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# Fragments of the future: Walker Evans's polaroids

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The feeling for projects – which one might call fragments of the future – is distinguishable from the feeling for fragments of the past only by its direction: progressive in the former, regressive in the latter. What is essential is to be able to idealise and realise objects immediately and simultaneously: to complete them and in part carry them out within oneself.<sup>1</sup>

This examination into the photography of Walker Evans (1903–75) seeks to re-evaluate Evans's late polaroids – largely overlooked in comparison to his more iconic 1930s documentary work – as exemplary of the 'Romantic fragment'; that is to say, as works that present themselves as part of, or fragments of, larger projects, and that do so in ways that are both self-conscious and deliberate. In this respect, the concept of the Romantic [AQ cap R OK] fragment is read by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel as part of a longer process within modernism, indicative of the moment when incompleteness and fragmentation, rather than acting as a failure, represent the most productive means for the continuation of art itself. According to Samuel Weber, 'neither self-contained nor self-sufficient; the fragment acquires significance only through what comes after it in order to become what alone it can never be'.<sup>2</sup> Thus while John Szarkowski saw Evans's work

as ‘a reaffirmation of photography’s central sense of purpose and aesthetic: the precise and lucid description of significant fact’, the polaroids paradoxically offer the viewer a fragmented version of those significant facts – the streets, the objects and the signage – that Evans originally became famous for photographing.<sup>3</sup> In Evans’s late polaroids in particular, the sense that they are ‘neither self-contained nor self-sufficient’ renders them more akin to preliminary studies for an ongoing project rather than finalised visions of the urban landscape.<sup>4</sup>

While Evans is commonly read primarily as one of the chief proponents of a modernist photographic aesthetic, his polaroids of fragmented objects, signage, advertising and billboards from the early 1970s until his death in 1975 prove the importance of the romantic fragment as a constituent part of modernist aesthetics. In fact, Evans’s fragments, both as the photographic subject matter of his polaroids and in his own collection of fragmented objects, exemplify a modernist adaptation of what Schlegel would call ‘fragments of the future’, later incorporated into the twentieth-century German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s theory of ‘infinite reflection’.<sup>5</sup> While Evans never articulated his own practice in such terms, his photography nonetheless exemplifies how fragmentation, as subject matter and praxis, mimics the Romantic idea of art as ideally work in progress or studies for future projects rather than as a work of mimetic exactitude.

The idea of work in progress, I hope to show, is fundamental to both Evans’s practice and to Schlegel’s definition of the fragment. Defining ‘the Romantic kind of poetry as still in a state of becoming, that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected’, Schlegel used the fragment to define a Romantic ethos in contrast to a more classical one and, as such, it has predominantly been read as indicative of an aphoristic, more experimental turn within Romantic poetry.<sup>6</sup> In modernist terms, the idea of the fragment can also be read as a form of knowingness in terms of the artistic process, an assertion of self-

referentiality that lends itself to more contemporary readings of the self-reflective nature of photography.<sup>7</sup> While Schlegel's fragment is often read as a way to illuminate a written text's self-consciousness of its own incompleteness, Evans's late polaroids – with their constant referencing of linguistic signifiers unmoored and cut loose from their original context – acknowledge the discursive limitations of art. These are limitations, as we shall see, that Evans continuously visualises by referencing his earlier photographic subject material and then reframing it as fragments of its former self.

In Evans's 1930s documentary photographs of sharecropper interiors, shop fronts and commercial signage, objects and people were situated within the larger context of certain unmistakable economic and historical factors. Nonetheless, while the polaroids share much of the same subject matter, the same propensity towards the dilapidated, the used, the discarded remnants of lived life, they are more than simply contemporary versions of Evans's 1930s documentary aesthetic. By being cropped to represent only constituent parts of what would have been shown in its entirety thirty years before, the polaroids gesture – paradoxically – in a very deliberate way towards what was once whole as well as towards what might, conceivably, one day be whole again. In other words, the limitations of Evans's polaroids, the fact that they so visibly constitute fragments of objects, becomes a way to conceptualise a connection rarely made: namely, the connection between photographs both as cohesive works of art and as works of art that rely on a notion of fragmentation for their aesthetic charge. In re-examining Walker Evans's later polaroids as fragments of earlier projects and ideas, and as self-contained ruminations on photography's ability to reflect on representation itself, we may rethink his oeuvre in its entirety.

