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An Unmade Book: Walker Evans's 1970s Polaroids of Letters

'the photograph is not a picture of something but is an object about something'
Robert Heinecken, (1965) - ¹

When Walker Evans died in 1975, he had been in the process of putting together a photo-book, or rather, an alternate literary typology based on a series of Polaroids of isolated letters. Taken from roadside signs, traffic markings, advertisements and other urban ephemera the letters are both singular and discernibly a part of longer words and writing. The aim, according to Jeff L. Rosenheim, the curator of the Evans Archives at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, was to create 'an alphabet book based on individual letters.'² Despite the fact that the book never materialized, the speculative nature of this letter project, together with the thousands of Polaroids ranging from portraits, to houses, to debris, and signage, seemingly disparate and taken ad hoc, allows us to take a backward glance at the complex nature of Evans' practice. The Polaroids function as commentaries on Evans' earlier photographs but they also, in ways that are usually overseen, counter the idea of Evans' work as predominantly a "critique of the unravelling of American culture."³ Instead, the

¹ Quoted in William Jenkins, 'Introduction' in James Enyeart, ed. *Heinecken* (Carmel: Friends of Photography, 1980), p.11.

² Walker Evans, *Polaroids*, introduced by Jeff L. Rosenheim (New York: Scalo Press, 2001, p.2.

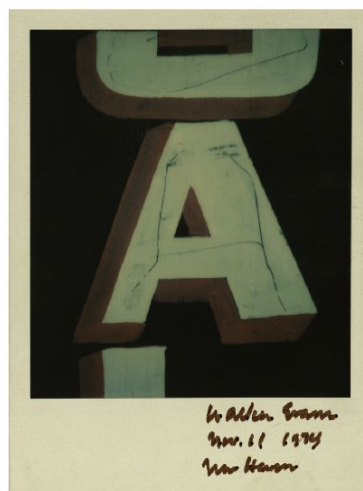
³ Ibid. p.1.

projected book of letters works towards the opposite by articulating a sequential and recognizable system of meaning. In these Polaroids, Evans' desire to get ever closer to the material substance of his photography can be seen in graphic terms; a desire that isn't contradictory to his earlier practice but an extension of a life-long attempt to provide a cohesive perspective on the constituent parts of American culture. In other words, the Polaroids become both an exploration into the possibility of photography as a language in and of itself and a way to reconstitute American culture rather than focus the signs of its social disintegration. Despite its anomalous nature, then, Evans' unmade book signals something fundamental but often overlooked about his overall oeuvre. In the Polaroids, there is an attempt to make culture legible alphabetically as many of the same obsolete, inconsequential and discarded parts of American culture that Evans had previously photographed are re-inscribed into a coherent, rather than fragmented, vision of 20th. century life.

Looking at the Polaroids in terms of a "renewed concentration on the minutiae of life and its graphic qualities", the few Evans scholars who have paid attention to them tend to see a continuation of a post-war move towards "a strong visual language of abstraction and the doubling or slippage of meaning", rather than in terms of coherency and legibility.⁴ Other critics read them simply as the last efforts of a lazier and older photographer intent on returning to the material of his heyday. However, while the Polaroids exemplify Evans' continued obsession with the graphic qualities

⁴ From *Damaged: Ruin and Decay in Walker Evans' Photographs*
Donna West Brett, University of Sydney Walker Evans Symposium. Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, October 7th. 2016

of photography, the issue of a 'doubling or slippage of meaning' requires some thought. Firstly, the focus on the constituent parts of language in the letter Polaroids in some ways constitutes the opposite of a 'slippage of meaning'. Instead, it engenders – if not fixes - meaning through a more intimate approach to the materials of American culture, including the material nature of the Polaroid as a photographic object in its own right. Known for his tendency to take a step back to survey rather than engage with his subjects, the Polaroids of letters thus occupy an unusually abstract aesthetic for a photographer whose earlier still lives are so replete with social and historical meaning.



Despite only using the Polaroid SX-70 roughly between 1973-1975, Evans managed to amass thousands of Polaroids prior to his death in October 1975. According to Jeff L. Rosenheim, there were over 2,600 instant photos in color and some in black and white. While a portion were dedicated to portraits of friends, students and models, the vast amount of Polaroids are variations on Evans' earlier subjects,

abandoned wood structures in the South, objects found discarded on the streets and so forth. Close ups of discarded signage, road signs, singular letters, advertisements partially torn and illegible reference Evans's earlier material from the Depression Era, such as the torn images on the walls of the sharecroppers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1942) – his famous collaboration with the writer James Agee - the salvaged belongings of flood refugees in 1937 as well as his magazine work on tools and utensils from the 1940s and 50s.⁵ Because of this, it is tempting to see the letter Polaroids - in particular - as simply close-up versions of the material fragments of modernity that Evans had already photographed throughout his career. However, some key differences, amongst them the introduction of color, provides us with a sense of Evans re-seeing the material of past work rather than simply getting closer to it.

