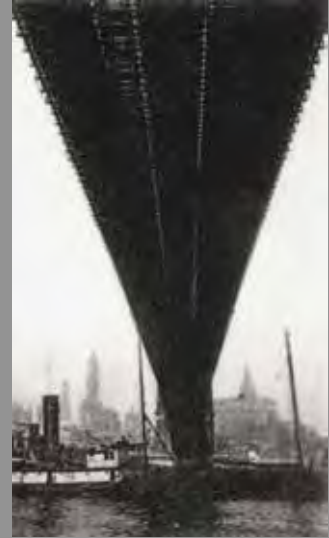
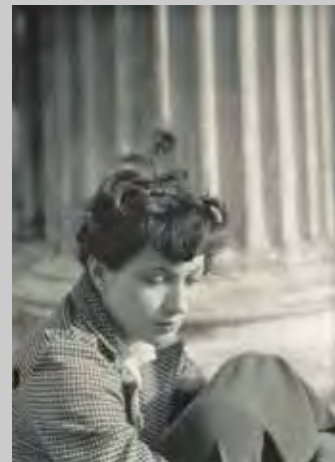


Walker Evans: Depth of Field















Silhouette Self-Portrait, Juan-les-Pins, France, January 1927

*Stare. It is the way to educate your eye,
and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop.
Die knowing something. You are not here long.*

Walker Evans

Walker Evans: Depth of Field

Edited by John T. Hill and Heinz Liesbrock

Essays by John T. Hill
Heinz Liesbrock
Jerry L. Thompson
Alan Trachtenberg
Thomas Weski

Josef Albers Museum Quadrat, Bottrop

High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver

Prestel • Munich • London • New York



Walker Evans with His Father and Grandfather
Walker Evans II, Walker Evans III, Walker Evans I

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Directors' Foreword

The significance of Walker Evans in the establishment of photography as art can hardly be overemphasized. His work serves as the nexus among many strands of twentieth-century photography. Evans was influenced by modern European photography: Eugène Atget and August Sander would become his guiding lights. The vanguard of European literature—from Flaubert and Baudelaire to James Joyce—was no less important to him. Intellectually thus equipped, he rapidly developed his own distinctive visual language in the United States, the impact of which persists to this day. There is scarcely a photographer in the world who has not been influenced by his work.

Against the backdrop of his encounter with Europe, Evans developed a new perspective on American culture, discovering its wealth particularly in the guise of everyday artifacts, in which he saw expressions of an almost naive vernacular art. He opened our eyes to phenomena that lay beyond the prevailing cultural canon of his day, phenomena that were not highly regarded before the emergence of Pop art in the 1960s. John Szarkowski very aptly described Evans's cultural contribution in the introduction to an Evans retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1971: "It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth, or invented it."

Evans's visual language was decidedly objective, and it emulated the characteristics of the documentary photography then common in newspapers and magazines. Behind this veneer, however, Evans concealed both a moral impetus and a high artistic aspiration that together made him a harbinger of a new perception of photography. He perceived himself as a historiographer seeking to capture the essence of his time, so that he might offer it to a later generation as a means of orientation. At the same time, he was convinced that photography had to be artistically infused with an autonomous formal structure, and that this was the only thing that would ensure its survival and validity in the future.

Walker Evans: Depth of Field underscores this broad aspiration of Evans's art and provides a comprehensive introduction to his work. A retrospective of this scope represents a first for Europe, and it breaks new ground as well for the American South in Atlanta and the Pacific coast in Vancouver. Although the focus is on the classic work done during the 1930s while on assignment for the Farm Security Administration, the exhibition also

reveals the rapidity with which Evans developed his unique approach during the preceding years. Individual essays therefore introduce his early series on Victorian architecture, Cuba, and antebellum architecture. The photographs taken in the subways of New York between 1938 and 1941 also represent an important step in the depiction of the anonymous individual: it is an aesthetic that evolves from a mixture of coincidence and contrivance, and it points far into the future. Evans began working for *Fortune* magazine in 1945 and remained there for twenty years. Although his photographic output during this period may have lacked the solidity of his earlier work, one still finds images with a high degree of artistic density. Evans finally turned to color photography while at *Fortune*, an aspect of his oeuvre that still remains largely unknown and surrounded by misconceptions. We dedicate space to this facet of his career as well, and thereby segue to Evans's later years, during which he masterfully employed the Polaroid camera as a tool of a new artistic vision.

The exhibition *Walker Evans: Depth of Field* and the companion book are the result of a joint project among the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat in Bottrop, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curatorial responsibility rested with John T. Hill, Heinz Liesbrock, and Brett Abbott. Our special thanks are due to John Hill: the exhibition reaps the benefits of his unmatched knowledge and personal experience. He was Evans's friend and colleague and was stipulated by him as the executor of his artistic estate. Over the decades he has published much on the subject of Evans's work, and here, once again, he shares his expertise regarding this great artist.

Depth of Field is also deeply indebted to Jerry L. Thompson. His knowledge of Walker Evans and his intimate familiarity with the history of photography in its artistic-philosophical dimension find expression in his astute comments and profound written contributions, which added valuable dimension to the exhibition and this book. We would also like to thank Alan Trachtenberg and Thomas Weski for their written contributions to the book.

Thanks are also due to Lesley K. Baier and Nicola von Velsen, who meticulously bore editorial responsibility for the book. We finally wish to thank Jeff Rosenheim, Curator in Charge of the Department of Photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for his generous advice.

We extend deep appreciation to the Terra Foundation for American Art, sponsor of the exhibition at its three venues in Bottrop, Atlanta, and Vancouver, and to the German Federal Cultural Foundation and the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation for their support of the exhibition in Bottrop. We also wish to express a final word of thanks to the institutions and individuals who so generously loaned works by Evans from their collections.

The exhibition *Walker Evans: Depth of Field* represents a high-water mark for the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat in Bottrop, which houses the world's largest public collection of artworks by Josef Albers. Over the past decades and in the course of various projects, the museum has examined the genesis of Albers's work paradigm and its impact, especially in the United States. In doing so, we have regularly presented names in American and European photography that seemed closely akin to Evans's art: Robert Adams, Joachim Brohm, Bernhard Fuchs, Nicholas Nixon, and Judith Joy Ross are representative examples.

Although Albers and Evans both taught at Yale University, albeit at different times, they probably never met face to face; nevertheless, they are kindred spirits. Both men shared an abiding fascination with the sensuous appearance of the world as well as an ability to find an equivalent for it in the language of art, an equivalent that consistently speaks of form rather than the personal sensitivities of the author.

Walker Evans took the lessons of European modernism and applied them to the documentation of the social landscape in the United States, and particularly in the American South, where his singular achievements have deeply impacted the history of photography. It is thus an honor for the High Museum, Atlanta, to collaborate with international colleagues on this major retrospective of his career. *Walker Evans: Depth of Field* is the first full retrospective of Evans's work to be shown in the American South. While Evans's work has been exhibited at the High in robust ways in the past, the region has never been exposed to an Evans show of the scope and caliber of this one in terms of its scholarly approach, basis in connoisseurship, and loans from major institutions around the world.

The High has distinguished itself as a leader in assessing the American South's contributions to the history of photography. Not only does the

museum hold a preeminent collection of work related to the region, but it also maintains among the largest institutional repositories of Evans's protégés Peter Sekaer and William Christenberry. Through this exhibition, the museum is proud to advance the understanding of Evans's indelible contributions to our cultural landscape, and we extend deep appreciation to our staff and board of directors, whose dedication and steadfast support allow landmark projects like this to reach fruition.

The photographs of Walker Evans hold a special significance in Vancouver, a city that has become widely associated with conceptually rigorous photography over the past three decades. The precision with which Evans depicted his subject matter, his emphasis on the everyday, and his historically inflected vision have been a model for generations of photographers and an important point of reference for Vancouver-based artists to this day. Although Evans has long been recognized as one of the great artists of the twentieth century, *Walker Evans: Depth of Field* is the first substantial exhibition of his work to be presented in this city. As an institution that has taken on a leadership role in exhibiting and collecting photography while contributing significantly to current discussions on the role of photography in modern and contemporary art, the Vancouver Art Gallery is honored to be a partner on this project and grateful for the opportunity to present this comprehensive overview of Evans's work to our public. We extend our profound thanks to the gallery's staff, especially coordinating curator Grant Arnold, and board of trustees, whose ongoing commitment and support have made possible the presentation of this groundbreaking exhibition in Vancouver.

