, and for many years they became my images' backgrounds. Their blankness appealed to me. That was the starting point for a tendency in my work that has remained constant: the conflation between the blank sky and the blank page.

The Sun & the Sign is a transitional body of work that happened in between DDL and *STRIKE* (2008). It's far more materially engaged, and except for one or two images, I moved “off the horizon,” so to speak, and was using the camera very differently from how it functioned with DDL. With DDL I was hauling my whole roadside station into the field and then walking the camera far enough back to a fixed position. *The Sun & the Sign* led me back to the

garage studio altogether, though, so when I finally installed the system for the *STRIKE* alphabet in 2007, I'd taken myself out of the field for a long time. The grid steel peg system that held the cinderblocks became the landscape—including to a punctum-less field of vision, a militarized landscape, aerial views, and coordinate systems for missile projection. Cinderblocks are everywhere in this city too, they have an ugly kind of beautiful quality that I've come to love about Los Angeles. I'm thinking of these marginal zones of junk consumerism such as car parts shops (chop shops) in Sun Valley, or places for the demolition of metals, cardboard, and soda cans. By 2011, I'd finally made it out the other side of working with the *STRIKE* alphabet, and was hungry to reenter the world outside the studio.

When I drive around Los Angeles, which I love to do, I am looking at and for language—and it is looking at me. My relationship to landscape is about a relationship to language.

ZL: To go back to your earlier question about my own relationship to landscape. There are real resonances between Alaska and Marfa for me. I really like wild country—big expanses, open spaces. Here in Marfa, you have a 360-degree view. That is what defines Marfa—you're on a high plateau, ringed by low mountains in each direction, but the mountains are miles away, so even a slight rise offers up the most extraordinary view in all directions. To see a horizon all the way around is somehow mind-expanding. And then there's the deep quiet that lets you hear sounds as subtle as the rustle of birds in dry grass or a train in the distance. It is a luxury that allows for a different kind of concentration. But the desert environment is harsh. The range of plants and animals that can live here is small and specific since they have to be able to withstand both freezing and extremely hot conditions. You're sort of at the edge of what is habitable for a living being.

On the Yukon, I was a few miles away from the Arctic Circle, where the flora and fauna were at the northernmost edge of their range. There were only five species of trees. I liked that I could learn them all, and that the vegetation

and the animals explained the place to me. They revealed where the water was, the elevation, the contours of the land. It was also intensely beautiful, but the beauty was slow and quiet, like here in West Texas. At certain times of day, all you see here is a washed-out, yellowish dust. The blaring sun and nothing. But then, the sun shifts, and the whole sky lights up. The light hits the mountains from a different angle and they suddenly gain contour, color, presence. You learn to see things unfold. Time is part of vision here.

In part, that's why I wanted to site a camera here, and have it up for at least a full year. With the camera, the longer you stay, the more you see. First it's dark. Then there's a dim image. Then a panorama. If you stay longer and walk around you'll see tiny details—a blinking light, a car going by, a flock of birds circling. A landscape like this one asks for this kind of sustained attention. Other aspects of this site are also key. There's the railroad, with all it implies about a history of photography and a history of commerce. The nineteenth-century European-American expansion that brought both the camera and the railroad out to the West was violent. The building of the railroad is inextricably tied up with commercial exploitation of the land, its mineral resources, and many human lives. Of course that's a sweeping over-simplification of westward expansion, but it's all still here in some way. The Mexican border is not far from Marfa, and there is a huge Border Patrol station in town. Chinati occupies the grounds of an old fort. The view outside *100 North Nevill* is not a “pure” or idealized landscape; it's a view of a railroad track, a group of warehouse buildings, some oil tanks, and an electric power station.

The other important aspect of the location is, of course, Chinati, and the artworks by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, Roni Horn, and others sited here. That the museum was conceived by an artist is no small thing; Judd had a clear vision of a situation in which artwork, architecture, and landscape would all be of equal importance, and understood in concert with one another. I fell into an unexpected conversation with the place and these works. Living on campus for several months, it

Zoe Leonard,
ANALOGUE (detail),
1998-2009, 412
C-prints plus gelatin
silver prints, 11 x 11
inches each.