In this particular instance, I wish to illustrate some of these mechanisms through a closer look at a distinct series of Evans's late polaroids taken with an SX-70. According to Christopher Bonanos in *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*, the 'SX-70 was unveiled teasingly

and gradually, over a couple of years, with sneak peeks doled out carefully to industry people ... the big revelation [was] at a Polaroid shareholders' meeting in April 1972'.<sup>8</sup> Walker Evans, as did André Kertész, obtained an SX-70 quite quickly after its release and shot thousands of photographs over the succeeding fourteen months. As he explained in an interview at the time: 'Nobody should touch a polaroid until he's over sixty. You should first do all that work ... It reduces everything to your brain and taste.'<sup>9</sup> Apart from a series dedicated to portraits of friends, students and models, the vast amount of Evans's output using his Polaroid SX-70 camera consists of variations on the subject of the fragment: discarded signage, road signs, singular letters, one-dimensional objects, advertisements partially torn and illegible, and perhaps the clearest referent to Evans's earlier material from the Depression Era: the handwritten sign indicating commerce at its most basic level. Most noticeable are those polaroids that relate to Evans's earlier images of similar objects, road signs, debris and other pieces of the American landscape where the polaroid picture itself, like a fragment, seems to indicate what Schlegel called 'a once constituted or future whole'; objects that are recognisably iconic but also somehow altered through the perspective of the camera.

The most obvious examples of this practice can be found in Evans's very last series of polaroids: images of individual letters – taken from road signs, advertising and other public signage – designed to eventually be sequenced alphabetically into a book of letters. Evans had planned, according to his biographer Jerry Thompson, a project that would eventually create his own personal version of the American index, a lexicon of Americana able to encompass vernacular culture in its written form from A–Z. For Evans, the issue, however, was not how to encompass 'all' of vernacular culture, but how to prove the transcendent quality of those everyday objects otherwise deemed disposable, lacking in conventional value and increasingly part of an ever-present consumer culture. In this respect, the polaroids were

part of an ongoing project because they, like Evans's work from the 1930s and 1940s, focus on a working vernacular culture in which the inherent beauty of the mundane and the everyday is made visible through the photographer's lens.

**[Insert Figure 3.1 around here]**

While there are similarities between Evans's black-and-white photography of the 1930s (particularly of interiors, furniture and personal belongings) and the later polaroids, his focus on the constituent parts of the alphabet in his 'letter' images pushes the linguistic element to the fore in ways that seem less about the social context of the images' production and more about their potential as signifiers in their own right (see figure 3.1). In the accompanying wall writing for his exhibition 'Walker Evans: Forty Years' at the Yale Art Gallery in 1972, Evans states:

The photographer, the artist, 'takes' a picture: symbolically he lifts an object or a combination of objects, and in so doing he makes a claim for that object or that composition and a claim for his act of seeing in the first place that in each instance his vision has penetrating validity.<sup>10</sup>

In seeking to counter the definition of his work as solely documentary by nature (a lifelong preoccupation for Evans), and in seeking to redefine the public's perception of what constitutes a 'documentary' eye, Evans relies on the visionary abilities of the artist and the process of looking itself.

**[Insert Figure 3.2 around here]**

In figure 3.2, for instance, the juxtaposition of a recognisable dollar sign with the number 1, an advertisement for some unknown commodity, necessitates our focusing on the dollar sign and its graphic beauty, rather than its practical application. There is something distinctly quaint about the size of the dollar sign in proportion to its accompanying number;

something poignant in the faded red that once was meant to be punchy and noticeable. This is a vision both recognisably American and vernacular, as the attempt to render a sense of depth looks homemade rather than prefabricated. Here, Evans is more interested in how the selective focus on objects aids the perpetuation of their meaning than he is in rendering them accurately. As in the Schlegelian belief in the Romantic fragment as a process of infinite becoming, a process that never finalises itself, perpetuation in this respect is not antithetical to an idea of wholeness, but a reminder of the fragment as a project always in the process of becoming. The dollar sign in Evans's polaroid is beautiful in its simplicity but, more importantly, it is a beauty that relies on our vision of it as something extracted, something asking to be recognised in a way that distinguishes it from how we usually 'read' a dollar sign. As Samuel Weber points out, the very thing that connects the concept of the Romantic fragment to modernity 'lies not in the effort to dissolve the work in an absolute and ultimately self-identical critical reflection ... but that by undermining the integrity of the individual "form" at the same time allows the singular work to "survive" ... even as a different kind'.<sup>11</sup>

