# ARTHUR OU AND SHANNON EBNER

**ARTHUR: There is a clear progression from the pieces you made in the very beginning, in which photographs were really used as a material that you then worked on, both through collage and constructive methods as well as installational strategies. To be more specific, I can remember the series of seascapes that were layered with clear Xeroxes of blank notebook pages and the landscape that you mounted on top of a built-in corner table. It seems that you were already interested in working with photographic images in a much more sculptural way. With the "Dead Democracy Letters" project, it seems that you have found the most direct way to integrate an array of practices, which then result in singular photographs. Do you see this as a reversal?**

**SHANNON:** Yeah. The process really reversed itself, and the "Dead Democracy Letters" project definitely felt like a homecoming of sorts. It seems for years that I was kind of circling around all three mediums, trying to integrate them for better or worse. For a while, I was interested in the materiality of photography. I was trying to work with light and have an interruption take place—a mediated experience between an actual light source and the light-sensitive paper. I was also trying to highlight the sculptural elements of photography by insisting on the photograph as an object. And within these investigations I was very much trying to incorporate writing into the process. I've always seen the horizon as being this folded notebook page, and I've always thought that the element of terror that defines having a sublime experience is very much a conflation of a horizon in an expansive landscape and a blank notebook page waiting for language. But then the process reversed itself, and I don't think it was really a conscious change, but the photographs just became photographs again, and my interest in objectness or sculpture started happening from inside the image. And then somehow, within this reversal, I became really adamant that I wanted a photographic reality. I wanted something that could just exist for the purposes of the photograph.

**ARTHUR: I see a similarity in my practice in the last few years in that there is also this direct reversal. Perhaps it has to do with having faith in the photograph again, whereas before, for many reasons, I felt the singular photographic image was not enough. I've always felt that the photographic process ends when the shutter is released, when the image is fixed onto film. And this end has always felt abrupt to me. Much of my earlier work was attempting to extend this process. In a way, I was thinking about the photographic picture as a receptacle.**

**SHANNON:** No, it's true. What motivated that earlier work was this kind of frustration with the two-dimensionality of the image and the surface. The fact that it was always a surface. There's the process of taking the photograph and the placement of everything within that surface, but then the actual image itself is so impenetrable and immaterial, so I think the impulse was always to try and extend the photograph by bringing something to it. But then again, the more you can bring the process to the surface, the more potential there is for the process to reveal itself.

**ARTHUR: Yes. The mechanistic process stripped bare by dismantling the picture... Also, by prolonging or slowing the process, one can better examine it. In retrospect, it was necessary to go through that process. It feels much more natural now to make so-called straight—or perhaps singular is a better description—photographs.**

**SHANNON:** It seems that for a while you truly departed from photography and you weren't taking pictures for years.

**ARTHUR: Well, I was.**

**SHANNON:** You were? [*Laughs.*]

**ARTHUR: I don't know... Which project are you talking about, actually?**

**SHANNON:** I guess I'm thinking of those drawings you made where you were tracing the outlines of photographs. In those drawings, I was interested in the way that you removed all of the information except for the contours. It seemed like even though they were clearly drawings, you were approaching them as photographs. The way you drew the camera into the drawing was very much a kind of Lee Friedlander gesture. The camera became a way of implicating yourself. I took these drawings to be another way for you to examine the way photographs work culturally. Now, of course, you're finally allowing yourself to just take pictures again.

**ARTHUR: Yeah, I think that has a lot to do with the last few trips that I've taken to Taiwan within the past year and a half. Being in the place that I was once familiar**

**with, I noticed very directly that the familiarities are subsumed by the newness of the changes that have taken place through all these years. I felt the only way that I could really get at this disconnect—these discrepancies between progress and disappearance—was to photograph it. It was the quickest way that I could make a record, and then perhaps examine it as a picture, as some kind of contained space.**

**SHANNON:** Bringing the photographs back into the dialogue has certainly opened everything back up again. Your recent show brought many ideas together that you have been coming to terms with over the years, such as dislocation, architecture, memory, sculpture, photography, and so on. It seems that you found a way to take the family narrative out the work while still having it be an informant of sorts.

