

Off the Clock: Walker Evans and the Crisis of American Capital, 1933-38

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Margaretta M. Lovell  
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Professor Richard Walker

Fall 2010



## Abstract

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This dissertation examines the photographs of Walker Evans made during a crucial period of his career—the years 1933-38—and uses a simple question about Walker Evans’s photographs as a springboard from which to examine his career and the place of documentary photography in Depression and post-Depression American culture: Why did Evans train his camera lens so frequently on people who appear to be working class but are not at work? Throughout the 1930s, Evans regularly and successfully made pictures of poor and working people, but he largely elided the two major tropes of pictures of working people by neither photographing bodies bent over machine or field, nor focusing on unemployment lines and scenes of labor unrest. Evans was also interested in things that were not at work—he pictured forms of industrial infrastructure that were not in use such as railroads and factories, decaying or damaged signage for events that had already happened, and—most famously—a great number of unoccupied buildings. I argue that this interest in the obsolescent and the not-working constitute a sustained meditation on his contemporary history.

My interpretation of Evans’s photographs from this crucial period of history focuses on the formal imperatives that ordered his photographic practice, and make the case that Evans found the crux of photography’s medium specificity in its relationship to time. Time, under the conditions of industrial capitalism, thus occupied a position of both formal and social importance throughout his career. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argue that Evans developed a repertoire of street portraiture that differed from previous models of documentary photography in its refusal to create narrative contexts for the subjects he pictured. That initial act of refusal on Evans’s part can be read as a formal choice and also as a social choice: with it, he abandoned a tradition of picturing the poor associated with Progressive reform politics. In the second chapter I argue that Evans’s work in 1936 can be read within a larger cultural conversation about the relationship between movement and stillness, and that his approach to the working poor in the Mississippi Delta Region consistently refused to picture them as the subjects of irreducible, unchanging poverty. The third and final chapter addresses Evans’s 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *American Photographs*, and argues that the exhibition itself should be read as a proxy for the photographer’s travels through the country; further, that it should also be

read as a claim by the photographer for the importance of a model of artistic freedom that elided the kinds of employment models that characterized much photographic work during the period.

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## Acknowledgements

Like most dissertations, this one would not have been possible without the support—intellectual, moral and material—of many people and institutions. That support started with the extraordinary history of art department at the University of California, Berkeley, and its students and faculty. Margaretta Lovell supervised this project (and the peregrinations of its author) with steady guidance, insight and patience. Her colleagues, my professors Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby and Richard Walker responded to this manuscript judiciously and with characteristic generosity. Anne Middleton Wagner helped get the project underway. My classmates Elise Archias, Sarah Evans, Sarah Hamill and Linda Kim were crucial to the early formulation of this project. Diane Sigman in the history of art department managed the logistics of its final stages with exceptional grace and good humor.

I have been extremely fortunate to have received financial support for this project from a number of institutions, including the University of California Graduate Division, the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Terra Foundation for American Art. At SAAM, Amelia Goerlitz, Cynthia Mills and Virginia Mecklenburg could not have been more helpful during my fellowship. The wonderful Amelia Graves opened her house to me for my entire stay in Washington, D.C. At the Metropolitan, Marcy Karp and Lindsay Dorrance graciously and efficiently administered the fellows program, and in the Department of Photographs, Malcolm Daniel, Julia De Roulet, Predrag Dimitrijevic, Doug Eklund, Mia Fineman, Laura Harris, Jeff Rosenheim and Lucy von Brachel were unfailingly welcoming, generous with their knowledge, and challenging in their responses to my work. At the Terra Foundation Summer Residency in Giverny, Veerle Thielemans, Ewa Bobrowska and Miranda Fontaine administered a rigorous, thoughtful program that provided time to think and work, challenged my basic assumptions about the practice of art history (and, not incidentally, citizenship) in the world beyond the United States. They also reminded me of the significant pleasures of scholarship. I was able to go to Giverny because my employer, the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, supported my need for time off to write. John Rohrbach, senior curator of photographs, and Sylvie Penichon, the conservator of photographs, have been consistent voices of support and encouragement as I have worked to complete this dissertation.

In addition to my committee, a number of scholars and friends have read large sections of this work or have spent time discussing it with me at crucial points, and to each of them I owe thanks: Karen Bala, Sharon Corwin, Kimberly Curtiss, Sarah Evans, Amy Freund, Karrie Hovey, Linda Kim, Alexis McCrossen, Mignon Nixon, Patsy Norvell, Jody Patterson, Sylvie Penichon, Elizabeth Pergam, John Rohrbach, Jeff Rosenheim, Karen Sherry, Marc Simpson, Joel Sternfeld, Kirsten Swenson, Stephanie Taylor, Marta Weiss, Terri Weissman and Marnin Young. In the Dallas—Fort Worth area, a working group led by Amy Freund and including Heather MacDonald, Amy Buono, Eric Stryker and Sally Huxtable have read and encouraged this work in its final stages. Elizabeth Le Coney helped prepare the image files, a task of great consequence and complexity that she made seem easy. In every step of this dissertation, I have written with the knowledge that I am the beneficiary of the care and attention that Jeff Rosenheim lavished on the archive of Walker Evans, which he and his colleagues meticulously catalogued. I have also benefited from the keen attention Jeff has paid to my project. I simply cannot thank him enough, and will only try to do so by telling a story that does justice to its chief protagonist.

Throughout the past six years, I have made New York City a sometimes home, and always Patsy Norvell has been there to welcome me into her apartment and her life. Her friendship, as well as the example of her thoughtful work and her deep knowledge of art, has transformed my life. Finally, Karen Cabel Bala, my sweetest, dearest love, has lived with this dissertation and supported its author through six years; three cities; two homes; the birth of our son, Noah Josef; a perpetually messy pile of paperwork; as well as many tears and hopes for the post-dissertation future. May every writer be so lucky.

## Introduction

### **Vicksburg, 1936**

Sometime after the early spring of 1936, probably at his studio in New York or in a temporary studio in Washington, D.C., Walker Evans (1903-1975) printed a recently exposed negative (Fig. 1, *Untitled [Barbershops, Vicksburg, Mississippi]*). The negative, one of thousands he printed that year, was made on commission for the federal government.<sup>1</sup> Still, the negative made a particularly interesting composition, and so Evans kept it in his own collection to print, rework and distribute as he liked. In this resulting photograph of figure 1, three African-American men stand in raking morning sunlight against the white wooden clapboards of a storefront barbershop. Actually, they occupy a sidewalk in front of a row of barbershops whose names are a pleasure to repeat: the New Deal Barbershop and the Savoy Barber Shop (Brother-in-Law Barbershop, visible in other negatives, is slightly off frame). To the right of the Savoy, a food market shares a similar façade, so the horizontal planes of wood seem to stretch from one side of the photograph to the other. The photographer, from across the street, set up his tripod so that the lens of the camera was nearly parallel to the edge of the sidewalk, although the entire street slopes slightly downwards along the right side of the photograph. The convergence of sunlight against wood and concrete, the straight-on view that gives way to a slight angle, and the play of silvery grays throughout the print create a remarkably even composition, and the three men, two seated and one standing between them, are decidedly low-key. They gaze at the photographer, but their bodies give no hint of movement in Evans's direction. Rather, a cool appraisal seems to shuttle back and forth between photographer and subjects, one that may run its course from the distance of a street's width, or that may culminate in interaction, conversation, even movement. Caught in this moment as we viewers are, the openness of their mutual inquiry is sufficiently absorbing and dramatic that questions about what will happen next, or what has already transpired, seem beside the point. Indeed, Evans's photograph may have interested him because it opened up more questions than it answered—about shop fronts in Vicksburg, about the men standing out front, about the bracing quality of morning sunlight, and about the nature of the flat, silvery medium that brought these mysteries together.

This dissertation tells the story of one man's career over a very concentrated period of time—five years. In doing so, it attempts to give language to the questions established in this photograph, but a language which is also crucial to Evans's work throughout the five years under investigation, 1933-38. Nationally, these years were marked by economic crisis, social transformation, and the politicization of art production. Although my primary goal is to shed light on the nature of Evans's artistic achievements during this time, I also make the case that documentary photography, a marginalized practice in the United States by the late 1920s, was substantively reinvented during the 1930s and stabilized as a genre within the field of modern art. This strategic move—and Evans's centrality to it—would have a profound impact on the idea of documentary and

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<sup>1</sup> This photograph has been memorably discussed in print by Jeff L. Rosenheim in his essay, "The Cruel Radiance of What Is": Walker Evans and the South," in Rosenheim, et.al., *Walker Evans* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 82-83.

its political efficacy for several generations; and it was the product of Evans's alliance with the young Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, founded 1929) as well as his engagement with a contemporary, transcontinental dialogue about the medium of photography. Why strategic? Modernism was not the only course for a young documentary photographer in the early 1930s, and documentary was by no means the natural course for an ambitious modern artist. For Evans, documentary was a field to be reinvented within the context of an expanding concept of modernism—one that relentlessly interrogated medium as the basis for artistic achievement. By the end of the decade, Evans efficiently twinned American modernism with documentary photography—so much that the medium and the genre are now considered integral to the establishment of modernism in America.

