

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

REVIEW: JOHN LEHR, *STET*

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John Lehr, "Gibberish" (2010). Pigmented inkjet print. 24 × 31 1/2 inches.  
Edition of 5 with 2 AP. Image courtesy of Kate Werble Gallery.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term "stet" as a transitive verb, meaning "to direct retention of (a word or passage previously ordered to be deleted or omitted from a manuscript or printer's proof) by annotating usually with the word *stet*." The meaning of this brief, curt-sounding word, printer's jargon, becomes immediately relevant to the viewer upon entering John Lehr's solo exhibition of the same name.

Entering Kate Werble Gallery, Lehr's quiet display of the awkward, disrupted smears and smudges of human existence seems to ask the viewer what he or she expects from a photographic image. Nicéphore Niépce's first permanent photograph, made in 1826 in the uncontrolled setting of nature, was practically yesterday. As a relatively young art form, photography has suffered for the science and presumed precision that birthed it. While the intention and hand of the artist seems indivisible from this overtly mechanized artmaking process, one cannot escape even the briefest discourse on this art form's rise without at least a nod to the dissenters who would have the viewer know that the unfeeling, metal bastard-robot called photography, and that vaunted, sun-drenched, free-flowing, earthy crone, ART, were mutually exclusive concepts.

Lehr is able to embrace the detached, still, mechanical language of the medium to discuss the detritus of humanity and its methods of visual communication. These stark, formal images at once appear to be studies of some strange world's bizarre practices, blindly vomiting forth fragments of gestures, words, and signals, layering them until the result is nonsense (or "Gibberish," one piece proclaims, memorably hawking a variety of fish-related goods from cramped window space). One could consider Lehr's gloriously unsentimental focus to be that of a curious archaeologist scrutinizing some post-apocalyptic leftovers in search of explanations and keys, or possibly even some disgruntled proofreader of human communication, here documenting what he can't correct. The subjects trace existence from subtly figurative remnants of adhesive smeared on a dirty window to an overtly absurd, boarded-up bank entrance with carefully cut holes for its now-impotent door handles. These are remnants of abstracted, man-made concepts made manifest and parsed. The only human faces the viewer encounters here are the overexposed, predictably blank, stock-photo faces of Active, Fun Gran and Gramps™ at the Doctor™, here trapped and confused behind metal security gates, stand-ins for the unseen figures whose movements, thoughts, and intentions etch the surface of each of Lehr's silent appraisals.

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Yet there is an undeniable sense of humor present here, a nearly tangible spark, indicating that these observations are more than a cold cataloguing of some perhaps-dead civilization's botched and awkward attempts to convey a series of curiously formed thoughts about fish tanks or beer. Detached and structured, the images seem free to celebrate the blatant absurdity of all manner of visual signifiers, both intentional and accidental, without the burden of melodrama.

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