**ARTHUR: The family narrative is difficult to get away from, as much as I consciously or even unconsciously try. I am interested in the connections between photography, architecture, and sculpture, and the way that each of these practices is used to generate certain mise-en-scènes. Architecture in the modern sense is, of course, no longer only about building shelters; now it's about much more than that—building settings, backdrops in which narratives can take place. As for cinema, all that is situated in front of the camera is quite literally the mise-en-scène where the actors move about, completing the narratives to be recorded by the camera. In the very same way, I think photography is about the same thing, about trying to find the most efficient way to show something, be it a person, place, or thing. I think it has been an experiment in my mind to see how these differing parts work together, but having the chance to test out the experiment in an exhibition space answered some questions.**

**SHANNON:** Such as...

**ARTHUR: Such as allowing the photographs to function as the historical material to the objects—the photographs as "artifacting" apparatus.**

**SHANNON:** It does seem that the images of Taipei definitely framed or provided a context for the other pieces in the show, that they almost supplemented the reading of the objects. In terms of the objects though, I'm interested to hear you talk more about the function of the Wittgenstein house, as it seems almost like a centrifugal piece in the show.

**ARTHUR: The Wittgenstein house was made with a conscious reference to traditional Chinese funeral objects, which are made to be burned for the deceased so that they can be used in the afterlife. These objects are usually made with thin paper and strips of wood, which form only the shell of the intended object. When I first saw these funeral objects, I immediately thought of them as apposite analogies to photographs. The shell provides the likeness, the semblance, like the illusory surfaces of photographs, nothing more, and by the act of burning, these objects are transformed into something that is functional, something that can be used. And Wittgenstein served as the embodiment of a reexamination of Western philosophical thought.**

**SHANNON:** I see the relationship between that object's surface and photography's surfaces, now that you mention it, and I think that it's interesting to have the object symbolize the way in which photographs function culturally, but I also see the house in a very Sebaldian light. Wittgenstein's house is such a marker of Western philosophical thought, and so to literally drive it east to Taipei, where it is so estranged from its origins, seems to be the point. To remove this object from its origins makes it possible for it to become self-reflexive in the same way that W.G. Sebald fictionalizes the characters in his novels and then spreads them out geographically in order to examine their geographic dislocation and cultural alienation. Maybe you could also talk about the kind of "trade" involved in the ceramic pieces? I'm interested in the way those pieces came into existence. As much as they are an exercise in globalization, they also seem to be a kind of experiment in language and interpretation between yourself and the manufacturers in Taipei.

**ARTHUR: Globalization being illusory to something moving toward the unifying, but really much more than ever segmentalizing our day to day experience. Actually, the factory I worked with is in Shenzhen, China, which is purportedly the manufacturing capital of the world right now. Many foreign companies are setting up manufacturing plants there, including numerous companies from Taiwan. For me, China stands as the dark paragon of an accelerated form of capitalism, along with all of the problems endemic to capitalism, which are unfolding exponentially in very disturbing ways, as we are seeing in China's environmental collapse, ever-increasing peasant revolts, and its rapid and strategic amassing of economic and military power. What was interesting to me about working with the factory in China to produce the ceramic work—and this was the beginning point of**

**this project—is the idea that this wavering of an object's status, whether it is a manufactured object or a supposed art object, can be totally external from where the object is made. I am reminded of factories in China that print legal copies of Hollywood DVDs during the day and continue to print the very same DVDs after business hours, but those ones are considered "counterfeit" because they were produced outside of contractual authority. In this case, the wavering of these DVDs' status is a direct repudiation of capitalism's rules.**

**SHANNON:** That's so fascinating, that the hours of operation determine the codes of conduct. I wonder if Pfizer runs their pharmaceutical company like that too. But back to your pictures... I would have to say that the impulse to record this reconstruction photographically seems critical for you.