The 1930s is a deeply important period in the history of documentary photography, because it is a period in which the genre was essentially invented as such.<sup>2</sup> After the beginning of the Great Depression, which is dated to sequential drops in the stock market on October 24 and 29, 1929, but which deepened through the following years, photographic activity in America actually grew, and the use of documentary expanded dramatically. This was not wholly surprising: Americans' continued embrace of cameras and photographic technology was in keeping with their significant national investment in the medium, an investment that dated back to its earliest appearances in the United States in the 1840s.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, Americans produced vast numbers of photographs, pioneered new technologies, and participated eagerly in the establishment of a market for items of visual culture—including stereocards, *cartes-de-visites*, photographically-illustrated travelogues, photographs of the American West, portraits of loved ones and of celebrities, and photographic records of the Civil War. By the late nineteenth century, a self-consciously artistic photography movement had emerged in the United States under the leadership of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946). By the 1920s, American photographic practice was increasingly polarized between high and low, and there were few substantial points of connection between artist-photographers like Stieglitz and the rising wave of amateurs who took advantage of increasingly easy-to-use cameras to record their lives, families and communities.<sup>4</sup> (One important

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Miller's recent dissertation explicitly makes the case for the "invention" of a self-consciously documentary mode in the 1930s. See Sarah Miller, *Inventing 'Documentary' in American Photography, 1930-1945*. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2009. For an overview of the range of photographic production in the 1930s and documentary's prominence within that range, see John Raeburn's *A Staggering Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). Finally, for a discussion of the relationship between modernism and documentary in the 1930s, see Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 283-350.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of this topic see Martha Sandweiss, et.al., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, art photography became increasingly rarified. Its first incarnation in the United States, Pictorialism, was largely made up of amateurs. For more on this transition, see Sarah Greenough, "'Of Charming Glens, Graceful Glades, and Frowning Cliffs': The Economic Incentives, Social Inducements, and Aesthetic Issues of American Pictorial Photography, 1880-1902," in Martha Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1991), pp. 258-281; and Marianne Fulton, ed., *Pictorialism into Modernism: The Clarence White School of Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1996). On the rise of snapshots and the increasingly use of cameras by amateurs and the waning of Pictorialism, see Dianne Waggoner's essay, "Photographic Amusements" in Greenough, et. al., *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978: From the Collection of Robert F. Jackson*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2007), pp. 7-72.

exception to this gulf, however, was advertising photography, which expanded rapidly and found broad audiences, even as the Great Depression took hold.<sup>5</sup>) The professional practice of social documentary photography, which was strongly tinged by its association with progressive reform politics, was deeply marginalized during the 1920s, and its chief practitioners, Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940), had fallen into obscurity.<sup>6</sup>

During the early 1930s, a number of factors combined to create a more hospitable and non-polarized environment for young photographers such as Evans. A new openness to photography was especially pronounced in New York, where arts organizations and publishing industries were centered. Evans settled in the city in 1928, and saw his career (more prestigious than profitable) take off even as the Depression took hold, as reported by his biographer, James R. Mellow.<sup>7</sup> Along with his peer photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White and Berenice Abbott, he was able to take advantage of new galleries that were open to photography exhibitions, such as the Julien Levy Gallery and Weyhe Gallery. He also witnessed the opening of new museums that made room for photographs in their galleries such as the Museum of Modern Art (founded 1929) and the Museum of the City of New York (founded in 1923 but opened in its building in 1930). Finally, he began to place his photographs in periodicals—first in literary journals such as Cambridge-based *Hound & Horn* and the short-lived publication *USA* (from Philadelphia), and then later in much larger periodicals such as *Fortune* (which published Evans's first photo-essay in 1934; he would begin working for *Fortune* full-time in 1946).<sup>8</sup>

This ferment of activity around photography privileged the new, as cultural historian John Raeburn has demonstrated.<sup>9</sup> Unknown photographers had a place in these new exhibition spaces, and the previously rigid hierarchy between Stieglitz's chosen circle and a larger, more disorganized corps of photographers was fundamentally reorganized through exhibitions that showed a mix of the traditional subjects of art photography and newer, more various subjects. Importantly, juxtapositions of different kinds of photographic practice were the norm: portraiture and urban landscapes took their place alongside halftone prints of photojournalism, x-rays, industrial scenes, and European-inspired photomontage. The 1937 MoMA exhibition called *Photography, 1839-1937*, curated by Beaumont Newhall, is the most famous of these new photographic exhibitions, but Newhall's project evolved out of a decade of transformation that largely sprang from an important but obscure November, 1930, exhibition of photographs put on by the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art (and which included work by Evans).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, pp. 181-189. See also William A. Ewing and Todd Brandow, *Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, the Condé Nast Years, 1923-37* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, and Lausanne: Musées de l'Elysée, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See Raeburn, pp. 1-29.

<sup>7</sup> James Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 63-84. Mellow is actually Evans's second biographer. See also Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995). I cite Mellow rather than Rathbone consistently through this dissertation, although the earlier text is also very thorough.

<sup>8</sup> Mellow, pp. 225-26.

<sup>9</sup> Raeburn, pp. 1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Raeburn, pp. 24-26. On Harvard in the late 1920s and the ripple effect from its prestigious art history department, see Nicholas Fox Weber, *Patron Saints: Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art*,

Despite the emphasis placed on the new, and on young photographers, these exhibitions also made room for older models of photographic activity, specifically work attributed to Mathew Brady (1823-1896) and photographs by Eugene Atget (1857-1927), which were newly available to American audiences thanks to Abbott, who bought the French photographer's archive after his death with financial help from Levy.<sup>11</sup>

Younger photographers valued Atget and Brady for what they interpreted as the directness and immediacy of the deceased photographers' work, and both became important models for a new generation of American photographers, particularly those in New York and New England. While this group was looking backwards in time for inspiration, they were also looking east. Thus, European endeavors also proved important to the expansion of American photography. Journals like *Vue*, newspapers like the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and book publishers presented new theories of the relationship between photography and mass culture; photography and the graphic arts; and photography and modernism.<sup>12</sup> Further, members of New York's intellectual and artistic communities, including Evans's close friend Jay Leyda, traveled to Moscow and reported directly on the emergence of Soviet Constructivism.<sup>13</sup> Although there were strong distinctions between the new theoretical models, photographers like Evans and his peers in New York were likely to have understood that a new theory about photography was emerging with two major themes. First was the appeal to mass audiences through reproducibility, and second was its intrinsic and immediate relationship to everyday life. For Evans, the radical implication of this theory—the idea that photography could function as a revolutionary art form—was less important than the more schematic recognition that photography did, by its very nature, have a direct relationship to everyday life, and that an artistic practice could be built around that basic observation.

Everyday life during the early 1930s was increasingly marked by the invisible presence of the Great Depression, as well as its visible manifestations in the public sphere. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933, he began to establish both the programs of the New Deal and the political coalition necessary to enact them. These programs included reform legislation, but also provided funding for public works and public infrastructure as well as direct economic relief to the jobless; established long-term public programs such as Social Security; and (as a very slim but symbolically important

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1928-1943 (New York: Knopf, 1992). I discuss the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art (HSCA) exhibition in chapter three.

<sup>11</sup> Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1997), pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Phillips's *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989) surveys the most important primary texts that detail the increasingly tight relationship between photography and modernism during the 1930s, including works by Pierre MacOrlan, August Sander and Franz Roh, which all appeared in books Evans reviewed for the Harvard-based journal *Hound & Horn* in 1930. See Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5, no. 1 (October-December 1931), pp. 126-128. For an introduction to the subject of European modernism and photography, see Phillips's "Introduction," pp. xi-xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Evans discussed Leyda in his 1933 diary, Walker Evans Archive, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (WEA/MMA) 1994.250.95. See also correspondence between Evans and Leyda WEA/MMA 1994.260.12, and the Walker Evans correspondence file in the Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Archive and Library, New York University, New York. See a more general discussion of the news of Russian constructivism in New York in Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

piece of the pie) funded arts programs, including photography.<sup>14</sup> Senior administrators of the New Deal government, including Rexford Tugwell, head of the agricultural unit called the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration, RA/FSA), built their programs on the theories of Progressive reform movement: they posited that rational, centralized re-organization of the nation's macro- and micro-economic entities—everything from banks to farms—was the key to modernizing and strengthening the American economy.<sup>15</sup>

By the summer of 1935, Evans—who had already achieved some prominence as a photographer—had an offer to join the RA as a member of its Historical Division, under the supervision of Roy Stryker.<sup>16</sup> The program was a lightning rod for criticism of the entire New Deal project, as were the arts programs associated with the New Deal overall. Yet the photographers and other artists of the New Deal were primarily responsible for literally documenting the work of the different agencies for publicity purposes; thousands of photographs recorded bridge-building, road construction, the opening of new post offices, agricultural conservation initiatives and the like (the so-called “creative projects” were very secondary assignments).<sup>17</sup> Thus, the function of federally funded photography was literally indebted to an older model of social documentary that posited that progressive reformers could make use of the information in a candid documentary photograph to sell reform.