Heinz Liesbrock, Director, Josef Albers Museum Quadrat, Bottrop

Michael E. Shapiro, Nancy and Holcombe T. Green, Jr. Director,
High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Kathleen S. Bartels, Director, Vancouver Art Gallery

Patrons' Remarks

The Terra Foundation for American Art is proud to partner with the Josef Albers Museum and the High Museum of Art to present *Walker Evans: Depth of Field*, an insightful look at Evans's rich career and the numerous ways in which his artistic legacy has shaped the history of photography on an international scale.

Featuring Evans's images from the late 1920s and early '30s, including such lesser-known projects as his photographs of Victorian architecture and Cuba, the exhibition also presents works he made for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression in the American South, the innovative views he created in the subway system of New York, and his little-studied contributions to *Fortune* magazine.

Equally important to the photography exhibited, though, is the thoroughly transatlantic framework of this show. Evans's outlook on American culture was indelibly influenced by his early encounters in Europe. In particular, he found inspiration in the French photographer Eugène Atget and the German photographer August Sander. Additionally, this catalog is published in English and German, and accompanying educational programs provide a meaningful introduction to Evans's work for international audiences. All of this directly supports our mission to foster the exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for people across the globe.

The Terra Foundation was established in 1978 by Chicago businessman and art collector Daniel J. Terra (1911–1996), who believed American art was a dynamic and powerful expression of the nation's history and identity. He also held that engagement with original works of art could be a transformative experience, and throughout his lifetime he worked to share his collection of American art with audiences around the world.

For more than thirty-five years, we've been extending Daniel Terra's legacy by connecting people with American art, motivated by the conviction that art has the power both to distinguish cultures and to unite them. We congratulate the Josef Albers Museum and the High Museum of Art on this fine exhibition and on their dedication to inspiring new perspectives and cultivating robust cross-cultural exchange through art.

Elizabeth Glassman, President and CEO
Terra Foundation for American Art

Walker Evans described his photographic impetus as an interest "in what any present time will look like as the past." In a way that was almost unrivaled by any other twentieth-century photographer, he captured images of a changing American society that are suspended in a state of limbo between past, present, and future—from the effects of the Great Depression during the 1930s to the culture of a mass society. He found his motifs mainly on the periphery of industrialized society. The street and the seemingly mundane lives of ordinary people provided the raw material for his artistic work. He photographed factories and residential areas, the simple dwellings of the rural population, tools, interiors, and street scenes, as well as passengers in the New York subway, unobtrusively photographing them with a camera hidden beneath his coat.

This should not be taken to imply that Evans was merely a photojournalist with a penchant for social issues. He developed his own unique concept of art with an aesthetic core rooted in a Euro-American symbiosis. European photographers like Eugène Atget and August Sander had a lasting impact on his work, as did the writings of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Joyce. When Evans returned home from his studies in Paris, he viewed America through the eyes of a stranger. In this shift in perspective lies the key to his documentary style, with which he paved the way for modern photography as an art form.

The German Federal Cultural Foundation is pleased to sponsor *Walker Evans: Depth of Field*, an exhibition that focuses on the American photographer as a transatlantic artist. Special thanks in this regard are due to the German-American team of curators, Heinz Liesbrock, John T. Hill, and Brett Abbott. In the words of Marcel Proust, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." It is in this spirit that we wish all museum visitors in Bottrop, Atlanta, and Vancouver—as well as all our readers—an inspiring voyage of discovery.

Hortensia Völckers, Executive Board / Artistic Director
German Federal Cultural Foundation

Alexander Farenholtz, Executive Board / Administrative Director
German Federal Cultural Foundation

Both Walker Evans and Josef Albers craved clarity, exulted in the infinite possibilities of the black-and-white spectrum, considered formal beauty a source of mental equilibrium, and made art that, much as they respected the achievements of the past, was without any historical reference. Rather, their work took modernism forward in giant strides. And while it betrayed none of their private experiences and was the antithesis of the personal expressionism that dominated so much twentieth-century art, their magnificent “pictures,” human-scaled and welcoming, elicit emotion in spades.

Besides all of that, both Evans and Albers were embraced as artistic pioneers by the world surrounding the Museum of Modern Art at the time of its founding, lived in Connecticut toward the end of their lives, taught at the School of Art at Yale University, used the same law firm (the venerable New Haven establishment Wiggin and Dana, where they could be assured of the correctness, professionalism, and respect for art that was vital to both of them), and died within two years of one another at Yale-New Haven Hospital. I have always found it extraordinary that, to the best of our knowledge, Evans and Albers never actually met.

Yet their lack of direct personal association adds to the perfection of it all. These were individuals who mainly cared about doing their work. They devoted days and nights to the refinement of their artistic vision. They came from very different worlds—Evans from the upper echelons of American society, Albers from the craftsmen guilds of Bottrop; Evans Protestant and belonging to the establishment of boys’ preparatory schools and small private colleges, Albers devoutly Catholic and from the ranks of hardworking laborers and then a key player at the Bauhaus, that groundbreaking institution. But the art they made mattered more than any personal history. Their devotion to vision, to the wonder of artistic nuance, and to an understanding of materials and technique—and their gift to the world of art, which stabilizes and enriches us—make Evans and Albers conferees in the most important way. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation is delighted to have helped make this exhibition possible.

Nicholas Fox Weber, Executive Director
The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

Introduction

John T. Hill

A primary aim of this book is to show the singular breadth and impact of Walker Evans's career, which began in the late 1920s and ended a few days before his death in 1975. Dislodging Evans and his work from a pigeonhole labeled "Great Depression photographer" is one step. This all-too-convenient characterization misses the greater value of his accomplishments. To show Evans's elastic vision, where photography was a convenient tool for his broader artistic aims, is vital to such a reassignment. On several occasions he explained that the process was less about the pictures that you made with a camera than it was about having an eye.

Evans's work exposes an insatiable eye and a process that drew on more than the camera alone. He likened his approach to the phenomenon of the flaneur, a character defined by Baudelaire in the nineteenth century. The flaneur was a dandy strolling the boulevards, with no goal in mind, looking for no particular treasure—but with highly developed sensibilities, capable of finding intellectual riches in the most banal object or event that crossed his path. This concept meshed neatly with the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement of the 1920s, which also found meaning in the seemingly mundane. Here were the makings of a template that explains much about Evans's understanding and use of photography.

He greatly admired the nineteenth-century journals of the Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, who demonstrated the power of the flaneur's artless occupation. Each evening they recorded the details of their daily walks in Paris. Evans's literary roots and his innate visual gifts allowed him to see the connection between these unpretentious journals and his own dispassionate documents. In his first steps away from writing, crossing to the visual arts, he collected printed ephemera—postcards—and later cited their artless nature as a major influence on his work. So were his clippings of whimsical and ironic images from magazines and tabloids, collected and fashioned into scrapbook pages of word and picture montage. In the early 1930s he began to appropriate equally poignant details from movie posters and vernacular road signs. With no shame, he wryly proclaimed that it was he who had discovered Pop art.

A personal anecdote of Evans's uninhibited appropriation and his love of letterforms was told to this author by John Szarkowski. Shortly after they met, John invited Walker to his home for Christmas dinner. Right away, Walker was shown the stunning present John's wife had given him—a handsome wooden case containing a Victorian alphabet of large rubber stamps. Evans carefully inspected the gift and said how much he admired it. After dinner, as he was about to leave, in hat and coat, he casually tucked the box under his arm and begged forgiveness—saying how very sorry he was, but he had to have this alphabet—and made a quick getaway. Years after Evans's death the boxed alphabet was returned to John. Letters, words, and signs were high on a list of obsessions that drove Evans to ignore the etiquette he expected of others.

In the mid-1960s his passion for word-picture subjects reemerged in a turbocharged mode with his collection of signs. At times these signs were "taken" with his camera, but just as often they were stolen outright, at midday or midnight. He explained that for an artist there was no difference between the two acts. The artist's vision must be satisfied, regardless of the law.

While Evans acknowledged his love for nature, he proclaimed that man-made subjects were his focus. And whereas signs and words may have been favored, all of the vernacular world was his domain—architecture, advertising, dress, and debris. These were grist for his lyrical translations.