**ARTHUR: Yes, it was. When I visited Taipei on these trips, more than just trying to situate myself geographically and temporally in this place, I wanted to situate myself in a history that reveals the vestiges of occupation and colonization, which I felt were the sublimating forces that drive the country. The house I photographed, which was built during the Japanese occupation, really was the receptacle of Taiwan's history in the last century.**

**SHANNON:** I guess that brings me back to Sebald again and that impulse to record what's been written or imaged out of history.

**ARTHUR: Yes, history can also be defined by what is excluded. There is an amazing segment in Godard's last film, *Notre Musique*, in which he himself plays a filmmaker giving a talk to Bosnian film students in which he describes, with a set of photographs in his hands, the cinematic device of the "shot/countershot," which for him was representative of the opposing nature of the photographic images. In the same way, history functions according to this dichotomy, pointing simultaneously to what is included and what is excluded. Sebald used these found photographic materials that served as anchors within the literary space. If you think of these photographs as relics that are the literal transcriptions of how time passes, then they become the most suitable way that one can enter, pictorially or visually, events that have occurred before. But this becomes much more than just a historical fiction, of course, because Sebald is adding many more layers by using fragments of people's personal histories that he has collected. Photographs have a way of hovering between many different kinds of existences. In a way, Sebald, in his books, has provided the mise-en-scène where these found (or lost) photographs could once again belong, allowing their original meanings to be annihilated so that new meanings can arise and take place. It's as much a process of preservation as a process of cancellation. I think maybe the reason why I'm making these pictures is that I want to make historical pictures, but in the way that I know how to, by going to places I have some sort of history or connection with. How do you see your pictures in terms of history? [*Laughs.*]**

**SHANNON:** In terms of history?

**ARTHUR: [*Laughs.*]**

**SHANNON:** I don't know which "history" you're speaking of specifically, but in terms of photography's history, I guess that I can see myself belonging to the history or tradition of photographing signs. I like to say "from Atget to Ruscha" because it rhymes, but there are so many photographers you can fill in the blanks with. Atget and Ruscha are very much the cornerstones, with Evans, Kruger, and Holzer hanging out in the same crowd as Shore, Friedlander, and even Man Ray. I just downloaded this really beautiful Man Ray photograph. He took an image of a monument to [the French photographic pioneer] Nicéphore Niépce that's just exquisite.

**ARTHUR: Oh, really?**

**SHANNON:** Yeah, it's amazing.

**ARTHUR: What was the sign?**

**SHANNON:** It's a monument that was installed in 1933 near Gras, France. Man Ray made the image in 1937. The Getty has the image in their collection, and I think I might try and go see it. For me it's just another early example of this photographic impulse to record signs.

**ARTHUR: You mean, literally, signs?**

**SHANNON:** I mean it literally and figuratively, because the literal recording of signs or signage does very quickly become a kind of cultural recording. Historically photographers have always had the impulse to record the signs around them as evidence of their time. When I started with the "Dead Democracy Letters" series, I was more interested in making the signs that I wanted to photograph and then placing them where I wanted them seen. When I first started making that work in the spring of '02, we had just

gone into Afghanistan and were carpet-bombing the fuck out of it. The first image I made, which I never show, was of the word "HOLY."

**ARTHUR: In my view, the markers are not only temporal markers but ones that also have a very direct connection to commentary on what is happening in the present. Even though the text you use in the landscape can seem open enough to allow for different reads—perhaps this has to do with its resemblance to the iconographic signs that are very much part of the Los Angeles landscape—after prolonged viewing, the text seems to become a clear reflection of how you feel politically. As in the images that say "THE FOLDING UP" or "NAUSEA," for example...**

**SHANNON:** The impulse for making them was very much in direct response to the "war on terror" and all of the failings of democracy that allowed this war to be so entirely fabricated. I was very disillusioned by the way that political events and language were constructed after the terrorist attacks, and the "Dead Democracy Letters" series was an attempt to come to terms with that. Even though America's history is completely corrupt, there's always been a system of checks and balances to maintain a certain level of democracy. And I think that the sense of alienation that I feel now as an American is very different from a type of cultural alienation that's always been described photographically as operating from a position of privilege. I mean, look at Evans and Frank or diCorcia—the alienation that they describe is so provincial.