In fact, while in many of the Polaroids Evans has clearly returned to his previous subjects; dilapidated structures and facades, abandoned shacks and handmade signs are now bathed in the yellow golds of a setting sun and road side shacks and untended weed gardens are made up of saturated greens and blues rather than the muted black and white of the Depression era.

⁵ See David Company, *Walker Evans: The Magazine Work*, (Steidl, 2014).



Walker Evans, Untitled Polaroid 1973

The colors of these Polaroids thus not only reflect the unique tonal qualities of the instant film stock, they also give a sense of transparency to Evans' earlier black and white images. While the intersections between photographic and ethnographic practice are still in evidence in ways that are not dissimilar to earlier work, the luminosity of the Polaroid color adds a sense of weightlessness to the scenes, a sense heightened by the lack of people within the frame as well. Rather than focus on the locations shot as staging areas for particular lives – as in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – the structures, much as the letters, seem to be extracted and displayed for another purpose.



Walker Evans, Untitled Polaroid 1973-1975

This sense of luminosity, chiefly aided by the use of the Polaroid's colors in the landscapes and architectural studies, is there in some of the letter Polaroids as well. Together with Evans' continued focus on vernacular forms of signage, the presence of mass media and advertising is put to one side in favor of a more homespun version of American iconography. This is material that takes its cue from Evans' fascination with the persistent presence of the vernacular even within an urban environment rather than pop culture's fascination with the signs of commodification. In fact, it is between the crevices of what may or may not be a handmade sign, of a slightly awkwardly worded public message and its more official public counterpart, that Evans most visibly references as well as departs from his earlier work.



Walker Evans, Untitled Polaroid, 1973-1975

Thus, while the Polaroids continue Evan's interrogation into how photography operates as a cipher for the quotidian, they also form a critique of photography's tendency to universalize and classify the everyday, an interrogation made all the more poignant by the instant camera's status as an apparatus marketed for the everyman. Evans's interest in the discrete relationships between artifacts and signage is similar to his prewar photographs, but also tempered by a more oblique sense of timelessness.

This sense of timelessness is also accentuated by the anonymous nature of the letters in the Polaroids. They are recognizably vernacular but also synonymous with the city as a canvas for another form of language, one that is both timeless and

pervasive. These are Polaroids that resemble graffiti at times, and at others extracts of large-scale exercises in fonts for public services and roads. Above all, they give a sense of Evans as first and foremost an astute observer of the city as a jumble of signs, a liminal place where writing doesn't need to have a meaning in order to be both lyrical and indicative of something wider within American culture. However, in the letter Polaroids, previous images of the commodification of the American landscape, the vernacular advertisements and movie posters that prevail in Evans' earlier work, have become more experimental and more minimalist. Despite this, the ongoing iconographical nature of the material in the Polaroids tends to detract from the fact that Evans is engaged in a more conceptual and artistic effort. This is partly due to the ongoing fascination with Evans' more realistic images from the pre-war era – images in which the sociological and ethnographic contexts are more obvious and as such easier to insert into a historized reading. It is also a way to compartmentalize his early work and to retain its status both commercially and artistically. By avoiding a more synthetic vision of his work across decades, the pre-war photographs continue to form a much desired ur-text, not only for Evans' career, but for documentary photography in general.

A synthetic vision, one capable of incorporating the Polaroids as more than simply an extension of his earlier work, tends to downplay Evans' impulse towards abstraction. Instead, an idea of regionalism as an indicator of a wider zeitgeist socially and aesthetically prevails. Evans' ability to look directly at poverty and distress with clarity, foregoing the sentimentality and or pathos that his contemporaries might have been drawn to (Dorothea Lange for instance), has assured him the stature of an

iconoclast, and to some extent an unemotional photographer. However, in order to really understand the potential of the Polaroids it is necessary in some measure to set aside the politics of Evans' pre-war photography and instead think of the Polaroids as an extension of a more ontological and hence philosophically minded investigation into the medium itself. With this in mind, the letter Polaroids - rather than a last attempt to get as close as possible to the constituent parts of the self-same subjects and objects that he charted 40 years before – constitute an investigation into photographs, not only as social signifiers above all, but as a form of language onto itself.