If for Evans the photographer's gaze is the intuitive ability to make 'a claim for that object or that composition and a claim for his act of seeing in the first place', then we might ask whether the polaroids can, in fact, undermine the integrity of the individual form, as Weber puts it. Evans's iconic images of the interiors of sharecropper homes in the 1930s, where singular objects such as vases, ornaments and photos are shown fastidiously placed on tables and walls, seem after all to indicate quite the opposite, namely objects shown in their entirety, the discreet distance between camera and objects an indication of a sense of respect, even neutrality. The polaroids, on the other hand, crop out of the picture frame all extraneous elements in an attempt to get as close as possible to the signs themselves. One of the last images in Jerry Thompson's *The Last Years of Walker Evans* (1979), for example, shows

Evans crouching on a pavement to get as close as possible to the writing on the tarmac. In this sense, there are clear differences in the distance between Evans and his subjects, while on other thematic levels Evans's polaroids are clear variants of his earlier praxis. Like the early documentary work, the polaroids seem to search for some sense of wholeness through the minute and the everyday, and like earlier Evans photographs, they too operate within an unmistakably larger American landscape. It is not simply the use of recognisable iconography, the dollar sign and typography seen in figure 3.2, that reminds us of where we are; it is also – in many of Evans's polaroids (figure 3.3 is one such instance) – the attraction of the discarded as a nonetheless permanent fixture within American culture. In the fascination with litter lies an understanding that, as Jeff Rosenheim puts it in his introduction to *Walker Evans – Polaroids*, 'in the roadside lay the "stuff" of the contemporary world'.<sup>12</sup>

**[Insert Figure 3.3 around here]**

While it is apparent that Evans gravitated towards such items as debris, broken utensils, wayward signs and discarded shacks throughout his photography, the Romantic impetus at play in the polaroids is nonetheless different from the earlier material. Rather than elevate the fragmented objects to something nearly sacrosanct in the polaroids, a charge that one might have levied at the sharecropper interiors with their forlorn broken ornaments and torn calendars as indicators of the quiet austerity of their surroundings, the objects in the polaroids – flattened coke cans and discarded pieces of furniture, for example – are more reminiscent of abstract art and graffiti and thus appear more conceptual in their overall focus. In figure 3.3, a recognisable discarded coke can adds a flash of red into an image where a swathe of black borders one side, the pavement the other. In many of the polaroids, the muted colours, murky browns and urban greys, seem to add an indeterminate texture to objects already hard to define. In this instance, the vertical lines also give the appearance of three

distinct zones, a more luminous one, a grey area and a velvety black. If the idea of the Romantic fragment dictates that the most accurate representation of a thing is not the thing in total but a rethinking of the totality of the thing through its fragmented form, then Evans's polaroids of isolated letters also take on an additional, almost conceptual meaning in this respect. Evans was acutely aware of the fact that photography, like language, often labours under being shown sequentially, that it cannot escape being a sequential art form the minute it becomes institutionalised, for instance, in museums, books and various other photo-textual endeavours. In this respect, even 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 recognisable. The idiosyncratic nature of the letters means that there is no risk of reading them as coming from the same source and yet, inevitably, they function simultaneously in isolation and in tandem once exhibited together (see figure 3.2).