**ARTHUR: I think that in some ways the project is an examination of how monuments are erected and read, and, further on, how they are ultimately failures at what they attempt at doing. The problem with monuments is that they are permanent. They stay forever, until forces, natural or political, dismantle them. A more logical way of making monuments would be to make them temporary, in the same way that your signs are only propped up for the duration of the photographic activity and then they are dismantled. The photograph becomes the record of that monument being in that place.**

**SHANNON:** I really can't get behind seeing the photographs as monuments. Although I do agree that temporary monuments would be less problematic ideologically, I have a very hard time with the very notion of the monument. It seems so exclusively male, barring Maya Lin, of course. Last year I was in Ralph Rugoff's show "Monuments for the USA," which was a very interesting show but it presented a real challenge for me to even entertain this notion of the monument, because the very idea of a monument is so authoritative, so corrupted by history, power, and lies. Marvin Heifferman wrote a really interesting essay on the monument in relation to a body of lesser-known work that Friedlander made. He ends up talking about the World War II Iwo Jima memorial and how it's based on an actual, Pulitzer Prize–winning, staged photograph by Joe Rosenthal. He talks about the way that factual images took precedence over symbolic sculptures from that point onward, and how language began to fail us around the time of the Nixon-Kennedy debates, because it was no longer the content of the debate that the public judged but the debaters' appearances. Apparently Nixon refused to wear makeup and he drowned in a pool of his own sweat as a result. The debate became about public image as opposed to public discourse. But back to monuments...

**ARTHUR: Yes, back to your pictures. I think that on a basic level the photographs become the record of that monument situated in that place, only in that moment.**

**SHANNON:** Yes, I suppose that photography has that effect, and so, de facto, they become subsumed into the fabric of history. I think that they will become a record of land use and ownership in a very historically classic way. A couple of summers ago, I drove out to where Muybridge took one of his famous images of Mirror Lake in Yosemite, and of course the water has all but evaporated. I was left to crane my neck awkwardly at puddles so that I could catch glimpses of that once magnificent display of nature. A lot of the places where I photographed the "Dead Democracy Letters" series have already begun to be developed with houses. The interesting thing will be to wait and see how language usage ages. The series is definitely meant to be a public address of sorts; even though the language has a nonspecificity about it, it is definitely coming from an angry, reactionary place, a place of monumental discontent and violation. It seems that the end of this war is truly nowhere in sight...

**ARTHUR: Has this discontent also carried over into some of your new images? How do you see the "Dead Democracy Letters" series in relation to the new work?**

**SHANNON:** Well, something that I've been thinking about a lot in terms of the new work is the grid as a representation of the way we as individuals are being colonized. Walead Beshty was just telling me about this essay from around the time of the "New Topographics" work where Baltz talks about his experience of looking out over an expanse of undeveloped land and seeing a grid. Contem-

porary life has always been an assault on the individual, and it's always been about conforming to different constructions—these different constructs we need to create in order to live and function and have rules and laws and ways of generating capital and all these things that make for a functioning, high-level society—but at the same time, contemporary life is becoming about the illusion of choices when really the individual is becoming so obliterated.

**ARTHUR: Yes.**

**SHANNON:** So much for alienated labor... This is a different type of alienation, a disenfranchisement of the individual just through, of course, technology. The individual now carries the burden of private property. As "property," which cellphone or health-care provider will we choose? Or perhaps soon enough even our Social Security will be just another corporate enterprise that we have to enter into a contract with. When I was making the "Dead Democracy Letters," I was very much thinking about these sort of issues—I was asking myself, "What is contemporary?" I was thinking a lot about Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*. In both of those books there are these moments of industry really changing people's relationship to what's possible. In *Orlando*, I remember the main character traveling in an elevator and stepping out onto the second floor of a mall, and just being completely elated because it was now possible to be mechanically transported. Or in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there's that moment where Clarissa looks up into the sky with great wonder because they're skywriting. But then the skywriting, of course, is an advertisement for toffee. I feel that Gertrude Stein tried to come to terms with this too, only through language. She writes in the present participle to keep her language constantly contemporary. She was also very interested in what it means to be an American.

