

## Art in Review



At Andrea Rosen Gallery, left, an installation view of “The Wedding,” a group show organized by Ydessa Hendeles, and, above “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” by Michael St. John.

### ‘The Wedding’

(The Walker Evans Polaroid Project)

### Michael St. John

‘In the studio Twenty Eleven’

Andrea Rosen Gallery  
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea  
Through Feb. 4

The cooked and the raw go head to head in these two exhibitions. The main event and cooked portion is “The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project),” an inspired if somewhat lugubrious group show orchestrated by Ydessa Hendeles, a Canadian collector and respected independent (and independently wealthy) curator. Over the last 30 years Ms. Hendeles has become known for staging idiosyncratic exhibitions in her eponymous art foundation in Toronto, increasingly mixing contemporary art from her collection with other acquisitions, including vintage photographs and unusual antiques. At Rosen her first effort in New York pairs effectively with a show of the relatively fibrous collage-paintings that constitute the artist Michael St. John’s latest excursions into contemporary culture and its

discontents.

Characterized as “a curatorial composition,” Ms. Hendeles’s “Wedding” is less an exhibition than an elegiac installation piece. It carefully pits art against craft, the quick against the dead and, to my mind, fact and document (exemplified by photography) against faith and memory (represented by Gothic style). Ms. Hendeles finds traces of the Gothic sensibility in the Arts and Crafts furniture of Gustav Stickley, a photograph of an ancient Paris shop front by Eugène Atget and a monumental 19th-century mahogany bird cage in the form of a square, lavishly domed cathedral, crystal palace or mausoleum.

This magnificent object sits at the center of a large, gray-walled gallery, flanked reverentially by eight diminutive pewlike benches (meticulous reproductions of a child’s settle by Stickley). The mix also includes a lovely 19th-century wood miniature of a cooper’s (or barrelmaker’s) workshop, complete with tiny tools and parquet floor, and a grid of astounding photographs, dated 1887, from Eadweard Muybridge’s “Animal Locomotion” series. In them an adjutant, or giant stork, wings awkwardly akimbo, seems about to take flight.

The big mahogany bird cage

functions as a kind of mother ship for a selection of 68 small images, mostly of Victorian, Gothic-inflected houses that the great American photographer Walker Evans (1903-75) made shortly before his death, using the new Polaroid SX-70. Ringing the gallery in a single closely spaced line, they reiterate his crystalline, groundbreaking black-and-white images of vernacular architecture from the 1930s, but with fuzzy forms, seeping color and fading light. Here they form a relentless march of ghostly mirages that only pauses, at the center of each wall, for a photographic work by the sculptor Roni Horn: a pair of large color images of the heads of exotic, taxidermied birds, seen from behind.

Elegantly clear, with each feather in place, Ms. Horn’s bird images snap Ms. Hendeles’s presentation into focus. Portraying possible residents of the bird cage, they are the opposite of both Evans’s small blurry domiciles and Muybridge’s struggling adjutant. From afar the birds’ silhouettes can bring to mind Gothic arches. Up close they might be looking at the Polaroids; they could also be couples (same sex or not) exchanging marriage vows at the altar.

It is fascinating to parse the web of possible connections, contrasts

and meanings that permeate “The Wedding.” But it helps that the presentation’s slightly precious air is offset by the bracing, seemingly uncouth Americana of “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” Mr. St. John’s show in the back gallery. Inspired by a Jasper Johns painting, his nine new works teach the old dogs of appropriation and collage new tricks, partly through the use of sparkling, minimally painted canvases. Employing modernist abstraction as a kind of bulletin board that also suggests a chunk of art-studio wall, each presents a spare but suggestive assortment of cheap and expendable items — photographs, trinkets, newspaper clippings, decals, small objects and the odd drawing or note — that, like the works in Ms. Hendeles’s show, form a kind of rebus. Most of the items are real, although the tacks and pushpins holding hold them in place are actually painted on. With the ephemeral as a common thread Mr. St. John slyly fuses trompe l’oeil painting with a small, portable version of installation art. Somehow it is a very memorable lesson.

ROBERTA SMITH

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## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### "THE WEDDING (THE WALKER EVANS POLAROID PROJECT)"

The Toronto-based collector and curator Ydessa Hendeles organized this fascinating show around eighty-three Polaroids of vernacular architecture that Evans made in the year before his death, in 1975. She calls it "a site-specific curatorial composition," and includes an Atget photograph of a Paris storefront, a Muybridge motion study of an agitated bird, eight Roni Horn pictures of the sleek backs of Icelandic wildfowl heads, and, in the center of the main gallery, an enormous mahogany birdcage. Child-size benches, ranked around the object like church pews, give the show a ceremonial and elegiac cast. Evans's photographs strike a similarly melancholy note, but they're also miniature marvels, glowing in this eccentric setting. Through Jan. 14. (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000.)

THE NEW YORKER, JANUARY 9, 2012

ART

## Marrying Old and New: Walker Evans's Polaroids and Roni Horn's Photographs on View at Andrea Rosen

by Leslie Camhi



Walker Evans, *no title*, 1974

Photo: Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

“The strange and wonderful fruit of a late, unexpected harvest,” is how Jerry L. Thompson, a protégé of Walker Evans, once described the master’s Polaroids. In 1973, nearly half a century after he began taking pictures, Evans began playing around with Polaroid’s new camera, the SX-70. This “toy,” as he called it, triggered an exceptional burst of creativity in the photographer, who was then 70, in failing health, and whose classic work was decades behind him. (Think of the elderly Matisse, lying in bed, with his scissors and paper cutouts.) “With the Polaroid SX-70, Evans exposed photography to its core essence; the art of seeing, selecting and capturing,” says Gregory Crewdson, one of several contemporary artists who remain mesmerized by Evans’s late achievement. “The immediacy of the format fit perfectly with his search for a succinct yet lyrical view of the world around him.” Now Ydessa Hendeles, the founder and director of Toronto’s Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, who is best known for her poetic and allusive installations, has organized “The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project),” a show opening Saturday at Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea, which pairs 83 of Evans’s Polaroids of American vernacular architecture—funerary monuments, faded Victorian gingerbread cottages—with photographs from “Bird,” a body of work made by the artist Roni Horn between 1998 and 2007. (Various sculptural elements—a monumental, nineteenth-century English birdcage, for example, surrounded by pint-sized Gustav Stickley replica pews—complete the curator’s site-specific and theatrical *mise-en-scène*.) Horn’s pictures of taxidermied Icelandic waterfowl, shot in close-up and from behind, take their cues from the history of minimalism, encouraging reflection on sameness and difference. Evans’s Polaroids, on the other hand, are small elegies to a vanishing landscape, recorded in a now-nearly extinct technology. “He almost stalks the buildings,” Hendeles explains. “He goes around and around.” The exhibition is a marriage of opposites. “These are two bodies of work which have nothing in common other than their medium,” Hendeles continues. “As a curator, I created a narrative where it’s as if they are in a theater together, and they each have a voice.”

“*The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project) With Roni Horn*” opens December 10 at Andrea Rosen Gallery and is on view through January 14, 2012; [andreaosengallery.com](http://andreaosengallery.com)



## Biography/Chronology of Walker Evans

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1903 Born in ST. Louis, Missouri. His parents are well-off, puritanical; his father is an advertising director. He spends his youth in Toledo, Chicago, and New York City.

1922 Graduates from the Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Studies literature at Williams College (one year), then takes various jobs in New York City.

1926 Lives in Paris with the intention of becoming a writer; attends literature lectures at the Sorbonne.

1927 Returns to New York. Clerk for a stockbroker firm in Wall Street (until 1929).

1928 First photographs with a small hand-held, roll-film camera.

1929 Begins friendship with Lincoln Kirstein, then still a student at Harvard University but already a key figure in the American cultural scene.

1930 First publication of three photographs (Brooklyn Bridge) in the poetry book *The Bridge* by Hart Crane. First photographs of nineteenth century American houses; development of the descriptive style that influences his further work. He sees photographs by Eugene Atget who has a lasting influence on him. Begins work with different cameras up to 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches, initially with glass-plate negatives.

1931 Photo series of Victorian houses in the Boston vicinity; Lincoln Kirstein initiated the project and accompanied Evans. Shared studio in Greenwich Village with other artists, including the painter and later FSA photographer Ben Shahn (through 1932).

1933 Photographic expedition to Havana during the political unrest in Cuba with the commission to provide illustrations for Carleton Beals's book *The Crime of Cuba*. Encounter with Ernest Hemingway. Comes to prefer use of an 8 x 10 view camera; continues to work with a 35mm camera.

1935 Photographic expedition to the Southern states. Photographs architecture from the antebellum period, especially plantation houses. First cooperation with The Museum of Modern Art, New York: photographic documentation for the exhibition "African Negro Art"; select photographs are sent out on traveling exhibitions.

1935 In June and July first fixed-term photographic campaign for the Resettlement Administration (RA) to West Virginia and Pennsylvania. From October continuing photographic work for the RA, the later Farm Security Administration (FSA), primarily in the Southern states.

1936 July/August: three-week stay with sharecropper families in Hale County, Alabama, together with James Agee. The commission is from *Fortune* for a text-photo article on sharecroppers. Agee had requested Evans as photographer. Evans receives a temporary leave from his FSA job under the condition that the photographs become government property. The article (lost) does not meet the magazine's expectations and is rejected. The expanded book version does not appear until:

1941: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

1937 September: end of his contract with the FSA. From now on activity as independent photographer, partially, up to the summer of 1938, for the FSA.

1938 "Walker Evans: American Photographs," exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the first exhibition in this museum devoted to the work of a single photographer. Catalog with an essay by Lincoln Kirstein. First photographs in the New York subway with a camera hidden in his coat.

1940 Ever more seldom use of a view camera; in its place a 2 1/4 twin-lens reflex camera and a 35mm camera.

1941 Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is published by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston after a long search for a publisher. The book meets with a reserved response since the sharecropper problem has been replaced by wartime themes.

1943 Articles for Time magazine (through 1944).

1945 Continuous photo and text contributions to Fortune to 1965.

1948 Exhibition (retrospective) at the Art Institute of Chicago.

1950 Photo series of the American industrial landscape seen as though from the window of a moving train.

1955 Death of his friend James Agee.

1960 New edition of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men with expanded section of photographs. The book experiences a late success in the atmosphere of the 1960 protest movements and the beginning of a cult around James Agee. Through this edition a new generation also discovers Evans's photographs.

1965 Professor of photography on the Faculty for Graphic Design at the Yale School of Art and Architecture.

1966 Many are Called. Publication in book form of his subway photographs.

1971 "Walker Evans," exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Catalog with an essay by John Szarkowski.

