

## Flash: Shannon Ebner

June 27–August 29, 2015

Shannon Ebner's *STRIKE* is a collection of photographs. It is also a book, and a poem. As such, it rewards multiple forms of engagement: looking, reading, and reciting. Each of the 504 black and white pictures that make up *STRIKE* depicts a generic pegboard, small steel pegs fixed in each hole. The grid—11 pegs high, and usually 8 (sometimes 9) wide—provides a structure on which cinderblocks are hung to assemble the basic forms of single letters. Over time, by reading a series of images, or paging through the book, the letters form words, then sentences, and, in their full sequence, a poem.

"NO/" the poem begins, that most primal negation. Fragments rush to follow: "IT CAN/ AS IT IS/ IT IS A WAR/ RAW AS IT IS/ IT IS AN ACTION/." Composed of short stanzas, the poem comprises 15 palindromes, or sequences that read the same forward and backward. In these palindromes, "Evil" becomes "live," "war" turns to "raw," and "now" transforms into "won," together signaling a world in which life and war must coexist. Action, joy, love, sex, sadness—all the received and enacted things that make up a life—are folded into each other by the nature of the palindromic structure.

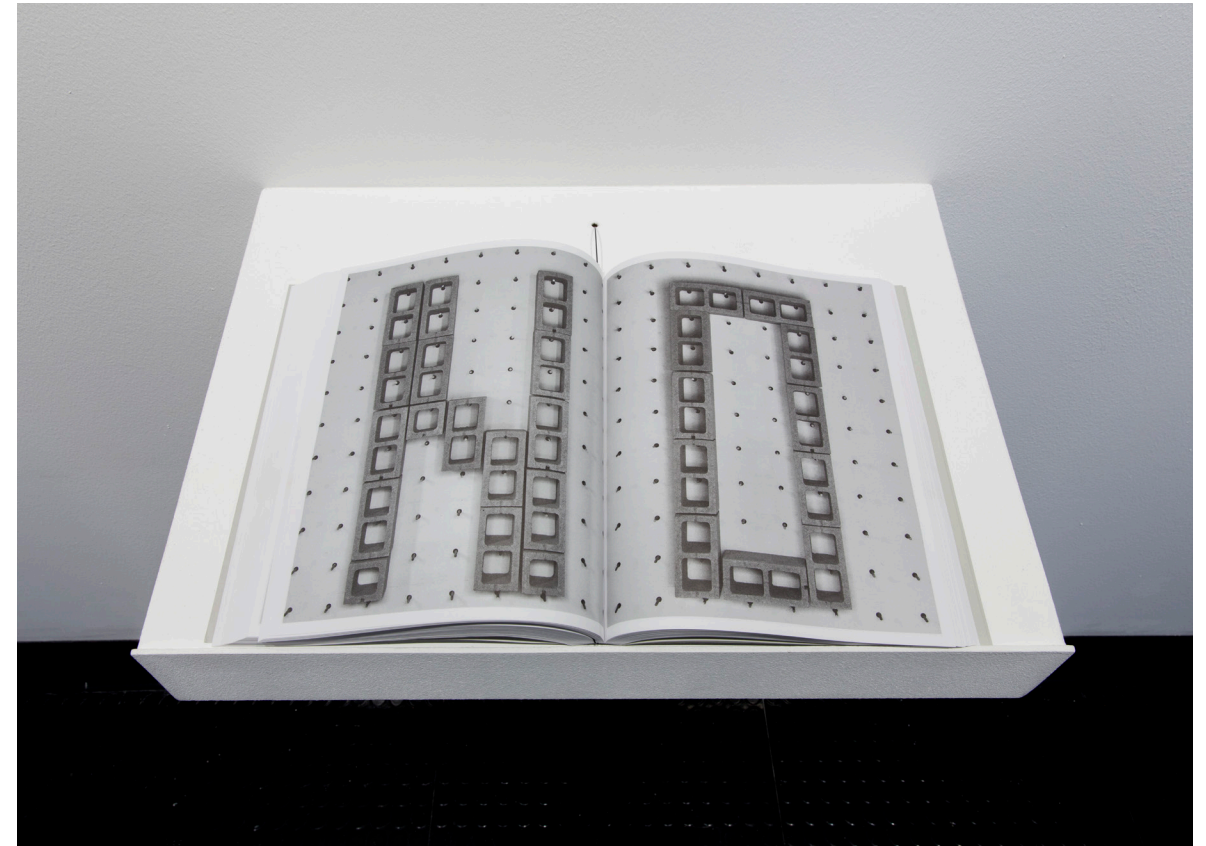
As the words mount up, a certain mood, and a certain history, may be called to mind. Written in 2007-08, in the tail end of President George W. Bush's second term, *STRIKE* may be understood as a somber reaction to that moment: in the wake of a military surge into Iraq, the context of mounting death tolls, and the economic precarity of an impending financial crash.