In this dissertation, I will suggest that Evans never fully bought into this model, as his ambitions differed widely from the demonstration of reform initiatives. Instead, I suggest that Evans's interest was in the relationship between photography and historicity. “This is pure record,” he wrote in an unsent letter to his soon-to-be boss, Stryker, “the value lies in the record itself.”<sup>18</sup> Evans's resistance to the reform model of documentary photography was premised on formal resistance. Although he knew that the record in question was that of a rapidly changing society during a time of crisis by virtue of his employment, his mode was consistently one of reducing the document to its most elemental terms: straightforward form, stable composition, and complete openness of meaning (both at the level of the photograph and its caption).

Evans's ideas of a “new” documentary practice, as exemplified by his Vicksburg photograph, demonstrates its stark contrast to that of his most important peer, Dorothea Lange, and her documentary work from the same period. In late February and March of 1936, Evans and Lange both worked for the RA and were on the road, Evans moving

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<sup>14</sup> See “Introduction,” Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. xi-xviii.

<sup>15</sup> Although the Historical Division of the RA/FSA, under the direction of Roy Stryker, is more frequently referred to by the acronym FSA in contemporary scholarship on New Deal arts projects, Evans was actually fired from the unit before its name changed from the RA to the FSA in 1937, so in this manuscript I will consistently use the term RA in relation to Evans's employment. The key resource on Evans's tenure at the RA is Jerald Maddox, *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973). A recent general resource on the RA/FSA generally is Gilles Mora and Beverly Brannan, *FSA: An American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006). For a discussion of labor in the 1930s, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 20-52.

<sup>16</sup> See Maddox. See also Mellow, pp. 254-257.

<sup>17</sup> The range of New Deal photography is surveyed in Pete Daniel and Sally Stein, et. al., *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> WEA/MMA 1994.250.4 (12). Memo in WE hand, no date. Printed in Thompson, p. 112.

along the Mississippi River in Mississippi and Alabama and Lange in central California. By setting up his camera directly across the street from a row of barber shops in Vicksburg, a town famous for its extant antebellum vernacular architecture, Evans made multiple exposures in front of the shop (Figs. 1-3). Other than exchanging gazes, he appears not to have spoken with the men, as no caption exists to document their names, occupations or living conditions. The photographs lack diagonal angles, and the dynamism Evans achieved is deliberately measured. No narrative other than the passing of time is implied.

In contrast, over the same period of time Lange made her now-famous “Migrant Mother” photographic series in Nipomo, California (Figs. 4-6). The sequence of photographs tracks her movement towards and around her subjects, Florence Thompson and her children, and the relationship of each subject to one another is clearly one of familial interdependence. Further, the Thompsons’ situation within their structural surroundings, a tent, reinforces the message of the accompanying caption—they are stranded migrants. Lange made extensive notes about the condition and precise situation of the family, both for the historical record and immediate use: in fact, while Evans took his negatives home and split them between those he would send back to his employer, Stryker, and those he would keep for himself, Lange immediately took her negatives to a San Francisco newspaper office for publication.<sup>19</sup> She then sent the entire group to Washington.<sup>20</sup> The difference between the two photographers is not merely that one was a good employee and the other was not (although this is a truism with regard to the two photographers); if we assume that both were working in good faith, the difference between their photographs and their methods illuminates a substantial difference in their ideas about documentary photography in general.

That difference can be characterized as part of the two different artists’ relationship to modernism. For Lange, the modernization of technologies of reproduction and circulation of photographs were central to the efficacy of her documentary efforts. Further, the idea of a complete record drove her practice to a substantial degree, not exclusively in the example of *Migrant Mother*, as a general principle of photography and language together as mediums capable of narrating the conditions of the world. For her, photographs and their related, language-based information (usually, the caption) took their place within a rational system of information. The idea that modernism or modernity could be overtly associated with or conveyed by style, however, was not a priority for her practice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Two articles appeared in the *San Francisco News* almost immediately upon Lange’s return. As cited by the Library of Congress’s online bibliography of *Migrant Mother*, they are: “Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squalor,” *San Francisco News* (March 10, 1936) and “What Does the ‘New Deal’ Mean to This Mother and Her Children?” *San Francisco News* (March 11, 1936). See: [http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128\\_migm.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html).

<sup>20</sup> The narrative about Lange and the famous *Migrant Mother* photographs is widely reported in scholarship on the photographer, including in Milton Meltzer’s biography of Lange, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer’s Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978); in James Curtis’s *Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and in Elizabeth Partridge, et.al., *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Lange’s position on this point led to her rejection by the f64 group. Although its members were familiar to her—some, like Ansel Adams, were lifelong friends—her unwillingness to embrace a photographic modernity at the level of the printed object put her outside the community of self-consciously modern

Evans's position was significantly different, and one of the tasks of this dissertation will be to locate Evans's modernism both conceptually and historically. As a young photographer (in his late 20s), Evans blew through photographic styles that he associated with European modernism. For instance, works like Evans's Brooklyn Bridge photographs, which he shared with the poet Hart Crane for use in the deluxe first edition of Crane's *The Bridge* (Figs. 7-9), are demonstrably graphic in their composition, revealing geometry as their core concern.<sup>22</sup> Their sturdy lines and blocky shapes spread evenly across the surface of the pictures. Further, they eschewed conventional horizon lines and the steadily horizontal or even upward gaze of more traditional photographic practices. I pick up after this moment, when Evans began a process of radical reduction in formal terms, preferring to wring visual interest out of the understated, simplified image made by a camera lens parallel to a flat surface, which may or may not be interrupted by human subjects. His questions became those that we associate with a discourse about modernism: chief among them, what are the precise terms of the medium itself? Although I would not argue that a fully fleshed understanding of modernism from a critical standpoint was crucial to Evans through the 1930s, as neither his *oeuvre* nor his photographs bear out such an argument, this dissertation evaluates the major questions Evans's work evokes: What is the simplest, most reduced form of visual documentation? What is the relationship of the camera and the photographic print to time? How should the work of making photographs be characterized? These questions form the basis of my inquiry into Evans's practice.

### **The Work of Photography**

Evans's explorations into photographic ontology did not happen in a vacuum, either socially or professionally. His own selfhood and sense of professional identity are central to the narrative of his development as a working photographer. Indeed, what is unexpected about the story of Walker Evans is the extent to which its chief engines truly are work and professional identity. Although one could reasonably argue that rarely has a decade passed within the history of industrial capitalism when the day-to-day matter of labor (small 'l') did not consume its subjects, during the 1930s the course of industrial capitalism in America was severely threatened, prompting an intensification of national interest in work, working people, and the politics of labor. Historian Michael Denning referred to this interest, and the wellspring of artistic and cultural expression that it engendered, as the "laboring" of American culture.<sup>23</sup> Americans' casual interest in the matter of work was fed by declining numbers of working Americans and a growing rate of joblessness; by increased unionization and widespread (often successful) strikes at major American factories and on the waterfronts; by a phenomenon that Lange examined of poor but independent Midwestern and Plains states farmers leaving their land in droves to become agricultural wage laborers in California; and finally by the government's massive infrastructural development and relief program, Roosevelt's New Deal. The

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photographers in California. See Meltzer, p. 73-76, 90. On *f64*, see also Therese Thau Heyman, *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland, Calif.: Oakland Museum, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (Paris: Black Sun Press, 1930).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London: Verso, 1997), p. xvi, and scattered references throughout the book. On the same topic of the cultural interest in labor and work during the Depression, see Robert Seguin, *Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 2001).

evidence for these broad trends comes from what Denning refers to as the “cultural front” of the 1930s, which is to say, that culture was broadly regarded during the 1930s as the proper forum for airing political and social matters—particularly those related to labor.<sup>24</sup>

Although many in Evans’s milieu were deeply invested in the broad public political sphere from the perspective of both the right and the left, Evans himself remained aloof from the more committed leftist politics of friends such as the film-maker and historian Jay Leyda, the artist Ben Shahn and even, intermittently, his important friend, patron and critic, Lincoln Kirstein. Evans’s letters and diaries are peppered with ambiguity and willful uncertainty on the major issues of the day (and they were major: revolution, communism and the rise of fascism dominated the world stage, while progressive reform, labor rights and the economic chasm laid bare by the Great Depression were close to home).<sup>25</sup> Thus, arguments about Evans’s ideological commitments moving in either direction are hard to sustain in the face of his overt ambiguity about the nature of social and political transformation.

Evans’s ambiguity did not translate into a lack of curiosity, nor, in one sense, outright refusal of the everyday and its potential political implications. Evans’s photographs reflect a voracious curiosity about the relationships between people and things, and their overall relationship with more abstract concepts like time and place. In effect, his curiosity manifested itself as an extended investigation of the circumstances of everyday life; as subject matter, work and working people are seemingly ineluctable staples in his 1930s photographs. Importantly, however, Evans never celebrated or heroized working people by making photographs of people, men especially, actually working. There are few bent, hunched, or even pre-occupied figures in Evans’s entire oeuvre, and by far the more likely subjects Evans sought were people sleeping or talking on the street. The men standing outside the barbershop are key examples of this tendency. Moreover, as in the barbershop photographs, where the men’s actions and relationships are completely unreadable, Evans seemed to be more interested in narrative *illegibility* as the condition of his subjects than the quick legibility of specific activities, which put him at odds with many of his photographer peers during the 1930s. Thus, this dissertation is organized around photographs of people not working. “Off the clock,” in its first iteration, reflects the fact that Evans had great interest in the subjects of an industrial capitalism in decline, but almost no interest in making photographs within the explicit context of industry.