1975 April 10: Evans dies in New Haven, Connecticut.

1994 The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquires the Walker Evans Archive.

2000 February - May: Walker Evans retrospective runs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

*reproduced from: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/chrono.html>*

Rosenheim, Jeff L. Walker Evans: Polaroids. Zurich: Scalo and New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.

*Walker Evans: Polaroids*

Jeff L. Rosenheim

In July 1973, the American artist Walker Evans (1903-1975) was four months shy of his seventieth birthday. After fifty years of work in photography, he was tired and in poor health, still recovering from near-fatal stomach surgery the previous winter. Childless and alone after his second divorce, Evans was supported during his protracted convalescence by several of his neighbors in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and a few of his Yale University students. All outward signs suggested that his remarkable career with the camera was a thing of the past—even the successful tour of his 1971 retrospective exhibition organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, had just concluded after eight venues. But while visiting a friend in Atlanta, Georgia, (a dentist/collector who agreed to work on his teeth), something—perhaps a sense of his own mortality—spurred the artist to acquire one more camera, a Polaroid SX-70, and to begin again the difficult job of making intelligent pictures. This final series of photographs, executed between September 1973 and November 1974, is the subject of this publication.

This just-released Polaroid SX-70 camera promised much more to the amateur snaphooter with money to burn: it produced instant color prints and incorporated a lens and exposure system calibrated primarily for portraiture; it was small in size—the machine folded up and fit easily into a jacket pocket; and it featured a refined modern design of brushed aluminum with inlaid pony leather sure to satisfy any country-clubber with technophile aspirations. But what could this new camera which Evans referred to as “the toy,” offer a serious photographer who had begun his career in the late 1920s with a glass-plate view camera and a wooden tripod, and who had been one of the first Americans to master the Leica, the premier 35mm roll-film camera? What could it offer a sophisticated artist who had collaborated with the writer James Agee on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), an intense study of the lives of Alabama tenant farmers, considered to be the masterpiece of documentary expression in 1930s America?

As is the case with most artists, Evans’s motivating impulses, and specifically what drove him to dedicate the last fourteen months of his creative life to the SX-70, are difficult to determine. His clearest statement of purpose appears in a 1974 interview conducted by Bill Ferris, at the time a fellow professor at Yale. When asked what interested him about the SX-70 camera, Evans responded:

“I bought that thing as a toy, and I took it as a kind of challenge. It was this gadget and I decided that I might be able to do something serious with it. So I got to work to try to prove that. I think I’ve done something with it. After all, I am getting older, and I feel that nobody should touch a Polaroid until he’s over sixty. You should first do all that work. It makes thing awfully easy to have that thing pop out. It reduces everything to your brains and taste. It interests me very much, too, because I feel that if you have these things in your head, this is the instrument that will really test it. The damn thing will do anything you point it at. You have to really know something before you dare point it anywhere. You have to know what you’re pointing it at, and why—even if it’s only instinctive.

*Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans*  
[Memphis, Tennessee: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977], p.37.

All this pointing generated more than 2,650 photographs. In the fall of 1973, Evans mustered his waning energy and directed it exclusively toward picture-making with the SX-70, an activity that required no tedious lab or darkroom work. Like the developing Polaroid print itself, with its miraculous and immediate image, Evans came to life. He worked feverishly, madly, with the new camera, despite its relatively inferior mechanics that produced, at best, a spectrum of inherently artificial and unstable colors. What was important to Evans, however, was that the SX-70 recorded things simply as they were, without pretension. As he had noted in 1971, “The secret of photography is, the camera takes on the character and the personality of the handler. The mind works on the machine—through it, rather.” By any reckoning, the photographic record presented here, drawn from the Walker Evans Archive at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, shows a tremendous flowering of activity: what the artist’s protégé Jerry L. Thompson refers to as the “strange and wonderful fruit of a late, unexpected harvest.”

With the Polaroid, Evans returned to several of his lifelong themes, including vernacular architecture, domestic interiors, portraiture, and roadside signage. Encouraged by renewed health and an unlimited supply of film courtesy of the manufacturer, he made the most of his final year of work. He promptly accepted visiting lectureships at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, at Oberlin College, in Ohio, and at the University of Alabama, in Tuscaloosa, and made portraits of students and faculty members (as he had at Yale). While in Alabama, he took advantage of the opportunity to revisit sites in Hale County, where he had photographed thirty-seven years earlier. On this occasion, the artist William Christenberry, a native of the region, replaced James Agee as his companion. Wherever he taught, Evans made daily forays into the streets, returning to the classroom to share with his often bewildered students Polaroids of crushed soda cans, wig shop windows, gingerbread trim and plastic fruit displays. He taught by example, and what his students remember of these episodes is the uncommon pleasure of watching Evans handle his miniature Polaroid prints like a man playing games with a peculiar deck of cards. Once he had sequenced and re-sequenced the photographs, he would number, caption and date the prints. More generous than he had been with his black & white photographs, Evans often gave away Polaroids (especially the portraits) as a form of light entertainment.

Evans kept himself very busy during this period, whether he was on campus or off. Inscriptions on the prints describe regular outings in Connecticut, New York, and in Massachusetts. The automobile junkyard near his Connecticut home was a frequent locus of activity as were seemingly dangerous street corners in nearby Old Saybrook, where Evans focused on both the decaying and freshly applied traffic markings and arrows painted on the asphalt. In the spring of 1974, ten days of vacation on Saint Martin in the French West Indies produced a multitude of picture, mostly detailed studies of commercial and hand-painted advertisements for cafés and shops, and more traditional, detached views of the island's characteristic stucco architecture. A trip to the beach town of Destin, Florida, later the same year, was similarly productive. There he focused on roadside signs, deconstructing them into their elemental phonemes and diphthongs: EN from "OPEN," AI from "PAID," and RT from "CART."

A year into his work with the SX-70, Evans's subject—more often than not—was an advertisement, hand lettered sign, traffic marking, or the category's ultimate reduction, an individual letterform. In the 1930s Evans had been the first American artist to draw emphatic attention the impact of the sign on the landscape. His continuing interest in quoting the written language of the roadside (and translating abbreviated graphic forms into witty, self-contained pictures) was fueled by his literary ambitions and by his understanding that the essential "stuff" of the contemporary world was to be found in these often unconscious symbols of modern life. It seems clear that Evans realized how perfectly the virtues of the SX-70 fit his search for a concise yet poetic vision of his world. The camera's instant prints were for the frail artist what scissors and cut paper were for the aging Matisse: the catalyst for a new, provocative, chromatically elemental, yet profoundly inventive body of work. In essence, the Polaroid breathed life into the body of a man who had long been denied the daily visceral pleasure of producing meaningful art.

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Walker Evans did not live to see the publication of these, his last photographs. But we know that he had an artist's book in mind—an alphabet book based on individual letters, edited from his Polaroids of roadside signs. However, before completing this graphic survey—a literary typology—he fell ill in late November 1974 and died the following April. Evans had conceived a book based on the model of Brian Rice and Tony Evans's *The English Sunrise* (1973), a straightforward volume of color photographs of the sunrise motif as incorporated into English shop signs, fences, mosaics, fuse boxes, tobacco tins, and doormats, The publication has no introductory text and only one small color reproduction, with no printed title, on each page. A list of picture captions (usually subject and location) at the end of the plate section is indexed to page numbers. Notwithstanding this book's introduction and the inclusion of a broader selection of photographs, *Walker Evans: Polaroids* essentially honors Evans's concept.

Text from the brochure for the exhibit "Walker Evans: Public Photographs ", University at Buffalo Art Gallery 20 March--24 April 1998

# Walker Evans

by Bruce Jackson



## I. "The Torpor of the Accustomed"

Walker Evans is perhaps the most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century American photographer. The work of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, David Plowden, and Diane Arbus is inconceivable without his photographs and vision. "When I first looked at Walker Evans' photographs," Robert Frank said, "I thought of something Malraux wrote: 'To transform destiny into awareness.' One is embarrassed to want so much for oneself. But, how else are you going to justify your failure and your effort?"<sup>(1)</sup>

The influence is not limited to photographers. At the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's 1971 Walker Evans retrospective, Robert Penn Warren spoke of the first time he had seen Evans's work: "....Staring at the pictures, I knew that my familiar world was a world I had never known. The veil of familiarity prevented my seeing it. Then, thirty years ago, Walker tore aside that veil; he woke me from the torpor of the accustomed."<sup>(2)</sup>

I suspect that we all see much of the time in that "torpor of the accustomed," and that the work of our best artists both energizes and instructs us so we can see our worlds anew. MoMA curator of photography John Szarkowski wrote in his introduction to the 1971 retrospective, "Evans' pictures have enlarged our sense of the usable visual tradition and have affected the way that we now see not only other photographs, but billboards, junkyards, postcards, gas stations, colloquial architecture, Main Streets, and the walls of rooms."<sup>(3)</sup>

"It is difficult to know now with certainty whether Evans recorded the America of his youth, or invented it," Szarkowski continued. "Beyond doubt, the accepted myth of our recent past is in some measure the creation of this photographer, whose work has persuaded us of the validity of a new set of clues and symbols bearing on the question of who we are. Whether that work and its judgment was fact or artifice, or half of each, it is now part of our history."<sup>(4)</sup>

Evans bristled when the word "documentary" was applied to him or his work. "My thought is that the term 'documentary' is inexact, vague, and even grammatically weak, as used to describe a style in photography which happens to be my style," he told a Yale audience in 1964.<sup>(5)</sup> He told



Leslie Katz that "documentary" was "a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. You have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. The item 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 certainly can adopt that style."<sup>(6)</sup>

Evans frequently said that the major influences on his thought were Flaubert, Baudelaire and Joyce--writers, not painters or photographers. He spent 1927, the year before he began photographing seriously, in Paris, realizing that he'd have to substitute something else for his early ambition to be a writer. He frequented Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Co. bookshop, where Beach offered to introduce him to Joyce. "But I was scared to death to meet him. I wouldn't do it. He came in, and I left the shop. He was my god. That, too, prevented me from writing. I wanted to write like that or not at all."<sup>(7)</sup>

"...I know now that Flaubert's esthetic is absolutely mine," he told Leslie Katz. "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 author, the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I want to use a camera and do. But spiritually, however, it is Baudelaire who is *the* influence on me. ...I consider him the father of modern literature, the whole modern movement, such as it is. Baudelaire influenced me and everybody else too."<sup>(8)</sup>

## II. "A Few Nice 'Sirupy' Pictures"

Walker Evans's career as a photographer was almost five decades long, beginning shortly after his return from his *Wanderjahr* in France in 1928 and continuing to the year before his death in 1975. But he is best known for the images upon which this exhibit is based, nearly all of which he created in the fifteen-month period between June 1935 and August 1936 when he was employed by the Resettlement Administration (RA).

