

# John Lehr, *The Last Things* @Kate Werble

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / January 15, 2025

**JTF (just the facts):** A selection of photographs and sculptures, hung in the main gallery space and office area, and installed outside on the terrace.

The following works are included in the show:

- 18 pigmented inkjet prints, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, sized roughly 25×21 inches (framed), in editions of 2+2AP
- 1 metal and digital print, 2024, sized roughly 48x13x31 inches
- 1 wood, metal, 2024, sized roughly 84x24x38 inches
- 1 concrete blocks, 2024

A monograph of this body of work was published in 2024 by TBW Books ([here](#)). Casebound hardcover with French fold jacket, 10.5 x 12.6 inches, 122 pages, with 80 color plates.

**Comments/Context:** A quick wander through a large 21st century city like New York, or any decently big American metropolis for that matter, will quickly reveal that its streets and sidewalks have increasingly become intensely concentrated spaces of visual distraction. Nearly every built surface these days is communicating with us, or trying to, with signs, symbols, images, words, displays, and moving screens, attempting to capture our precious attention as we pass by. To blunt this constant visual attack, successfully navigating a big city almost requires a kind of intentional muting of a person's usual curiosity, like the wearing of protective sensory blinders.

And while many of us might temporarily attempt to turn off our active engagement with this flood of vernacular communication, John Lehr has done just the opposite. With the precise attentiveness of an anthropologist studying the ruins of some long collapsed ancient civilization, Lehr has aimed his artistic energy at documenting unexpected urban finds and parsing the cryptic messages they can contain. His photographs offer us isolated snippets of everyday communication that don't always coalesce into obvious meaning, encouraging us to re-see the commonplace with the eyes of a newly arrived stranger who can't entirely comprehend what's going on.

*The Last Things* (in both gallery show and photobook forms) follows up on some of the visual themes Lehr explored in his 2019 project *The Island Position* (gallery show reviewed [here](#)), but noticeably moves in a bit closer, stripping away some of the photographic context surrounding the architectural structure of the storefronts, doorways, and window displays that have often provided his subject matter. His recent works are cropped much tighter, removing most of the helpful identifiers we might have used to orient ourselves, leading to pictures that feel even more mysterious, interrupted, and untethered.

A handful of Lehr's compositions ostensibly offer us words, letters, or fragments that we might decipher. A painted shop window claims to offer MIRRORS, but instead doubles the word with shadows, with no mirrors in sight anywhere. Another reversed sign communicates its fleeting message of ART amid encroaching stains and decay, its original intention (maybe TRAFFIC, TRAIL, or the like) now lost. A similar kind of cropping isolates part of a NO PARKING ANYTIME painted message, turning it into NO AN, a doubled letter koan of unknown meaning. And still other images become even more obscure, from a mystifying gathering of letters on a shop door to the illegible dots of a corrupted digital display.

Another group of photographs encourages painted marks and imagery to become their own kind of hieroglyphic language. Painted murals featuring video game consoles and pharmaceutical pills seem to offer what America might desire. The usual transparency of windows is frustrated by being boarded up and painted with a target, or being entirely fake, as in a wall covered with simplistic trompe l'oeil panes and frames. And other gestural marks in spray paint hint at anonymous expressiveness, from a quick but emphatic X to a more sympathetic heart painted over broken glass.

More ominous moods seem to linger just outside the frame of many of Lehr's most memorable works, their uncertainty providing a simmering sense of tension. Strips of tape hang off a wall, their original binding purpose now unknowable. The same might be said for a gridded sidewalk view, with a construction or pandemic face mask tied to its metal latticework. Even more puzzling is what looks like a raging fire right behind a fresh green hedge; the fire turns out to be some kind of vinyl mural bolted behind the garden, the two colors clashing with vibrant anxiety. And the hanging shadow of a flag feels quietly forlorn, drooping against an expanse of unforgiving and withering whiteness.

Lehr clearly wants to make his photographs feel more like objects, and his presentation choices amplify their three dimensional qualities. The prints are mounted and then seemingly affixed atop wooden blocks (on the back), with the resulting works displayed in clear acrylic boxes. The images are variously surrounded by white space when printed, creating different geometric arrangements and spatial relationships between the pictures and the same fixed external dimensions of the paper. This idea is then echoed in several sculptures included in the show, that wrap around the gallery walls and offer alternate modes of thinness and bulkiness on the terrace.

While plenty of American photographers have been seduced by vernacular architecture and signage across the history of the medium, Lehr's interests in these subjects continue to evolve and change, becoming more pared down and synthesized in this recent body of work. In distilling surfaces down to elemental essences, he's reducing the complexity of the American commercial experience down to resonant nuggets of visual precision. His amplified communications aren't always understandable in a literal way, but as a group, they craft an atmosphere of expired instability that feels altogether contemporary.

**Collector's POV:** The framed prints in this show are priced at \$5500 or \$6500, based on the place in the edition. Lehr's work has little secondary market history so gallery retail likely remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.