The phrase has two other valences, one of which acknowledges the labor of photography itself. Evans came of age at a moment of transition in photographic practice, and his own professional identity absorbed his attention for much of the 1930s.

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<sup>24</sup> Denning writes, “The emergence of a left culture in the age of the [Congress of Industrial Workers] was the result of two larger transformations in American life: the appearance of a powerful mass social movement, the Popular Front, based on the unprecedented organization of industrial workers into the new unions of the CIO; and the remarkable development of the modern ‘cultural apparatus,’ to adopt a phrases of C. Wright Mills, consisting of the culture industries of mass entertainment and the state cultural institutions,” p. 4. On the power of the unions during the Depression, see Lichtenstein, pp. 20-52.

<sup>25</sup> One blunt example of Evans’s writing on in this vein appears in a letter to his friend Jay Leyda dated Feb. 21, 1934, when Evans wrote, “I am fantastically mixed up, politically, and have often wished you were around for a conversation on certain events and theories.” Walker Evans correspondence files, Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University. See also regular, but scattered references to politics in Evans’s diaries in 1932-33, WEA/MMA 1994.250.95-.97.

During this period, Evans pushed back and forth between working independently, as an artist, and working as a contract employee. For many artists of the 1930s, particularly those on the left, the idea that art-making could assume the status of contracted labor was emancipatory on the grounds that it created common cause between artists and working people.<sup>26</sup> For Evans, however, this practicality was deeply frustrating. Photography itself occupied a professional middle ground, and thus its practitioners were exceptionally subject to the demands of the marketplace, which in the 1930s was constituted by nationally scaled media outlets (including Evans's on-again-off-again employer, *Fortune* magazine), the New Deal government, and to a much smaller extent, institutions of modern art like MoMA. Evans consistently rejected the professional model of the working photographer in favor of that of the independent modern artist. In reality, the model of independence as the magical key to art production was as spurious then as at any point in history, but within Evans's own milieu (and imagination), the idea of independence presented a sharp counterpoint to workaday employment and thus conceptually freed photography from the demands of other entities—be they corporate or governmental. Although he had mixed success in accomplishing his goal, the *ambition* to shed his status as a contract employee profoundly shaped Evans's practice. Practically, it meant that Evans consistently pushed against the terms of his own employment, as with the Farm Security Administration, and worked doubly hard to create contexts (such as his 1938 exhibition at MoMA, *American Photographs*) where his photographs would appear solely under his own name. Conceptually, it is the key to understanding what the historian Alan Trachtenberg has identified as Evans's key invention, the idea of a photographic point of view, which is, for Evans, visual evidence of a claim to independence.<sup>27</sup> "Off the clock," in its second iteration, refers to the photographer himself and his own relationship to workaday employment.

The phrase "off the clock" bears one final meaning for this project: it refers to the idea of photographic temporality, which in the early 1930s was a prominent component of what photographers and critics considered the uniqueness of the photograph. Evans was deeply invested in the nature of photographic temporality, and his earliest photographs of nineteenth-century New England architecture and his writings are consumed with this interest. Thus, this dissertation begins with the premise that Evans's photographs have a strong formal presence that is bound to the difficult problem of how to represent time, and attempts to tell a historically sensitive story about them. Evans consistently sought balance between the formal imperatives that allowed for this meditation on time and the social, political and economic imperatives that ordered his career and in large part determined his practice. While Evans accurately saw that the prize for achieving such balance was a means of integrating his photographic practice into a still-stabilizing understanding of modern art, the expense of doing so was an intense and continued engagement with the contemporary world as his subject matter. Although other kinds of photographic practices might have interested him at a different

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<sup>26</sup> See Denning, pp. 53-96. See also Meyer Schapiro, "Public Use of Art," *Art Union* 2 (Dec. 1936), pp. 4-6. On the first page of the essay, which dealt with the subject of government funding for the arts, Schapiro wrote, "The possibility of working class support depends on the recognition by the workers that this program of art has a real value for them. It depends further on a solidarity of artists and workers expressed in common economic and political demands."

<sup>27</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 250.

historical moment, his understanding of the medium of photography, which was part generational and part idiosyncratic, prevented him from seeking out the kind of modernist abstraction that older American photographers had attempted. At the same time, his rigorous interpretation of the formal limitations of the still photograph prevented him from seriously producing photographs with obscure vantage points (as his avant-garde Soviet and German counterparts did) or earnestly pursuing Surrealism after his initial exposure and experimentation. Describing a photograph or photographer as “formalist” is often derisive, and used to describe work that endlessly and self-consciously rehearses artistic styles in order to avoid political content or social engagement, but I do not believe this was the case for Evans.<sup>28</sup> Instead, the seriousness of his formalism and consideration of his medium prompted what I understand as its very significant social engagement—its representation of working people and attempt to characterize their experience of time as industrial capitalism failed.

Thus, Evans recognized that some kinds of picture-making were specifically photographic and other kinds of picture-making could be achieved just as well (or better) through another medium. For him, what was specific about still-picture cameras was the fact that they had a unique relationship to time, in two ways: first, photographs were excellent at breaking everyday time down into its constituent minute parts and holding them there permanently; second, the camera was bound to the present—it captured vast aspects of the surface details of the contemporary world efficiently and accurately. (These two observations were well-understood and remarked upon throughout the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>) Although in some sense this knowledge is a product of what I believe were fundamentally formal preoccupations, they required Evans to turn his camera on the everyday life in the United States and to engage with an emerging practice and discourse of documentary photography, which he did tentatively at first and then voraciously at the early point in his career where chapter one picks up, the summer of 1933. The great productive paradox of Evans’s early career is that his investigation into the medium of photography forced him to look very hard at his subjects and to try to represent the “real” with an absolute clarity and reduction of terms and excess. This effort pushed him into a thoughtful awareness and a considered response to his world.

Together, the three readings of the phrase “off the clock” both structure and delimit this project. Its chapters are devoted to each of the three concepts in their

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<sup>28</sup> This critique of Evans draws on a still-contentious divide between art and document. For a recent example, see Weissman’s comparison of Evans with Abbott, pp. 88-159. Weissman’s bracing criticism of Evans for his formalism is fairly well-trod territory. The most important published example is in Curtis, pp. 23-44. Curtis’s essay on Evans makes the case (which I contest in chapter two) that many of Evans’s southern photographs are posed or staged, and thus the claim to fine art trumps realism. He writes, “On close examination, what strikes the viewer as ‘naked realism’ is instead the artistry of Walker Evans,” p. 23. His argument creates a false polarity between his terms realism and art, and he does so in order to make a claim about the political failure of Evans’s work for the RA.

<sup>29</sup> Photography’s relationship to time was understood not least by Kirstein, whose writing on Evans is enriched by his sophisticated response to photographic temporality. See Kirstein’s essay for *American Photographs*, “Photographs of America: Walker Evans” (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1928), n.p. See also the two major essays on time and temporality during the 1930s: Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” (1929) republished in Michael Jennings, trans. and ed., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* volume 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 507-530; and Sigfried Kracauer, “Photography” (1927), republished in Thomas Levin, ed., *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47-63.

historical manifestations, but the poles of photographic temporality, the labor of photography, and economic crisis are also the disparate thematic strands that constitute my critical apparatus for approaching Evans's photographs. My larger argument, that Evans substantively reinvented documentary photography during the 1930s, moving the genre out of the realm of progressive social politics and the trade in social information and explicitly into the realm of modern art, is tempered by these concerns. Evans did so, however, more clearly within the context of a model of artistic *labor*—a model theoretically unbound by the demands of workaday industrial culture—than as a result of a perceived hierarchy of artistic production, or even a stated desire to be part of a historical model of artistic hierarchy. I will try to make the case that Evans could not square emerging ideas about the nature of photography with an employment model of photographic production. Thus, the reader may want to read the values of independence and freedom in modernism as under investigation: my goal is not to take these terms for granted, but rather to establish them as the ambitions that drove his efforts to establish documentary within an emerging tradition of modern art.

The resulting corpus of photographs presents a paradox, a body of work without a fixed political perspective, but which trades in the commitments of politics anyhow: unemployment and idleness, poverty and dissolution, race in the South, and the eclipse of regional culture. As Evans moved towards a photographic practice that prioritized temporality and perspective, he simultaneously moved closer and closer to the most tender, even volatile, aspects of his culture's social and political everyday. Thus, his use of the camera during the 1930s helps elucidate a paradoxical historical fact about photography's famous poverty of means, which Roland Barthes referred to as its role as bearer of a "message without a code."<sup>30</sup> Although Barthes was working through a specifically semiotic understanding of how photographs work, his famous statement can also be read ontologically: the message was the unavoidable social environment, but the lack of a code constitutes the photograph's inherent and perpetual ambiguity with regards to that social environment.