Another goal of this book is to illustrate Evans's genius for transforming commercial assignments into work that satisfied his own aesthetic while fulfilling the practical needs of his employers as well. With the exception of his earliest personal work and his late work of the mid-1960s until his death, most of Evans's photography was done for hire. This fact has rarely been noted and even less often matched by any other photographer. Beginning with the Victorian architecture assignment in 1931 and ending with "American Masonry" for *Fortune* in 1965, the majority of Evans's photographs were taken on paid assignment. (The New York subway portraits, funded by two

grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, were a rare exception.) Even the photographs for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, one of Evans's greatest accomplishments, were made entirely for a *Fortune* magazine assignment. Fine art photography was never his ultimate goal, making good on his earliest anti-art position.

The seminal impact of Evans's work for the FSA in the 1930s cannot be overstated. But it is nearsighted to appraise his career by a style that he set during this less than two-year assignment. Putting aside the magnificence of those photographs, his work before and after would secure Evans a place in the history of photography.

In this book there is a particular focus on Evans's innovations after 1935–36. Removing his mid-career work from its commercial magazine context offers a chance to see the prescience and newness of those photo essays. Throughout his twenty years at *Fortune*, he kept alive his commitment to social history. Most assignments were his own inventions. He referred to the work as being done incognito. While he was doing one thing—which is to say, his own thing—he was convincing his employer that he was doing their thing. He managed his role at *Fortune* much as he managed his employment by the FSA. Here was a man who, for dinner, regularly ordered “surf and turf.” There are few if any situations in which Evans failed to have it both ways, no matter what “it” might be.

Diverse sources, both literary and visual, gave structure to Evans's style, which was in fact an evolving series of styles. But a sampling from any decade of his work confirms the final appraisal of Evans as the consummate American photographer. The force of his work continues to spread far past those borders.

This book profits from contributions by three of Evans's long-standing friends—photographers and writers who have devoted considerable time and thought to their complex friend and his enigmatic work: Alan Trachtenberg, Jerry Thompson, and John T. Hill. It represents perhaps the last time that three firsthand accounts will appear together.



View of Easton, Pennsylvania, 1935

“A surgeon operating on the fluid body of time”: The Historiography and Poetry of Walker Evans

Heinz Liesbrock

When the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted a comprehensive exhibition of the works of Walker Evans in 1971, curator John Szarkowski undertook to introduce an artist who had not only played a vital role in determining the course of photography in the twentieth century, but had also attempted to seek out the identity of the United States beyond the pale of ideologies and political statements. Evans held forth a mirror in which the country could view the richness of its everyday life, which no one had ever seen more clearly than he: the way simply decorated wooden houses in small towns, for example, joined with handpainted billboards to form concise images. The aesthetic of public places—merchandise, fashion, automobiles, and the physiognomy of anonymous individuals—was a cultural phenomenon of the first order. One could, therefore, also regard the MoMA exhibition as an allusion to Pop art, which was much in vogue, and as an invitation to pay homage to Pop’s eminent forebear.

The exhibition was tantamount to a new discovery. For although Evans’s work had first gained the attention of a wider audience in this very museum with the landmark exhibition *American Photographs* in 1938, it had almost faded into obscurity during the ensuing years, and Evans’s eminence was recognized only by a discerning few. The average observer of contemporary art would have shrugged his shoulders at the mention of the sixty-eight-year-old Evans’s name. His work, past and present, was simply unknown in these circles. Photography as a visual art, i.e., in an aesthetic form transcending its presence in the popular press, was only appreciated by a small group of people. With few exceptions, it was not highly valued on the art market or by museums. This was true in the United States, but even more so in Europe, where photography did not find broad acceptance until the 1990s.

The organizers at MoMA had thus set out to introduce a preeminent artist in his own right while also emphasizing the conspicuous influence of his work on a younger generation of American photographers who had emerged since the mid-sixties. Szarkowski had, for example, organized the first joint exhibition devoted to the young photographers Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand in 1967. Due to their works’ idiosyncratic aesthetic, the

exhibition met with extremely controversial reviews. Its title, *New Documents*, adopted the documentary aspiration as formulated in the objective and concise diction of Evans’s images while simultaneously emphasizing that his younger colleagues sought to cast this perspective in a more personal hue. Here, under new auspices, the subjective moment became a significant category.

Looking back on these exhibitions of Evans and his younger colleagues and the artistic questions they addressed, we discover what has long since become classic terrain. Arbus, Winogrand, and Friedlander, of whom only the last is still alive and working, are highly esteemed as authors of their own independent visual languages. It was Evans, however, who was most successful in asserting his unique understanding of photography, which was comprehensible only to a few when he took up photography in the late twenties. Since that time he is, without question, viewed as a renewer of photography; its main protagonist, he substantially shaped its aesthetic and development.

Yet if we ask just what defines the art of this highly esteemed photographer, what its sources are, and how to describe its actual epistemic goals and the aesthetic means of portraying them, the answers remain, for the most part, vague. A dictum of G.W.F. Hegel also applies to Evans: “What is familiar is not understood precisely because it is familiar.” This handicap transcends the specific topic of Evans and is characteristic of the historical perception of photography per se. This is because the preconditions and artistic paradigms of photography, as well as its links to literature and the visual arts, have yet to be examined as extensively as has long been the case with modern painting and sculpture, for example.

In Evans we not only encounter a paragon of twentieth-century photography but also can clearly discern the aesthetic categories of the medium and its unique possibilities. His work concerns itself with fundamental decisions regarding the relationship between image and cosmos in photography, or to be more exact: the social reality of man. What is the photographic image capable of expressing? And how can these expressions be given a kind of permanence?

Evans's concept of photography, which we associate so closely with the land in which it originated, America, is in many ways tied to his encounter with modernist literature. His artistic initiation was altogether a literary one. Born and raised in the Midwest, he attended private schools in the East, but could scarcely identify with their curricula. Bored with his classes, he soon dropped out and ended his academic foray; nevertheless, during many hours spent in the library at Williams College, he had become captivated by contemporary literature. These works served as his interface with the present, and he began to comprehend aesthetic and social processes. This occurred during the early 1920s, when European and American literature was experiencing a fundamental renewal triggered by the intellectual and political crisis of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The now lifeless literary forms of the nineteenth century were radically rejected. Pompous and antiquated figures of speech gave way to a dynamic contemporaneity that found expression in colloquial discourse and the direct description of things and emotions. Here, the present was viewed within the context of a universal human condition.

Evans kept abreast of the emergence of artistic modernism in *The Dial*, a magazine that published leading-edge contributions regarding the current aesthetic and literary debate. T.S. Eliot's groundbreaking poem *The Waste Land* was published in *The Dial* in November 1922, and early poems of E.E. Cummings also appeared on its pages. Intellectual acuity and an aloof, impersonal approach as well as, in Cummings's case, the recourse to figures of colloquial speech: these are the characteristics of this poetry. It is not difficult to recognize these points of intersection in Evans's subsequent artistic development.

These texts were also part of a transnational discourse that closely linked American authors to French literature, in the main. It is therefore not surprising that Evans, who obviously felt out of place in American society, followed the allure of a foreign culture and moved to Paris in 1926 with the intention of learning the language and delving deeper into the literature of France. He read and translated from the French, following his youthful emphatic notion that this would prepare him for a career as a writer. But his sense of quality

was already so well developed that he soon realized the hopelessness of the undertaking: he would never be able to live up to his own artistic standards in the realm of literature.

Following his return to the States he therefore began to apply himself to photography. Evans had begun taking an interest in it while in Europe, where he had used a compact camera in typical tourist style. It became apparent to him that the aesthetic lessons learned from Flaubert and Baudelaire could also bear fruit in this terrain. These two were, along with Proust, Joyce, and Hemingway, the benchmarks of Evans's literary interest. When asked toward the end of his career about literary influences in his work, Evans replied without hesitation: "Flaubert, I suppose, mostly by method. And Baudelaire in spirit. Yes, they certainly did influence me, in every way.... I wasn't very conscious of it then, but I know now that Flaubert's esthetic is absolutely mine. Flaubert's method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyway used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity."² When viewing Evans's photographs, it is easy to recognize the appeal these two writers had for him. They call to mind the social anatomy in Flaubert's novels, the unwaveringly objective dissection of the French middle class and its eroded morality; and Evans was equally fascinated by Baudelaire's wanderings through the streets and avenues of Paris: *everything* caught the interest of his observant, unprejudiced eye, especially the baser phenomena that were entirely mute in the established cultural hierarchy, but which present themselves here in singular beauty. Evans realized that the artistic material he sought also lay waiting in America's streets and lower-middle-class dwellings and that this seemingly insignificant day-to-day life was well-suited to act as a vehicle for a genuine artistic style.