In the case of the letter Polaroids, the issue is not simply one of artistic experimentation, it is about the photograph itself as another version of the fragmented letters. In other words, the idea of the fragment is fundamental to the Polaroid *itself* as a distinct form of photographic endeavor, just as the idea of the letter is fundamental to the act of writing.⁶ In analogous terms, the Polaroid shares constituent aspects with that of photography as an object in its own right *and* a cipher for the things represented within it. Sequence, alphabetically speaking, is paramount but also in itself a nondescript thing in so far as it has a stand-alone meaning only in the context of what it potentially references in the form of future words and sentences. This is obvious, but in terms of the Polaroid it also pushes to the fore the fact that a Polaroid, as an object, is constitutively different from other

⁶ For more on this in relation to Schlegel's theories of the Fragment see: Caroline Blinder, 'Fragments of the Future: Walker Evans' Polaroids', in *Mixed Messages: American Correspondences in Visual and Verbal Practice*, eds. Catherine Gander and Sarah Garland, (Manchester U.P.,2016).

forms of photography. Because there is no original negative, as such, It cannot be duplicated ad infinity and it thus reserves a temporal quality that is different from other forms of re-printable images. If Evans' first monograph *American Photographs* (1938) relied heavily on the use of sequencing in order to introduce a particular narrative, the Polaroids likewise provide a sequence designed to unite the disparate nature of the individual images. They may be doing so in a more pared down and minimalist way, but the design behind the sequence is nonetheless meant to be



visible.

Walker Evans, *Untitled Polaroid*, 1974

In this regard, Evans' use of the Polaroids is another form of re-constitutive process, but one that also relies on a linguistic system that moves beyond the fissures and cracks within American culture. In fact, one might argue that It is the idea of legibility that enables an understanding of the Polaroids– not as isolated units – but as a series in itself.⁷ Rather than see the photographs as a collection of views, the aim is

⁷ In many ways this is the same impulse that made a younger Evans insist that a particular sequence of his photographs be maintained in his 1938 exhibition and to

to relay the cohesive narrative of one particular perspective, namely that of the photographer.

The urge to provide an intrinsically authorial perspective on the American landscape does not preclude a simultaneous desire to provide an index of sorts, a lexicon of the day to day, but so it is - one could argue - to most American documentary photographers of the early 20th century. More unique to Evans is the way in which he indiscriminately mixes the signs of urban dilapidation and rural decay. In a projected letter book mass produced street signs and vernacular signage could conceivably follow one another alphabetically as long as the letters themselves remained sequentially correct. This sense of hybridity – as other critics have noted - is a mainstay of Evans’ much noted European and modernist sensibility as well. After his extended stay in Paris in the 1920s, Evans agreed to translate parts of the poet/writer Blaise Cendrars’ novel *Moravigne* (1926), a novel that amongst other things seeks to narrativize an essentially modernist and urban version of the 20th century. Evans’ translation of Cendrars’ “principle of utility” from Cendrars’ chapter “Our Rambles in America” contains crucial glimmers of Evans’s alphabet book:

...the language—of words and things, of disks and runes, ..., numbers and trademarks, industrial patents, postage stamps, passenger tickets, bills of lading, signal codes, wireless radio—the language is refashioned and takes on body, ... the multicolored posters and the giant letters that prop up the hybrid architectures of

change the sequence of the photographs in the 1960 reprint of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

the cities and straddle the streets, the new electrical constellations that climb each night into the sky, the alphabet-book of smoking chimneys in the morning wind.”⁸

Written during the 1930s, Cendrars’ promissory note of modernity as a storehouse of images and letters has a certain Dos Passos quality, the exuberance of Henry Miller’s nocturnal wanderings and a desire to refashion the jumble of urbanity into a new language written from scratch but also as ephemeral as a ‘smoking chimney in the morning wind.’ It is electricity, partly, that enables the embodiment of this new language and it is a renewed focus on images of change and travel that seem less about the social context of their production and more about their potential as signifiers in their own right. In Evans’ Polaroids, rather than elevate the fragmented or extracted letters to something visibly aestheticized as still life objects, a charge that one might have levied at Evans’ sharecropper interiors, the letters are reminiscent – as mentioned earlier - of an urban form of abstract art and graffiti. In conceptual terms, their status as fragments thus becomes a commentary on photography beyond that of the social and historical circumstances of the photographs. In line with Cendrars’ promise that ‘language be refashioned in order to take on body’, Evans’ letters - rather than words simply torn asunder - take on their ‘own body’ by being refashioned as singular objects.