**ARTHUR: But of course this "American" identity of which Stein speaks is really just a selection of existing "types" that each individual grows into, generation after generation. It's amazing how prophetic this idea is to contemporary life, especially in thinking about photography and the way that it has directly and indirectly obliterated, as you say, the so-called individual in societies under capitalism. I think photography has played a large part in creating this technological alienation.**

**SHANNON:** Yeah.

**ARTHUR: From the inception of photography, the way that it has been used, from survey to surveillance, has been about some form of control. You talked about Baltz seeing the landscape and seeing it as yet-to-be-developed grids. In similar ways, what drove photographers to make photographs was to transform what was seen into this grid or convert it into a form that they can actually study and survey and ultimately control. Expedition photographs, for example, were made to assess the new West for habitation or industrialization. And in 1880s Paris, photography was instrumental in the control of masses by classification and identification.**

**SHANNON:** Right, the criminology images and those Steichen images from World War I.

**ARTHUR: Those Steichen aerial photographs are perhaps the other extreme, that of using an almost godlike point of view from a reconnaissance plane for the purpose of strategic mass destruction.**

**SHANNON:** Yes, the dark side of photography. No goofy pun intended, but really, it's deeply troubling to think about the amount of photographic information that we're being deprived of right now simply because it hasn't been made available to us. The very thing that led to photography's popularity was the printing press, and where would the Progressive Era be if the concerns of those times hadn't been validated through photographs? So, to think now that we're living in this moment where we're causing incredible misery and destruction in the Middle East, and yet there are very few images that the government is letting the American people see—that's very dark, because it's so calculated by the government based on lessons that were learned during the Vietnam War.

**ARTHUR: With the barrage of photographic images floating out there, and with the ever-increasing number of new ways to index and database and access the photographic heap (or I should say heaps), I think one's way of encountering the photograph or experiencing it has been completely transformed. And with that comes the gradual but very real reaffirmations of photography's failures.**

**SHANNON:** But then I don't know. Because you take an example like Abu Ghraib, and it makes the information conveyed through photography very tangible—these are photographs of Americans torturing prisoners in Iraq—and it brings it right back to photographs having power and being effective and functioning through their dissemination.

**ARTHUR: It's alarming that this effectiveness you speak of with regard to the Abu Ghraib pictures has to do with the**

**very fact that these are photographic souvenirs that soldiers have placed on their computer desktops and attached to their e-mails to friends and family. In a sense, they are the trophies of the abusers. The images' very power is based on our being witness to these closed-door acts.**

**SHANNON:** It's just this bizarre paradox, really. We live in a time when it's never been more possible to access imagery—whether it's through the World Wide Web or print media—and not only that, but also, having lived with photography for 150 years, our ability to read images has grown infinitely more sophisticated, and at least as Westerners we approach photographs with the knowledge that they could be lies or they could be truth. But because images are so effective, the government has done everything in its power to make sure that the people don't have access to the pictures. Look at what happened when the people got the pictures and film footage from the Vietnam War: They incited riotous protests. But then, of course, images always fail us in the end. Guantanamo Bay is still up and running, and we're practicing this "extraordinary rendition" program by torturing people all over the world.

**ARTHUR: Photographs can and have sparked wars.**

**SHANNON:** Yes, but can they end them? How often do photographs actually lead to reform? They may incriminate, but typically the party with lesser power and blah blah blah, same old ax to grind, eh.

**ARTHUR: Yes, that old photography ax... How did we get down such a darkened path here and now? It brings to mind the German word *aufheben*, which I came across in a footnote of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," which translates as "to preserve, to elevate, to cancel." Isn't it an apt description of photography?**