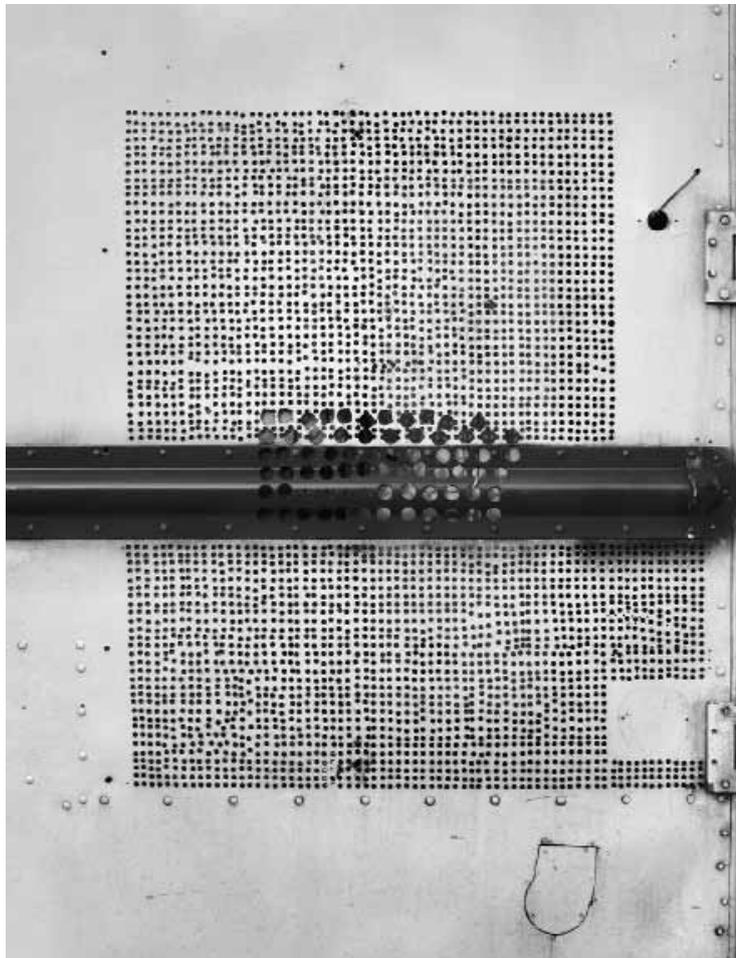
Shannon Ebner,
ELECTRIC COMMA
TWO, 2013, Epson
print, 48 7/8 x 60 inches.



Shannon Ebner,
PUBLIC SURFACE
PATTERN, 2013,
Epson print, 96 x 8 1/2
inches.



Shannon Ebner,
IMAGE PATTERN
GRATIFICATION,
2013, Epson print,
45 x 34 1/2 inches.



When I drive around Los Angeles, which I love to do, I am looking at and for language—and it is looking at me. My relationship to landscape is about a relationship to language.

— Shannon Ebner

was great to watch how Judd's works respond to light and weather. Although often described as monumental, his *15 untitled works in concrete* actually seem modest in this enormous landscape. They cannot dominate it. Antelopes graze by them, birds shit on them. This variability is exciting.

For me, Roni Horn's installation is a pivotal part of the collection. Hers is one of the most understated in terms of scale. It takes up one relatively small building and succinctly offers two identical objects in different positions. This simple repetition reveals the difference perspective makes in perception. A turn of the head changes everything. The work's title *Things That Happen Again: for a Here and a There*, could describe this whole place.

Shannon, I'm always intrigued by the many different ways you move from sculpture to photography. You'll make an object to be photographed or you'll make a sculpture that is then documented. Some of your words appear on T-shirts or signs of various kinds. People then become agents performing in your work. One could say bluntly that your work is always interactive. It steps right up to the viewer and asks to be responded to. What is your decision-making process around object-making, photography, and performance or actions? Do you see certain images distinctly as works and others as documentation?

SE: My answer to this question is ever-evolving. You mentioned *On the Way to Paradise* (2004), which features a group of friends wearing T-shirts I designed, each with a letter on it that together spell "SELF IGNITE". The piece was about agency and mobility, and its implications are somewhat gruesome. I made it within the context of the DDL series and it's the beginning of exactly what you're asking about: the work started to fan out in these different directions when I began considering various ways to carry the language

materially. The material registers have specific implications. For example, using a plastic sheet as the surface for *Dismantled Peace Sign* might signal total dystopia and wipeout, I guess, but also a thin and synthetic material that you can see through, quite literally.

To address your larger question, the first time I showed an object in an exhibition that could have just as easily been a graphic element in one of my images, was in 2009. I showed a small piece called *not equal* in a show called *Invisible Language Workshop*. I tried that piece as an image first, which taught me a lot because the frame of the image defined the object too narrowly. That's when I decided to have the object exist in space, so it would have greater autonomy. In a way, that entire show was trying to negotiate this same phenomenon. But not to get off topic. For an upcoming show in Rome called *Auto Body Collision*, I've started writing a poem in long form using six-foot-tall cardboard letters. I've come full circle, since the letters spell out words that will be in the exhibition space along with images related to the topic.

Starting with the show in 2009, I made a video called *Ecstatic Alphabet* that poses the riddle: When is a photographic sentence a sentence to photograph? I've been trying to muse on that riddle for a while now and the project in Rome is an attempt to do that. I am curious about what will happen if I document the exhibition and then eventually publish the work as the culmination of a poem that first existed in space.

ZL: The politics in your work seems to be at play not only in the words you choose, but also in the structures you disrupt. I find your work dark and dystopic—in an almost post-apocalyptic sense—but, at the same time, uplifting or hopeful. The act of speech implies a listener or, in your case, a looker. There's some kind of subversion and call to action. Do you agree?

SE: Yes. That might reside in the element of the work that slows down the readability of the image. Even when I am going to great lengths to communicate, as with the *STRIKE* piece, it takes the viewer a lot of time to work through the text. And that's probably one of the most directly political works I've made. Shifting the temporal register of an artwork can be an act of resistance in some form, though this is also an open question that bears further thought or discussion.