### Calling Cards

Each of the three chapters takes up a short period during Evans's 1930s career—1933-34; 1935-36; and 1938. This is a very tight time span and in no way forms a coherent career-long portrait of the artist. Nevertheless, biographical details are pertinent: Evans spent much of his childhood in Kenilworth, Illinois, and Toledo, Ohio, but was educated in elite east coast preparatory schools. He graduated from Phillips Academy in 1922 and matriculated at Williams College that fall. He attended Williams for one only year before dropping out and moving to New York. His grades were not strong and his biographer James Mellow reports that Evans later recounted remembering nothing from his classes. Another reason for leaving school could have been money. Evans's father was an advertising copy writer and although both sides of Evans's natal family were prosperous in previous generations, his family was not wealthy.<sup>31</sup> In 1926-

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961) republished in Barthes, *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 17. Stephen Heath, trans.

<sup>31</sup> Evans's early years and education are covered in detail by Mellow, pp. 29-34, although his information comes from Evans's published interviews and a few scattered remarks in his diaries of the 1930s. Very

27, Evans's father paid for him to travel to Europe for a year.<sup>32</sup> Upon his return to the United States, Evans was largely left to his own financial devices. This situation forced him to seek jobs, as well as photographic commissions and sales almost immediately after he began making photographs in earnest, around 1927 (Evans had hoped to be a writer; it is not clear what prompted him to take up the camera).<sup>33</sup> He had limited, though measurable, success with his photographs during the early years of the Depression, so although he experienced severe financial limitations his exposure had the beneficial effect of introducing his name and work to a number of people—including the dealer Julien Levy; Lincoln Kirstein; MoMA administrators Alfred Barr, Thomas Dabney Mabry and Beaumont Newhall; Roy Stryker; Henry Luce; and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation administrator Henry Allen Moe—who would be in a position to offer him work and material support throughout the 1930s.

Although Evans's best known work would be made during his tenure as an RA photographer, from 1935 through 1937, my first chapter, "Abandoning Progressivism," picks up during the period 1933 and 1934 and examines a series of street portraits Evans made in New York and Cuba. In it, I make the case that Evans was interested during this time in making records of working people on the street, not at work but as passersby. For the most part, they do not acknowledge the photographer. The extant photographs provide evidence of his engagement with and development of a documentary practice—specifically the development of an idea of "straight photography." At the same time, Evans's refusal to picture people working amounted to a repudiation of political progressivism, a reform tradition long associated with American documentary. I review the state of literature that addresses Evans's political inclinations, and conclude that the early photographs function more coherently as a rejection of politics than an embrace. Thus this chapter establishes the parameters of Evans's emerging documentary practice as one that specifically divided the photographic document from its historical political association.

The second chapter, "Picturing Time," examines work from the period 1935-36, made in the American South, while Evans was on assignment for the RA. It specifically examines two major series of works, the Vicksburg barbershop group and the portraits Evans made in Hale County (which would later be used in Evans's collaboration with James Agee, the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941), within the context of Evans's intellectual engagement with the concept of photographic temporality. Although Evans's photographic work during this period constituted a sustained investigation into contemporary ideas about photographic temporality, his investigation was enlivened and burnished because of two factors: the first was Evans's desire to make a film and to fully evaluate the relationship between still and motion pictures; the second—unrelated—was his understanding of the parallel relationship between photographic work and manual labor in the industrializing south. Convincing anecdotal evidence suggests that Evans knew and respected the work of the intellectuals known as the Southern Agrarians, who

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little information about his early life survives in his archives, and as his school records are sealed, information about his schooling is difficult to access. Rathbone interviewed former classmates and filled out a narrative of Evans's education thoroughly, but also does not address his financial arrangements, pp. 11-20.

<sup>32</sup> Mellow, pp. 37-60.

<sup>33</sup> Mellow, p. 623.

in 1929 published *I'll Take My Stand*, an important conservative critical response to the industrialization of the South.<sup>34</sup> In this chapter I address Evans's relationship to the Agrarians directly, and evaluate his work from the South in light of the backward-looking social model they propose, which—I propose—is based on time in pre-industrial society. Thus, the chapter argues that the photographs Evans made in Vicksburg and Hale County evoke a political perspective not via iconography directly, but through their picturing of time itself—ungovernable by industry, resistant to organization or government interests, and the repository of regional culture.

The third and final chapter, “Re-reading *American Photographs*,” addresses Evans's 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *American Photographs*, an experience that Evans later remembered as his “calling card” to the world of art.<sup>35</sup> It was the first major solo exhibition for a photographer held by the institution, and a very early solo exhibition for any living photographer at any major American cultural institution.<sup>36</sup> In the chapter, I track Evans's wavering status at the museum as both a contract employee and a museum artist throughout the 1930s, which culminated in Evans's very aggressive public claim to the art side of the equation in the exhibition. While some artists of the 1930s identified a utopianism in the close linking of art and labor, Evans found the association debased and actively rejected his own history of working relationships with commissioning institutions and organizations.<sup>37</sup> The chapter evaluates the actual hang of the exhibition and the physical properties of the photographs, and I make the case that the physical experience of walking through the exhibition was meant to prompt viewers to see a representation of the country, but also to become aware of the work of photography. Thus, although Evans's rhetoric was strong (and is better remembered than the exhibition itself in many quarters), the dominant narrative of the exhibition itself—the photographer's movement through the countryside—as it unfolded visually was one of unconstrained, “unlocked” movement of both the viewer and the artist.

Together the three chapters examine the three valences of “off the clock,” each in turn: we move from workers, the subjects of the photographs, literally being off the industrial timeclock in the first chapter; to Evans acting—in Kirstein's words—“on the body of time,” in the second chapter. The third chapter suggests the artist's own attempt to get off the clock, and to redefine a professional practice within a tradition that he associated with freedom from workaday employment. Evans's ambitions were overly optimistic, which perhaps reveals the false dichotomy between work and freedom that governed his logic to begin with. By the mid-1940s he took a job working for *Fortune*

<sup>34</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), p. xlv. First published 1930.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Cummings, “Oral history interview with Walker Evans, Oct. 13-Dec. 23, 1971,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Transcript available online: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/evans71.htm>. Also see Trachtenberg's discussion of Evans's “establishment,” p. 238.

<sup>36</sup> An important (and local) exception to this truism is Berenice Abbott's 1934 exhibition of photographs of New York at the Museum of the City of New York. See Bonnie Yochelson, introduction to *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: New Press and Museum of the City of New York, 1997), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> For a recent and cogent discussion of the utopianism that attended the association between art-making and other forms of labor, see Jody Patterson, “The Art of Swinging Left in the 1930s: Modernism, Realism, and the Politics of the Left,” *Art History* 33, no. 1 (Jan. 2010), pp. 98-123. See also Schapiro, and Denning, pp. 53-96. Evans's literal rejection of this model crops up repeatedly in his archive. See in particular his diaries 1933-35, WEA/MMA 1994.250.95-97.

magazine that would sustain his photographic practice, and his everyday life, for nearly twenty years.<sup>38</sup> In his final burst of formal employment, he taught photography at Yale and his success there afforded him modest celebrity. Although he formally retired three years before his death in 1975, Evans remained closely involved with photographic education in America, frequently lecturing to students and faculty and continuing to maintain relationships with students at Yale.<sup>39</sup>

My critical apparatus for understanding Evans's work of the 1930s has developed largely from sources that precede contemporary photographic history and theory, and especially precede the formulation of a critical approach to documentary that occurred in this country during the 1980s.<sup>40</sup> Unlike more recent accounts, writing from the 1940s through the 1970s labored not to isolate documentary photography from other forms of cultural expression during the thirties, but to understand documentary as an expansive genre that had a highly nuanced relationship to medium. I am primarily interested in accounts of documentary practice by James Agee, Alfred Kazin and William Stott, which were all loaded with the language of feeling and affect. Kazin and Stott, from the broad perspectives of literary criticism and social history, moved back and forth between literature, mass media, film and photography fluidly, reflecting the historical conditions of the development of documentary photography in the 1930s. Agee, a film critic and novelist, knew Evans well, and wrote about both Evans and his peer, Helen Levitt, in the early 1940s.<sup>41</sup>

Stott's 1973 book, *Documentary Expression in Thirties America*, argued that the genre of documentary in the thirties, which encompassed all media, was not merely utilitarian (i.e., the goal was not to communicate specific information) but was instead a new mode of perceiving and representing the world that was developed as a result of the sheer expansion of information available to the public. According to Stott, documentary had an essential narrative component that bridged a gap between fact and feeling.<sup>42</sup> Its primary contribution to thirties culture was, in Stott's words, to "sensitize our intellect, or educate our emotions."<sup>43</sup> The sense that documentary had a transcendent function pervades Stott's book. Even though his focus was on the genre of documentary rather than a specific medium, he consistently noted that photography had a special place as a medium because of the seeming passivity of the camera. Although on some level, the idea that a camera is an essentially passive recording tool is deeply naïve, the *idea* of the passive camera is important to the critical history of documentary.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The definitive account of Evans's work for *Fortune* is Lesley Baier, *Walker Evans at Fortune, 1945-1965*, exh. cat. (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Museum, 1977).

<sup>39</sup> Evans reached Yale's mandatory retirement age in 1972, although he remained engaged with the university and its graduate students until the end of his life. Mellow, p. 629.

<sup>40</sup> See in particular Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs*; Trachtenberg and Lawrence Levine, *Documenting America: 1935-1943* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988); Pete Daniel, Sally Stein et. al., *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989); Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*.