Evans's fascination with letters isolated from conventional syntactical meaning may, then, gesture towards the pop art of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, with its gleeful use of commercial fonts and recognisable packaging. Nonetheless, the ramshackle nature of Evans's alphabet, the discarded coke can, signals a melancholia that is much different from pop art's embrace of a commodified American landscape. In Evans's own words, the Romantic impulse has to be present for 'the garbage can ... to be beautiful. Some people are able to see that – see and feel it. I lean toward the enchantment, the visual power of the aesthetically rejected object.'<sup>13</sup>

For Weber, the Romantic fragment is thus 'characterised by an intersection of what is present and what is absent, of the real and the ideal'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, we might say that the letters operate in isolation as idealised icons as well as part of a wider set of images. This sense of endless permutations, of what John Tagg calls Evans's predisposition towards 'reordering,

insertions, recategorisation, and regrouping’,<sup>15</sup> stresses Evans’s antipathy towards rigid narratives, towards any unnecessary foreclosure of meaning. Much has been written about the sequencing of *American Photographs* (1938), Evans’s first monograph and the catalogue for his ground-breaking show at MoMA the same year. And yet, as Tagg also points out, despite the ‘rigid binding of the book’, *American Photographs* retains ‘a sequence that might be undone by a provisionality that allowed the reader to imagine the book unmade and remade again’.<sup>16</sup> For Tagg, then, *American Photographs* forms a precursor – emotionally and conceptually, if not in the actual look of the photographs – to the type of experimentation later enacted in the polaroids. Like the polaroids, Evans’s early images resist, in these terms, any genuine measure of truth to the point where the camera becomes, for Tagg, ‘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” but, as Evans precisely put it, “as the past – as always already lost”’.<sup>17</sup>

Tagg unites his reading of Evans’s aesthetics to a form of detachment towards the social; a detachment in line with Evans’s reputation as a somewhat elitist artist at heart. Nonetheless, the images of fragments from the 1930s, foregrounded as the painstaking documentation of the worn-out and soon to be obsolete possessions of the sharecroppers, are inevitably invested with social meaning. So how do we demarcate between these early ‘fragments’ and those in the polaroids? Schlegel’s idea of fragments of the future, rather than the past, is useful here. In a Schlegelian sense the polaroids are fragments of the future because they force the viewer to contemplate what is not there, the missing letters, the unseen word or sign, rather than what was, last year’s calendar, the torn photograph of a more affluent ancestor on a sharecropper’s wall. In this sense, the missing parts of the letters also serve to make them strangely universal, even in some ways removed from the American landscape itself, in ways that are simply impossible in the early black-and-white images. In

comparison with Evans's earlier photographs of broken utensils and worn-out domestic objects that reference the social and historical circumstances of their production, the polaroids, instead of signalling the collective loss of the Depression era, seem a more personal, or as Tagg would have it, a more melancholy form of realism.

This is not to say that the polaroids don't show an engagement with and a fidelity to the immediate world that aligns them with a particularly American tradition, simply that there is something decidedly wistful in Evans's later outlook. Another neo-Romantic American, Ralph Waldo Emerson, posed a relevant rhetorical question in 'The American Scholar': 'What is man born for, but to be a reformer, a re-maker of what man has made?' – a question that in many ways defines an idealised version of the American artist that persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Emerson's Romantic, pragmatic idea of the American project as a never-ending process of creation can be equally applied to Evans's distinct sense of the American landscape as an ongoing process, a site of cultural practice continuously refashioning itself. In similar ways, the polaroids attempt to remake their own subjects, while simultaneously remaining faithful to the actual origins of those subjects. If we can call this a distinctly American reworking of German Romanticism, it is because its idealism is born out of a sense of pragmatic responsibility, the responsibility that the artist has in putting the materials of lived life into the public domain. As Paul Hamilton states in his re-reading of the Romantic fragment, a 'democratising of access to the work of art' is made 'by rendering the work's uniqueness fragmentary ... and thus one part of the unfolding history of its continuing significance in different forms'.<sup>19</sup>

The answer is partly that Evans saw the process of 'remaking' or 'reforming' as something intrinsic rather than harmful to the integrity of the objects portrayed. David Campany's extensive study of Evans's magazine work illuminates the significant amount of projects that Evans photographed and captioned for various magazines, in which titles such

as ‘Downtown: A last look Backward’ in *Fortune* (1956), and ‘America’s Great Architecture is Doomed, it must be Saved’, in *Life* (1963), indicate a perpetual interest in both documenting and, in some ways, memorialising a vanishing America.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the desire to come ever closer to many of the same subjects that he initially photographed in the 1930s becomes an extension of a project from which he had never truly deviated: namely to establish the fragment as a cipher for the integrity of the object as a whole, to in a sense define the fragment itself as subject.