The first solo show of photographs at the Museum of Modern Art was Evans's "American Photographs" in 1938<sup>(9)</sup>; 63 of the photographs in that show are from Evans's RA period. All the photographs in both editions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were made during that period, as were 44 of the 100 images in the book of the 1971 MoMA retrospective, and 21 of the 44 images in the 1993 Aperture Evans monograph. Photographs from the RA period appeared on the covers of all those books, as well as the cover of the massive Getty catalog published in 1995.

The RA hired Evans for three months beginning June 1935. In September of that year, he and Ben Shahn were the first full-time photographers appointed by Roy Stryker, the new director of the RA's Historical Section. Evans did field photography for the RA in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. In February 1937, he and Edwin Locke photographed flood victims in Arkansas and Tennessee.<sup>(10)</sup> His photographs



are the best known of those produced by any of the full-time RA (later Farm Security Administration) photographers even though he made fewer photographs than any of them.

The RA project was designed to create propaganda for the Roosevelt administration's New Deal. It is difficult to imagine someone less suited for propaganda work than Walker Evans. His papers include a handwritten draft memorandum regarding the RA job that seems to have been written in spring 1935, before he ever did any assignments for the government:

Never under any circumstances asked to do anything more than these things. Mean never make photographic statements for the government or do photographic chores for gov or anyone in gov, no matter how powerful--this is pure record not propaganda. The value and, if you like, even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done. NO POLITICS whatever<sup>(11)</sup>

He was right. The propaganda of the thirties grows ever more tedious and vapid: watch, if you can bear it, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, or try reading aloud Tom Joad's last speech in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Evans's photographs are as vital and lucid as they ever were.

Even though it was Evans's vision that most informed Stryker's sense of the project in its early years, the two existed in what was at best a state of uneasy truce. Stryker was sentimental; Evans was clinical. Stryker was a populist and activist, he wanted specific assignments completed on time, activity reports, pictures that could be used in magazines and books to promote the New Deal's image and goals; Evans was elegant and apolitical, he liked to be out there on his own, sending in pictures now and then. (Jeff Rosenheim, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Department of Photographs, thinks it likely that Evans sometimes sent Stryker negatives he'd made a year or two earlier, just to shut him up and keep the paycheck coming.) For Evans, photography was about art; for Stryker, "the photograph is only the subsidiary, the little brother, of the word."<sup>(12)</sup> Stryker was capable of sending Evans letters with lines like this: "Try to get us a few nice 'sirupy' pictures of agricultural scenes and general landscape pictures for cover pages."<sup>(13)</sup> No one who knew the two men was surprised that when the budget tightened in March 1937 Evans was the first person Stryker fired.

By that time, Evans had become engaged in the project that would have more significance than anything he had done thus far in his career. In the spring of 1936, James Agee had been assigned by *Fortune* to do a magazine piece on tenant farmers. He said he wanted Walker Evans to be his photographer. The publishers asked Stryker to release Evans for a few months. Stryker was probably happy to have Evans off his hands but he imposed one condition: Evans could go to Alabama with Agee and *Fortune* could publish the pictures, but the negatives would be the property of the American people.<sup>(14)</sup>

Agee's manuscript was too long and too angry for a magazine devoted to the glory of American business. *Fortune* turned it down. Agee kept writing, rewriting, expanding, and in the spring of 1941, maybe the worst of all possible times, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published. The Depression was over, the nation was tooling up for war, no one was interested in a verbal and visual poetic exploration of the condition of tenant farmers in the American southeast. The small first edition was eventually remaindered. Then something remarkable happened. When the book was reprinted in 1960, it was hailed as an American classic, one of those key works that, like

*Leaves of Grass* and *Moby Dick* and *The Sound and the Fury*, you had to know if you were going to know what America was all about. Roy Stryker's bad boy had entered the canon.

### III. "It's Not the Camera"

Throughout his career, Evans continually tuned his work. He was always aware of position and juxtaposition, and in shows and publications he fought to control both. When he worked for *Fortune*, he sometimes cut his negatives with scissors to be sure the layout editors included no more of the image than he wished. The 1938 MoMA exhibit and book differ in major ways: Evans substituted some prints for others and cropped some that were common to both differently. The 1960 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has twice as many photographs as the 1941 edition—62 compared to 31—and many of the photographs common to both volumes are cropped differently. "I'll do anything to get one photograph," Evans said. "Stieglitz wouldn't cut a quarter of an inch off a frame. I would cut any number of inches off my frames in order to get a better picture." <sup>(15)</sup>For Evans, negatives were fields of possibility, not absolute conditions.

"People keep asking me what kind of camera I use," Evans said to me in March 1974. "I tell them it's not the camera. It's this." With his right index finger he touched his right temple. It is indeed the mind of the maker that determines the photograph, but different kinds of cameras see things differently. The 35mm Leica is used at eye-level, the 2¼ x 2¼ Rolleiflex at breastbone or waist level, so the instruments provide different sightlines and proportions and feelings. With the 35mm, you can snap off pictures quickly, as Evans did of the Tenge family in Hale County when they seemed to be getting ready for a more formal 8x10 portrait. And you can even spy with it: Evans sometimes used an attachment that let him point his Leica in one direction but actually take pictures to his right or left. He was sneakier on a grander scale in the series of pictures he made in 1938 and 1942 in New York subways: he fitted a 35mm Contax under his jacket and ran the shutter release cable through his sleeve.

You can't be sneaky with an 8x10. It's an enormous box with the lens mounted on a board in front that is connected to the box by black bellows that snake further or closer to focus; parts of the camera tilt to straighten the camera's tendency to hasten the vanishing point of parallel lines. The photographer must duck under a dark cloth where he looks at an image that is upside down and backwards. After composing and focusing, he slides the film holder into place, takes out the protective slide, cocks the shutter, and takes a single picture. He then inserts the slide and locks it into position. If he wants to take another picture, he takes out the film holder and repeats the entire process. The 8x10 by its very nature is a meditative instrument. The extraordinary depth of field, range of detail, and sharpness of image in Evans's 8x10 contact prints are well-earned.



Near the end of his life Evans discovered and fell in love with the Polaroid SX-70. His student and friend Jerry L. Thompson wrote that, "He carried this camera with him on his daily outings, making hundreds of pictures of signs, bits of litter, and the faces of his friends and students."<sup>(16)</sup> William Christenberry told me that on the trip to Hale County the two of them took in 1973, Evans had with him a Rolleiflex twin lens reflex and the Polaroid SX-70, but Evans never once uncased the Rolleiflex. At the opening reception of a 1974 University of Texas exhibit of the 1936 Hale County photos Evans walked up to a wall of prints, took his SX-70 from a leather holster on his hip and began recapturing the images he had made thirty-eight years earlier.

A few years before he discovered the SX-70 Evans told Paul Cummings that he had a "psychological block" about taking pictures of friends. "I haven't analyzed it very much. I was around Hemingway a little bit, but I would never bring out a camera and photograph him, out of regard for him really, as too obvious a thing to do. I thought too much of our relationship to throw a camera into it."<sup>(17)</sup> The SX-70 seems to have dissolved the psychological block. So far as I know, the Polaroid years were the only time Evans went around freely snapping photographs of friends and students. He made thousands of them, far more than he made for the RA.<sup>(18)</sup> In earlier years Evans often professed disdain for color photography (though he had published many beautiful color images in *Fortune*), but with the Polaroid he did some of his most beautiful found-object work in color. The SX-70 freed Evans to work quickly; it was the polar opposite of the 8x10 view camera. He said of it, "A practical photographer has an entirely new extension in that camera. You photograph things that you wouldn't think of photographing before. I don't even yet know why, but I find that I'm quite rejuvenated by it. With that little camera your work is done the instant you push that button. But you must think what goes into that. You have to have a lot of experience and training and discipline behind you. . . . It's the first time, I think, that you can put a machine in an artist's hands and have him then rely entirely on his vision and his taste and his mind."<sup>(19)</sup>

#### **IV. An Archaeologist of the Present**

History is always afterwards, a narration possible only after something is over. Evans's vision puts before us a perpetual present. What changes are our associations, the reverberations the images and their juxtapositions occasion in us.

Photographs are specific and self-contained; whatever referentiality exists is coincidental. A photograph may be contextualized by its relation to other photographs (as, say, in series on a gallery wall or with the photographs that precede and follow in a book), and it may be contextualized by its relation to the quotidian, which always requires external information. That external information may be very close, as, for example, James Agee's text which immediately follows Evans's photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It may be our own, in which case it is always partial, transient, and relative: the external information I bring to a photograph of Lyndon Johnson is not what my children bring to a photograph of Lyndon Johnson or what you bring to a photograph of Lyndon Johnson, and the information you or I bring to that photograph today is not what we would have brought to it a decade ago or twenty years ago.

If Evans's photographs are taken as a historical record, they are of course insufficient. But mere historical record was never his intention. The photographs are, however, items upon which or with which a history might be constructed, just as bits of pottery and fragments of bone are items

upon which a history might be constructed. At one level, Evans is an archaeologist of the present. "The objective picture of America in the 1930's made by Evans," he wrote in an unpublished introductory note for the 1961 reissue of *American Photographs*, "was neither journalistic nor political in technique and intention. It was reflective rather than tendentious and, in a certain way, disinterested. . . . Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past."<sup>(20)</sup>

There is a tension of meaning in every one of these images. The same visual object that forever seizes a present moment is always an image of the past, even the Polaroids that blossom into full color sixty seconds after the event. How could it be otherwise? Just as the present becomes the past as soon as we can be aware of it as having happened, photographic images are the past as soon as we close the shutter. All photographs made in the camera are grounded in temporality. They all are *of* something; none is *sui generis*.

Evans frequently used the words "anonymous" and "anonymity" when talking about his photographs. He didn't take pictures of famous people, he didn't take pictures of dramatic events, and--with few unavoidable exceptions--he didn't intrude into his images. He was immaculately conscious of and attentive to everything he did. The result is an astonishing body of art that seems to be the most unselfconscious of all.

### **Chronology, selected solo exhibits, and major publications**

1903 Born November 3 in St. Louis, Missouri.

1922-23 Graduates Phillips Andover, attends Williams College.

1926-27 Travels in Europe.

1929 MoMA opens in temporary quarters.

1930 First 3 photographs published in first edition of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*.

1933 May and June: makes photos in Cuba for Carlton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba*, and hangs out with Hemingway. "Walker Evans: Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses" at MoMA. (The show travels to several locations, including Buffalo's Albright Art Gallery.)

1935 "African Negro Art: A Corpus of Photographs by Walker Evans" at MoMA.