<sup>41</sup> James Agee "Introduction" (1940) in Evans, *Many Are Called* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1966), n.p.; Agee and Helen Levitt, *A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New York by Helen Levitt* (New York: Viking, 1965), pp. 3-8; 73-78.

<sup>42</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (NY: Oxford, 1973).

<sup>43</sup> Stott, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Curtis directly addresses the issue of the camera's passivity in *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth*, pp. 23-44.

Alfred Kazin's 1941 *On Native Grounds* was much less celebratory and emotionally charged than Stott's later work, and in some ways was much less concerned with documentary photography (although his conclusion about American culture of the 1930s had documentary photography, and specifically the work of Evans, at its center).<sup>45</sup> The book was an evaluation of recent American literary criticism, but in his final chapter he evaluated the documentary impulse that swept the United States during the 1930s, and took on the presence of photography as part of the documentary scene. Kazin described the state of American literature as a vast but shallow pool of information gathered about the ways and means of the United States, which had come to new cultural prominence after the rise of fascism in Europe, and argued that because of the impulse towards a "mass record," the camera in metaphor and in practice was the characteristic instrument of the 1930s. The camera was a metaphor because its working perfectly captures the sense of passive recording of seemingly endless detail without substantive understanding or analysis; correspondingly, the camera was characteristic of the age in a practical sense because photography as a media was so ever-present, so dominant.<sup>46</sup>

Kazin's argument was grounded in what he understood was a "spiritual fatigue" amongst writers and artists that precluded interpretation. On this point, Kazin relied heavily on James Agee's description of the value of the camera, writing,

It follows from all that has been said of the documentary reporters that the appeal of the camera was not to their superficiality but to their spiritual fatigue, as it were; to their 'not knowing. . . society's not knowing.' The 'keen historic spasm of the shutter,' as James Agee called it, served not only 'to portray America,' but also to answer subtly to the writer's conscious or unconscious unwillingness or inability to go beyond his material.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Kazin argued—at an extremely early moment—that the 1930s represent a moment of the country coming to grips with itself by wanting its art to act as a kind of mirror, and for this reason the camera had an extremely important role to play in cultural self-expression. He did not necessarily celebrate this move: an entire generation of artists and writers emulating the camera and aspiring to the level of a passive recorder represented, to Kazin, a generation incapable of rousing its collective imagination to produce true literature and criticism.

In two essays in the early 1940s, one on Evans and one on Helen Levitt's street photographs in Harlem, Agee laid out two key ideas about photography (neither was published until the 1960s) and demonstrated considerably more enthusiasm than Kazin.<sup>48</sup> First, he suggested that the photograph makes sense of the vastness of the world and that camerawork is a means for encompassing the diversity of human culture. Agee's perspective was not formed by a contemporary celebration of diversity in representation (indeed, much of what he wrote about Agee's subjects—poor, urban, and mostly of

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<sup>45</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Literature* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995). First published by Viking Books in 1941.

<sup>46</sup> Kazin's essay at this point bears strong resemblance to Sigfried Kracauer's essay entitled "Photography" (1927) in Thomas Levin, trans. and ed., *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47-63.

<sup>47</sup> Kazin, p. 495. In this section on photography and cameras, Kazin quotes both Agee and Kirstein, both of whom are writing on Evans's pictures.

<sup>48</sup> See Agee, *A Way of Seeing* and *Many Are Called*.

color—was deeply essentialist and would not pass muster in a contemporary essay); rather, he lauded the camera’s ability to take in a vast panorama which would include subjects that did not reflect the experiences of the viewer—which he presumed to be educated white professional classes, although not necessarily male. In contradistinction to Levitt’s work, he wrote, “A great lyrical artist might still possibly find much among people and building of the middle and rich classes, to turn to pure lyrical account. But it seems hardly necessary to point out that flowers grow much more rarely in that soil, perhaps especially in this country at this time, than weeds and cactuses...”<sup>49</sup> Agee’s interest in the experiences of others motivated his collaborative project with Evans, the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Although arguably Agee’s highly reflexive writing revealed a deeper internal than external focus, he repeatedly focused in on what he called “the quality of mystery” and typically found it among those who were strange to him economically, racially and even geographically.<sup>50</sup> Documentary photography had access to that mystery in a way that other media did not.

Second, and equally importantly, he presented the idea that the camera and its operator can draw out unseen forces and render them part of our legible human experience. It was this creative power that led him to write the line that Kazin quoted: “In these pictures the actual world constantly brings to the surface its own signals and mysteries,” and to continue by noting that certain readers would notice, “how constantly the unimagined world is in its own terms to an artist, and how deep and deft the creative intelligence must be to recognize, foresee, and make permanent its best moments.”<sup>51</sup> Although this argument is most clearly understood as relating to the rhythmic organization of the photograph, Agee’s argument about signals and mysteries has particular bearing on Evans’s practice of portraiture, where Evans occasionally reached beyond what Agee refers to as the “mask” of consciousness to reveal more fundamental and hidden aspects of human presence. In portraiture, Agee was interested in what he referred to as “waking moments of suspension” in which subjects presented themselves to the camera not by conscious, willful self-presentation, but essentially unprepared.<sup>52</sup>

What I appreciate about these writings on documentary is what a different perspective they offer, one which is satisfyingly wobbly and uneven, even delicate, in contrast to the more sure-footed historical analysis that would follow in the 1980s. Kazin, Stott and Agee were engaged by a reading that emphasizes the emotional dimension of documentary. Further, the comparison between them reveals a decades-long attempt to wrest meaning from the medium itself, its immediate relationship to the real, and the embrace of that relationship by sophisticated documentary photographers in the 1930s, and particularly Evans. Agee, much more than Kazin or Stott, was interested in photography as a kind of alchemy—a semi-passive process by which the world would reveal itself to the camera as having an aesthetic order. For all three figures, lines of inquiry that revolve around passivity, narrative, and the emotional dimension of documentary are both generous and moving, worthy of rethinking and bringing back into

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<sup>49</sup> Agee, *A Way of Seeing*, p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Agee, *A Way of Seeing*, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Agee, *Many Are Called*, n.p. In this formulation, Agee explicit picks up on a line of thought expressed by Walter Benjamin (1927) in his discussion of nineteenth-century portraiture. It is unclear whether Agee had access to “The Little History of Photography.”

the conversation about how documentary photographs work. In my chapters on Evans's 1930s work, I attempt to pick up one thread of this conversation by reading the concept of passivity back into an analysis of documentary photography.

These conceptual threads linked Agee to Kazin to Stott, but then really fell out of the conversation about documentary photography. In the 1980s, an important group of photo historians—including Alan Trachtenberg, Sally Stein, Maren Stange, Pete Daniel, Merry Foresta and James Curtis—revisited and defined the style, accomplishments and motivating forces of documentary photography in the 1930s. (The scholarly boom in Depression-era photography is largely a result of the relative ease of access Americans have to the RA/FSA's trove of commissioned photographs, which are in the public domain and therefore were not put out-of-reach by increasingly aggressive copyright law enforcement in the 1970s and 1980s.) These scholars viewed the development of social documentary as closely associated with the political sympathies of American progressive reform and as part of the transformation and waning of that movement that occurred in the 1930s. At that time, the key methodology was to revise pre-existing, but old, photographic dichotomies of true and untrue, or lying; politically motivated and politically neutral; art or not art; and "with" or "without" style as separate categories of production.

In each case, these art historians aimed to demonstrate *not* the naïve genius of documentary photographers of the 1930s, *nor* the passive, apolitical and stylistically neutral manner of their production, but the opposite. Although they sidestepped the direct question of true/untrue and art/not art, they came down firmly on the side of "politically motivated" and "with style." One of the more interesting and helpful methodological moves this group of historians made was part and parcel of the shift in art history towards Visual Studies: they broadened the pool of photographers under consideration, looking at the vast swath of documentary projects during the 1930s rather than just its most celebrated and complex figures. Hence, in a book that examined the accumulated legacy of federally sponsored photography during the 1930s, Pete Daniel and Sally Stein attempted to define our central understanding of documentary production by marrying the political and the stylistic questions into a single thesis. They wrote, "Perhaps herein lies the motive for the characteristic 'documentary' style of New Deal publicity—a style that *looked* candid, intimate yet non-intrusive, even as it promoted the value of forceful, bureaucratic government intervention to shore up a stagnant economy."<sup>53</sup>

Although Daniel and Stein established a legitimate reading of much New Deal photographic production, their model cannot account for a career like Walker Evans's, which stands in contrast to the larger pool of RA/FSA photographs and has come to represent (at least in part) the heterogeneity and capaciousness of documentary in the thirties, particularly as it appeared in mass media; nor can this model account for the depth and seriousness of the idea of documentary within the history of modern art. "Characteristic style," as identified by Stein and Daniel, is a problem in itself, because it limits all production to a shared common denominator and one that is, in this case, overly broad.

The eighties scholars self-consciously offered what promised to be a cleansing tonic to an earlier generation's enthusiasm and interest in the emotional undercurrents of

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel and Stein, "Introduction," p. ix.

documentary production, instead seeing the work within what could be called, at a very basic level, a tradition of propaganda. In addition to calling out the perceived follies of their predecessors, they acted in response to other factors, including the fact that the market for American documentary photographs expanded a great deal in the late 1970s, and some American documentary work, such as that by Lange and Evans, was explicitly valorized by key institutions of modern art, such as at MoMA, where the powerful curator John Szarkowski organized a major Lange retrospective in 1965 (the year of her death) and an Evans retrospective in 1970. The expansion of the market and the professionalization of the field of American studies may account for the renewed attention to documentary photography specifically.