Like language, photography, as Evans and Cendrars were well aware of, labors under being shown sequentially, it cannot escape being a sequential art form the minute it

⁸ *Depth of Field*, p. 84

becomes institutionalized – in museums, in books, in various photo-textual endeavors. Thus, the focus on singular letters will always inevitably be ‘read’ syntactically, even when shown in fragments as a sort of alternate alphabet. The traditional sequence may be disturbed in this ‘alphabet’, but it will always in some shape or form be recognizable. While there is no risk of reading these singular letters as coming from the same source, they cannot help but function simultaneously in isolation and in tandem once exhibited together and certainly if published together in book form. The ephemeral nature of Cendrars’ ‘smoking chimneys in the morning wind’ are in this context a fantastical antidote to the literally concrete nature of Evans’ Polaroids for whom the material object world – no matter how seemingly fragmented - is its chief subject.

Nonetheless, the sense of endless permutations in the Polaroids, or what John Tagg calls Evans’s predispositions towards “reordering, insertions, recategorization, and regrouping”⁹, also denotes an antipathy towards rigid narratives and a sense of unnecessary foreclosure, one that may appear counter-indicative to the alphabetical nature of the project itself. In Tagg’s case the sequencing of *American Photographs* (1938) already showed the signs of this desire to retain a mutable structure.

According to Tagg, despite the “rigid binding of the book” *American Photographs* retains “a sequence that might be undone by a provisionality that allows the reader to imagine the book unmade and remade again.”¹⁰ *American Photographs*, then, could be seen as a precursor to the Polaroids – emotionally and conceptually – even

⁹ (Tagg, 2003: 155)

¹⁰ Ibid.

if the actual look of the photographs are very different. The images in *American Photographs* also resist any measure of truth by not providing an accompanying narrative or sociological explanation despite the careful sequencing. As Tagg argues, the camera instead becomes “both crypt and encrypting machine” ... “a portal to a world that has no message, that is addressed to no one, and that is seen not as ‘present.’”¹¹

In 1938 David Wolff in a *New Masses* review on *American Photographs* noted how Evans' work reveals “a certain hideous miscellaneousness of American life,” as though the variegated nature of Evans' subject matter indicated the scattered uneven aspects of American culture more widely. At the same time, paradoxically, Wolff seems to indicate a vision of something potentially much larger and more cohesive, namely American life more generally. In the case of the Polaroids, moving closer and closer to the constituent parts of signage Evans removes their purpose in terms of their original intent, advertising, road instructions and so forth and yet, as individualised ciphers and graphic artefacts they still reference the iconographic nature of their original form. The thing that remains discernible within this particular vision of modernity is - as Cendrars put it – that a language of ‘words and things’ has been put into play.

¹¹ (Tagg, 2003: 171).

Reading the Polaroids as a landscape particularly suited for the staging of language and writing as a form of artefact does not mean, however, that they are divested entirely from their social, economic and political context. To return to the Polaroid as object, its charge relies largely on its identity as a medium that itself functions as a series of miscellaneous objects rather than a set of duplicates. As mentioned previously, the polaroid cannot duplicate ad infinity, it cannot completely be erased, nor is it meant to be altered once the image has been taken. Hence, why Evans univocally stated that only photographers with experience and vision should ever take photographs with an instant camera. In this sense, the apparatus proves the instinctive nature of the Polaroid and its role as a container and purveyor of meaning it proves – as Tagg put it – that the camera is ‘both crypt and encrypting machine’.¹²

At the same time, the Polaroids very noticeably counter the type of Cartier Bresson aesthetic in which a decisive moment of activity is captured through the photographer’s ability to be in the right spot at the exact right time. For the Polaroid, its capabilities and aesthetic can only be based on being in the decisive place rather than the decisive moment, for lack of a better phrase. We might even think of it as return to a form of regionalism despite the fact that the subject matter of Evans’ Polaroids could be from nearly anywhere. Evans recognises this paradox within the

¹² On the virtues of the SX-70 Evans remarked “A practiced photographer has an entirely new extension in that camera. You photograph things that you wouldn’t think of photographing before. I don’t even yet know why, but I find that I’m quite rejuvenated by it. ... True, with that little camera your work is done the instant you push that button.” (George Eastman House, Image Magazine 17.4 (December,1974), Originally Published in Yale Alumni Magazine, February, 1974.