In these terms, Evans’s photography, like Schlegel’s philosophy, is not searching for the unconditional first principle, but – rather – is happy to engage in a process of infinite approximation. As Rodolphe Gasché concludes in his introduction to Schlegel’s *Athenaeum Fragments*:

If the Romantic fragment can be demarcated from a notion of fragment that is a part of a once constituted or future whole, it is because it thematises an essential fragmentation of the whole as such ... The Romantic fragment cannot be thought properly except if it is seen to articulate a problematic relative to the transcendental idea of totality.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than read the search for an ‘unattainable whole’ as a sign of a failed project, it becomes, in Evans’s case, a way to identify the importance of approximation as both the subject of the photograph and the most apt way of describing the act of taking the photograph itself. In this respect, photography might indeed have conformed to Schlegel’s desired vision of an art form: ‘that is fragmentary both in form and content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective’.<sup>22</sup>

For Andrei Codrescu, in his introduction to *Signs*, a collection of Evans’s early black-and-white images of signage, the fascination with the ‘self-referential nature of the sign’ proves that Evans’s images can be read as ‘meditations on the art of photography’.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, while Codrescu recognises the ‘self-referential nature’ of Evans’s interest in

signage, he argues that '[b]eyond the injunction to look at these fragments of language as a picture, the only commentary involved has to do with the evident modernity of the assemblage'.<sup>24</sup> Codrescu's main point, that meditation on the art of photography attends mainly to how it is put together, is clearly valid, but strangely, Codrescu ignores the possibility that within the assemblage lie multiple reference points – reference points that go beyond the obvious modernity of the advertisements and slogans of the period, and which later emerge more clearly in the polaroids.

In figure 3.2, for instance, the signage from which the letters are taken seems to be recognisably American even if of indeterminate origin; likewise, it could be something relatively contemporaneous or something dilapidated and old. Evans uses the polaroid film and its tendency to wash out contrast as a specific ploy here, the lyrical or nostalgic sense of the signage accentuated by the polaroid's colours, which are reminiscent of the picture postcards from the turn of the century that Evans used copiously to collect.<sup>25</sup> As such, the polaroids reference both Evans's earlier use of signage in the 1930s and 1940s, and the earlier, genuinely vernacular views of small town America taken by amateur photographers and sold as picture postcards. In this way the polaroids not only insert themselves into the personal history of the photographer's aesthetics (Evans's picture postcard collection), they also insert themselves into a public history, thus commenting on their own historical as well as artistic processes.

By 1974 the polaroid, indicative of a growing trend among consumers to have instantaneous images, even if of lesser quality, also seemed to signal the end of a particular type of concerned documentary photography. In the photographer Jacob Holdt's *American Photos* (1970–75), an obvious nod to Evans's *American Photographs*, the shock value of racial disparity and other graphic displays of social inequality left little room for the details of domesticity that had fascinated Evans. Nonetheless, the recent return of the polaroid seems to

have proven the innate desire of photo-enthusiasts for expediency as well as a deep-rooted nostalgia for a pre-digital sense of images as permanent objects in their own right. For Evans, the polaroid, rather than a disavowal of his earlier 1930s work, was an expedient way to continue his interrogation of the potential of those objects, both found and discarded, that he had in fact focused on throughout his career. One could be tempted to read this as a form of memorialisation of pre-industrial America, just as it is tempting to see Evans's agrarian interiors as proof of the perseverance of something pure and untainted by capitalist ideologies. Nonetheless, the polaroids, with their sparse subject matter, are more concerned with photography itself as an act of memorialisation.

For Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects*, the 'memorialisation' of certain objects constitutes an unspoken critique of modernity, a critique in which objects are designated as collectible antiques by the bourgeoisie precisely because they invest the outmoded with capital value. By memorialising certain objects that are rapidly becoming obsolete, a reinvestment in the derelict and the outworn is made which suddenly gives the fragment an emotional, as well as a commercial, exchange value. For Baudrillard, of course, the search for such objects – and Evans's lexicon of images are prime examples of such a search – by necessity implies a regressive form of art; an art that relies not on innovation but on something more akin to a collector's desire for antiques. Antiques, within the wider schematics of Baudrillard's reading of accumulation and capital as governed by unconscious forces, imply a desire to 'escape into one's own childhood', to arrest time rather than to render its inherently progressive nature. In these terms, Evans's focus on 'antiques' could be read as somehow regressive, as somehow conforming to Baudrillard's model in which the act of collecting is a mode of weighing things down rather than liberating them. According to Baudrillard, 'antiques partake of "legend", because they are defined first and foremost by their mythical quality, by their coefficient of authenticity'.<sup>26</sup>

For Baudrillard this search for authenticity is a remnant of an obsolete Romanticism, a Romanticism that he finds problematic politically because it encourages nostalgia rather than change. This Romanticism is nonetheless something that I would argue Evans embraces. In these terms, the Romantic model is appropriate to Evans not because it allows him to retain the concept of authenticity within photography as a sentimental gesture but because it allows him to take things of seemingly little value and confer upon them that ‘coefficient of authenticity’ that photography always struggles to retain. In terms of the polaroid, in particular, the notion of authenticity and value – if we follow Baudrillard – is not about proof and foreclosure, so much as it is about accepting the polaroid’s ability to render things distinct and unique, no matter their financial value. In many ways, this seems even more pertinent to the photograph as object itself. The fact that the Polaroid SX-70 can only print one image at a time and never duplicate it means theoretically that its value exceeds that of a standard print. The fact that its uniqueness is guaranteed by the chemical process that has created it in the first place is, in a sense, what makes it valuable.

There is, of course, much to be said about how the photographing of objects relates to the malleable nature of both photographs themselves as commodities and of photographs of commodities. In fact, one might argue that what runs through Evans’s earlier as well as later work is an attempt to prove that photography applies value, rather than divests things of their transient value. In other words, photography is always and inevitably determining what remains an exchangeable commodity, because it is always engaged in making things iconic, or as Evans puts it, adding a ‘penetrating validity’ to its subject matter. Therefore, while Evans’s polaroids relate in subject matter to the 1930s monochrome object photographs, they are emblematic of something beyond the more obvious social and ethnographic ramifications of the ‘original’ images. This does not mean that the two cannot coexist. While Weber, paraphrasing Schlegel, defined the fragment in terms of intimation and suggestion, he also

saw it as proof of what Schlegel called ‘an unconditionally social spirit’.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Evans’s fragments, similarly, gesture towards a space for objects that have visibly fallen in value, that, even though they are outside of the commodity system, deserve a safe haven of sorts for the discarded and used.

Evans’s desire to eventually create an alphabet of twenty-six fragments may seem merely the continuation of documentary photography as an indexical effort above all, an effort that in this respect counters the notion of the polaroids as a successful attempt at fragmentation in an aesthetic sense. However, the indexical effort does not necessarily counter the Romantic turn that I have attempted to apply here. Instead, the Romantic turn may signal Evans’s desire for a photographic intimacy that is hard to achieve within the remit of documentary work. Is it then possible to argue for an emotional impetus behind the use of the fragment? Is the idea of the Romantic simply another way to identify an increasingly introverted practice for Evans, a practice that became more paramount as he aged? So far I have argued that the notion of the fragment plays a key role in understanding how Evans’s polaroids return to and reconstitute his earlier still-life images, but how do they illuminate Evans’s real and acute desire to get as close to the world around him as possible? If we consider Evans as a quintessentially American Romantic – that is to say one whose practice comes out of a nineteenth-century desire to prove the value of a transcendent and mediated world – his practice begins to make sense. William Carlos Williams, writing on Evans’s *American Photographs* in 1938, saw the images as representing ‘ourselves lifted from a parochial setting’, proof that ‘what the artist does applies to everything, every day, everywhere to quicken and elucidate, to fortify and enlarge the life about him and make it eloquent – to make it scream, as Evans does at times, or gurgle, laugh and speak masterfully when the occasion offers’.<sup>28</sup> For Williams, Evans’s photography was an indicator of the democratic everyday, but an everyday with which a sense of transcendence could coexist,

everywhere. In a genuinely Emersonian vein, Williams saw the objective world as there for the artist to capture and, through it, to construct a vantage point from which to see the world as mediated. The issue for Williams, as for Emerson, was not to determine what nature's order or meaning was precisely, but of what use it could be in overcoming our sense of alienation from the world and, in turn, to create an art form that could reflect this.