Hired by RA June 24, Works for Resettlement Administration in June and July and then appointed to "permanent" position September 16.

1936 Summer in Hale County, Alabama, with James Agee. In the fall, Evans works on a film project with Ben Shahn (it is never finished).

1937 Fired by Stryker March 23.

1938 "Walker Evans: American Photographs" at MoMA's temporary underground gallery in Rockefeller Center (the show travels to 10 venues, including Buffalo's Garret Club). *American Photographs* published. Begins taking secret photos in New York subways that he won't complete until 1942 and won't show until 1966.

1941 Guggenheim fellowship.

1941 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* published.

1943-45: Staff reviewer for *Time*.

1945 Becomes staff photographer at *Fortune*, later Photographic Editor and then Associate Editor. He continues photographing and writing until 1965. *Fortune* publishes 42 of his portfolios, some with color images, many with text by Evans.

1948 "Walker Evans Retrospective," Art Institute of Chicago.

1955 James Agee dies.

1959 Second Guggenheim fellowship.

1960 Second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

1962 "Walker Evans: American Photographs," MoMA photographs from the 1938 exhibition.

1964 "Walker Evans," The Art Institute of Chicago.

1965 Appointed professor of Photography/Graphic Design at Yale.

1966 Publication of *Many Are Called* and *Message from the Interior*.

"Walker Evans: Subway Photographs" at MoMA.

1971 "Walker Evans, MoMA, publication of *Walker Evans*.

1973 Elected to National Institute of Arts and Letters.

1974 Becomes professor emeritus at Yale. "Photographs from the 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men' Project," University of Texas.

1975 Dies April 10 in New Haven.

1978 "Walker Evans" Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

Publication of *Walker Evans: First and Last*.



1982 Publication of *Walker Evans at Work*, edited by John T. Hill and with an essay by Jerry L. Thompson.

1983 "Walker Evans 1903/1974," IVAM Centre, Valencia, Spain

1989 "Havana 1933," Paris, FNAC, publication of *Walker Evans: Havana, 1933*.

1990 "Walker Evans Amerika: Bilder aus den Jahren der Depression." Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

1993 "Walker Evans: Polaroids 1973-1974." 292 Gallery, New York.

Publication of *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, edited by John T. Hill and with text by Gilles Mora.

1998. "Walker Evans: Public Photographs 1935-1937". Center for the Arts, University at Buffalo.

"Walker Evans: Simple Secrets." High Museum of Art. Atlanta.

[2000] "Signs of Life: Walker Evans and the American Vernacular" [working title], Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accompanied by a collection of letters, essays and unpublished notes, edited by Jeff L. Rosenheim.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Notes**

1. Robert Frank, "A Statement," *U.S. Camera Annual*, 1958, p. 115. Not all American photographers were so enamored of Evans's work. The nature photographer Ansel Adams wrote in a letter to Edward Guston: "Walker Evans' [*American Photographs*] gave me a hernia. I'm so goddamn mad over what people from the left tier think America is," Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 166.

2. Rathbone, p. 284.
3. John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 17.
4. Szarkowski, p. 20.
5. Jerry L. Thompson and John T. Hill, eds. *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 238. (Hereafter *WEAW*)
6. Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March-April 1971), p.87.
7. Paul Cummings, *Artists in Their Own Words* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p.85.
8. Katz, p. 84.
9. Actually, there were two shows at MoMA comprised entirely of Evans' photographs before the 1938 show: "Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses" in 1933 and "Photographs of African Negro Art" in 1935. But Evans considered them shows *of* something for which he simply provided the images: "The one in 1938 was more important. That's the one I remember, because to my mind it was the first big photography show that I'd had, and it was the first big one that the museum gave. I don't consider that business about architecture in 1933 a show" (Cummings, pp.93-94). Historians of photography have accepted the distinction, e.g. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 238: "The 1938 exhibition, the first one-man show by a photographer at the Museum of Modern Art...."
10. There are about fifty 35mm negatives from what seems to have been a one-day shoot in New York City in the summer of 1938, but it is not clear which, if any, of those negatives were shot by Evans. Some historians think most and perhaps all of them were actually made by Evans's close friend, Ben Shahn.
11. *WEAW*, p. 112.
12. Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as seen in the FSA Photographs*, (New York Graphic Society: Greenwich, CT, 1973), p. 8.
13. The letter is undated but it's probably from December 1936 or January 1937. *WEAW*, p. 118-119.
14. As were all the other negatives made by Evans while he was in the pay of the RA, and all the negatives made by Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Gordon Parks, and the other photographers who worked on the project. The whole project was and remains one of the best art bargains ever made on behalf of the American people: all these negatives are in the public domain. The Library of Congress will make prints of any of them for a small processing fee. For order forms, prices, and other information, contact the Photoduplication Service, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540-5230.

15. Katz, p. 86.

16. *WEAW*, p 17. See also Thompson's excellent memoir, *The Last Years of Walker Evans: A First-hand Account* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1997).

17. Cummings, p. 97.

18. No one knows how many photos Evans made while he worked for the RA or even how many Stryker kept. Stryker had a practice of "killing" photographs that didn't appeal to him. Killed sheet film was given to the photographers or thrown out. The 35mm film was cut into strips of 5, so often images Stryker liked and disliked were on the same strip. For a while he solved that problem by punching holes in the negatives he didn't think ought to be printed. The usual estimate is about 1000 Evans images in the Library of Congress RA/FSA collection, but Jeff L. Rosenheim, who oversees the Evans collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, thinks the number may be closer to 1500.

19. *WEAW*, 235.

20. *WEAW*, 151.

"Walker Evans: Public Photographs 1935-1937" was curated by Bruce Jackson, Samuel P. Capen Professor of American Culture, SUNY Distinguished Professor, and Director of the Center for Studies in American Culture, State University of New York at Buffalo.

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# American photo legend, ex-Yale prof Walker Evans exhibit at the Met

MAKEBA SEARGEANT

*YDN Contributing Critic*

This month, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is having a wonderful retrospective on the work of Walker Evans. Evans, who is best known for his book *American Photographs*, which was published in 1938 and later developed into an unprecedented one man show at the Museum of Modern Art, was a professor at Yale during his later years.

The exhibit begins with Evans' early photos, taken in the 1920's and early 1930's in New York City. In the second room are his architectural photographs as well as pictures of Havana and the Southern United States. These works are followed by Evans' photo illustrations for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which he worked on with friend and fellow artist, writer James Agee. The show continues with Evans' "subway series," along with Polaroids he took near the end of his life, which are the real surprise of the show.

Small and in color, the Polaroids are neither sharp, nor perfectly printed, as is so typical of his other photos. However, they are still classic Evans. Supplied with an unlimited amount of film and an Sx 70 Polaroid from the manufacturer for his experiment, Evans photographed signs, letters and indoor scenes, harkening back to the subjects of his earlier photos.

Another highlight of the show are photographs Evans took for the Farm Security Administration. While on the FSA payroll, Evans shot striking photographs of farmers and their families in the throws of the Depression. The subjects are dirty and their houses falling apart, but all one sees is their beauty and dignity. The town landscapes are also very emotional and show the downtrodden side of America from this era that many may have forgotten or never knew existed.

The only unfortunate aspect of having such a thorough collection is that the photographs are hung slightly closer than one would desire-- During my Sunday visit I had many a tourist breathing down my neck, straining to see over my shoulder. But if one can transcend such annoyances, the photographs are a pure joy.

This collection is not only gorgeous and extensive, but it also tells a visual story of America--from the time of the Depression through WWII and afterwards--with unparalleled care. Evans respect for every aspect of American life is evident in his photographs. The doors of old gothic houses, the shoes of a poor farmer, the landscapes of "Small Town, USA" all have a beautiful and tranquil quality in his world. Whether one loves Evans' work or is just moderately acquainted, this show is sure to impress.

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**Lucidity on Fire**  
by Jerry Saltz



[Subway Passengers, New York](#)  
1938



[Shop Front, New Orleans](#)  
1935



"Walker Evans," Feb. 1-May 14, 2000, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028.

I love that there's a book on Walker Evans titled *The Hungry Eye* because the general mood of his show at the Met is one of searching, restless omnivorousness. There's that and the kind of perfection that Evans achieved with such stunning frequency, especially between 1931, when he photographed a curving street on a rainy day in Saratoga Springs, and 1938, when he went underground, into the New York subway, surreptitiously photographing fellow passengers as they sat across from this man with a camera concealed beneath his coat. Evans was the man on the street par excellence, less an artist than a medium who gives himself over to his subjects without ever letting go.

Whether working fast with a 35mm camera or slow with an 8x10, Evans captured the wounded, striving, uncertain soul of America in the 1930s, and set it down with one of the most detached but mindful touches in photographic history. Witness the sun-bleached facades and apparently deserted cities and towns; see the dilapidated Victorian mansions, decaying signs, derelicts asleep in New York doorways, a "Negro" barbershop in Atlanta, an auto graveyard in Pennsylvania, countless portraits in a photographer's studio window, or the gut-wrenching, paradigm-shifting series, made in the summer of 1936, of three destitute tenant-farmer families in Hale County, Alabama (published alongside James Agee's text in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*). Neither socially committed nor apathetic, this is purity with heat, with heart -- lucidity on fire.

Not only do these perfect pictures of an imperfect world form the ectoplasmic collective dream of America in the 1930s, they mark a dividing point between what we might call old-school photography and something modern. When Evans picked up a camera in the 1920s, the big names were Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. Initially, Evans emulated these modernists in little shadow self-portraits and street scenes taken from oblique angles. By 1930, he knew his forebears were artists like Eugène Atget, Mathew Brady, Paul Strand and August Sander -- even vernacular postcard photography. In the words of MoMA's former photo czar John Szarkowski, Stieglitz had become "deplorable for his artiness, Steichen for his commercialism."

What should be a majestic exhibition unfolds instead in abbreviated stages. There are 175 pictures here, but the show feels piecemeal. There aren't

Burroughs Family Cabin, Hale County, Alabama  
1936



Torn Movie Poster  
1930



Main Street, Saratoga Springs, New York  
1931



enough early-'30s Havana pictures, there are only two of the brutally beautiful 1946 Chicago street shots, and the dearth of images made in and around New Orleans in 1935 denies us the opportunity to see him warming up for the Hale County masterpieces. This is due partly to the disjointed configuration of the Met's galleries and partly to the unavailability of nearly 60 images owned by MoMA and currently included in "Walker Evans & Company," which goes further to establish Evans as the genius progenitor that he is. At the Met, sections feel truncated, labels barge in, titles mislead. Under "The South," for example, we see several pictures from Pennsylvania. The press release claims this is "the first comprehensive Evans retrospective," though MoMA mounted an Evans survey in 1971 that featured 202 pictures, and Atlanta's High Museum presented an exhibition in 1998 that included the late Polaroids. Still, this show delivers.