The precedent for much of the scholarship on documentary photography is Alan Trachtenberg's major 1989 account, *Reading American Photographs*. Its last chapter is dedicated to Evans's *American Photographs*, and takes the measure of the 1938 MoMA exhibition (and catalog) and his place at the culmination of a trajectory of specifically American photography. By doing so, Trachtenberg implicitly regards Evans as outside the main trajectory of social documentary arguing that the force of Evans's innovation was the establishment of point-of-view as the particular and major contribution of photography. Although I am deeply indebted to Trachtenberg's account (which he began working on while Evans was still alive; the two men knew one another in New Haven in the early 1970s), my own differs significantly.<sup>54</sup> First, I make the case that time and temporality are central conceptual issues for Evans, and attempt to account for them as the lens through which Evans established a working documentary practice; and second, I attempt to re-examine the historical relationship of documentary to fine art. For Trachtenberg, not unreasonably, the polarizing nature of this relationship is both uninteresting and lacks critical inflection; for my own work, however, the concept of "art" is explicitly loaded with historical context and is thus crucial. On some level, my operating premise is that the only way to move past the art/document dichotomy is to work through it. Evans, in my view, is the essential case study.

One important means of "working through" the case study of Walker Evans's 1930s career is afforded by changing photographic technologies in the twenty-first century. I have had access to the full run of Evans's negatives at both the Library of Congress and at the Walker Evans Archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In both cases, both glass and film negatives have been scanned and both institutions have put their negative collections online (scanning the negatives transforms them into positive images, thus they are easily "read" and look more like printed photographs). The effect of this open access has been to transform negatives from a theoretical "dark spot" in the photographic process into an essential and accessible index of the artist's working process—in many cases I have been able to examine the negative and several generations of prints that were made from it. This kind of analysis afforded me the opportunity to read not just the final products, finished prints, but a series of choices that play out through time about how a photograph should look; what its proper parameters are; and even what the subject of a work really is. In each case my goal has been to very clearly

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<sup>54</sup> In Evans's archive, his late papers reveal that he had access to and an ongoing conversation with Trachtenberg about the nature of documentary during this period. See WEA/MMA 1994.250.6 (manuscript files 1960s-1970s) and 1994.260.19 (files 5-8; correspondence with Trachtenberg and his wife, Betty).

privilege prints as final product and negatives as part of the working process rather than an end unto themselves. Thus, I have labored to make clear in the text and in the figure captions when I am working from a negative and when I am working from a vintage print. I have also strongly favored vintage over non-vintage prints on the logic that the cropping (unabashed, often aggressive) in Evans's vintage 1930s prints is radically different from that which would follow in the 1960s and early 1970s by Evans's revising hand, and, of course, posthumous prints.

Even via this humble methodological detail, the priority of the vintage print (with its often unexpected cropping) over negatives or uncropped modern prints, Evans's thorough investigation of the terms of photography emerges as an investigation into medium itself, which ties his work into the production of modern art in ways that were, if not fully new for photographers, newly *thorough* with Evans and his generation. What seems at first glance as a rather fussy technicism on Evans's part evokes, in time, the joys and demands of invention, of pictorial play, and of self-reflection. The flurry of invention that Evans participated in during the 1930s resulted in a changed relationship between photography and the fine arts, and the goal of this dissertation is to give voice to the excitement of that transformation.

## Chapter One: Abandoning Progressivism

Although Walker Evans's biographer, James Mellow, regarded the years 1933 and 1934 as the "calm before the storm" of Evans's major work in the American South later in the decade, those two years were formative for the young photographer.<sup>55</sup> During them, Evans worked out his relationship to the tradition of American social documentary, which meant, for him, the double motion of developing his skills as a "straight photographer," and pushing against the expectation that "straight photography"—that is, unretouched, unmediated, and unconcerned with the traditions of art photography—could or should produce clear and legible narratives of its subjects' lives. Not coincidentally, it was also during these two years that Evans cultivated his interest in portraiture, re-interpreting the role of the pose in the photographic portrait and responding to the precedent of perceived immediacy and access to people on the street in photographic portraiture established by modernist predecessors like Paul Strand. Evans increasingly mined the tradition of portraiture as his documentary practice matured; it was his way of negating the strong narrative component of documentary practice. This chapter proposes that his rejection of narrative constituted a refusal of the twinning of the social documentary tradition and progressive politics.

Evans's move towards portraiture suggests a kind of visual neutrality at the level of social politics, and that move has been so clearly absorbed by later generations of photographers that it has become politically invisible. But in fact, Evans's deliberate move away from progressivism in 1933-34 was not motivated by a refusal of social politics altogether, it was an acknowledgement of contradiction—capitalism was unstable, but Evans's diary and letters suggest that to him, neither reform nor revolution seemed like plausible responses. "I am fantastically mixed up, politically," he wrote to a friend in 1934.<sup>56</sup> Although 1933-34 were the years of his most direct interaction with the political left in New York, and a trip to Cuba in 1933 boosted Evans's political and social consciousness in concrete and lasting ways, neither experience prompted him to embrace a single political identity as his own—a fact which he made clear—if only to himself—in unsent correspondence to his boss, Roy Stryker, in 1935 with the statement, "No POLITICS whatever."<sup>57</sup> In fact, one premise of this chapter is that Evans rejected progressivism as a workable political model, despite its historical relationship with the photographic tradition that Evans confronted during this period, that of social

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<sup>55</sup> James Mellow's biography of Evans, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) discusses Evans's life in New York during the period of summer 1933 through the summer of 1934 predominantly in terms of Evans's dire finances, his love life, and his various attempts to secure stable employment. Other published accounts of Evans's career during the 1930s, particularly Gilles Mora and John T. Hill's *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993) justifiably reserve their most exhaustive critical inquiry for Evans's southern work, noting only the highlights of this earlier period. One important exception is Douglas Eklund's essay on Evans in the early 1930s, "Exile's Return," published in Jeff L. Rosenheim, et. al., *Walker Evans*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 29-53.

<sup>56</sup> Handwritten letter Evans to Jay Leyda, Feb. 21, 1934, in Walker Evans correspondence file, Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.

<sup>57</sup> WEA/MMA 1994.250.4, file 12, as printed in Jerry Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 112. I discuss this letter in more depth in chapter two. Alan Trachtenberg handled Evans's politics with a subtle (accurate) deflection: "Evans's concept of America cannot be defined by enlisting him in any camp..." Trachtenberg, "A Book Nearly Anonymous," *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), p. 247.

documentary.<sup>58</sup> Although questions about the artist's political identity are on the table, my goal is not to pin him down too precisely but to allow for leeway, and thus ambivalence. The artist's famous political ambivalence gave rise to photographs that made use of the camera's ready access to visual ambiguity. Ambiguity and ambivalence, I argue, were central terms in his practice, but the primary lesson of these early pictures is how much both concepts (inter-related but separate) were formed in response to the emphasis on narrative clarity which characterized the Progressive social documentary tradition.

The goal of this chapter is to situate portraiture, and more specifically portraits of strangers, of working people, in Evans's work in 1933-34, as his first serious foray into documentary photography. I propose that this period provided Evans with a practical "clearing of the decks" of historical tradition, as well as iconic association. Although many of the photographs under discussion in this chapter did not become the key images that characterize his practice, I read them as a class of experimental pictures that pushed him to engage with the formal possibilities of camera work itself, and to engage with subject matter of everyday life during the Depression. My conclusion here is that while he found he could invigorate photographic practice, and literally reinvent documentary, by paring down its capacity for connotation, he did so by making pictures of working people, arguably capitalism's most vulnerable and most common subjects. The paradox of his position—Evans was essentially diving into the pool of social and economic transformation while protesting his dislike of water—required tricky maneuvering.

### **Organized Labor**

During the early summer of 1934, Evans took a series of pictures of men picketing at a Manhattan waterfront.<sup>59</sup> Evans was in full reporter mode, on his feet

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<sup>58</sup> Progressivism as a political model emerged out of turn-of-the-century reform movements such as Hull House in Chicago—its goals were to ameliorate working and living conditions for the working poor and recent immigrants, as well as to end child labor. For overviews, see Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967) and David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). As I discussed in the introduction, the photographers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine are both traditionally associated with progressivism in America, and photo historian Maren Stange, in her book, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Documentary Photography in America*, traced the relationship between progressivism and documentary into the New Deal photography projects, such as the Resettlement Administration (the RA, later known as the Farm Security Administration, FSA).