Evans, too, believed photography was able to transcend its realist parameters, not by abstraction but by making the real and the ideal as one, which meant looking as closely and accurately at things as possible. In other words, the fragmented, dilapidated, used nature of objects becomes precisely that which renders them beautiful, which, in effect, enables them to transcend their origins and usage and become something valuable. If the utilitarian aspect of the objects speaks of toil and labour, their 'social spirit' and political context, it is their ability to gesture beyond the everyday, to transcend their utilitarian value, that enables them to become the building blocks for something like Evans's alternate alphabet.

The difficulty, in this context, is how to combine photography's artistic aspiration, its ability to transcend its everyday parameters, with the ability to stay simultaneously true to what Williams calls the 'everyday and everything'. If art, according to Emerson, should make 'the axis of vision coincide with the axis of things', could we then re-read Evans's polaroids as intent on creating a fundamental alliance between transcendent vision and neutral observation?<sup>29</sup> One indication that Evans saw objects as able to transcend their origins and everyday context lies in the fact that by the time he started the polaroids, the objects he photographed were no longer necessarily rendered in situ, but were often taken away from their original context. According to Thompson, by 1972 'Evans was regularly collecting or commissioning the collecting of roadside and other kinds of signs ... He was still photographing them in situ, but was also photographing them ... at home, often in the yard or nailed to the side of the house.'<sup>30</sup> According to Thompson, Evans's photographs of signs

before the 1960s were often ‘permanently attached to their settings, painted directly onto the bricks or boards of the buildings they embellished’, whereas by the 1970s, the ‘signs were often less referential, more self-contained, less dependent on context’.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, while the signs may be less ‘referential’ in terms of their original placement and meaning, another form of referentiality is created. In the 1972 exhibition at Yale Art Gallery, Evans installed some of his own collection of actual used signs, framed, next to his photographs of signs. As Evans notes in his writing for the exhibit’s wall panel

The installation, here, of actual graphic ‘found objects’ may need little or no interpretation via the written words. Assuredly, these objects may be felt – experienced – in this gallery, by anyone, just as the photographer felt them in the field, on location. ... A distinct point, though, is made in the lifting of these objects from their original settings. The point is that lifting is, in the raw, exactly what the photographer is doing with his machine, the camera, anyway, always.<sup>32</sup>

Thompson is adamant that Evans ‘wasn’t thinking about his earlier pictures when he wrote this statement, nor would his temperament ... lead him to compare recent pictures with earlier photographs of similar subjects’.<sup>33</sup> However, in the light of Evans’s own points about the camera, as ‘lifting objects from their original settings ... anyway, always’, Thompson’s statement seems somewhat simplistic. In fact, Evans’s statement actually stresses a desire for photography to mediate the division, if not between the spiritual and the material, then between the physical things themselves. And once again, it is in the fragments of material life, in his private collection where he obsessively hoarded bottle caps, old tools, signs and other debris, that crucial clues emerge. By saving those things that seemed to actively resist the vagaries of time, by collecting and sorting them, Evans believed that he might, indeed, render them meaningful fragments of the future.

The connection between the impulse to collect and the photographer’s ‘claim for his act of seeing in the first place’, re-establishes the artist as the centre from which both vision

and intuition emanates. The idea, in a modernist sense, was firmly situated by Benjamin in the aphoristic impulse, the focus on extracts, concise and yet always pointing in other directions, that he had discerned in Schlegel. For Evans, as a photographer, the polaroid camera with its combination of neutrality and subjectivity was the perfect medium with which to create photographic aphorisms, the ability to give a shorthand version of the more expansive and inclusive visions that he had produced earlier.

