

Edward Fella

Edward Fella: Letters on America

photographs and lettering

essays by Lewis Blackwell and Lorraine Wild

Letters



AMERICA

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Laurence King

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71 Great Russell Street
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Tel: +44 20 7831 6351

Fax: +44 20 7831 8356

e-mail: enquiries@calmann-king.co.uk

www.laurence-king.com

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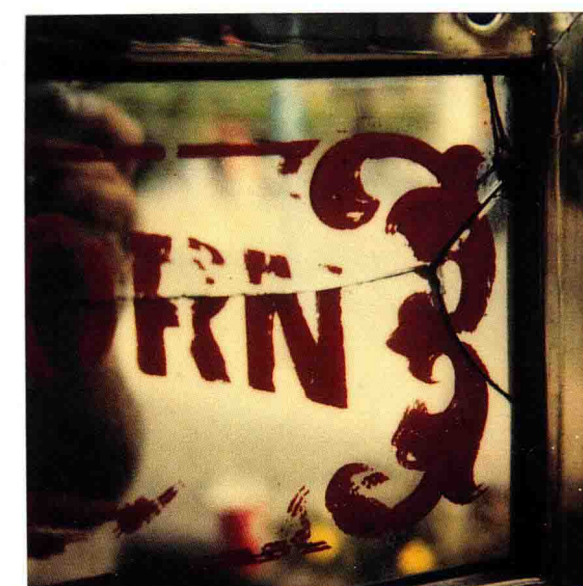
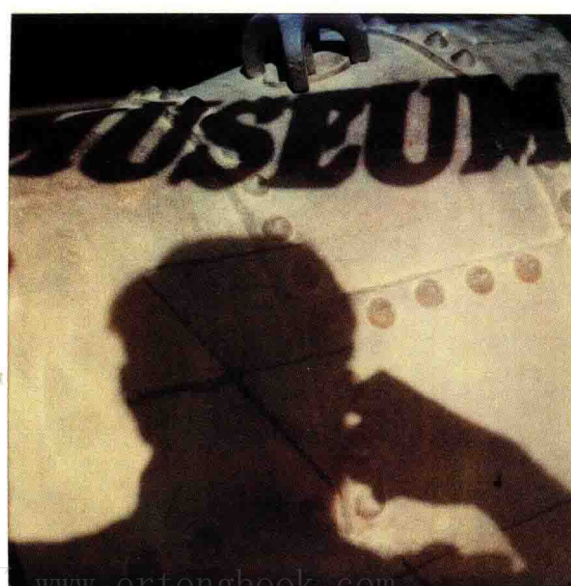
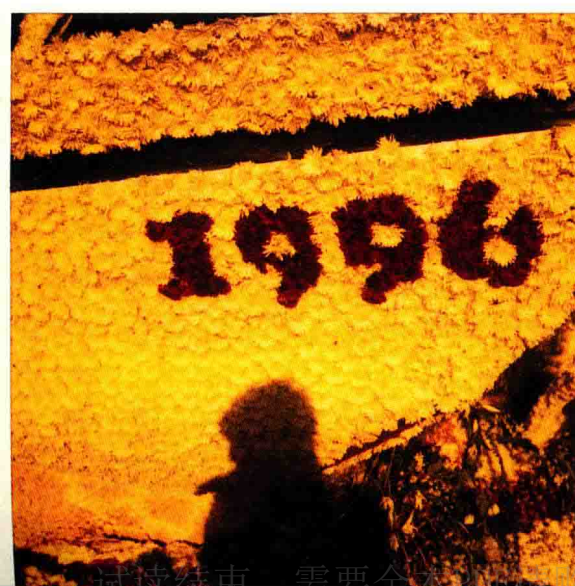
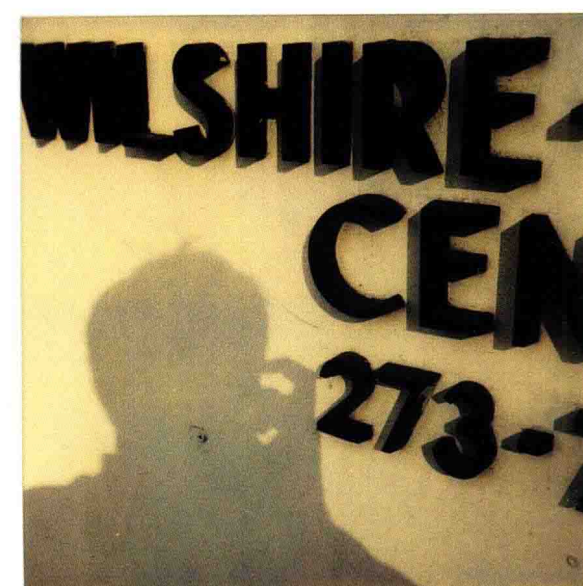
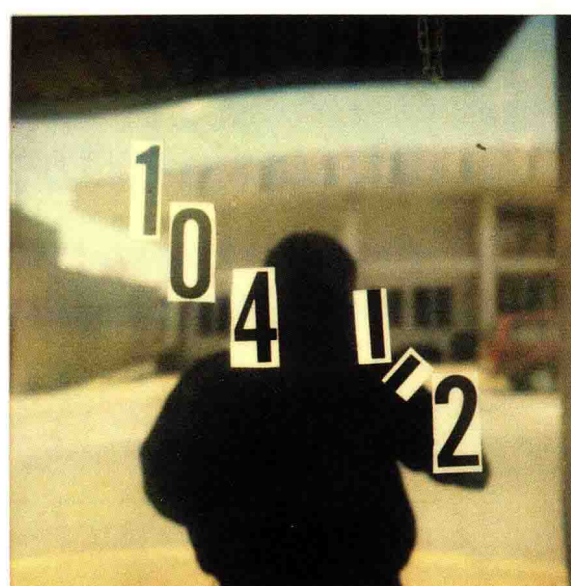
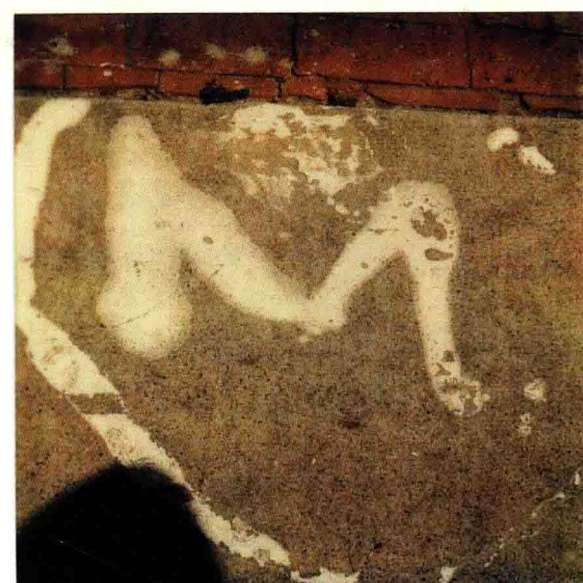
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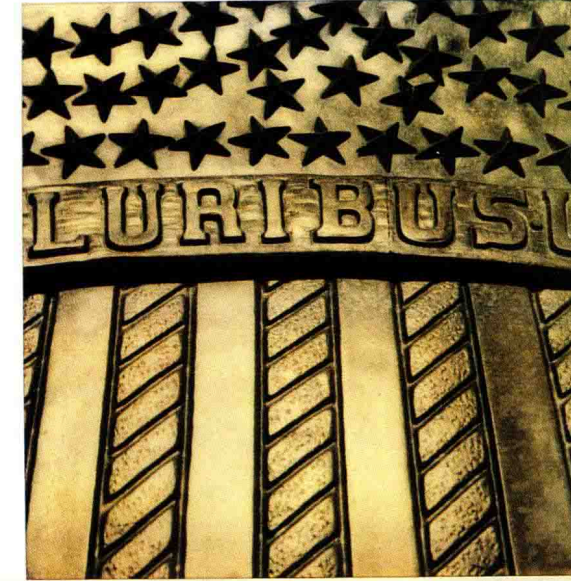
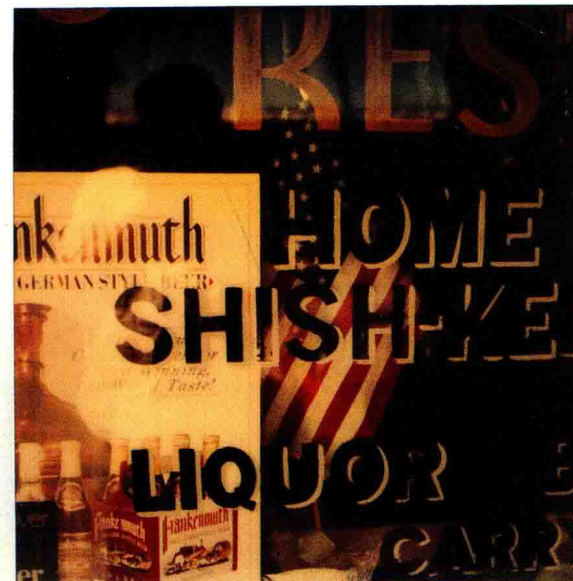
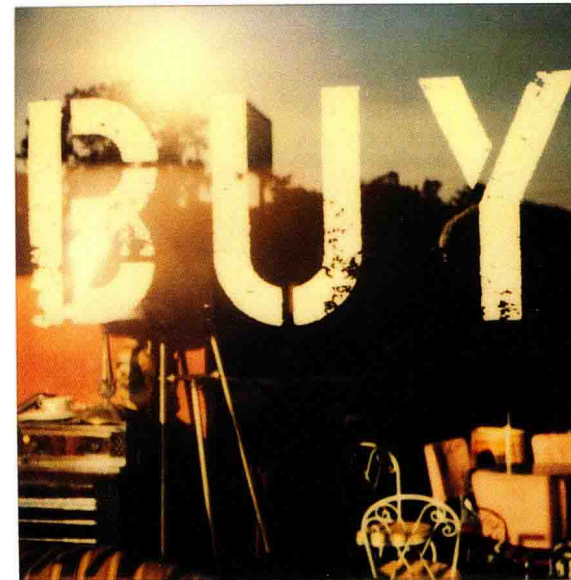
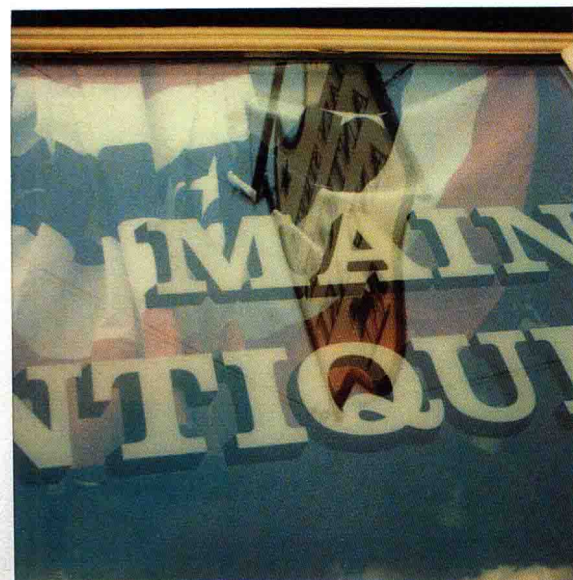
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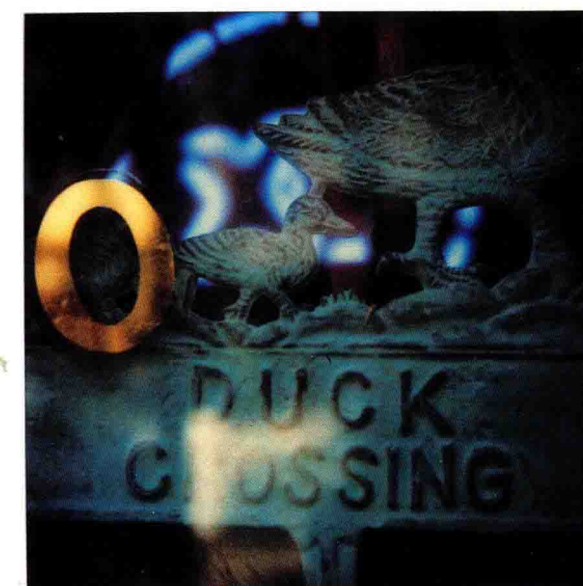
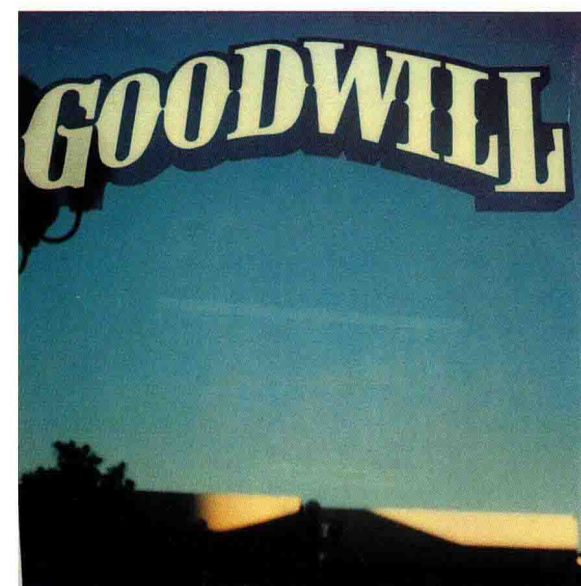
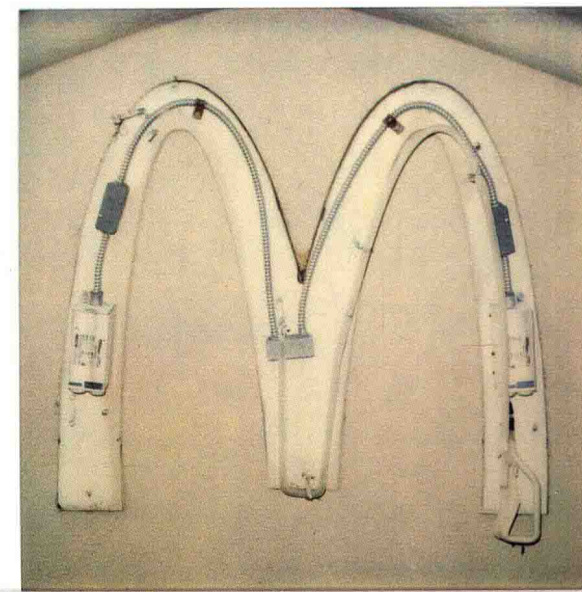
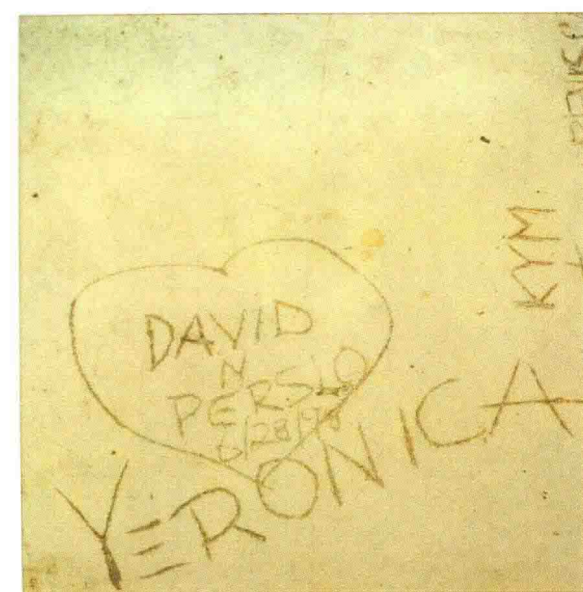
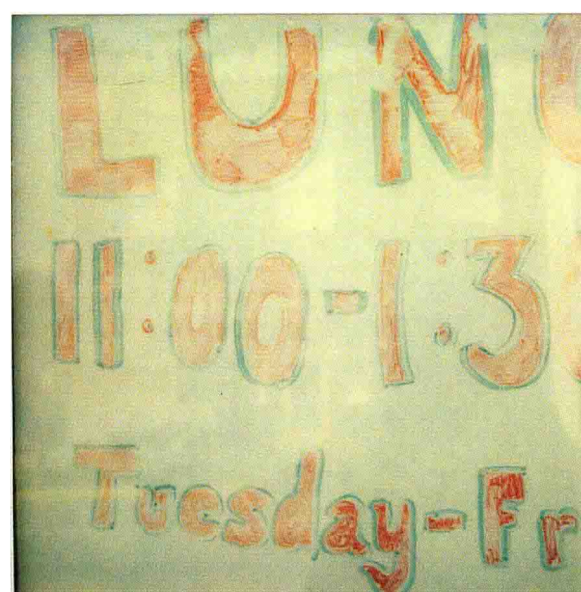
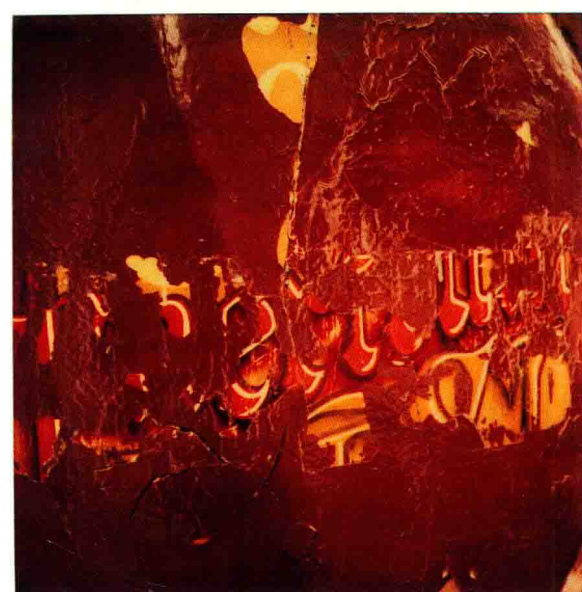
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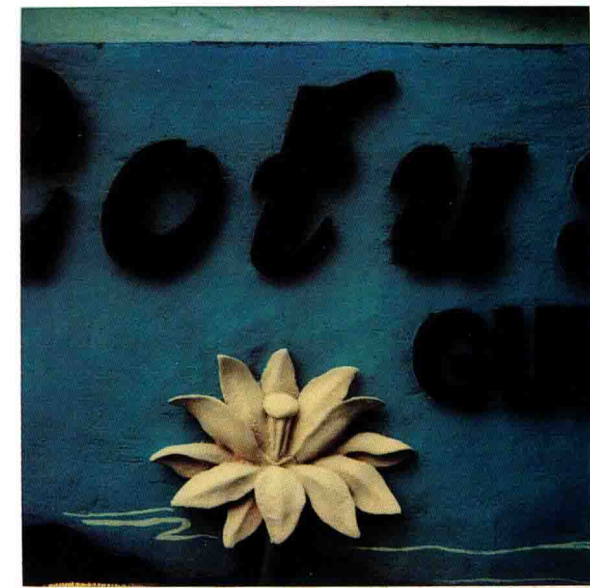
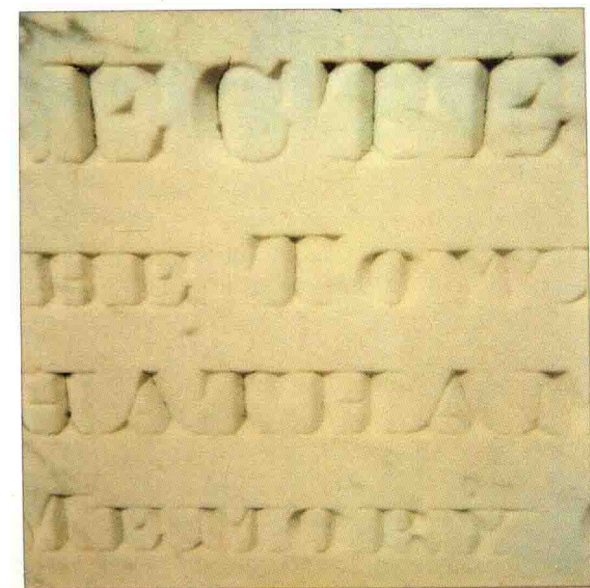
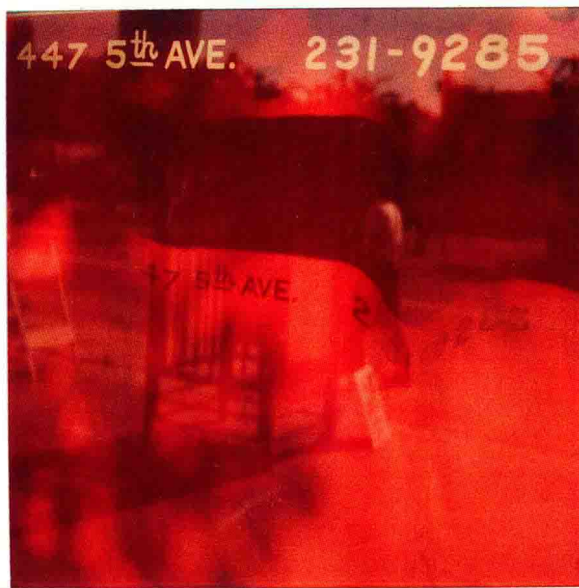
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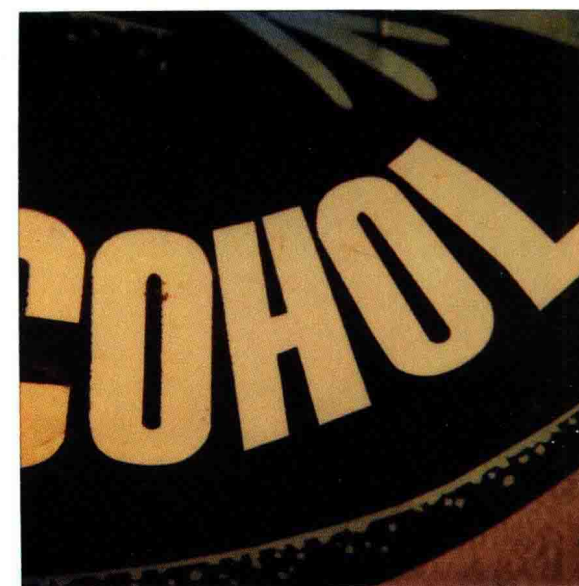
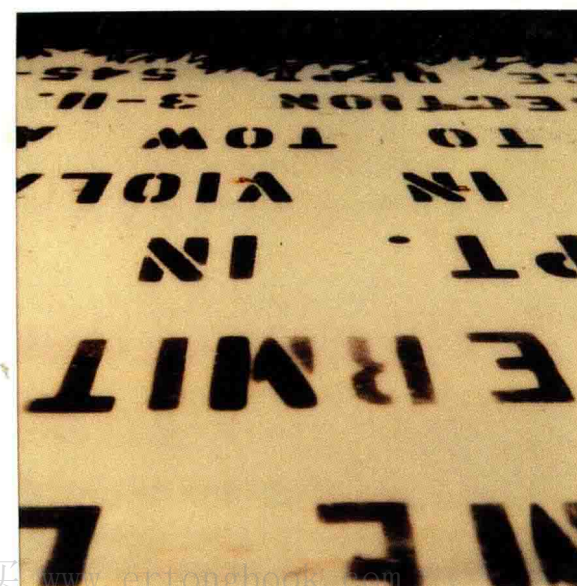
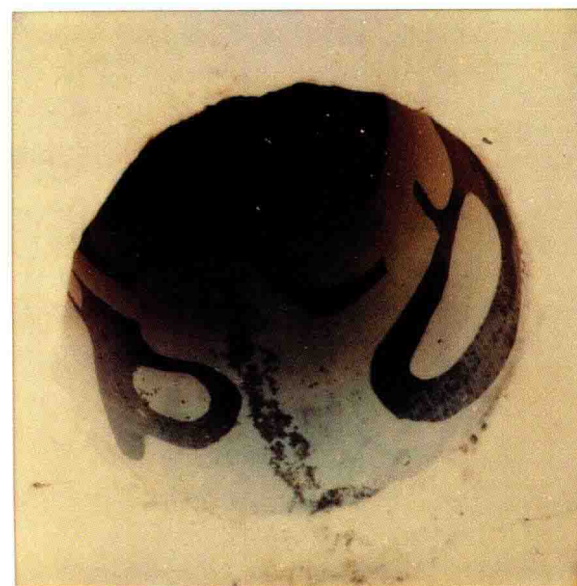
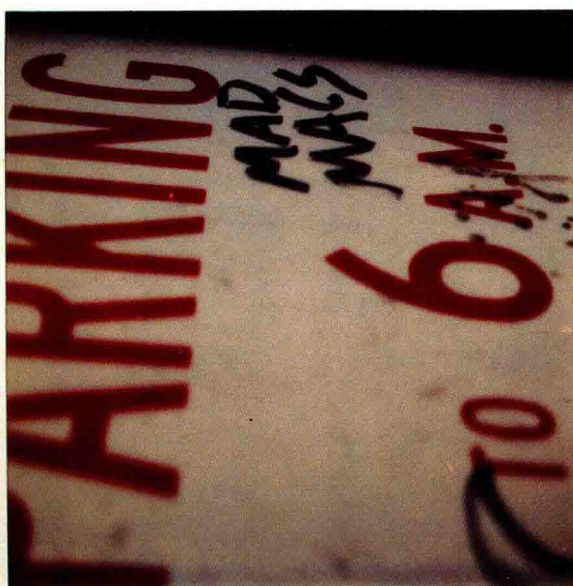
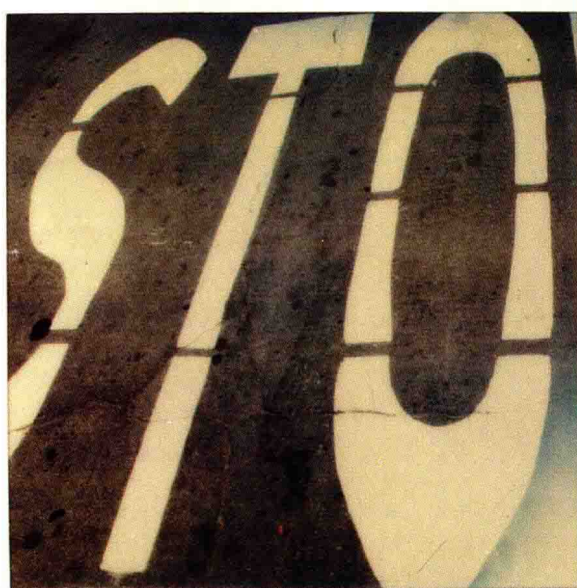
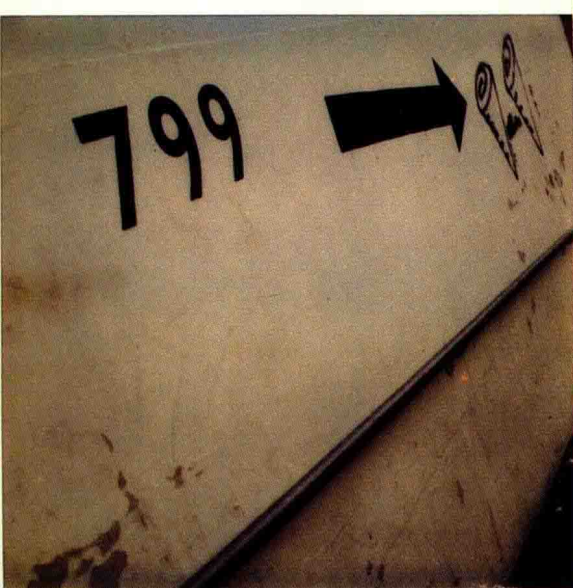
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Off The Road by Lewis Blackwell

This book has some pages of hand-drawn lettering in pen and coloured pencil and many pages that show signs in whole or part captured on 1134 photographs shot with a Polaroid 680 SE camera on type 600 film. These drawings and photographs are by Edward Fella (1938–), American born in Detroit; he grew up in the city and worked there as an illustrator and designer until going to graduate school at the age of 47. Shortly after graduation in 1987 he joined the faculty at the California Institute of Arts in Valencia, California. He has lived there ever since, except for time spent on long drives across the United States. Each summer he drives back to the midwest and then on to the east coast. He draws every day in his notebooks, and occasionally designs self-published pieces, but no longer works for clients: at 62, he sees himself at the 'Exit Level' of design, and has no desire or need to work to somebody else's brief.

We walk from the car to the entrance of The Original Saugus Café in Santa Clarita Valley, California: Ed Fella, Lucy Bates and myself. Ed stops suddenly a few paces before the door. He looks with fascination at the adjacent general store, which sports a window full of signs. He says: 'You see, they're everywhere, it's a very American kind of clutter.'

And they are everywhere. In this window, at this moment, a cacophony of characters put on a non-stop visual entertainment proclaiming special offers and surprising services. Beyond this moment they continue coast-to-coast, a vital part of the American experience. These characters, this cast, establish the space and time of big city, small town or roadside passage, as essential in placing us in the 'land of the free' as the highways that stitch together the nation. They are the original 24/7 communication, interactive in ways that the web can't even dream of. The characters can be found on any surface, as distractions or directions, decoration or marker. They are in wood, metal, paint, sticky-back plastic, etched, behind glass, behind bars, torn and layered. They come alone or clustered together, isolated or juxtaposed, fresh or faded, direct or distorted; from in-your-face dayglo to subtle tones that are obscured, reflected, as shadow,

as drop shadow with shadow, or even as a sunburnt memory of a lost message.

These are the letters on America. They are not from it, about it, or out of it...they are literally on it. The product of many hands, of many moments, of many processes. In other countries, there are also splashes of letterforms scattered across the environment, but they are not 'American'. Language, form and place conspire to make them different. Every country has its patina of language repeatedly splattered over its landscape, and every country might justifiably claim a unique quality to its collage of character sets, but they don't approach the same intrusion-level of the sign that is apparent in the United States. Here the very architectural fabric can end up built of signs, in a way only echoed in uncontrolled Third World situations. Here we are atop the imperial power of the First World, the original and best display of twentieth-century, multi-cultural, unfettered free-market capitalist expressionism.

At least since the 1960s, when Robert Venturi and his students mapped the architecture of Las Vegas and suggested modernism could learn something from its facades and furnishings, the vernacular of the graphic environment has become a thing of intellectual study and ironic posturing. But you would be misled to think this book is about the larger message of these signs, about the compositional wholes, or the amusing juxtapositions and contexts of such material. No such populism here. Fella's images are not taken for their amusing language, or their locale. These pictures do not stand back, but come in close. These pictures take us to the smaller messages, the bits in-between, the cracks rather than the compositions. There is no tongue-in-cheek wit or heavy irony here; these are out-takes from work-in-process. They are honestly appreciative, highly respectful of the handiwork, admiring the skill and the accident that went into the marks. This is an important difference to the love of the vernacular that has seeped through recent graphic design: there is no sneer or condescension to the material here, but rather a fascination with its inner workings.

While looking up close, with personal interest in subsuming these details into his own work, Fella is highly conscious that

the parts betray more and thereby spin out the greater import of this barrage of unique detail. These images show a ubiquitous but often ignored aspect of America as it is, up close, as we stroll past it, voyeurs of the sidewalk. The images give us many clues to puzzles that lie beyond the picture frame. Fella, so experienced in the commercial forms of illustration and design, self-conscious of just how sophisticated and yet also how limited his own hand skills are, gathers these snaps as prizes from a treasure trove to be reinvested in later work. To put them here is almost a betrayal of their purpose...except that their forms can still live again and again, consciously or subconsciously, in the everyday sketches he works out, every day. The lettering pages interspersing the image blocks illuminate that transition, revealing how the raw becomes the cooked in 'Fellaland'.

America, unlike Europe, for the most part does not have urban space that is made up from the accretion of building forms over many centuries. Instead, the rich layering of most of the built environment has arrived with the industrial and post-industrial age, and in doing so it has come within the time of mass-print and mass-communication. Thus signage is a part of the environment, of the built form, a part of the tradition in a way that does not apply in the capitals or small towns of old Europe. Even in new towns in Europe, historical reference is not to richly signed environments but to the accreted stone, brick and cement of traditional forms, and so the copies aspire to an unsigned territory. In contrast, the new American mall incorporates layers of sign and facade, images and texts, as part of the vernacular it seeks to reference. Europe aspires to a land of Transylvanian mystery, while the United States is a sporting event with the sponsors and scorekeeping to the fore. Neither is more or less fake, but both are perhaps slightly more self-conscious than their precedents.

The café that Fella, Lucy Bates and I finally stepped into was one of the oldest places around Valencia and it dates as far back, perhaps, as the 1930s. The signs help you connect with it, being the visual cry of the seller and at the same time the assertion of the owner, and these help to delimit the space. Meanwhile, in the new mall down the road a tableaux of valley life from the time of the founding of the café is played out in

rich colours across giant murals that are just a couple of years old: again, the sign is saying 'community' while it is also attending to its need to sell, and to assert ownership.

In this culture built on the liberating virtues of trade, it is not surprising that the commercial sign has such a robust, expressive quality, and is so ubiquitous. You can find the same things happening in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, but they are different: signs carry a lot of other baggage besides their overt message. In Europe the sign often speaks of community with a socialist tinge, even in this post-socialist age, and before that it references community with a medieval weight, feudal, oozing associations that you can't question: the values are communal in the grandest and most oppressive political sense. Somehow in America it would not be surprising if a road sign was sponsored, private and yet approachable, whereas in western Europe that would be an affront to the sense of communal values, the desire for authority but not ownership.

Most of the subject matter here is insistently one-off, not private but not in public ownership either; it is more often than not selling goods or services. Usually the signs are for small enterprises, and seem only a few steps from the salesman importuning passers-by. The inflection of the hawker's voice is there in the infinite variety of this lettering. The hoarse comment, the smooth tones, the cries in competition in the marketplace...the ceaseless individualism of vocal expression is matched but with an even greater level of perceptible detail; Fella's camera hones in not so much on the word, as on the individual letter-forms and the spaces between, before and behind them.

These 1,100 or so images are less than a third of the collection amassed by Fella since he first started this series of Polaroids in 1987. The project of capturing vernacular lettering detail in this way began on a study trip to San Francisco in the spring of that year, as he approached the end of his master's degree at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. A mid-life career shift, breaking from the thirty years spent as an illustrator and designer in Detroit, had taken Fella back to graduate school to study on one of the leading graphic design courses in the States. The pioneering mapping of post-modern theory over graphics at the school had fuelled Fella's work, pushing his

earlier explorations into more extreme paths: his highly disrupted typographic pieces stood out for their quirkiness that went beyond formal disruption and expressed (thanks to the designer's natural felicity with the pen borne from years of commercial practice) a deep appreciation of vernacular forms.

This appreciation came not through overt professional practice or appropriation. 'I was never one of those designers who was doing "vernacular". I was a highly paid commercial illustrator working for the likes of General Motors, not the corner grocery store!' he says. Indeed, it is not the 'vernacular' as a concept that draws Fella. 'It's not that this stuff is the vernacular, it is not its "on the street" aspect or what it literally says that concerns me. It is the formal qualities of the lettering that particularly interest me.' In this he admits his curiosity is with an arcane corner of the bigger picture. 'I love the mythology of America, including the dark side, but this is more a take on Americana rather than America.'

Ed claims that the material for his images is not hard to find. It isn't (in that material like this is everywhere) and yet it is, in that each image is unique, based on signs that are nearly all one-offs. And as Polaroids, they are originals. They are as rare as people and as unique. This variety is achieved through the surfaces: wood, glass, paper, metal, stone, plaster, cement, tiles, tarmac, plastics and brick. Commonplace. However, many different techniques are overlaid on the surfaces: machine-set type, stencil lettering, lettering incised with a tool, pre-formed stuck lettering, hand-made sticky lettering, painted or drawn (in many fluids and with different tools). Then there are the pre-formed units of neon, or fabricated metal, glass and wood...factory fabrications made unique by their particular placement in a particular environment over a particular time. There are these variables to consider before we get to describing the individual nature of the characters: perhaps a familiar font, or a common stencil, but also an entirely individual product of one artist or artisan's hand, practised or hamfisted.

What has been done here, in a project of some dozen years so far, is not a documentary, but an insight into 'work in progress'. This is not a book of neatly-taken photographs documenting the

roadside vernacular, observing with wry detachment the amusing juxtaposition of message. Other people have done that with funnier observations, more sentimentality.

At first glance the potency of these images comes from a combination of sentimentality and transgression. But only at first glance. Sentimentality because they are documents that savour material so often 'seen' but passed over. We find when looking closer at the roadside gallery that there are strange stitches in the fabric of these canvases. These prompt awareness of the individual at work in the passage of the days, call for respect for the unique if modest visions suspended in time and space, however arbitrary or inexplicable. A warm rush of humanity at work pours out of every shaped and misshapen sign. And even when the 'sign' is an accident of nature—for example, the suggestion of letterforms carried in seaweed on a beach, or soap suds drying and separating into glyphs on a window—the human is still there in the recording eye. We are touched by the person who made the sign, and by Ed Fella making the picture. The images require us to dwell on time past and our collective place in it. We are made aware of the making of space, and we may appreciate that it is a little ironic that two-dimensional imagery (for the most part) enables this.

Transgression? Because for the greater part these images are of things that are not meant to be seen for what they are, but for what they say. When we look at these signs like this, we are looking for too long and too intrusively. They are humdrum and unassuming pointers to other experience, not the stuff of focus. As with most signs, they are meant to be transparent in their messaging, to be consumed as useful or occasionally pleasurable. They are not meant to demand more than a millisecond of thought about their existence, but instead to take our thoughts elsewhere, answering needs or prompting desires.

In itself the self-conscious signing of signs is not transgressive now: for more than thirty years it has been a staple of western cultural speculation; it is mixed into the rubble of thought that underpins post-modernism. The transgression comes in what Fella has done to the signs. He is not really interested in what the signs say, nor is he trying to say that looking at signs

closely is in itself remarkable; he is showing these images not as an environmental documentary, but as documents of his thought processes, his looking for the glue that holds these messages together. He is noting the bizarre tics of the temporal, he is seeking out the order in the disorder, the moment that put one letter that way instead of another. Across the Polaroids in these pages a million and more modest yet disruptive questions can be asked—why is that orange painted next to that dull orange plastic, itself next to that blue swashy P on bleached wood? For what reason the struggle to echo machine forms in hand practice to make a sign for sacks? Why is it more than OK to have a big O like that O? How is an A there? Countless variations in letterform and context are contained within these pages. And the result is not images that build to a finished work, but works behind work-in-progress. They are part of the artist's process played and displayed. They feed new lettering and image-making. The pages of Fella's penmanship included in this book (examples of his ceaseless outpouring of lettering and images) give the final resting places of some of the ideas. The glitches in the signs are remade, remixed and bedded down into new forms, unique and yet highly referential.

The transgressive act is to pinpoint previously unappreciated (and thereby valueless) difference and raise it to the level of significance. As a result we celebrate—even fetishize—the kinks of message-making, the bits that are not on the programme, but are as vital as the approved system. It may not seem such a big thing as transgressions go, but these pictures are constantly giving value to that which is commonly seen as having no value, or is even seen as being of negative worth.

This is a tendency familiar in graphic design, and indeed in Fella's own career. From appreciating unfashionable illustration and lettering styles at the beginning of his commercial art career in the late 1950s, to exploring the concern about irregular spacing prompted by early computer typography in the late 1980s when he began teaching at CalArts (Fella doesn't use a computer to this day), there is a constant quest to embrace that which rubs things the wrong way. It is a familiar form of transgressive behaviour: that which is prohibited, or repressed, is

first revealed or rediscovered as covertly attractive, then openly if controversially embraced, then celebrated as part of a new value system. It is the fact that we don't normally see these elements in the signs—that we repress them from being of importance in our reading of the signs—that makes them significant. Our enjoyment (if that is the right word) in dwelling on

these images is that we thrill to see that which is not normally seen. It is all the better for being previously unaccounted.

That is at first glance. But when the thrill has gone, when the warm glow of sentiment at seeing this familiar stuff made a little unfamiliar dies down, what do we have at second glance? We see that the choice of image subject is not arbitrary, nor is it tied to a programme. It is structured around the idea that these are things Fella can use. These are ideas.

He comes in close with his camera, a camera deliberately chosen for its restricted but unique functionality, capable of almost instantly delivering a regularly formatted image with a good fixed lens, the image flashlit or not, focused here or there but always subject to the colour palette and resolution of type 600 film. The compositions are precisely controlled, and yet the final images are not always so precisely worked. Fella typically only takes one shot of a subject, and has discarded very few images over the dozen years of the series. If an image ends up a little blown out by the flash, so be it, that's part of that moment for that sign.

Given what he is recording, it is not surprising that precision and imprecision are held in tension in the making of the pictures. Fella is carefully looking at the bits that we would normally subconsciously erase—the irregular spacing, the unplanned juxtaposition of surface, the weathered image that sits next to an incongruous character. He finds and cherishes the events that make each sign unique, appreciating them not for what they say, or for their historical significance, or for any programmed reason, but instead appreciating them for the thing he can use. That is all there is: ideas you might want to re-shape, recycle, reformat, or even occasionally revolt against.

While Fella has an archive of photographs in this book, he did not take them in order to build an archive, but to be notes

towards later image-making. Even when this book was in development, and he knew that certain photographs might work to build out certain themes, he could not work out how to 'assign' himself to these tasks. The subject choice for photography is not derived from a programme, but is impulsion drawn from that rich experience and aspiration as to the value of these signs. 'In part, these photographs are about nothing more than what letters look like when they are photographed,' says Fella. And that is a statement that can be taken to mean nothing more than it says on the surface, or can be examined, like the image, for its own grain.

There is virtually no difference between what the original subject is and what Fella ends up with as his image. Having seen something that seems remarkable, he takes it, with care and increasing skill over the years. He throws away virtually nothing after the decision to photograph has been made. This is unlike any conventional professional practice. 'I haven't thrown away more than a handful of pictures in all the years. Hey, they cost a dollar each!', jokes Fella, but it is a true laugh: the money was never immaterial, and neither was the appreciation that the photograph is itself the object.

Of course, to get the collection down to a size that could squeeze into this book took editing, but there were as many on the table fighting to be in as ended up here. The images at the basic level of image-making document signs that are of equal value: they are what they are. They are one Polaroid's worth of sign. The challenge for the editors of this book was to arrive at some more sophisticated (but certainly not absolute) values.

'The pictures are deliberately, precisely, composed,' Fella says. 'I am not particularly interested in the words, indeed I deliberately cut off parts of the words or letters. It is very spontaneous, but also very composed. Each photo has its own investment for me, each was made for a reason: it is difficult for me to say that one is good or that one is bad.'

'I use low design to make high design, non-condescendingly,' he stresses. 'It's a kind of bio-feedback; it's visual reference material at its simplest.' The appropriation involved in this image-making is an appreciation, albeit a critique too. And

then a further appropriation, and heightening, may take place if that subsequently feeds through into the design and art work. This is a deep, transformational appreciation for object (the sign) and subject (Fella as artist).

He admits to sometimes 'theorizing after the fact', realizing the powers of what he has photographed or what has fed through into his work after the event of shooting that image or making a letterform. 'I have this idea that I'm taking these pictures because I'm going to do some kind of future project around it.' Which, in several ways, he has...and continues to do each time he opens up a sketchbook and creates letterforms and related elements that draw on the accumulated appreciation of the vernacular forms and practices.

The images in themselves, though, and in their shaping and making, can be analysed for an intricacy of vision and craft which reveals much about the Polaroid project as a whole. While ostensibly all concerned with the same subject, they contain within them great differences that go beyond the raw content (the sign) being shown. For one thing, the signs are sometimes shouting out their oddity, but in other cases it is Fella who has brought the 'idea' to the sign. This was definitely the case with the first images in his project, which were street signs in San Francisco that were photographed in such a way as to particularly emphasize the stretch and squash possibilities of foreshortening in photography. The signs in themselves were less remarkable (standard US road signs in several cases) but recording what the eye sees (or what the eye sees as the camera can capture) brought out a range of 'typographic' effects that pre-date the digital experiments that designers would undertake *en masse* with desktop graphics software over the following few years.

Those images are, however, atypical. The bulk of the series preoccupies itself with more one-off signs and collisions. Here, the images fall into at least two areas. There are those which report, and there are those which reveal. In this the images sit squarely in the territory of documentary photography.

On the one hand, the selection is made to capture something of note, to report it as it ties in with issues that Fella thinks are

interesting (such as irregular spacing, the curious freedoms of hand lettering, a strange distressed effect, some obscuring of characters, the fall of shadow). They are not documents taken with a view for others to see: they are not commissioned, or devised to inform anybody other than Fella's own sensibility.

Then there is the more artful image that demonstrably seeks to reveal a point to us. These use the power of the crop or the fall of light to make a point: for example, images of non-text marks that can be interpreted as having characteristics akin to letters; or damaged signs whose unplanned marks have started to take on pictorial qualities (such as the rusting face seemingly eating one sign, or the melodramatic film-like, movie title, effect of shooting incised letters at an angle with shadow falling across them). Those that reveal, that shape and make a point, go beyond the report level of meaning that perhaps describes most of the pictures.

In stressing this more 'intentional' element in the picture meaning, I tread on thin ground. After all, as suggested above, Fella takes these pictures fairly quickly, on the fly as he walks along. Once taken, the camera is placed in his bag or pocket and Fella walks on. So to suggest that he is determined to reveal certain elements, shaping the picture to carry a particular personal message could seem to be misrepresenting the process. However, the decisive act of taking a picture determines that there is a very specific meaning, however difficult to retrieve. This rediscovery is not easy in that Fella is quite consciously 'not really interested in the meaning of the words, or the wit of word juxtapositions. Other people have done that, and it is certainly not something I ever wanted to do with these pictures. In fact of the very few I have thrown away it is sometimes because of what it inadvertently said.'

So what are the pictures about? Can we find some unifying theme? Are these pictures about art, or about design? In that they have no compulsion to respect the integrity of the original (in other words, the signs are nearly always carefully cropped to disrupt the original message) they can scarcely be reporting on the art or design that may be within the source subject. In that they are not a completed work or with any clear sense of defined

purpose, the images would not seem to fit art or design.

At this point, the images and sketches might seem to be of such uncontrolled meaning as to have no clear message...and to be of little or no value other than eye candy for people who like spotting the curious detail of signs. However, this leads us to the label that most readily might be given: that these images and drawings record and then rework the vernacular. But think beyond the twee box that the word 'vernacular' has come to sit in. This is not about noting and appropriating. While Fella knows how to do that, there is an altogether more discursive programme at work. The images are mapping out a territory of new meanings (but visual meanings to which you cannot put easy words) and every image and sketch is a possible position for the evolution of language. Fella's documents are scout's maps showing the edge of visual language, where it builds up and breaks down, where it can go. They are the sighting of stars at the edge of the known universe; suddenly we see how A and Q can sit together and suggest something unexpected. From such little bricks and mortar large edifices of meaning can grow.

Remembering Fella's comment 'it's a take on Americana that I am doing, rather than America,' we can see it is an occasional meditation on the language that shapes our sense of America. This Americana, these telling quirks of everyday clutter that speak of and define a whole nation and its culture, these are outpourings and aspirations washed on the littered shore of the roadside; it is the opposite of high culture, it is the mythical, dream dimension of American visual culture that emerges from the ephemeral.

And let's not overlook Fella's use of the word 'take'. This is a variation, and there could have been others. This is not a finite statement. The meaning of this work can be found by looking at its use. It is not art, it is not design: such work is identified by its use as such. For with these photographs and drawings, which could have been art or design if used differently, the meaning comes from what we (or Fella) do with them. And what we all do with them is take them as something to inform, to feed or fuel the process by which we work with letters. The drawings