Polaroid, the way in which the format lends itself to a certain proximity to the subject matter, a certain kind of intimacy. This is an intimacy that comes from more than simply the act of getting closer physically to the objects that you photograph, it is born out of the object itself - you can put the Polaroid in your pocket – it can be easily transferred etc. The format and chemical properties of the Polaroid mechanism eliminates one kind of labour (the laboratory and development) in favour of a necessarily more careful and singular consideration of what is seen in the viewfinder.



Walker Evans, Untitled Polaroid 1973-1975

The sense of singularity also means that for all of its disposable qualities the Polaroid shares a 19th century reliance on a photographic process in which the chemical properties determine the outcome of the image to a large extent. These

considerations, of the material object that the Polaroid first and foremost is, is often downplayed in writing on Evans - if dealt with at all. As mentioned previously, this is partly because of the attractiveness of his photographic persona as form of documentary truth teller; a photographer whose intentions are consolidated through his expert use of the camera rather than determined by the limitations or advantages of the apparatus itself. In *Depth of Field*, for instance, Heinz Liesbrook reads Evans in these terms as a consolidator of existing materials rather than a creator of something new. Liesbrook describes Evans' ethos as:

“a process of clarification within existing circumstances, not the discovery of something fundamentally new, as would be the case in the act of composing. The auteur's artistic will to form is restricted by the very weight of the visible world.”¹³

While the Polaroids do carry the 'weight of the visible world' they are nonetheless less reliant on regional markers for their sense of identity, the vernacular signs and road signs captured by Evans could – after all - be from anywhere and nearly any time. Writing on precisely this, the mass proliferation of images and the encroachment of the material world onto the photographic one, the photographer and cinematographer Hollis Frampton also wrote on the uneasy interaction between abstraction, realism and photography in the 1970s. Frampton, whose abstract film 'Zorns Lemma' was based not coincidentally on the alphabet, wrote on how the

¹³ *Depth of field*, p. 23.

application of alphabetical signs together with various images might question the idea of photographic veracity.¹⁴ For Frampton, the important thing was that photography in itself could never be a 'true' version of life. Logically speaking, the meaning of isolated images would always be determined by whatever pre-existing contexts we impose on them.

As Frampton put it:

“We assume, then, that there are certainties in our knowledge of, and through, photographs. An extended generation of photographers dominated the propagation of the photographic code ... by enforcing their belief that the legibility of photographs is directly dependent upon a credibility guaranteed by ontological association with a pretext. But a photograph is, above all, a sign of the radical *absence* of its pretext. To validate the prior existence of another object from a photograph is to commit a novel sin.”¹⁵

If – as Frampton puts it - “a photograph is really dependent on the credibility guaranteed by ontological association with a pretext” then Evans’ images of fragmented signs are a perfect instance of this. For Frampton, as with Evans, photographic veracity is not a defunct idea. However, it must be deployed as a way

¹⁴ Zorns Lemma is a 1970 American structural experimental film by Hollis Frampton. Originally starting as a series of photographs, the non-narrative film is structured around a 24-letter Latin alphabet.

¹⁵ Hollis Frampton, ‘Pictures, Krims’s Pictures, PLEASE!’ (1982) in *On Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters – The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. By Bruce Jenkins, (MIT Press, 2009).

to interrogate our obsession with the correspondence between image and sign and therefore between image and the meaning we impose on it. In similar terms, Evans's Polaroids also act as interrogations into the correspondence or lack of one between image and sign; they are immediately recognisable as something familiar and yet – at the same time – signal the radical absence of whatever 'pretext' they were a part of originally. Two paradoxes are at play here: firstly, by getting closer and closer to his subject matter in the Polaroids, Evans manages to make them both singular and yet clearly a part of a wider whole and secondly, by showing letters that evidently are part of longer words the sign of a 'radical absence' – according to Frampton – becomes visible.

The wider metaphor of photography as a linguistic system allows us to return to one of Evans' earliest statements on photography, namely that photography is in reality 'the most literary of the graphic arts'.¹⁶ Writing on Evans tends to fix on the literary aspect of this statement – often referencing his interest in the literary realism of the French writer Gustave Flaubert – but the word graphic is in this context as important. Not only does the graphic nature of the letters themselves take centre stage, they often determine the framing and outline of the Polaroid itself. The Polaroids may be breaking language down by taking various parts out of context, but they are doing so through a continuous process of assembly as well.