The political content in my work can be very overt, but it can also disguise itself. With *The Electric Comma* (2011–13), I like the implied urgency of using portable changeable message signs—the solar LED signs of our highway and roadway systems alerting us to an emergency or delay or collision ahead. For the photographic part of my project, I drained the safety orange color from the letters and programmed the computer with my own writing, so it addresses a "dear reader" directly. But the message is too long to be urgent, so the language functions more as a kind of public surface pattern. I am, in a sense, calling to you, the reader, but the message falls apart.

ZL: When you were here in Marfa you mentioned a work that you wanted to show me. You thought it might have a connection to the work I made here.

SE: Oh yes, I was talking about the *Dear Reader* video (2013), which is part of this same *Electric Comma* project. It's a silly comparison in many ways, because your camera obscura moves rather slowly and my video has this poem I wrote on the portable changeable message sign, with the language zooming by. The connection had to do with the idea that the observer of a system also becomes the maker of a system. It goes back to second-wave cybernetics, when the scientists and engineers and the great Margaret Mead had this crisis about how to perform good science.

Can scientists be objective or does their interference disqualify their findings as science altogether? Something about the *Nevill Street* camera, and the fact that you can look at the lens from either inside or outside of the building, intrigues me. In my video, I am recorded on the surface of the image as a shadow on a hillside. The portable changeable message sign rotated 360 degrees from a base, and so did the camera, the photographer, and the computer that was capturing all of the images live. The landscape kept changing as the sign changed position, so different reflections of the landscape's surface appear on the video as well. And the programmed poem was also being recorded in each frame, so we're all kind of spinning in the video.

ZL: *Dear Reader* is amazing in that it really happens in two temporalities. The text is so fast, but the shadows and reflections on the surface of the sign change slowly, almost elliptically. This is exactly the kind of disjunction we are asked to navigate on a daily basis as we move around our cities.

Do you ever think of yourself as a poet or writer? Does that identity matter to you?

SE: The work itself functions as a form of writing for me, except that it can take me a disproportionate amount of time to complete a project. It started to get really absurd with *The Electric Comma* project: it took three years to make an artwork from a thirteen-line poem. It took me that long to find the right form for the language. Often I am asked about my relationship to the Concrete poets because of the role that form plays in my work vis-à-vis the imagery. I am always trying to shift that dialogue a bit; there's a distinction to be made between Concretism and its history, and something that's actually about self-reflexivity. I am more interested in a conversation about form as a manifestation of self-reflexive thinking. I am not sure how to reconcile that with poetry, even though I am consistently engaged with words, their visual appearance, and what they mean or don't mean. This often finds me reading *about* poetry more so than poetry itself. I do think about the question of identity—I've had to,

since the question does come up. I have been reluctant to identify as a poet and I am not sure what that is about. Maybe I've always felt like an outlier. This question of identity does matter to me, even though I am unresolved about it.

I have this one thing nagging at me and it has to do with Alaska. What you said about the landscape and time being part of vision was profound. In my own faint memories, around the time we met, you were always in perpetual motion—riding a bike or jogging! Then you were gone to the Yukon. We did not know each other well then, but I've always wondered about this chapter of your life. It seemed extreme in terms of the remoteness, but also remarkable and extremely personal. What were the circumstances that led you to Alaska and then brought you back to New York? I guess I am asking you to talk more about the '90s. There is a lot of revisiting of this decade lately: you participated in the 1993 show at the New Museum and also in *Take It or Leave It*, which just opened at the Hammer Museum. You're in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, but you also participated in the '93 Biennial. It was a deeply political time and the stakes were very high in terms of the AIDS epidemic, ACT UP, institutional critique, and identity politics. Was your decision to go to Alaska related to any of these things?

ZL: This question opens another whole conversation. It maps a huge terrain of ideas, time, and geographies—both internal and external. I'm not sure I know how to address this succinctly; it's such a big set of issues, memories, ideas, politics, emotions, and art-making. There's so much to talk about here, I'm not sure I want to try to compress it. Maybe this means we have to meet again for part two of this conversation? What I can say for now is that I am the kind of artist who likes to work around the edges, the places in-between things, where one place runs out and another begins. This is not only about actual places—cities or types of landscapes—but it's also about queerness, politics, language, and a certain kind of art practice. I'm not looking for the monumental or the majestic; I'm looking for situations in which something about ourselves is revealed. In the small village where I spent time in

Alaska and in the desert here in Marfa, you can see the beauty of the land—the land as it was millennia ago and also a land we've used. The marks on the land are visible—in their ugly beauty, as you said so well—and show us so much about our culture, about who we are and how we live. I grew up in New York, which is its own kind of extreme place. The edge of town, the city limits, the border, no man's land—these phrases also describe states of mind and states of inquiry. It's situations where one culture meets another, where one medium combines with another, where one voice overlaps with another. These kinds of influences and exchanges interest me. They keep me going.