In the first gallery, we see Evans finding his distinctive nonstyle and honing his irony in pictures of a rumpled couple at Coney Island and a sign that says "damaged" being loaded onto a truck -- a Depression gestalt zap. The following gallery gives us Evans in '30s cruise mode. Check out an interior of a Louisiana plantation in which a slightly off-center composition captures Southern luster in decay, or the magnificent 1936 *Negro Church, South Carolina*, a lesson in pure frontality. The third gallery, devoted almost entirely to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is staggering.

Conventional wisdom says the show should now wind down. Even MoMA's photography curator, Peter Galassi, who is enormously insightful about Evans, has written that "his essential achievement was complete by 1941." But Jeff L. Rosenheim, this exhibition's curator, makes a case for the late work.

He gives us 11 New York subway portraits (which were, in fact, completed in 1941). Each a study in simple grandeur, these faces invite you into private universes of pensive splendor. For me, these are among the first photographs of the period we live in now -- simple, straightforward and bottomless. Across from these are six arresting pedestrian portraits made in Detroit in 1946 and two of the awesome Chicago pictures. Next, after four stately tool portraits Evans made for *Fortune* (between 1934 and 1965, he contributed more than 400 photographs to the magazine), Rosenheim springs a surprise.

Even though Evans once dismissed color as "vulgar," he made over 10,000 color transparencies. Taken from passing trains, on deserted streets, outside factories or along railroad tracks, these images (though only seen on a video monitor) are breathtakingly contemporary and point to photographers like William Eggleston, Stephen Shore and Robert Adams.

But Evans wasn't finished. In 1973, two years before his death, he picked



Broadway  
1930



Truck and Sign  
1930



Junked Car, Old Lyme, Conn.  
1973-74

up the newly invented SX-70 Polaroid camera. In these last pictures we see him revisiting earlier obsessions. Concentrated images of his youth pass before our eyes: signs, faces, buildings. Evans created a style for the ages, one that countless artists have built upon; in these final images he's at play and at peace.

**JERRY SALTZ** is art critic for the *Village Voice*, where this article first appeared.



## Jed Perl on Art In the American Grain

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Imagine a man who goes on a fabulous binge but remains an unembarrassed ascetic, and you will begin to have a sense of the complicated power of Walker Evans, who is perhaps the greatest of all photographers. Evans can pile the gaudy vernacular comedy and disquietingly angular drama of modern America into his small silvery images. The miracle is that his mandarin taste for epigrammatic juxtaposition and iconic elegance lives on such easy terms with the hodgepodge that is the world. How did he do it? This is the question that fuels the many books and exhibitions related to Evans that have appeared in recent years. This month the Metropolitan Museum of Art has opened not one but two Evans shows: a full-scale retrospective, the first in New York in more than a quarter of a century, and "Perfect Documents," a small exhibition that focuses on an assignment that Evans received in 1935 from the Museum of Modern Art, to photograph some 500 works contained in a pioneering show of African tribal art.

Photographers generally fall into two categories. There are those, such as Edward Weston and Harry Callahan, who seem to discipline reality, and those, such as Lewis Hine and Berenice Abbott, who give the impression of taking things as they are. Evans does something more mysterious. He suggests that an enigmatic yet thrillingly formal logic is beneath the surface of almost everything that he sees: the product-of-necessity designs of rural clapboard churches, the off-the-cuff arrangements of crowded mantelpieces, the small-town facades jammed with hand-painted signs. When he photographs people, the poses may be casual, but you feel Evans reaching for an emotional poise that is related to something as basic as the bilateral symmetry of the human body. There is a snappy, ad hoc charm to this boisterous America of his; but also a beautiful, underlying shape.

Evans's art first flourished in the 1930s, and was a response to forces both inside and outside of photography. He and the friends with whom he collaborated--they were often the same people who wrote about his work--were exhilaratingly alive to the kaleidoscopic spectacle of modern America. Already in 1927, when he was twenty-three, Evans had translated a passage from Gide's *If It Die* about a kaleidoscope, in which "the slightest movement of one of the little parts would have terrific consequences." Nine years later Evans was traveling with James Agee in Alabama--the travels that culminated in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*--and, as he recalled, his friend was "wildly excited, and physically as energetic as a jumping, vociferating six-year-old boy." Hart Crane was another of Evans's friends: he created some of the most lyrically fragmented impressions of New York before committing suicide in 1932; the first, limited edition of *The Bridge*

contained three photographs by Evans. And Lincoln Kirstein--who in his memoir *Mosaic* offered his own at-an-angle recollections of a '30s New York that Crane and Evans knew--inspired and collaborated on Evans's first adventures photographing Victorian architecture in New England, and organized a show of those photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, and wrote the essay about Evans for his first book, *American Photographs*, published by the Modern in 1938.

These men regarded America as *the* modern subject. They were alive to the possibility of a sophisticated American documentary style, in literature and in photography, a style with deep, complex roots in a nineteenth-century European culture where looking oh-so-closely had already become a symbolist experience. They were interested, all at once, in Baudelaire, Emily Dickinson, Bauhaus design, Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge, *Ulysses*, and Eakins's portraits. In 1931, Lewis Mumford--whom Kirstein had tried to interest in Evans's photographs--published *The Brown Decades*, and argued that there was an affinity between the years after the Civil War and the years after World War I, for in both instances the "very disorder" of the times could be "a challenge."

Artists and writers embraced the new European aesthetic, with its emphasis on collage techniques, as a way of making sense of a disorderly America. Crane spoke in one poem of "new thresholds, new anatomies"--a phrase that might describe any number of Evans photographs. As photography approached its onehundredth birthday in the late 1930s--and the Civil War achievements of Mathew Brady were admired for their frankness by Evans and others--the unpredictable objectivity of this old-new medium caught fire. When Evans picked up a camera, it turned out that Flaubert and Cubism were in the very grain of America. What a tremendous time it was to be a photographer!

Or at least so it seems now, a generation after Evans's death in 1975 at the age of seventy-one. Certainly in the last few years, as books and exhibitions about Evans have proliferated, the man's name has become a kind of art-world mantra. His work is much discussed, much thought about, not just among photographers but also among artists in general. And why not? We live in a time of numbingly dull high-culture-versus-low-culture debates, so that there can be something thrilling about looking back to a photographer who found a triumphantly styleless sense of style in the way that a Coca-Cola sign was stuck on the facade of a country store. William Carlos Williams, reviewing *American Photographs* in these pages in 1938, put it this way: "The pictures are for the most part mild, but in spite of this, though always exquisitely clear in reasoning and in visual quality, they pack a wicked punch." More than sixty years later, many of us are still amazed that Evans can give all this mildness such a wicked punch.

What is not surprising is that there is this surge of interest in Evans a quartercentury after his death. It can take that long for the dust to settle, for archives and collections to be set up, for people to begin to see the man whole. Not that Evans was ever unknown: the photographs that he took as a young man, traveling the South under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration, are legendary. (And there is an extra advantage to their having been taken under public auspices: to this day anybody can obtain original prints from those negatives for a nominal fee.) Still, the ubiquity of some of Evans's images

notwithstanding, the man himself, who photographed to the end of his life and produced a huge body of work, was for long stretches an obscure figure, at least so far as the museumgoing public was concerned. Evans was not averse to the pleasures of a kind of exclusive bohemian anonymity, and he did not exactly push his way into the limelight. And when he died in 1975, the vast sea change in interest in photography was only beginning.

Evans is certainly a prime beneficiary of what now seems like photography's never-ending boom. The Getty Museum in Los Angeles purchased a major collection of Evans photographs in 1984. In 1994, the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired from the photographer's estate what is now known as the Walker Evans Archive, a vast store of the photographer's letters, manuscripts, negatives, little-known paintings and collages, and collections of postcards and found objects. In 1995 the Getty published an elaborate, beautifully produced catalogue of their still-expanding Evans holdings, which cover the entire career and include both well-known and virtually unknown work. (The author is Judith Keller, a curator at the museum.) That same year saw the publication of a solid biography by Belinda Rathbone; and the Eakins Press, long associated with the photographer, published a beautiful folio volume called *Incognito*, which contains Evans's most important statement about his work. In 1997, Jerry L. Thompson, a photographer who had been an assistant and friend to Evans at the end of his life, published a useful book called *The Last Years of Walker Evans*. In 1998 the Getty mounted a small show, "Walker Evans: New York," and published *Signs*, a picture book that celebrates Evans's interest in lettering and signage of all kinds. (It contains an essay by Andrei Codrescu that investigates Evans's links to Dadaist and other literary wordplay, and is one of the most revealing things ever written about the artist.) Also in 1998, another Evans show, called "Simple Secrets," began a national tour at the High Museum in Atlanta.

Last summer brought the publication of James R. Mellow's *Walker Evans* (Basic Books); and although this widely respected biographer died suddenly in 1997, before he could complete the book, there is little doubt that it will stand as the definitive account of Evans's career. And now there are the two shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The retrospective, organized by Jeff L. Rosenheim, assistant curator of photography, goes to San Francisco and Houston after closing in New York in May. The Metropolitan is also publishing three Evans books. There is the catalogue of the retrospective. And there is the catalogue for "Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935," written by Virginia-Lee Webb, archivist of the museum's photograph collection. In this show, some of the photographs of African sculpture that Evans took for the Museum of Modern Art are being exhibited alongside the sculptures themselves. And there is *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology*, edited by Rosenheim and Douglas Eklund, a nifty sampling from the riches contained in the Evans Archive. Surely a larger compilation of Evans's writings and letters is needed.

We are at flood tide, with still more to come. A PBS documentary, "Walker Evans/America," also airs this month. The International Center of Photography in New York has a show opening that focuses on the photographers who worked at Fortune

magazine, with Evans prominent among them. And in March the Museum of Modern Art, where Evans had already in the 1930s had his first and second one-man shows, will present "Walker Evans & Company," an investigation of his impact down to our own day, as part of "Making Choices," the second phase of the year-long MoMA2000.

It is obvious that the Evans boom reaches way beyond the photography world. The very atmosphere of contemporary art--all those videos and installations and pop culture allusions--keeps sending us back to Evans's fascination with the quotidian and the serendipitous. Artists who haven't a fraction of his grasp of abstract structure or metaphorical complexity are drawn to Evans's fascination with cataloguing and collecting, to his sly way of expressing his sensibility even as he appears to be archiving or chronicling the sensibilities of others. If you have walked through Chelsea or SoHo in the past year or so, you will have seen reflections and refractions of a dozen Evansesque attitudes. When Douglas Gordon shows clips from Robert De Niro's "You talkin' to me?" scene in *Taxi Driver* on huge screens at the Gagosian Gallery, isn't he some kind of descendent of Evans, who was so fascinated by the faces on movie posters?

Nowadays, though, the dazzling highwire acts that Evans could make of his encounters with American culture tend to be recapitulated in a dodgier, brittle form. Evans is revered, but his warmth and his headlong pleasure in finding classical order in all the strangest places is generally way beyond his fans. His lyric documentary style can seem as dead and gone as Homeric song. What makes the case of Walker Evans so interesting is that the same notions of anonymity, of disinterestedness, of emotional opacity, of anti-art that can be the undoing of his admirers are nevertheless at the core of his art.

The magnitude of Evans's achievement is somehow related to his diffidence about interpretation, to his idea of simply presenting the thing in itself. And yet he avoided an intellectual chill. Many of Evans's most important achievements were to one degree or another collaborations or assignments; his imagination was fired up by the dream of objectivity that has always been mixed in with photographic art. Toward the end of his life he exhibited not only his photographs of signs, but also old signs that he had scavenged from various sites, and the result was to underscore the found-object--even the Duchampian Readymade--quality of so much of what he had already done. He seemed to be saying that the world that he regarded in a photograph had its own inviolable significance.

Evans's work, for all its delicious clarity and art-for-art's-sake aplomb, tosses off question marks. He remains an enigma, and there seems to be a gathering consensus that that is how he would have wanted it to be. A series of self-portraits that he did in the late '20s in Europe, photographing his shadow on a wall, have received a lot of attention lately. There is one reproduced on the cover of the catalogue of the "Simple Secrets" show, several appear in Mellow's biography, and more are at the Metropolitan. These fuzzy-edged silhouettes may be seen as emblematic of the man (and, indeed, of the very idea of a photographer), with his sneaky, here-but-not-here fascination.

The mystery man has been miraculously fortunate in his biographers, who have respected Evans's elusive qualities, telling us everything that can be told while leaving some space for the question marks that he cultivated. This man who started out in New York at the end of the 1920s had a life that was crisscrossed by the kinds of complicated friendships, affections, and love affairs that, precisely because they are so hard to define, are especially vulnerable to the sensationalist-nostalgic treatment that publishing executives nowadays believe the reading public craves. Yet Evans, whose biography was written not once but twice in the 1990s, has emerged unscathed. The man always had good karma when it came to attracting writers.

Belinda Rathbone's biography of Evans is clean-lined, lucid, and creditable. James R. Mellow's biography is much more. This work, which Mellow had only brought to the mid-1950s at the time of his death, has been greeted with understandable regret at what was left unfinished. (Hilton Kramer, a lifelong friend of Mellow who has over the years written sensitively about Evans, contributed an introduction; and an extensive chronology fills out the book.) I have heard people say that they expect that had Mellow lived, he would have given the whole book a more flowing, polished feeling. Maybe; but the book that we have is magnificent, and I think that its persuasiveness as a portrait of the artist is in fact related to a certain vagueness that Mellow allows to permeate his pages.

Mellow wisely resists the temptation to hammer the facts into a seamless narrative. The result is a captivating portrait of a shadowy artist. Early on, Mellow observes that "a certain off-handed diffidence" could be characteristic of Evans, and that temperament, which is an essential element of the photographer's brilliant watchfulness, can make it difficult to quite get at the emotional character of his two marriages and his many friendships and love affairs. You might say that Mellow's idea is to achieve strong effects through a certain cautiousness of approach--and that might be said to be Evans's approach, too.

Mellow gives the known facts, and leaves the unknown open; he weighs the evidence but refuses to present his evaluations as realities; he offers an account or interpretation of events along with possible alternative accounts. And he is skeptical. John Cheever and Walker Evans were friends in the '30s, and years later Cheever described a sexual encounter with Evans. Belinda Rathbone presents this account of Cheever's as fact. Mellow presents it, then delicately unravels it, and then leaves well enough alone. The result, here and on many pages of the book, is a narrative that has the prismatic, elusive, risky texture of life itself.

There is something a little startling about the brevity with which Mellow's book begins. In six scant pages he moves through the family genealogy, Evans's parents' marriage, the birth of Walker Evans III in 1903, his father's career in advertising, his early schooling, the breakup of his parents' marriage (his father went off with another woman), a couple of years at Phillips Academy, and one year at Williams. Rathbone takes twenty-two pages to cover the same period, constructing along the way a solid picture of St. Louis (describing, for example, the opening of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904), and of Kenilworth, the prosperous Chicago suburb to which the family moved in 1908.



Perhaps Mellow would have lingered a bit more if he had lived to finish a complete draft of these early pages; but there is also a rough rightness to Mellow's opening, with its flash of geneological fact and shuffle of a few old family photographs.

If Mellow can give us little more of Evans's parents than a young, attractive couple on a sailboat with a group of friends in 1899--and this picture, in a family album that Evans apparently kept to the end of his life, is a winning image of turn-of-the-century youthfulness--perhaps it is the biographer's first, quick salute to his subject's undying belief in a photograph's revelatory power. Mellow does slow the pace once Evans, at this point an aspiring writer, is off to France in 1926, at first traveling, or so it seems, with his mother. He had already been reading D.H. Lawrence and George Moore, while getting bad grades at every school he attended. In Paris, he went to Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, expanded his grasp of modern literature, took French classes, tried his hand at translation. He traveled in the south of France and in Italy. There are strong impressions from this period, in letters written by a New York friend, the artist Hanns Skolle.

Once Evans was back in New York, his circle began to expand, as he met Crane, Kirstein, and Ben Shahn, among others. By 1930 he had assimilated Baudelaire, Flaubert, Gide, Proust, Joyce; he was beginning to know Atget's photographs of Paris, which would be a lifelong inspiration. In 1931 he traveled with Kirstein in the Northeast, taking pictures. In 1932 he exhibited in Manhattan with Julien Levy, in whose gallery a pioneering fascination with photography past and present went hand in hand with a taste for Surrealist enigmas and Neoromantic panache. (Joseph Cornell also started out with Levy, and the parallels between him and Evans are intriguing: both of these ultrasophisticated students of popular culture had been students at Phillips Academy, admired Brady and Nadar, and were sometime friends and collaborators of Kirstein.)

In 1933 Kirstein organized Evans's first museum show, at the Modern. In the '30s, assignments took Evans to Tahiti (to produce a film for a rich tourist), and to Cuba. In 1935, he went south on a project to photograph antebellum architecture, and in New Orleans he met Jane Smith Ninas, a painter who became his first wife. Ernestine Evans, a New York literary agent, helped him get in touch with what would later become the Farm Security Administration, where he worked in the same program as Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, and Marion Post Wolcott, and did most of his most famous photographs of the South. In 1936 he was in Alabama with Agee, working on the study of tenant farmers that had been commissioned (but was rejected) by *Fortune*. In 1938, the Modern mounted its second Evans show and published *American Photographs*, the album of eighty-seven plates with which, at age thirty-five, Evans defined for all time his lyric documentary style.

Exhibitions of Evans's work tend to favor the '30s by a wide margin, and the retrospective at the Metropolitan is no exception. When John Szarkowski organized a retrospective at the Modern in 1971, some three-quarters of the photographs came from the '30s; the preponderance of the gallery space in the Met show this winter is devoted to those same years. Yet Evans, who was forty in 1943, was immensely active all his life. Opinions

about the huge later output remain unsettled, and a retrospective can pique the curiosity of those who think they know the work well. Rosenheim and the other curators at the Metropolitan are making a pitch for the later color work, much of it done with a Polaroid SX-70 camera.

In 1973 and 1974 Evans produced some 2,600 Polaroids. Here the adamant logic of his earlier photographs of signs and facades gains a tossed-off look that is to some degree a function of the Polaroid technology. These pictures have an enjoyable in-your-face immediacy, but Rosenheim is reaching when he compares them to Matisse's paper cutouts, and one cannot avoid the fact that Evans did not live long enough to winnow these images, to engage in the editorial process that he believed was so essential. It must also be pointed out that while Rosenheim has emphasized these late color works, he has included almost none of the black-and-white photographs of the '50s and '60s that Szarkowski included in 1971. Perhaps he was constrained by the relatively restricted dimensions of the galleries in which the retrospective has been mounted; but it is regrettable that we get so little sense of how Evans continued in the black-and-white vein of the '30s-- and sometimes (here I agree with Szarkowski) at a comparable level of quality, as in *The Home Organ, Chester, Nova Scotia* (1968).

What everybody seems agreed in admiring, in the work done after *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, are the anonymous portraits that Evans took in the New York subways in the late '30s and early '40s with a camera hidden in his winter coat and a remote control in one hand. These images of subway riders in that alone-but-together dream state that public transportation can induce--they were published a quarter-century later in *Many Are Called*, another book with a text (this time posthumous) by Agee--inaugurate a darkly lyrical American mode. Robert Frank built on this vision in *The Americans*, a project that Evans supported, writing on behalf of Frank's successful Guggenheim application in 1955-1956 and praising the younger man's work several years later in a *U.S. Camera Annual*. By then Evans was well into his long involvement with *Fortune* magazine, where he was a staff photographer and editor from 1945 to 1965. He did dozens of photographic essays for the magazine, almost all with his own photographs and planned by him down to the smallest detail of the layouts. Among these portfolios are to be found some of Evans's early experiments with color film: he photographed fading industrial areas, blurred views from speeding trains, old office furniture, common tools.

Evans's marriage to Jane Smith Ninas unraveled in the '50s. (They were divorced in 1955 and she married the music critic Winthrop Sargeant.) Although Evans had a reputation for steering clear of other photographers, he became a strong supporter of Robert Frank, of Lee Friedlander, of Diane Arbus. He married again; he began to teach at Yale; he exhibited at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery. In his last years he became increasingly involved in collecting, not just the postcards and the rusty signs that had been obsessions for years, but also driftwood and such detritus as the flip-tops from soda cans, some of which he made into collages.

Evans could be a ferociously dedicated worker. In the early years, when he was using a view camera on a tripod as well as a Leica, there was often plain hard labor involved in

simply getting the camera into place. Yet the man always had a dandified, laid-back side, and those who knew him often found it hard to figure out where he was coming from. During their trips to photograph Victorian architecture in the early '30s, Kirstein got to a point where he found Evans a genuinely unsympathetic character--perhaps what we would call passive-aggressive. In his diary, Kirstein wrote that he was "increasingly bored with Evans. No resilience of energy." Yet the work produced suggests otherwise. Evans could be a sort of anti-team team player, and this would never be truer than several decades later, when he was a curiously effective presence at *Fortune*, following his own lights (and alienating fellow employees in the process) while apparently keeping on the right side of just enough people in positions of power.

The man was a laconic, watchful spirit. He could calmly subvert the rules that box in photographers "on assignment." He could turn just about anything that came his way to his advantage. Sent out on government money to photograph the calamities of the Depression, he did the job--and did it better than anybody else; yet all the while he was perfecting his all-American photographic version of the Baudelairean prose poem. While he was a true professional, Evans was unwilling to be constrained by the conventions of his profession. Edmund Wilson--a near contemporary of Evans's whose accounts of Depression America, collected in *The American Earthquake* (1958), at times give a magnified, Evans-like beauty to the visual details of people's lives--once explained that the trick of a career such as his own was "to write what you are interested in writing and to succeed in getting editors to pay for it." Substitute photography for writing, and this describes Evans, too. Both men used the journalistic craft as a medium through which to create work with a complexly personal artistic shape. "You have to learn," Wilson continued, "to load solid matter into notices of ephemeral happenings; you have to develop a resourcefulness at pursuing a line of thought through pieces on miscellaneous and more or less fortuitous subjects."

Evans dared to be true to an essentially journalistic element in photography. A lesser artist would probably never have taken that risk: many journalistic photographers, at least the ones who do portrait work or fashion work, imagine that they must prove their artistic worth by refusing to do anything in the tried-and-true way. Evans goes in the opposite direction. He photographs so matter-of-factly, so straightforwardly, that he can seem plodding. One of his first photographic essays, published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1939, concerns new public housing projects. The photographs of a kitchen with modern appliances and of a little girl's bedroom (with "her prized photo of Joe Louis" on the wall) are so quietly reportorial that you expect the photo credit to indicate not an artist but a news service.

Evans was a radical, but his radicalism was grounded in a recognition of the essentially modest nature of the work that a photographer does. By the time that Evans took up photography, of course, this medium that circumvented all the craft traditions of picture-making seemed to offer a kind of functionalism that paralleled new ideals in architecture and other arts. The sleek, bare-bones look of modernist photography had become a staple of advertising, but Evans rejected what he regarded as the easy lucidity, the surface clarity, of European practitioners such as Albert Renger-Patzsch. Evans was a

fundamentalist. Kirstein was getting at this when he began his 1938 essay by drawing an analogy between Evans and "the early photographic master [who had] a simple but overwhelming interest in the object which was set before his machine."

Evans finds an imaginative shimmer in the most ordinary objects, and then he rhymes that shimmer with an imaginative intuition of his own. "The essence is done very quietly," he explained toward the end of his life, "with the flash of the mind, and with a machine." In South Carolina in 1936, Evans took a photograph of a facade emblazoned with signs, one of them a marvelous naive painting of fruits and vegetables. Years later he said of this painted sign that it "struck me as very funny, absurd, naive and unconscious--much more humor in it than in pop art. The still life of fruit is a lovely piece of primitive painting." And Evans's photograph becomes a kind of riff on the sign; he works like a jazz musician improvising on a folk tune. You can even see the name of the artist who painted those fruits and vegetables: "Bill the Sign Man, Beaufort." Evans and his machine were collaborating with this Beaufort primitive. (Beaufort was one of the Southern towns that Evans urged Robert Frank to visit on his own photographic odyssey a generation later.)

Nobody was more aware than Evans that photography was a way of magnifying appearances, of giving a new kind of attentiveness to ordinary things. When he photographed African sculpture, he approached the anonymous images with all the gravity that mid-nineteenth-century photographers brought to their earliest attempts to catch the truth of the Gothic cathedrals. Evans's attentiveness has a collaborative dimension. Bill the Sign Man was almost certainly unaware of Evans, just as the portrait subjects in the subway pictures did not know that they were being photographed. Yet Evans is such a transparent presence that his photographs can take on a surprisingly collaborative aura. He brings a white-heat disinterestedness to his work; the result is photography in a new and elusive emotional key.

Evans's shaded feelings are certainly evident in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that strange, magnificent, and flawed study of three tenant farmer families on which he collaborated with James Agee. Nothing else that Evans ever did is as instantly recognizable as the photographs of the Burroughs family and their home. By the time the book, which had begun as a magazine assignment, was published in 1941 (and sold only a few hundred copies--for a long time it was an underground classic), it had a text of over 400 pages. The photographs (31 in 1941; 62 in the 1960 edition) are treated as a freestanding unit; they precede the title page and are meant to tell their own story.

A handful of these images have become emblems of Depression America. There was a time a couple of decades ago when a few of Dorothea Lange's images, with their more overtly heroic look, were as famous as Evans's; but I think it is safe to say that his understated approach is what people are most familiar with today. There is Allie Mae Burroughs, with her thin mouth, her wary eyes, and her dark hair pulled back from her face; and her husband Floyd, regarding us through narrow eyes; and several views of their pathetically bare home. When people think of Evans's contribution to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, they remember these photographs of the tenant farmers, but when

Evans redid his portfolio in 1960, he also included some of his sweetest, wittiest photographs of country stores plastered with lots of mismatched signs. I have a hunch that Evans wanted those images for comic relief--though for the Burroughs family, who could not afford to buy anything that those signs advertised, the implications might have been very different.

What is extraordinary about *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the extent to which Agee and Evans present the hopeless poverty of these families in all its grinding everydayness. The book's enduring power rests with their insistence that the world that they are chronicling is too complex to be described as anything but a collage, a scrapbook; this is a tragedy without conclusion or catharsis. Agee and Evans have no patience with the socialist romanticism of the '30s. Their merciless realism was what struck Dwight Macdonald when he wrote about the book in *politics* in 1948. He admired the fact that Agee's writing could fit into "neither the `liberal' nor the `conservative' category, being pessimistic, unconstructive, impractical, indignant, lyrical and always personal." "The great thing about Agee's text and Evans's photographs," Macdonald observed, "is that they dare to state the truth about these trapped people, without the usual Progressive-superficialities about `solving problems' (All They Need is a TVA). They have given us a *Works and Days* of our times, a chronicle of decay instead of growth, where the land does not nourish those who labor on it but destroys them."

Agee's best descriptions have a closeup power. He writes that a man in "new workclothes" has "the shy and silly formal charm of a mail-order-catalogue engraving." And then, as the farmer lives in those clothes, "the whole shape, texture, color, finally substance, all are changed." Agee describes "the urgent frontage of the thighs" and the way "the whole structure of the knee and musculature of the thigh is sculptured there; each man's garment wearing the shape and beauty of his induplicable body." This salute to the brilliance of overalls, to the way that they are transformed as they are used, has distant echoes of a more conventional leftist celebration of the working man; but Agee's prose is such a complication of that viewpoint that we find ourselves ending up with an infinitely more interesting and ambiguous view of the American laborer.

And yet, as is so often the case when artists and intellectuals regard those less fortunate than themselves, the project has a voyeuristic undertow. Agee and Evans are appalled by what they see, but they are fascinated, too. You almost hear them saying to themselves, "What a wonderful subject." They are eager to present the perfect account of the tamped-down horror of these lives. I begin to suspect that they are, if not exactly enjoying, then surely lingering a little too long over these people's suffering. While Agee's writing can be beautifully straightforward for long stretches, there are too many look-at-me romantic flourishes, too much fanciful, neo-Elizabethan language. Agee exults in getting under another man's skin. Those passages about work clothes have a physical, an almost erotic current that ultimately reads as a self-portrait of Agee rather than a portrait of a Southern tenant farmer.

True, Evans maintains an extraordinary spirit of discretion, even as he focuses on the most embarrassingly threadbare clothes and broken-down bedrooms. He is a master of

disinterested attentiveness. But his contributions to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also contain a discomfiting element of self-congratulation. Looking at Evans's photographs of the Burroughs, we are never entirely free of the suspicion that we are the better for having seen this suffering. Maybe we are. But where does that leave Allie Mae Burroughs? Evans never robs these people of their dignity. The problem is that he has taken upon himself the task of polishing their dignity.

When James Mellow writes of an "almost Vermeerlike quality of light" in the photographs of the Burroughs home, I cannot help feeling that he is falling into a trap that Evans has set. There is indeed a sense in which the photographs of the Burroughs kitchen, with the angled broom, simple stoneware, and ever-so-humble chair, recall seventeenth-century Dutch paintings (or one of the Fox Talbot photographs that were meant to echo de Hooch). But when Evans is at his greatest, he does not leave us thinking that one thing is *like* another. When we look at his most beautifully resolved photographs--of a church facade or a weathered poster--we are held precisely by the sensation that this picture is like nothing else we have ever seen.

Taken together, the photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are by no means the most sustained demonstrations of Evans's gifts as a photographer; I would give that honor to *American Photographs*. But there are passages among Agee's descriptions of the tenant farmers' clothes and homes that come closer than anything ever written to explaining how Evans regards the objects that he sets before his machine. Both Agee and Evans later on reported that they had avoided constantly consulting with one another while they worked. Still, who can doubt that Agee was thinking like Evans when he wrote that "plain objects and atmospheres have a sufficient intrinsic beauty and stature" and ought to be "handled and presented on their own merits without either distortion or apology?" Agee describes vernacular architecture as having precisely the kind of formal authority that you feel in Evans's work. He speaks of a tenant farmer's house as being "put together out of the cheapest available pine lumber ... according to one of the three or four simplest, stingiest, and thus most classical plans contrivable." That shift from stinginess to classicism goes to the heart of Evans's art. Evans is a master at getting at the classicism of commonness.

He is also a master when it comes to the classicism of kitsch. Evans is enraptured by ordinary images. Perhaps even more importantly, he is obsessed with a quotidian way of representing reality. He looks for ways of organizing compositions that have an unconscious--"found"--beauty. He loves the frontality and forthrightness of illustrations in trade catalogues, and the ultra-deep perspective of a street disappearing into infinity on a picture postcard. One of Jeff Rosenheim's more interesting discoveries in the Evans Archives is a postcard of a street in Morgan City, Louisiana, which has a composition that is almost identical to that of a view of Morgan City by Evans himself. Rosenheim wonders: "Did Evans stop in a local diner for a cup of coffee, see the postcard, and then wander the streets seeking out its location? Or did he make his photograph first and later discover that he had exactly duplicated the postcard view? The former scenario seems more likely." In the end it hardly matters, for (as Rosenheim writes) postcards in general "offered precisely the anonymous, anti-aesthetic, documentary quality he sought to achieve in his own photography."

When Evans is at his greatest, he is glorying in vernacular forms, playing them for every echo and implication that he can find. He loves to anatomize popular images and disclose their exhilaratingly sophisticated bones. All those buildings that he photographs front and center are true Readymades--found objects that in their photographic isolation achieve a Dadaist absurdity. Yet the very simplicity of those structures also suggests a natural, unfathomable classicism. These might seem contradictory accomplishments, except that in the '30s and '40s there was a gathering feeling in certain artistic circles that the extremes of Duchamp's Dadaism and Mondrian's purism might ultimately meet--which is precisely what happens in some of Evans's great, near-symmetrical photographs of rural Southern clapboard churches, with their modest porches and single steeples. These buildings have a Constructivist singularity that recalls some of Malevich's compositions; and the primitive decoration suggests a readymade purism. Evans offers purism as a found experience. The balance of elements--the accidental, the inevitable--is thrilling. No wonder Evans said that he felt that he was "walking on a tightrope instead of the ground."

The image of the tightrope walker captures Evans perfectly. In his later years, he did nothing to discourage the many admirers who regarded his photographs as models of compositional perfection. Yet he was also a Dadaist trickster who was glad to play devil's advocate and suggest that art might no longer be a freestanding ideal. How else can we explain the fact that in 1971, when Yale mounted "Walker Evans: Forty Years," Evans included, among the works on display, a group of ten rusty metal signs that he had scavenged from buildings and roadside sites? (Some examples from his collection of found signs may be seen in the Metropolitan show.) I have a hunch that Evans, when he chose to hang those signs at Yale, meant to remind an audience that regarded him as an American classic that his art had a bad-boy side, too.

There is always a high-versus-low ambiguity at the center of Evans's art. In 1969, just as he was embarking on the involvement with color photography that would dominate his last years, he published an essay on photography in a volume called *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, edited by Louis Kronenberger. Introducing the subject of color, he observed that "there are four simple words for the matter, which must be whispered: Color-photography is vulgar." (The whisper was printed in a smaller typeface.) He then observed of a photograph of a pileup of hand-painted signs in a parking lot that "in the example reproduced here, there is color in primitive accident and in bracing vibrancy combined." The curious thing about this example is that the photograph, which is described as "photographer unknown," looks like an Evans. Indeed, in the chronology at the end of Mellow's book, it is said to be "almost certainly by Evans." Which means that Evans was bad-mouthing the "vulgarity" of color even as he celebrated it in his own faux-anonymous work.

Here we have Evans the sneak. He not only echoed vernacular forms; he tried to pass off his echoes as the real thing. Perhaps Evans wanted to escape from the trap of a kind of probity that had been ascribed to him ever since Kirstein, at the end of the '30s, observed that his work suggested "neither a baroque nor a decorative, but a purely protestant attitude: meagre, stripped, cold, and, on occasion, humorous." Where in that description, Evans might have been asking, was there room for some unabashed outrageousness? He



might have been answering Kirstein when, in the *Quality* essay, he wrote that the photographer must be "a joyous sensualist....What keeps him going is pure absorption, incurable childishness, and healthy defiance of Puritanism-Calvinism." All true. And yet Kirstein was not wrong. We suspect that Evans was the author of the color photograph for which he would not quite take responsibility because it has such a serene and severe formal logic.

Evans will not stay put. That is the tremendous thing about him. He is there in the prehistory of Pop Art, true enough. And last summer I found myself thinking about him as I went through "Fame After Photography," at the Museum of Modern Art. Among that bewilderingly gaudy display of publicity stills, fanzines, and clips from TV celebrity programs, there was some raw material that was not unlike the stuff out of which Evans made his art. Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, the show's curators, did not know what to do with all the junk that they had hauled into the museum; but their fascination with this pop outrageousness was by no means alien to Evans. He, too, liked to survey other people's trashy dreams and fantasies. Come to think of it, he was one of the first artists to bring such themes into the Museum of Modern Art.

You cannot look at all the photographs that Evans took of bedrooms--tenant farmers' bedrooms, bohemian bedrooms, middle-class bedrooms--without considering what a shameless voyeur he was. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee describes going through the most personal effects in those poor tenant farmers' closets and dresser drawers. In a sense, Evans did that his whole artistic life, and he did it with the whole country. There is a vulgarity about Walker Evans that is wedded--this is the strangest thing of all--to a sense of proportion as fine as any American artist has ever had

## THE HUNGRY EYE

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April 6 , 2000

Creating with a camera, and to Ray Suarez.

RAY SUAREZ: These stark, black and white, deceptively simple photographs are among the best known images of the rural South during the Great Depression. These pictures have become part of our memory bank, part of America's shared visual catalogue of a time long gone and places changed beyond recognition. When they first appeared 65 years ago, these pictures immediately established the reputation of an artist, who helped move photography in new directions as an art form: Walker Evans. For weeks now, people have been crowding a new exhibit of Evans' work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Jeff Rosenheim is the curator of photography at the museum.

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM, Curator: I think Evans had a unique idea, which really distinguishes him from many other artists. He set himself up as a historical model to see the present as if it were already the past. And if he could do that at the time, he could stand for all time, and I think that his success is that he achieved his goal to photograph what was most American about America, but also to photograph those things in the present with the eye of tradition. And I think that those pictures are timeless.

RAY SUAREZ: Evans called the style he was striving for, lyric documentary. It was stripped down, meant to record the world as it is, instead of using a tool, the camera, to create a world the eye cannot normally see. Whether shooting the frank, unadorned, straight-ahead gaze of the poorest Americans, small- town streetscapes with no people to be seen, or decaying advertising signs, Evans' art simply emerged from knowing what to put in, and what to leave out.

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM: He wanted his role to disappear. He wanted to hide his hand, if you will, so that we can stand where he stood and look at the world and come to terms with it directly, unfiltered by the artist's perceptions, but of course influenced directly by them.

RAY SUAREZ: Evans was born in 1903, and raised in affluence. His desire to be a writer took him to Paris after the First World War. He started his life's work as a photographer when he returned to America in 1927. Throughout his life, Evans remained a blend of rebel outsider and well-groomed ivy- league sophisticate. His photos of the Brooklyn Bridge, illustrations for a book by his friend Hart Crane, began building his reputation. They were followed by journalistic work in the Caribbean for a book, "The Crime of Cuba." In the mid-1930's Evans was hired by the Farm Security Administration. He chronicled the

grinding poverty of southern farmers, and indulged his own interest in southern architecture. Rosenheim says, unlike many of the New Deal artists, he did not have a political agenda.

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM: His agreement is no politics, whatsoever, that there would be no use for propaganda. He was not interested in that, but he was well aware that the agency he was working for was trying to illustrate the efforts by the New Deal administration to relieve some of the terrible poverty that has befallen America during the Depression, and that the efforts made by the New Deal administration to assist them was something, I think, he believed in. What he didn't believe in, is that art could change anything. He believed that the photograph as a record, as a document, would be the greatest thing that could ever have been created by the New Deal administration, and I think it has been.

RAY SUAREZ: It was during this same period that Evans traveled south with writer James Agee. The pair spent several months with the farmers of Hale County, Alabama, in preparation for an article for "Fortune" magazine that would never be published. Instead it became the book, "Let us Now Praise Famous Men," which along with the New Deal photos sealed Evans place in the history of American photography. But he wasn't close to finished. He took pictures for another 40 years. Evans' work was recognized almost immediately for the way it turned documentary photography into an art form. In 1938, the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave Evans their first-ever one-man show in photography.

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM: The art comes in, actually, in the things that are hidden in the picture. It's the angle of light, the illumination of the facade. If you look at one of these pictures, it's in the composition, that doesn't look like it's anything, but nature's composition or the civilization's composition.

RAY SUAREZ: Evans was fascinated with signs. He photographed them, and collected them. Like many earlier 20th century artists, he took ordinary things out of their environment, and treated them as art.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY, Artist: I think he laughingly said that he was the father of pop art at one time, but his interest in things found, like that, those go quite a ways back in his work.

RAY SUAREZ: Artist William Christenberry helped Evans collect many of those signs.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY: I think he was very much taken with, what I call the aesthetics of the aging process: How time and the elements, bullet holes, rust, whatever, can make something that was once in mint condition have a quality that is more interesting than if it were in mint condition.

RAY SUAREZ: While building the stature of photography, Evans also preserved for us lost pieces of the American past, like these photos taken in the New York City subways. They were taken in secret. Evans hid a camera in his coat, and ran a shutter release cable down

his sleeve.

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM: And he would sit opposite his fellow passengers on the subway, and record a hidden, if you will, a surreptitious view of his fellow passengers: the idea being that he didn't like the artifice, and sort of falsity, of commercial portraiture, or studio portraiture. He basically felt like the most honest form of portraiture is a portrait of someone unaware that they're actually having their picture made.

RAY SUAREZ: In a project for "Fortune" on the working people of Detroit Evans hid in plain sight, holding his camera waist high, and quietly snapping passersby. He was fascinated by the variety of faces, classes, and attitudes of Detroiters in the modern economy. The Metropolitan Museum is not only home to thousands of Evans' photographs, but the kinds of artifacts that fill in the man behind the art hanging in the galleries. Evans collected thousands of postcards, admiring the straightforward way this format tells a story. The museum has his letters, his diaries, the books he read, the classified ads for his series on working men and women, and the outtakes from his photographic essays. They tell you more about what Evans was looking for in his work, and reassure you that even a master can take underexposed and out-of-focus pictures.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY: Walker Evans' work influenced me greatly.

RAY SUAREZ: In the early 1960's, Christenberry was befriended by the older man. Christenberry himself came from the part of Alabama where Evans had made his famous pictures decades before. The two remained friends until Evans' death in 1975. In the early 1970's, the two men traveled to the same part of Alabama. By then Evans had switched to color and instant photography-- the Polaroid SX-70. Christenberry describes his friend at work.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY: He said, "would you look in the car in my duffel bag and get me a box of film?" SX-70 film, I said, "yes, sir," and when I took it back to him he was focusing the SX-70, which for me is kind of an awkward camera to focus, but he'd had it up to his eye. So I approached him, without interrupting, from his left side and I saw his eye looking through that lens. And the best way I can describe it, it was like the eye of an eagle. I mean it was really sharply focused. I don't know how to express that, but it was intense.

RAY SUAREZ: So Christenberry grabbed his own camera, and took this picture, a portrait of the artist, as an old man. In his last years, Evans taught at Yale and tried out the new tools advancing camera technology offered. He said, "the artist's eye must be hungry, and my eye is hungry."

JEFF L. ROSENHEIM: It's in the subway pictures. It's in the labor anonymous pictures, but I think it's in all of his work. It's the struggle between the individual and society. It's what the artist does. The artist is always somewhat distant from the society, in order to be able to observe it from that sort of necessary distance. You'd spoken about, you know, how do we look at photographs, and what does the photograph teach us? How is... What is the language

of the camera? And I think Evans was one of the people that defined it.

**RAY SUAREZ:** The Evans retrospective is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York until May 14.