¹⁶ As cited in David Company, *Walker Evans & the Written Word* Aperture magazine #217, Winter 2014.

For Evans, then, it is the Polaroid's integral nature (the word utilised by the inventor of the Polaroid, Herbert Land to describe the one step process), that is the real attraction. The white borders of the print signal the integral nature of a self-contained printing process one in which the job of development, cropping and cutting has been done for the photographer. The word integral however also denotes that the process is equally about the addition of a necessary component, about rendering something complete and legible.

For Evans there was a clear affinity between his obsession with the Polaroid format and his not inconsiderable collection of picture postcards; another art form that can be easily transported and that straddles a thin line between the commercial and the private. While the analogy may seem somewhat forced, it is the obsessive nature of Evans' categorisation of his postcards that signals a similar movement towards indexicality and order. Evans categorised them according to what iconographic subjects and materials they represented, for instance 'town squares', 'seaside' etc., rather than in regional or geographical terms. Despite the fact that most of his picture postcards are late 19th and early 20th century, and are more readily seen as precursors for his 1930s images of main streets and shops, the washed out colours of the picture postcards, with their muted reds and blues and green tints are in many ways reminiscent of his 1970s Polaroids.

In similar terms, the intention of the picture postcard – just as with the original Polaroids - is to be easily communicable and easily transferable. In this sense, the picture postcard has an aspect of it that is fundamental to its charge as an artefact

that is similar to that of the Polaroid; it can be passed around easily, its portable and transferable nature makes it a picture postcard and not simply a picture.



From Walker Evans' Post Card Collection

In *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*, published by The Walker Evans archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Curator Jeff Rosenheim notes the relationship between Evans' photographs from the 1930s and 40s and the quotidian subjects of the picture postcards. While this makes sense in terms of subject matter and aesthetics, the actual graphic design of the formatting of the postcard and the Polaroids should still be noted. Between 1935-36, Evans worked on a postcard project for the Museum of Modern Art in which he sought to reprint his own large format 8*10inch negatives on postcard format photographic paper. The project, like the book of letters, never materialised itself but it provides some evidence of his attempt to straddle several mediums through a process of both alignment and transferral. By taking the art prints off the walls of the museum Evans' images also become more accessible, they become more tactile and presumably less costly – much like a Polaroid.¹⁷

¹⁷ "You don't want your work to spring from art; you want it to commence from life, and that's in the street now. I'm no longer comfortable in a museum. I don't want to go to them, don't want to be 'taught' anything, don't want to see

In this way, the Polaroids – similarly to the aborted postcard project - attest to a desire for a more direct form of engagement with the material nature of the print. Interestingly, the gravitas and confidence of the 1930s museum images still rely to a large extent on the perceived distance between Evans as the professional photographer and the subjects photographed, a distance that is often cited as having enabled him to photograph the destitute and the abject with a sense of dignity and respect. Not so with the Polaroids. Here, Evans positions himself on top of the very material, at hands length from the objects on the street, almost as though he wants to step into the material that he decades before would have observed from a more decorous distance.

This desire to get ever closer to the material substance of his photography is an underestimated part of Evans' legacy but it is not contradictory to his earlier practice – simply an extension of his desire to provide a cohesive perspective on the constituent parts of American culture. Evans' interest in the object nature of his work is not simply as a matter related to the Polaroids alone but a concern throughout his career. The subject matter of Evans's letter Polaroids clearly relates to the earlier black and white photographs of objects and places in the 1930s, but the letter Polaroids in particular are also emblematic of something beyond the more

'accomplished' art. I'm interested in what's called vernacular. For example, finished, I mean educated, architecture doesn't interest me, but I love to find American vernacular" as cited in Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March–April 1971), L. p. 88.

obvious social and ethnographic ramifications of Evans' practice. To return to the projected alphabet book allows us to see Evans' life-long interest in the vernacular as something beyond documentary practice, a term which he himself famously had misgivings about. For Evans, the issue was not necessarily one of coherency or about systematizing the material culture he took as his subject. Instead, it was about the process through which an artist amasses the materials of his or her art. Legible and yet open-ended, the letter Polaroids are the perfect medium for such an exploration providing something different from the so-called 'hidden miscellaneousness of American life'. Instead, they must be read as a series of unique variations on what Evans had done from the beginning; namely provide a coherent if idiosyncratic vision of the everyday.