As was the case with painter Edward Hopper, who experienced his artistic awakening in Paris twenty years before Evans, the encounter with French art paved the way for Evans, enabling him to recognize the aesthetic possibilities presented by the seemingly prosaic reality of life in the United States. Both artists viewed America through the eyes of strangers, thereby uncovering a new enchantment in the seemingly mundane. The soberness of their approach and their

preference for architectural forms that take on a life of their own in the light are the common bonds that unite the aesthetic of the painter and the photographer. The final emancipation of American art from the European beau ideal, the liberation from a deep-seated feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the Old World that characterized America's cultural climate in the nineteenth century and long afterwards, did not occur until around 1950 with the emergence of abstract expressionism. This movement formulated a new artistic ethos, one that explicitly distanced itself from the legacy of Europe. Evans and Hopper belonged to the avant-garde of this development, and it was more than historical happenstance that the first exhibitions of these two artists at the Museum of Modern Art ran parallel for a short time in 1933.³

When Hopper returned from Europe for good in 1910 after three extended stays, he felt deeply alienated in his homeland: "America seemed awfully crude and raw when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe."⁴ Evans, who settled in New York upon returning from Paris, felt much the same way. His emotions found no echo in a society dominated by economic pursuits and a cult of mediocrity rooted in a Puritan canon of values. Unlike French society and culture as he had come to know it, the intellectual independence of the individual who cultivated his unique sensibility, and was admired for doing so, was not held in high regard there. Furthermore, Evans was destitute and had to take on odd jobs, as a clerk on Wall Street among other things, in order to survive. Thus did a deep-seated antipathy arise toward an unfettered capitalist economic system, its self-righteousness, and its naive trust in progress. During a lecture he gave two days before his death, the memories of that time remained vivid: "It was a hateful society, and that embittered all people of my age. You either got into that parade, or you got a bum treatment... I used to jump for joy when I read of some of those stockbrokers jumping out of windows! They were all dancing in the streets of the Village the day Michigan went off money and the banks all closed there."⁵

Evans felt himself culturally and economically marginalized, and his rejection of American society and its values would later find expression in his preference for the joys and aesthetic tastes of the



Political Poster, Massachusetts Village, 1929

common people who inhabited the outskirts of high culture. In a sense, one could even view Evans's preoccupation with photography and its artistic possibilities as the choice of an outsider who was a failure by the standards of the society in which he lived. Although modernist writers ostensibly broke with all the traditional rules of literature, they were nevertheless able to build upon an artistic tradition and the educational canon that bore them. The aesthetic status of photography, on the other hand, was still altogether unclear when Evans took it up.

Evans needed but a few years to formulate his vision of a new photography. When he began working in 1928, he initially based his visual language on the aesthetic of the New Vision, which was, at the time, being developed primarily in Germany and the Soviet Union. László Moholy-Nagy, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and El Lissitzky were the protagonists of this leading-edge photography, which was the embodiment of the zeitgeist. Its structure reflected a dynamism that addressed the acceleration of life in the fast-growing metropolises that followed in the wake of industrialization. The views they provided seem dramatic, as if there were no firm ground beneath them. Although Evans's first photographs demonstrated an amazing degree of artistic maturity, they did not yet bear his signature. Their aesthetic followed the accentuation of form of the New Vision, a constructivism for its own sake. Skyscrapers and their dramatic axial alignments can be found in any metropolis: what is missing is Evans's own distinctive power of expression, for example the interest in the patina of local culture that characterizes his later work.

But this personal signature would soon assert itself. Beginning around 1930, Evans restlessly combed New York, in particular Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as the suburbs and areas dedicated to amusement and recreation. By 1933, when he was photographing in Cuba, he had found his own unique visual language and, with it, a high degree of artistic self-confidence: two elements that would henceforth provide the foundation for his work. Between 1935 and 1938, Evans worked for the federal government's Resettlement Administration (later Farm Security Administration), mostly in the deep South. He was sent there to document the life of the farmers and small-town residents who were impoverished by the Great

Depression. It was hoped that images recording the positive effects of state-sponsored relief programs would help gain political and public support for the programs' continuation. But Evans quietly ignored this assignment and developed his themes without regard for the prevailing conventions of socially engaged photography. He defended this freedom against all attempts to instrumentalize his images in the service of social and political campaigns, for example, regardless of how noble their goals might seem. "NO POLITICS whatever"⁶ was his cast-iron maxim when it came to his work. His interests in current affairs ran deeper than any politically oriented outlook. And thus within the framework of a program meant to promote the arts and social welfare, a body of work emerged that not only determines our perception of Evans's work, but also our concept of photography at its highest artistic level.

The characteristics of Evans's visual language are aloofness, economy of means, and intellectual acuity. His photographs can take on the appearance of sculptures: serene, formally lucid, and without superfluous ornamentation. They remain strictly impersonal. The subject matter is paramount. What fascinated him were subjects that had heretofore been ignored by photography: the signs and symbols of the commercial world, people in faceless suburbs, an anonymous architecture, and the neglected peripheries of the industrial landscape. Nor were the hardships of the Depression and the effects of natural disasters on the rural population ignored. In this work we encounter the face of the American nation, not the varnished and nostalgic view of the country that characterized advertising and political propaganda. Evans reveals the cultural cosmos of a mass society born of industrialization. Although this society does not bear the stamp of prosperity and learning in the traditional sense, it does nevertheless reveal its own aesthetic and creativity. Under Evans's eye, the commonplace and, from the perspective of high culture, the trivial take on a depth of their own and become extraordinary. "It is ourselves we see, ourselves lifted from a parochial setting. We see what we have not heretofore realized, ourselves made worthy in our anonymity." That is how William Carlos Williams described the impact these images had on him in 1938, following the publication of *American Photographs*, the magnum opus of Evans's published works.⁷

Evans's approach to photography is governed by a straightforwardness that forbids any formal embellishment—or “artiness,” as he put it. It was a pejorative directed primarily against Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, the principal protagonists of American and international photography of the day. These two photographers also served as a superb antithesis for their younger colleague and helped him develop his own artistic aesthetic. “I felt angry, and anxious to go in the opposite direction of these two men.”⁸ Whereas the older Stieglitz still discerned the aesthetic of the photographic image in proximity to painting and tried to imitate its effects while subscribing to the notion of an elaborate personal signature, Evans aspired to a form of photography that faces social reality and utilizes the possibilities inherent in the medium to capture the visible in a precise manner. It comes as no surprise that Paul Strand's photograph of a blind woman in the streets of New York would serve as one of Evans's few acknowledged paragons at the time (see p. 225). With regard to his thematic interests, he similarly dissociated himself from the established canon that determined which subjects were “artworthy.” Evans had a deep mistrust of the paradigm of the museum, believing that art should draw its energy from those areas where contemporary life showed itself in its most condensed form. For Evans, these areas were the streets of the cities and the people who moved in them.⁹ His aesthetic was fueled by the energy of that unconscious folk art known as “American vernacular,” which manifested itself in the public sphere, for example in the form of impromptu architecture, on billboards, and in window dressing.¹⁰ He had also encountered this in the photographs of Eugène Atget, in which an unadulterated, nonacademic sense of beauty manifests itself within a historical perspective extending back for centuries and generally founded in craftsmanship.¹¹

Evans's artistic ethos is defined by a deep respect for the visible world and its phenomena. His aim was to observe them meticulously and to portray them as clearly as possible, without any admixture of personal bias. He wanted to create documents, not art. Yet this approach does not tarry at the level of the crude empiricism one finds in journalistic or scientific documentation, for example, but instead advances to an inner sphere where matters are charged by the artist's imagination and thereby imbued with extraordinary

vitality. Evans walks a fine line between internal and external reality. He seeks a way to depict empirical reality that also reflects the artist's intimate reaction to it. When this is successful, photography, as Evans views it, comes into its own and can open up a transcendent dimension. How does this occur? The otherwise blind, unformed world suddenly answers us, and an underlying order shines through. Via the image, this epiphanic and, by its very nature, transitory moment is given tangible form without, however, destroying its inherently fleeting character. One recognizes in this a search for balance and a classic “will to form.” It is a state of balance between the outer world and the photographer, a fixed point at which he subordinates himself and his personal biases to the visible world and is absorbed into the formal structure of the image. This constitutes 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. The latter must not be adulterated by personal elements. This is because, one could say, that which is sensually perceptible is already beautiful in itself, and it requires no subjective molding, which could easily lapse into arbitrariness.