The poem is punctuated by forward slashes that both delineate the text and inflect it; when reciting the poem, the artist articulates the word "strike" every time a slash appears in the text: "REVILED DID I LIVE (STRIKE)

SAID I (STRIKE) AS EVIL I DID (STRIKE) DELIVER (STRIKE)." In this way, "strike" is inserted into the text and takes on variable meanings as noun—a physical blow, a crossing out, a bombing, a refusal to work—or a command, a call to rally. Repeated 44 times throughout the poem, the drumming "strike" gives this piece structure, even as it interjects constant interruption. Moments that may seem optimistic in the primary text, such as "ARE WE NOT DRAWN ONWARD/ WE FEW/ DRAWN ONWARD TO NEW ERA/" are inflected with hesitation and loneliness, and transformed when read aloud: "WE FEW STRIKE." With each reading the meanings slip in and out of each other, trading places: what might have been a lonely idealist in the primary text becomes militant with the addition of "strike." So too is a life lived during years of ongoing war interrupted and reshaped because of it. Community, comfort, hope, and vulnerability cannot be recalled without recalling that "strike" beat, cannot be remembered as separate from human suffering.

Negations double as affirmations in this poem that flips itself inside and out. The dissenting terms that begin and end the piece—"NO" and "STRIKE"—must be joined to a third term. "NOW SIR/ A WAR IS NEVER EVEN SIR/ A WAR IS NOT WON/." The "NOT" breaks the logic of the palindrome in which it is positioned to assert that the war in Iraq was not won, and neither were the left's attempts to stop the military advances. Inserted into this poem among otherwise visually identical letters, this negation—"A WAR IS NOT WON"—is especially forceful in its negation of the palindromic structure. Breaking her own rules, Ebner asserts her agency as a political subject: STRIKE.

—Joanna Szupinska-Myers



*STRIKE*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Mousse Publishing, Milan. Photo by Nikolay Maslov, UCR ARTSblock.

**Shannon Ebner** (born 1971 in New Jersey) lives and works in Los Angeles. The artist's work encompasses photography, video, sculpture, and installation. Her works frequently explore the nature of writing and its meaning, with the work acting as a form of writing, and the writing, in turn, a way of seeing. "For me, language is a material," she reflects. "I tend to be drawn to writing that is unruly and that has a magnetic center that attracts and repels material." Recent solo projects include a commission for the High Line in collaboration with David Reinfurt, *A Hudson Yard*, New York (2015); *Auto Body Collision*, Fondazione Memmo Arte Contemporanea, Rome (2014); Hammer Museum (2011), and PS1 MoMA (2007). Her work has also been featured in numerous group exhibitions including *Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2015); *Artist Theatre Program with Erika Vogt*, EMPAC, New York (2015); *Who Runs May Read*, South London Gallery, London (2013); *Things Words and Consequences*, Moscow Museum of Modern Art (2012); *Ecstatic Alphabets/ Heaps of Language*, MoMA, New York

(2012); *ILLUMInations*, 54th Venice Biennale, Venice (2011); *The Spectacular of Vernacular*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2011); 6th Berlin Biennale of Contemporary Art, Berlin (2010); and the Whitney Biennial, New York (2008), among others. In 2009, Ebner's book *The Sun as Error* was published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in co-operation with Dexter Sinister. This fall the Carnegie Museum will publish *Auto Body Collision*, an artist book commissioned by the museum's Hillman Photography Initiative with texts by Tina Kukielski, Alex Klein, and Mark Owens. *A Public Character*, a solo exhibition featuring Ebner's work, will take place at ICA Miami from October 2015 to January 2016. She earned her BA at Bard College in 1993 and her MFA at Yale University in 2000.

**Flash! contemporary art series** features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock.