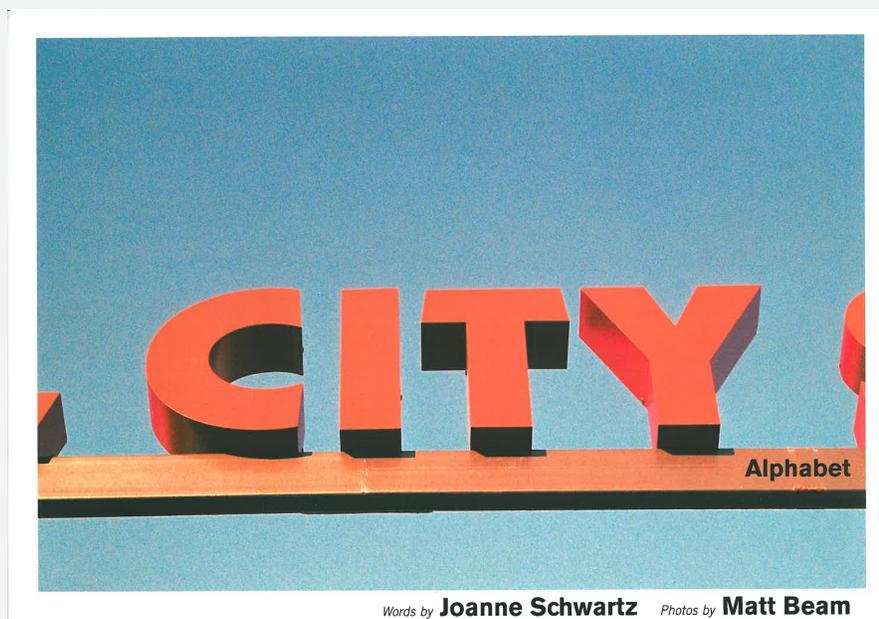


## First Opinion: Signage and the City

Schwartz, Joanne, and Matt Beam. *City Alphabet*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009.

*Susan Britsch*



Signage does not constitute new subject matter for photographers. Walker Evans's (1991) masterful monochromatic photographs from the 1930s come immediately to mind. One cannot help but sense such yearnings in the images of *City Alphabet*, billed on the overleaf as an "edgy catalogue of words from 'art' to 'zoo' that inspire us to look more closely." *City Alphabet* presents a series of facing pages, each of which includes on the left an upper and lower case letter, the initial sound of a word that also appears on that page. The facing page displays a color photograph of the word itself, found in a signage or graffiti context that is briefly identified in print (e.g., "Stencil painted on metal. Parking sign."). The book covers the entire alphabet in order from the "A" word—*art*—to the "Z" word—*zoo*.

It can be said that photographic images are "not conceived but selected" (Szarkowski 9). In other words, the photographer frames the shot in order to "define content," to "isolate unexpected juxtapositions," and to "create relationships" (Szarkowski 70). The images in *City Alphabet* were clearly shot to communicate an urban, found-object quality, but in this

context, the strategic crops used to create the “words” in some of the images represent a kind of cheating. The words are *found*, in a sense, but not as is. For example, the “U” word, (if it can be so called) is “um,” not so neatly sliced from a surrounding word, the continuation of which is visible at right. The resulting image does little to reflect the random hesitancy of the utterance in question, so the purpose for this framing is unclear. In a more semiotically satisfying way, however, the “G” word—*ground*—has not been completely severed from the word “battle” directly above it. Both appear in dark orange spray paint that has dripped and run. In this case, the crop works on the principle of closure, bringing to mind the context named by the sign.

Some of the photographs in *City Alphabet* beautifully and simply link their subjects with the content they signify. The “F” word—*forever*—lies scratched in concrete, separated from a curled, brown leaf by a well-placed diagonal between sidewalk slabs. The image for the “L” word—*love*—is another effective example, the word carved into a well-worn, rainbow-tinted background of wood. The contradiction of the “T” word—*top*—located at the bottom of the frame also works, along with the color harmony created by the red text topped by a horizontal red line. Unfortunately, many of the images do not work as well in this respect. Those for the “P” word—*pet*—the “Z” word—*zoo*—and the “S” word—*shoes*—for example, stand as *signifiants* lacking *signifiés*. True, the visual texture of these words and their backgrounds reflects the fact that they were found in the city, but where?

In terms of image quality, certain shots suffer somewhat from the photographic technique used; for instance, the “D” word (*drop*) was found (as the text indicates) on the “mottled glass” of a storefront door. The flash used for this photograph is clearly visible at upper right, while the color correction does little to enhance the yellow and red of the lettering. Depth of field is also an occasional issue: for example, in the image of vinyl decals spelling out “x-ray,” only the “R” and the lower half of the “A” are in focus. A more satisfying shot might have either increased the depth of field to focus all of the letters for the reader or adjusted the aperture to focus on particular letters in a progression from in- to out-of-focus.

Certain pages could also have been enriched by the inclusion of both close and long shots to contextualize the signage, especially (but not exclusively) for child readers of photographs. The work of Tana Hoban (1997) accomplishes this very successfully. In *City Alphabet*, however, the close shot of “x-ray” decals might have been combined with a long shot of the entire clinic door on which they were found. In fact, many of the images require the text on the facing page for situation.

Granted, the words themselves are meant to function as image, but some choices raise phonetics issues if the book is considered from a literacy perspective for early readers; for example, the “D” word—*drop*—begins with a consonant cluster often pronounced as the voiced palato-alveolar affricate [dj]. Thus, *drop* does not really work as a “D” word. Similarly, *shoes* is visually but not phonetically an “S” word. Nonetheless, *City Alphabet* may

motivate readers living in varied environments to search their surroundings for words. In this connection, however, the noted linguist Edward Sapir pointed out that, “the essence of language consists in the assigning of conventional, voluntarily articulated sounds, or of their equivalents, to the diverse elements of experience” (11). This means that a word becomes a linguistic fact only when visual, kinesthetic, and auditory experiences “are automatically associated with the image” (Sapir 11-12). Perhaps, then, child as well as adult readers will find in *City Alphabet* an impetus to explore their own experiences via the use of media that do not simply report that discourse but that, in fact, contribute to it.

### Works Cited

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### About the Author

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