Evans sought to avoid any obvious presence as author in his photographs. The artist as a person with biographically influenced likes and dislikes remained invisible: an expression of opinion, let alone a moralizing air, was repulsive to him. This was Flaubert's maxim, which Evans applied with such advantage to himself: things take on a richer appearance and have a deeper effect when they are left untouched, as it were, in their own reality. Be that as it may, the facts that Evans wished to portray as objectively as possible nevertheless take on a magic of their own. This is because the artistic excitement of the photographer has seeped into their structure. He views things in an entirely new light—as if it were the first day of creation. What may at first appear to be a mere documentation of the visible is nevertheless a personal expression that binds itself to the appearance of things and, in doing so, transcends them. An observation a young Evans made about Atget's photographs also applies to his own artistic approach, which he defined as “lyric documentary” in order to distinguish it from a mere documentary



Sons of the American Legion, 1935

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impulse. In Atget's case, according to Evans, the issue is "a poetry which is not 'the poetry of the street' or 'the poetry of Paris' but the projection of Atget's person."¹²

The concept of "lyric documentary" has its counterpart in the term "documentary style." It stands at the center of Evans's aesthetic because it unites the two antipodes that define his notion of the artistic image. It is the point of intersection between the image's documentary pretension, namely the unmitigated depiction of selected visible phenomena, and its simultaneous artistic rendition, which elevates things above a merely empirical context. The photographic image renders things visible—and obscures them at the same time, depriving them of their nonambiguity. Their specific richness is spared dissolution within a purely functional context. A look at Evans's work makes it clear that the art of photography begins where the visible comes into contact with the invisible. The following quote is of central importance here:

"Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. You have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it can certainly adopt that style. I'm sometimes called a 'documentary photographer,' but that supposes quite a subtle knowledge of the distinction I've just made, which is rather new."¹³

It would thus appear that the empirical concept of truth peculiar to the exact sciences is confronted with an artistic plausibility that is sufficient unto itself in its simple sensory guise. Viewed from the perspective of techno-pragmatic utilitarian thinking, it may appear "useless," but for Evans, that which is "exact" according to the natural sciences has no exclusive claim to truth. In fact it does not grasp the intricacy of reality. With this in mind he prefaced one of his later publications—*Message from the Interior*, a manifesto of his artistic intentions that contained only twelve plates and a short text by Szarkowski—with an epigram borrowed from Matisse (who had taken it from Delacroix): "L'exactitude n'est pas la vérité" (Exactitude is not truth).¹⁴

Photography, as understood by Evans, *describes* reality, but it does not simply depict it. Photography is also always interpretation. It tries to *understand* what it sees while at the same time incorporating this comprehension into the image structure. A form-giving decision by the photographer vis-à-vis the visible world brings to a jolting halt the stream of seemingly common phenomena that would otherwise pour over us unfiltered. In the image they are transposed to a new order, one that liberates them from long-established patterns of perception. The seemingly familiar suddenly appears odd to us. It is made transparent, revealing an underlying framework that provides the primary foundation for singular entities and embeds them in a larger context of meaning. The image generates a unique visual energy and, with it, a cognitive vibrancy—the transcendence of which Evans spoke.

Today, more than ever, the perception of photography confuses the subject of the image with its aesthetic. Its so-called content is equated with the artistic statement. Although Evans's images are also borne by an interest in social contexts, we nevertheless discover in them with exceptional concision that which remains when all exposition and all narrative description of the world are said and done: it is the image in its own language, the essence that transforms the photographic print into art.

In light of this complex image concept, it is not surprising that Evans seems somewhat Janus-faced in his comments, published interviews, and written words. He effortlessly pendulated between supposed contradictions, never really committing himself and carefully avoiding any clear-cut statement that would constitute an undue restriction on himself. Any such statement could not adequately express the complexity of the field of experience in which he was interested. The same ambiguous character is also found in his photographs. They oscillate between a historical statement describing clearly defined facts, and the concept of an autonomous image that manifests itself as a simple sensory presence and is not wrapped up in an unequivocal reference or context that can be grasped via discourse. An aesthetic overhang always remains that cannot simply be attributed to the image content.

Asked about the polysemy of his photographs, Evans noted with regard to his works from the thirties that a historiographic impulse had naturally played a major role in his work: "Yes, and I was doing social history."¹⁵ He had been interested in the publicly visible guises of his time as expressions of social coexistence. He sought to capture advertising, architecture, the clothes that people wore, the emergence of the automobile—in short, all phenomena in which the public sphere intersected with elements of private life. To him they not only had value in and of themselves, but were of cultural importance as well. His eye served a historian's cause: he extracted those elements from the present that later generations would comprehend as fundamental aspects of their past, a past that had left its stamp on them. He interpreted the fleeting present with a view to a hypothetical future: "Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past."¹⁶

But Evans was also convinced—and this distinction was crucial to him—that photography could only succeed in such an undertaking if it found its own independent visual language to express it.

"For the thousandth time, it must be said that pictures speak for themselves, wordlessly, visually—or they fail."¹⁷ It is not sufficient to merely capture things and events in an anonymous manner, without infusing them artistically in the process. Such photographs are "blind" documents and will fade into obscurity when the historical moments they portray are no longer of current interest. It is above all the iconic density of a photograph that ensures the image will be remembered in the far-distant future.

These interrelationships between historical interest and the evidence of the artistic image become clearer when one takes a look at the evolution of Evans's work during the 1940s. At that time, he was working almost exclusively for *Fortune* magazine. He became staff photographer there in 1945, a position that gave him the ease and financial security he needed to develop his own concepts. Although these were purely commissioned photographs, they reveal a high degree of artistic energy. The things Evans photographed in the streets of Bridgeport, Detroit, and Chicago, for example, later appeared as photo stories in *Fortune*, but they were nevertheless completely in keeping with his own ideas and driven by the desire to further develop his idea of photography. These work groups are thematically linked through their concentration on a specific understanding of man, which is the conspicuous focus of attention.

Evans's interest in the portrayal of man runs deep and is a driving force behind his work. Yet the individual studio portraits taken at the outset of his career had little lasting significance for him. He was far more interested in the anonymous faces he encountered in public places, especially in cities. The term "anonymous" needs further clarification. The people he photographed are by no means faceless, but Evans does not concern himself with the study of their psyche or their individual outlook on life. He was instead interested in people as the central component in a cultural and historical process. At the end of his life, he once again pointedly declared his passion for the overarching social structures in which man is immersed along with the testimonials of his actions. "I'm fascinated by man's work

and the civilization he's built. In fact, I think that's *the* interesting thing in the world, what man does. Nature rather bores me as an art form."¹⁸ It is only as the bearer of such cultural meaning that man attains his stature. The way in which the individual fulfills this task was of primary interest to Evans, and he never tired of the subject. It is here that we encounter his true artistic drive, a drive was already apparent in the photographs taken in the streets of New York around 1930 in which the persons depicted, whose names we do not know, take on a quietude and dignity that makes them stand out from the anonymous crowd. This same energy, which can be generated through a direct encounter with another person, is also palpable in the Polaroids taken in Evans's private surroundings in New Haven during the last years of his life.

The counterpart to Evans's concept of art is an abstraction in which form is uncoupled from concrete experience and becomes an end in itself. To Evans, the idiosyncratic is an irreplaceable category, and he opposes its disappearance and the dissolution of man and all that bears witness to him within a superordinate historical perspective, a perspective that can only seem pale in comparison to the multifarious wealth of our living environment. Just what touched Evans's heart as a person and as an artist is expressed in the following text written in 1938, in which the coupling of his photographic concept to a specific outlook on life becomes apparent. It begins with a quote from Charles Flato about photographer Mathew Brady and then goes on to give a concise description of his own visual doctrine:

"Human beings...are far more important than elucidating factors in history; by themselves they have a greatness aside from the impressive structure of history.' There are moments and moments in history, and we do not need military battles to provide the images of conflicts, or to reveal the movements and changes, or again, the conflicts which in passing become the body of the history of civilizations. But we do need more than the illustrations in the morning papers of our period.... And then one thinks of the general run of the social mill: these anonymous people who come and go in the cities and who move on the land; it is on what they look like, now; what is in their faces and in the windows and on the streets beside

and around them; what they are wearing and what they are riding in, and how they are gesturing, that we need to concentrate, consciously, with the camera."¹⁹

Historiography as envisioned by Evans is the portrayal of man via the manmade cultural forms in which he lives and which he uses to interpret the world around him. For Evans, these constitute the idea of "life."