The polaroids are unique in this sense, not just because their chemical properties guarantee the singularity of the completed print, but also because they confront the issue of individualism and duplication, fragmentation and coherency. Much more can be said, in this context, about the philosophical implications of moving from a camera where the process of negotiating the shot is infinitely more complicated, but the print can be duplicated endlessly, to a process where the taking of the photograph is ‘easier’, but it cannot be reproduced. The fact that the polaroid – as a result of the film and nature of the camera itself – cannot be duplicated, that it by necessity remains a ‘one-off’, must have appealed to Evans’s sense of the photograph as an *objet d’art*, although by several accounts he very freely gave his polaroids away as presents. On the other hand, the polaroids of old weathered signs, fragments of flattened coke cans and other disposable items are also Evans’s tongue-in-cheek versions of an American vernacular situated in the gutter as well as the living room. Filtered through Evans’s knowledge that the polaroid represented the most accessible of media with which to view the nation, it could operate both as a cipher for the quotidian and a comment on photography’s tendency to universalise and classify the everyday, an interrogation made all the more poignant by the polaroid’s status as a camera apparatus marketed for the everyman.

To conclude, the polaroid SX-70 facilitated Evans’s fascination with both personal and public artefacts, and it enabled him to continue his questioning of what actually

constitutes a photographic language. This search, however, was not about the incomprehensibility of meaning in a postmodern sense but about the ongoing currency of the Romantic fragment as proof of photography's intuitive powers. Evans's polaroids of singular letters and other fragments provide us with an insight into the desire for photography as essentially about communicability. In this respect, the letters and signage that we see are ciphers that communicate, in just as valuable a format as Evans's earlier documentary work, the origins of a vernacular language. In the end, Evans's primary goal was not to prove that photography should be read as a superior form of language, but to prove that it too participates in a very human endeavour: namely, to create an alternate space where the past, rather than being archived for posterity, would continue to live.

## Notes

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- 1 Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeums Fragmente / Philosophical Fragments* (1799), trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 22.
  - 2 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's – abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 62.
  - 3 John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans* (New York: MoMA, 1971), p. 10.
  - 4 Ibid.
  - 5 Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection', in Peter Osborne (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 25.
  - 6 Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 21.

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- 7 On the link between fragmentation and Romanticism, see Alexander Regier, *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 8 Christopher Bonas, *Instant: The Story of Polaroid* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), p. 102.
- 9 Ibid., p. 101.
- 10 Walker Evans, *Walker Evans at Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 229.
- 11 Weber, *Benjamin's – abilities*, p. 29.
- 12 Jeff L. Rosenheim, 'Intro – Walker Evans: Polaroids', in *Walker Evans: Polaroids* (New York: Scalo, 2002), p. 8.
- 13 Walker Evans, *Walker Evans at Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 220.
- 14 Weber, *Benjamin's – abilities*, p. 16.
- 15 John Tagg, 'Melancholy Realism: Walker Evans's Resistance to Meaning', in *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 155.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 171.
- 18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar' (1837), in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (London: Penguin, 1946), p. 65.
- 19 Paul Hamilton, 'Leopardi and the Logic of the Romantic Fragment', in Hamilton, *Realpolitik: European Romanticism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 206.
- 20 David Company, *Walker Evans: The Magazine Work* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2014).

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- 21 Rodolphe Gasché, 'Foreword', in Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. xxx.
- 22 Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 72.
- 23 Andrei Codrescu, 'Introduction', in *Walker Evans: SIGNS* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 6.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 According to Jeff Rosenheim in *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Walker Evans Archive includes over 9,000 cards collected by Evans.
- 26 Jean Baudrillard, 'The Non-Functional System or Subjective Discourse: Marginal Objects: Antiques', in *Le Système des objets / The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005 [1968]), p. 10.
- 27 Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 22.
- 28 William Carlos Williams, 'Sermon with a Camera', *New Republic* (October 1938), 282.
- 29 Emerson, 'Nature' (1836), in Bode (ed.), *The Portable Emerson*, p. 48.
- 30 Jerry L. Thompson, *The Last Years of Walker Evans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 20.
- 31 Ibid., p. 21.
- 32 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 52.
- 33 Ibid.