From the outset, Evans's work was defined by a unique inner freedom. He made his artistic decisions intuitively and without regard to prevailing aesthetic paradigms. He incorporated the changing external variables of photography, such as newer types of cameras, in his work, but above all, he adhered to his own concept of artistic necessity without paying heed to the various opinions of those around him. One can speak of Evans's self-empowerment, an autonomy that allowed him to make his decisions in accordance with his *own* ideas.

This intellectual independence was evident in his so-called subway portraits, the first extensive series of images that followed the publication of *American Photographs* in 1938. Evans resolutely trailblazed new territory with these photographs taken between 1938 and 1941 in the New York subway. During the thirties, he had almost exclusively photographed outdoors using a large-plate camera. He usually set it up for a frontal shot that enabled him to precisely frame the subject. Every detail was captured clearly and was, moreover, modulated by the effects of indirect sunlight. The compact camera he used while riding the subway took him to a new artistic level. It was wintertime, and he was therefore able to hide the camera under his overcoat. Only the lens was exposed, allowing him to photograph the people sitting opposite him without their knowledge. The results of these underground journeys upend the notions of a perfectly composed and perfectly lit photograph prevalent at the time: the photographer has but an inkling of what the camera will actually capture. He is solely guided by his experience and intuition. The faces and upper bodies of the passengers clad in heavy winter clothes seem to lean toward us out of the semidarkness. Completely absorbed in their inner worlds, they gaze at us while also

gazing into the void. These are the unique epistemic possibilities inherent in this approach: the vulnerability of the subjects endows them with a candidness that precludes them from assuming a sham pose, as they would in front of a visible camera. “The guard is down and the mask is off...people’s faces are in naked repose down in the subway.”²⁰ Here we encounter the harbinger of a new concept of the photographic image, one that Evans sought outside the studio and its supposed artistic aura. The photographer no longer assumes the guise of ingenious author with absolute mastery of the camera and its form-giving “tricks.” Instead, he gives a productive turn to the seeming curtailment of his technical possibilities. We see in him a sort of “blind prophet” blessed, like Tiresias, with the ability to reveal the truth that remains hidden from the seemingly unimpaired. Having dispensed with total control of the camera, the photographer embraces the element of chance combined with a new conceptual stringency, an automated rhythm previously unknown in photography, which operates the shutter. “Composition is a schoolteacher’s word,”²¹ as Evans once self-confidently put it in order to differentiate it from his own intuitively guided method. The subway portraits demonstrate the unmitigated energy that could be released by a rebellion against the conventions of the art concept prevalent at that time. Here we witness not only a renewal of form, but of content as well, because an understanding of individuality emerges that illustrates a humane potential precisely in anonymity. It is not surprising that Szarkowski discovered in these photographs “the astonishing individuality of Evans’ subjects and fellow riders—an individuality not so much of their roles and stations as of their secrets.”²²

Referring to August Sander’s book *Antlitz der Zeit* (Face of Our Time), in which people appear as representatives of an occupational group or a social class in Germany, Evans had written in 1931 of “a photographic editing of society, a clinical process”²³ that would represent an important task for the photography of the future. With the subway portraits, he took a first decisive step toward such an objective form of social analysis, one that was liberated from the personal preferences of the author. That work would continue in the *Fortune* portfolio “Labor Anonymous” (1946; see pp. 282–87), which poses the same questions under different external circumstances. Once again

the subjects are anonymous people in a public space, but the camera has moved out of the semidarkness of the winter subway onto a busy Detroit street on a summer afternoon. There, against the neutral backdrop of a construction fence, the camera captures people, singly or in pairs, most of whom are probably on their way home from work.

Equipped with his Rolleiflex, a medium-format camera, Evans had posted himself on the opposite side of the street. He did not look directly at the passersby, but rather at the camera’s viewfinder, which he had locked in the desired position. The passersby must have appeared like shadows to him as they came into view, and Evans had only a fraction of a second to decide if the image was worthwhile before releasing the shutter. The creative process is governed by an openness that knows no precise composition of the image nor focusing of the lens. His subjects rarely took notice of the camera because it was set up some distance away. They move naturally, most of them with downcast eyes, lost in their own thoughts. This distance frees the photographer to concentrate solely on the desired image without encroaching on the subjects’ privacy. Due to the lack of interpretation by the photographer, they barely seem like individuals. Instead they take on the character of a social type that provides a clear view of social reality. “A city street will tell you as much in its way as your morning newspaper tells. One fact it will not only tell you but rub it into you hard: everybody works.”²⁴ A cross-section of American society passes in review, capturing the unique spirit prevalent at this moment in history following the Second World War. Although chance plays a significant role—for there was no way of foreseeing just who would pass by at that hour—we are nevertheless convinced that these images depict something real and valid that transcends the fleeting existence of the passersby. The people in the photographs are too poignant in their unbroken presence to permit any other interpretation. Where photography was concerned, Walker Evans was convinced that “nothing good ever happens except by mistake,”²⁵ as Lincoln Kirstein noted in his diary in 1931. “Labor Anonymous” also bears witness to the way artistic necessity can arise out of seeming happenstance.

In summing up Evans’s historical significance, it becomes apparent that it is not formal renewal but rather a change of *perspective* that

sets him apart from the traditional task of photography, namely the precise description of significant phenomena in the visible world. In his case the difference lies in the unique quality of his eye and consciousness. In Evans's work one observes a return to the anonymous craftsmanship of early photography, a craftsmanship that replaces the distinct signature of the author so characteristic of modern art. His art is guided by personal restraint, which forms a shield behind which he can give his imagination free rein. This inner independence provided him with the self-confidence necessary to capture the beauty of seemingly trivial things with certainty, transforming them into unquestionable facts released from the sphere of personal opinion. The incidental and commonplace are transformed into everlasting symbols and take on the appearance of expressions of order and morality. Through the selection of particular, at times seemingly arbitrary, fragments, it is possible to piece together an overall image of a society and its culture that, as if by magic, became home to a generation of Americans. As Thomas Mabry wrote in a review of *American Photographs* in 1938: "Look across the river, down into Easton, Pennsylvania. I think it is a spring day. The whole town lies there. I was not born in Pennsylvania, nor in a city, and yet I think I must have been born here."²⁶ In this sense we understand the characterization of Evans's photography by Lincoln Kirstein quoted in the title of this essay: "A surgeon operating on the fluid body of time."²⁷

Above all, an insatiable appetite for life radiates from Evans's photographs. His receptivity to the unmediated sensual experience of the world was urgent and deep, and it raises his images above the level of mere documents. It was the expression of one man's unrestricted search for the Archimedean point of the world—a search that was capable of devouring the searcher: "The thing itself is such a secret and so unapproachable."²⁸

Notes

This essay expands upon ideas that I have also addressed in “Lyric Documentary: The Social Poetics of Walker Evans,” in *Walker Evans: Labor Anonymous* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015).

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (The Phenomenology of Spirit), Web.
2. Leslie Katz, “Interview with Walker Evans,” *Art in America* 59 (March–April 1971): 84.
3. For a combined examination of Evans and Hopper, see Heinz Liesbrock, “Giganten Amerikas—Edward Hopper und Walker Evans. Eine Begegnung,” in *Linien. Musik des Sichtbaren. Festschrift für Michael Semff* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2015), 316–25.
4. Quoted in Brian O’Doherty, “Portrait: Edward Hopper,” *Art in America* 52 (December 1964): 23.
5. Quoted from an unpublished transcript of a talk at South House, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass., April 8, 1975. Papers of Marcia Due and Jerry L. Thompson, Amenia, N.Y.
6. Walker Evans, “Memorandum re Resettlement Administration job, Spring 1935,” published in *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), 112.
7. William Carlos Williams, “Sermon with a Camera,” *The New Republic* 96 (October 11, 1938): 282.
8. Jonathan Goell, “Walker Evans Recalls Beginning,” *Boston Sunday Globe* (September 19, 1971): 53.
9. “Then the street becomes your museum; the museum itself is bad for you. 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 ‘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” (Katz, 88).
10. “Evans abhorred artiness, for it was the substitution of aspect for fact; but the subject matter of his own work was very often a kind of incipient art: the promising beginnings and honorable failures and fragmented shards of an American sensibility, which if respected might someday rise up to become a coherent and persuasive style of life and value.... Evans rejected the accepted successes of picture making, and began again instinctively with the nourishment that he could find in hand-painted signs, amateur buildings, the humbler varieties of commercial art, automobiles, and the people’s sense of posture, costume and design” (John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971], 16).
11. See John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget*, 4 vols. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981–85). On Evans’s relationship to Atget, see especially John Szarkowski, *ibid.*, vol. 4, *Modern Times*, 9–33.
12. Walker Evans, “The Reappearance of Photography,” *Hound & Horn* 5 (October–December 1931): 126.
13. Katz, 87.
14. Walker Evans, *Message from the Interior* (New York: Eakins Press, 1966).
15. “I was sure that I was working in the documentary style. Yes, and I was doing social history, broadly speaking” (Boston interview, August 4, 1971, in *Walker Evans at Work*, 82).
16. From Evans’s unpublished introductory note, dated November 29, 1961, for reissue of *American Photographs*, in *ibid.*, 151.
17. Walker Evans, “Robert Frank,” in *U.S. Camera Annual 1958*, ed. Tom Maloney (New York: U.S. Camera Publishing Corp., 1958), 90.
18. Quoted from an unpublished transcript of a talk at South House, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass., April 8, 1975. Papers of Marcia Due and Jerry L. Thompson, Amenia, N.Y.
19. From Evans’s unpublished note for the original edition of *American Photographs*, in *Walker Evans at Work*, 151.
20. From Evans’s caption for photographs published in *Harper’s Bazaar* (March 1962), in *ibid.*, 152.
21. Katz, 85.
22. Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, 18.
23. Walker Evans, “The Reappearance of Photography,” 128.
24. Walker Evans, “Copy to LABOR PICTURE SPREAD,” August 8, 1946, typescript. Walker Evans Archive, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
25. “One of W. E.’s convictions is that nothing good ever happens except by mistake” (Lincoln Kirstein, diary entry dated March 26, 1931, carbon-copy typescript given to Jerry Thompson in 1984. Papers of Marcia Due and Jerry Thompson, Amenia, N.Y.).
26. Thomas Dabney Mabry, “Walker Evans’s Photographs of America,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (November 1, 1938): 85, quoted in Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, 20.
27. Lincoln Kirstein, unpublished diary entry, April 1931, quoted in Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, 12.
28. Walker Evans, “The Thing Itself Is Such a Secret and So Unapproachable,” *Yale Alumni Magazine* (February 1974).

1 Origins and Early Work, 1926–1931

John T. Hill

When Walker Evans left on his first trip to Europe in April of 1926 with hopes of becoming a writer on a par set by his heroes, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and especially James Joyce, he took as an aside Eastman Kodak's smallest vest pocket camera. (Aside number two was his mother, who accompanied him—at least for a short while.)

In a late interview Evans told students, "Any man of my age who was sensitive to the arts was drawn as by a magnet to Paris because that was the incandescent center, the place to be."¹ Evans sampled the bars and restaurants favored by expatriate artists. He enrolled in classes, and for some months he wrote a creditable number of short works. The paths of his literary idols led him along the Riviera beaches. He read and translated extended passages from modern French writers including Flaubert, Baudelaire, Gide, and Proust.

Although Evans liked to recall that he lived in Paris for two years, he in fact returned to New York in May of 1927. But the year abroad had a profound effect on him: "mine was the first generation that went to Europe and got a European perspective and technique and came back and applied it to America," he said in a 1971 interview.²

From Evans's first faint interest in photography he must have seen the lyrical parallels of words and images. By 1928 the emotional blockage in his writing and the discovery of his visual gifts encouraged him to redirect his passion toward photography. As he recalled in that same interview:

"I was a passionate photographer, and for a while somewhat guiltily. I thought it was a substitute for something else—well, for writing, for one thing. I wanted to write. But I became very engaged with all the things there were to be had out of the camera, and became compulsive about it. It was a real drive. Particularly when the lighting was right, you couldn't keep me in. I was a little shamefaced about it, because most photography had about it a ludicrous, almost comic side, I thought. A 'photographer' was a figure held in great disdain. Later I used that defiantly. But then, I suppose, I thought photographing was a minor thing to be doing. And I guess I thought I ought to be writing. In Paris, I had been trying to write. But in writing I felt blocked—mostly by high standards. Writing's a



Untitled, Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1929

very daring thing to do. I'd done a lot of reading, and I knew what writing was. But shy young men are seldom daring.... About 1928 and 1929, I had a few prescient flashes and they led me on. I found I wanted to get a type in the street, a 'snapshot' of a fellow on the waterfront, or a stenographer at lunch. That was a very good vein. I still mine that vein."³

Evans's earliest photographs were made using his small folding camera. In some of the first, he records himself in a mirror or his shadow on a wall (pp. 8, 391). Then, as today, it was a normal reflex to make a "selfie." However, most of his early works focused on abstractions of architecture, showing a clear interest in the constructivist style from Germany and Russia. In 1930, for example, Hart Crane's epic poem *The Bridge* was published with three of Evans's photographs of the bridge, rendered in a constructivist

manner. In the same year, *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst* was published in Paris and Leipzig by Henri Jonquières.⁴ Maurice Casteels was the author, and Henry van de Velde contributed the foreword. This large, richly produced book surveys the architecture and decorative interiors of the day. Among the carefully credited illustrations are two plates by Evans: one is of the Chrysler Building under construction, and the second looks down on patterns of high-rise buildings just below midtown Manhattan (p. 32). Such works were a prime example of his youthful sampling of a style that was more dependent on form than content. Glimpses of surrealism as well appear in two early portraits of Lincoln Kirstein: one a Janus-like double exposure (p. 103), the other a bare-chested Kirstein dismembering a funnel (p. 4).

Evans is due all that has been written about his deep literary reservoir and how he drew on that trove in establishing his own style. In later years he paid homage to French authors as sources of his depth of field, citing less often the impact of visual artists on his work: “I found myself operating direct from the French esthetic and psychological approach to the world. I applied that to the problem of rendering what I saw.”⁵ But over the years, Evans’s style would be shaped by an eclectic and intricate root system, one indebted to visual no less than literary influences. In a letter to Hanns Skolle, he wrote of the impact made by Alfred Stieglitz’s photograph of Georgia O’Keeffe’s hands. Through an introduction by a painter friend, Evans was granted an audience with Stieglitz, the reigning master of photographic art. Though Stieglitz failed to accept Evans into the magic circle, the young photographer now had a bounding board that pushed him to find his own aesthetic. For Evans to disavow Stieglitz’s paradigm was a bold step away from the establishment and into the unknown, particularly given photography’s reception at the time: “in the thirties or when I was moving into this thing, it so happened that very few men of taste, education, or even just general sophistication, or any kind of educated mind, ever touched photography. Nobody ever says that very much. But that has a lot to do with the history of photography.... We don’t often talk about how damn few superior minds were ever in it. Also it was a disdained medium.”⁶

Equally significant was Paul Strand’s work, specifically his adept capture of the portrait of a blind woman, heightened by its graphic label, the word “BLIND” (p. 225). (Making the word a subject or a vital focal point appeared in much of Evans’s early work.) Evans’s early pursuit of New York street portraits must owe some debt to Strand.

During this exploratory stage, Hanns Skolle and Paul Grotz were Evans’s close friends and at times his roommates. Both artists were new arrivals from Germany. Having been recently in Europe, Evans was no doubt familiar with the German avant-garde tenets of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*—Grotz and Skolle may have reinforced those concepts. The movement’s name, fashioned by Gustav Hartlaub in the early 1920s, defined a reaction against expressionism, romantic tradition, and Weimar politics. The translation of *Neue Sachlichkeit* contains nuance beyond the range of English. “New Objectivity” is accepted as a fair compromise translation. The most literal translation of *Sachlichkeit* could be “Thingness.”

31



By Maurice Casteels

Published by Henri Jonquières, Paris and Leipzig, 1930

Here was a frontal attack on the fine art tradition and an embrace of things as they are. It reflected an American attitude—the proud candor to “tell it like it is”—that neatly aligns with Evans’s embrace of the tabloid, the newsreel, postcards, and most anything vernacular. The work of Neue Sachlichkeit photographers was characterized by sharp images focused on the everyday and the non-beautiful. Compositions were static, not relying on the dynamic angle or visual tour de force. As the name suggests, all sentimentality was scraped away. The movement is a broad recognition of the banal as a worthy subject.

In late 1931 Lincoln Kirstein invited Evans to write a critical review of six recent photo books (likely Evans’s selections) for the literary magazine *Hound & Horn*. Evans responded by producing a brilliant and timeless critique, “The Reappearance of Photography.” One of the books was the first publication of Eugène Atget’s work, initiated by Berenice Abbott and published in Paris and New York. Three were German publications. Two of these show the work of August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch, photographers closely associated with Neue Sachlichkeit. The third, *Photo-Eye*, was an anthology of seventy-six photographs edited by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold. A photographer and theorist, Roh had created a second name for essentially the same movement, calling it “magic realism.” Roh’s title brings to mind Evans’s ultimate definition of his own style as “lyric documentary.” In both terms, the combination of opposing words produced phrases with similar meaning. Evans would quote more than twenty lines from this volume, which he called “a nervous and important book,” saluting its editors for finding examples of the “new” photography in “the news photo, aerial photography, microphotography, astronomical photography, photomontage and the photogram, multiple exposure and the negative print.”⁷

A generation earlier, the work of Eugène Atget foresaw this new spirit. He produced thorough representations of specific sober subjects, static, with precisely rendered objects—qualities of the new vision and qualities that later defined Evans’s photographs. When Berenice Abbott returned to New York from Paris, she brought with her a major portion of Atget’s archive. Evans’s access to that work was a pivotal force in shaping his mature style. In what seems



Walker Evans, plates 14 and 87, *Die Sachlichkeit in der modernen Kunst*



Eugène Atget, *Petit Intérieur d'un artiste dramatique*, ca. 1901

Walker Evans, *Fuller House Interior*, ca. 1930



a fortunate but natural conflation of Atget's work with the New Objectivity, we see Evans building the framework that would support a personal and intensely American style. Reviewing the Atget book, he noted a "lyrical understanding of the street,...special feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail, over all of which is thrown a poetry which is not 'the poetry of the street' or 'the poetry of Paris,' but the projection of Atget's person." What is not expected in a book review is Evans's criticism of the book's physical shortcomings: "reproductions are extremely disappointing. They and the typography and the binding make the book look like a pirated edition of some other publication."⁸ These words signaled his early evaluation of the book as a complete gestalt, with a need to balance content and presentation.

We all identify ourselves with the kin we claim. We brand ourselves by the mentors we choose, keeping in mind the currency of their respect. Evans was no exception. Over the years, his literary references trump those from the visual arts. In spite of what may be said in support of the image, the written word holds the higher card in the arts. Among Evans's oft-cited literary mentors, however, one name is glaring in its absence, that of Blaise Cendrars. In 1926, Cendrars and Guillaume Apollinaire were named by John Dos Passos as the two seminal modernist poets. His work with Apollinaire and Cocteau was well known. Cendrars's 1912 poem "Easter in New York," followed by his "Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France" had established him as a major force. He stood shoulder to shoulder with the extraordinary artists of that fertile period.

In April of 1926 when Evans arrived in Paris, Cendrars's horrific novel *Moravagine* had just appeared in the bookshops. Cendrars was a dazzler—a gifted, unrestrained, shape-shifting persona who could not have escaped Evans's voracious eye. When Evans returned to New York in 1927 he began translating *Moravagine*. In August of 1929 two pages of that translation were published in the literary magazine *Alhambra*, edited by Angel Flores. In the same edition was Evans's first published photograph, *New York in the Making*. He must have been delighted to see his literary effort and his photograph in one publication. Here, in print, were his diverging roads.

Building on Baudelaire's respect for common objects as vehicles of poetic meaning, Cendrars examined what he termed the "principle of utility" in *Moravagine* in the chapter "Our Rambles in America." It is a clear outline of the aesthetic and utilitarian values of objects:

"The caveman making a handle for his stone axe, curving it gently to give him a better grip, polishing it lovingly, was obeying the same principle of utility that guides the modern engineer when he builds a scientific curve into the hull of a 40,000-ton transatlantic steamer... incidentally giving this floating city a line that is pleasing to the eye.

Roads, canals, railways, ports, buttresses, sustaining walls and embankments, high-tension wires, water conduits, bridges, tunnels, all these straight and curved lines that dominate the modern landscape impose upon it a kind of grandiose geometry....

The concrete traces of [human] activity are not art objects but objects artistically made....

...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, this language that is the reflection of human consciousness the poetry that makes known the image of the mind conceiving it, the lyricism that is a way of being and feeling,... the multicolored posters and the giant letters that prop up the hybrid architectures of 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.

Today.
Profundity of today."⁹

If it were not for Evans's effort in translating parts of Cendrars's novel, this extract could be dismissed as a coincidental footnote. However, Cendrars's remarkable list could easily serve as an inventory of Evans's early subjects, or the later subjects that he proposed to *Fortune* magazine. Cendrars was a brilliant innovator who put down prescient markers but quickly moved on—from poetry to film to



Qi 8619			
LONDON TRANSPORT BUSES			
1	ROUTE 96	FT	
1	Spencer Arms Pinner Con	Bow Bridge	22
2	Putney Church	Bow Road L.T. Station	21
3	Manselton Road	Barnet Road	20
4	Willesden Green Sta	Stratford Stn	19
5	Stanford Hill Stadium	London Hwy Central Sta	18
6	Redcliffe Road Barnet Stn	Highgate Stn	17
7	William II Queen's Way	Manningtree Station	16
8	St. Pancras Station	Chiswick Cross	15
9	Waltham Cross Station	Wellington Street	14
10	St. George's Hospital	Turnham Green Craven St	13
11	Green Park Station	Chiswick Cross	12

Walker Evans, *Untitled, Two-Ended Wrench*, 1955
(*Fortune*; unpublished)

London bus ticket, collected by Evans



Walker Evans, *Untitled, New York Skyline*, ca. 1928



Blaise Cendrars, *Kodak (Documentaire)*, 1924

Cover illustration, Frans Masereel

journalism to memoir—before fully developing his claims. An earlier work of some relevance was his book *Kodak* (1924), a collection of poems that he described as verbal photographs. But by the time Evans began using references to modernist French writers as the origins of his style, Cendrars was no longer recognized as the literary innovator he had once been. Evans's fascination with his work seems to have been brief, and he did not make the list of Evans's French heroes. Thus we can only speculate about the impact of these lines from *Moravagine*.

Evans cast himself as a modernist, even though his process could easily be misinterpreted as traditional. His choice of nineteenth-century large-format paraphernalia for one period of his career might obscure the reading of his bold new way of making pictures. Much of his genius comes from his endless reinventing and adjusting his style and his persona. "Photography isn't a matter of taking pictures. It's a matter of having an eye."¹⁰

Notes

1. Quoted in James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 38.
2. See Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March–April 1971): 84.
3. *Ibid.*, 83–84, 85.
4. Jonquières was also the publisher of the volume of Atget photographs that Evans reviewed the following year in *Hound & Horn*.
5. Katz, 84.
6. Oral history interview with Walker Evans, October 13–December 23, 1971, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
7. Walker Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5 (October–December 1931): 127.
8. *Ibid.*, 126.
9. Blaise Cendrars, *Moravagine*, trans. Alan Brown (New York: Blast Books, Inc., 1990), 148–49, 150, 157–58.
10. Walker Evans, quoted in "The Art of Seeing," *The New Yorker* (December 24, 1966): 27, an unsigned "Talk of the Town" piece occasioned by the recent publication of *Message from the Interior* and *Many Are Called*, as well as solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery.



Untitled, Self-Portrait, Paris, 1926

Untitled, Bay of Naples, April 1927





Untitled, Self-Portrait, Brooklyn, 1928

Untitled, Three Self-Portraits, Darien, Connecticut, 1929



Untitled, Self-Portrait, Cuba, 1933

Untitled, Self-Portraits, New York, 1928



Untitled, Brooklyn House, 1929
Wall Street Windows, 1929