<sup>59</sup> Although the first photograph I will consider in this chapter, [*Demonstration and Picketing Organized by communists // NY Waterfront*] can be fairly securely dated to 1934 by marks on its verso, the evidence within the Walker Evans Archive about its precise date is ambiguous because the group of negatives is undated. (In most cases, particularly after 1934, Evans dated his negative sleeves, creating reliable documentation of the course of his work.) Circumstantial evidence, most importantly the content of the pictures and the fact that Evans had a summertime commission by *Fortune* magazine to investigate communism in America, points to the 1934 date as opposed to an alternate date of May 29, 1937. On the later date, Evans made a dated series of waterfront strike pictures (WEA/MMA 1994.253.373.1-.2) on 35mm film, but the photographs Evans made in 1937 are substantively different from my Figure 10 ([*Demonstration and Picketing Organized by Communists // NY Waterfront*]) and other photographs on its same roll. Thus, the photograph under consideration here was made—I believe—in 1934. Similarly, a number of the other photographs under consideration in this chapter are not securely dated to 1933-34 within the archive. Nevertheless, I will read them together, as the product of Evans's work during this period because: first, they hold together formally and conceptually; second, because other evidence about

during the demonstration and working with a fast 35mm camera. Not all the pictures were eventually printed, but at least one was (*[Demonstration and Picketing Organized by communists // NY Waterfront]*, Fig. 10), and in it, male picketers march past Evans, apparently uninterested in the photographer or unaware of his camera. No one posed. Evans may have been one of a number of photographers on the site that day and the marchers may have been inured to his presence, but this was not a large march and the New York presses rarely ran photographs of pickets during this period, so it is more likely that Evans tucked his camera into his shirt, or held it discretely at his chest. Any number of options would have sufficed to minimize his own presence, including using his right angle lens; Evans had worked in the city for several years at that point and had mastered at least a few tricks to de-emphasize his role as city voyeur.<sup>60</sup> In fact, this photograph evidences key elements of Evans's practice during the years 1933-1934: unposed portraiture, working-class people, and city streets. The question of how these disparate interests fit together, and how we can use those strands to better understand the stakes of this photograph and its economy of means, is the subject of this chapter.

Out-takes from the day reveal that Evans went to some lengths to get lost in the crowd (Figs. 11-16).<sup>61</sup> In three photographs (Figs. 12, 14, 16) participants appear to make a direct connection with the camera, and in some, such as figures 13 and 15, Evans hung back and photographed the marchers or the gathered crowd from behind, deliberately eclipsing what we imagine must be a more exciting scene playing out before them. Further, and in Figure 10 in particular, the strikers themselves are disorganized. They march in a line but each occupies his own world. The man in the front center of the photograph walks with a cigarette in his mouth; he is frozen by the camera in the midst of a wide, loping step, looking down and swinging his arms around, as though his entire body is a mechanism for forward movement. He is not the only marcher looking down. Behind him another marcher carries an aggressive sign that declares, "Help Smash Machine Gun Terror Strike," but his stride is contained, polite, and he looks at the ground as he walks.<sup>62</sup> Next to him a handsome man with sunken shoulders appears to chant,

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Evans's developing ambitions and interests during those two years suggests that they are part of a broader goal of recording working people in the streets.

<sup>60</sup> Like his predecessor Paul Strand and his friend and peer Ben Shahn, who both took photographs using a right-angle lens (a mechanism that allowed a photographer to point the camera one direction and take a photograph of a subject at a right angle), Evans seemed to have few, if any, ethical qualms about the practice of catching his subjects unawares. This is a practice that, then as now, prompts reasonable ethical questions, and it is also a practice that does not seem to work very well, as often subjects appear to gaze, or glare, directly at the photographer.

<sup>61</sup> Figures 10-16 represent seven of the twenty-plus exposures Evans made using a roll of 35 mm Perutz film, probably on assignment for *Fortune* magazine during the summer of 1934. I am not entirely sure that only Figure 10 was printed from the group, but it is the only print from the roll that I have seen. Time, Inc., may have others in its corporate archive. The negatives are MMA/WEA 1994.253.176\*-1994.253.184\*, film information courtesy Rosenheim, email to author 26 June 2007. The photograph is in a private collection, information about it derives from digital images of the recto and verso, provided courtesy its owners.

<sup>62</sup> "Machine Gun Terror Strike" is an unusual phrase. It helps to date figure 1 by its apparent allusion to San Francisco labor unionist Harry Bridges' well-publicized reference to the attempted defeat of the San Francisco Longshoremen's Strike of late spring 1934 by the National Guard. Bridges is reported to have said, "We cannot stand up against police, machine guns, and National Guard bayonets." For more information on the San Francisco strike and Joseph Ryan's role as a conservative union leader, based in

while behind him a man dressed not in the muted colors and shirtsleeves of a manual worker but rather in white trousers and a tailored jacket yells into the space beyond the picture. The men march together, in some semblance of a two-deep line, but their attentions and bodies are disorganized in space and fill the picture with suggestions of different vectors of movement. Evans caught them not looking unified, organized and particularly menacing, but as though they were each in a unique place. In figure 11, a woman has dropped into the line and appears to flirt with a striker, and their private conversation interrupts the all-male ranks and, more importantly, the apparent seriousness of the march. In figure 13, a police officer looks away, while the rest of the standing men, backs to the camera, are loosely assembled around someone holding yet another aggressive sign. The signs, more than the assembled marchers, are the key indicators that the situation pictured is a hostile one.

A comparison of figure 17, Aleksandr Rodchenko's photograph of a street demonstration in Moscow from above, with Evans's figure 10, reveals both artists working with a similar problem and helps elucidate the visual drama of Evans's photograph.<sup>63</sup> In Rodchenko's photograph, made from an apartment balcony so as to picture a street below in near-plan view, parade marchers are clustered into a single square (grid) in the upper portion of the photograph. Throughout the rest of the photograph, which in fact is primarily dedicated to a view of the street, loose groups of people, so tiny as to look like small black and white forms, mill about in casual, disorganized fashion, but appear primarily as a contrast to the orderly grid of the marchers. Discolored and formless patches of dark pavement on the street create a further contrast to the marchers, so that the entire photograph is essentially about the balance between orderliness and the irregular patterns that emerge out of randomness, or, more pointedly, the contrast between the spectacle of bodies organized in space, and the equally absorbing, but deliberately anti-spectacular, look of people just milling about. Evans's and Rodchenko's resulting photographs are very different pictures, no doubt, but they share an interest in the visual possibilities that one can find by examining the relationship between order and disorder in city streets, and particularly the way human beings sometimes lend themselves to those demonstrations of orderliness. Although in Rodchenko's case, the agent of orderliness (the organizer of the march) was the state, and in Evans's the agents were communist labor unions, both photographs seem to suggest—somewhat in contrast to the objectives of the march organizers in both contexts—that the relationship between unity and disunity is not a clear opposition but rather a dialectical

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New York and deeply hostile to communists, see Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), pp. 252-298. Bridges' comment quoted by Bernstein on p. 279 (no citation).

<sup>63</sup> Although I do not know whether Evans knew this particular photograph, Evans likely knew Rodchenko's work well before 1934. Rodchenko worked extensively with the magazine *Soviet Photography* and submitted work to the 1928 *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart. Evans would not have seen the exhibition, but reviewed its de facto catalog, *Photo-Eye*, by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, for *Hound & Horn* in 1930. Further, Alfred Barr, part of Evans's circle of friends as of the late 1920s, was already in active contact with Rodchenko by the late 1920s, and Evans's close friend Jay Leyda moved to Moscow in 1933 and integrated himself into avant-garde film and photographic circles there. However familiar Evans was with the scope of Rodchenko's experimental photographs, during the 1930-33 period, he made an number of exposures from above, with off-kilter compositions and vertiginous angles in clear homage to Soviet practice (see WEA/MMA 1994.251.386-392).

situation, by which I mean locked together in opposition to one another.<sup>64</sup> The basic structure of Evans's picture is a line of men marching past the passive camera in a two-deep formation, and to a certain extent one imagines that the picture is about the flexibility and durability of that line. At the same time, the drama that enriches the picture is not a glorious spectacle of strong bodies, but the strikers' slackness, their low-key resistance to orderliness and group identity.

The complexity of Evans's interest does not square with my initial characterization of him as working in intrepid "boy reporter" mode. My characterization is a foil; judged exclusively on the basis of his pictures' value to the news-magazines, Evans failed on this assignment. The pictures hide more than they reveal; the marchers look spaced out and disorganized; the size of the crowd seems anemic; the visual space is confusing. Instead of picturing the longshoreman as impassioned toughies, the men look like end-of-shift workers, tired and heading home. Their signs are inflammatory but their lax bodies and their meager numbers inspire no alarm and no urgency, facts that run counter to popular ideas about what political radicalism looks like. (This fact alone may account for why *Fortune* did not print them, even though they were part of a larger set of inquiries into American communism that Evans made that year and which culminated in a September 1934 story about American communism, featuring photographs Evans made at a family summer camp.<sup>65</sup>) Putting aside questions of success or failure, Evans worked with a fairly complicated set of terms in this group of photographs, which crystallize in figure 10. The picture is heavy in its associations with political radicalism and union activism, but its message is about scatteredness, or even the ineffectiveness of unity. Evans drained the political fervor from the scene through the slackness of composition, his point of view, and the timing of his film exposure. In each man's face and body, viewers can trace a division between active participation and full engagement on the one hand, and going through the motions on the other.

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<sup>64</sup> The idea of lending one's body to an organized spectacle, either as a mode of political demonstration, entertainment (as in dance revues) or production lines, is the subject of Siegfried Kracauer's essay, "The Mass Ornament" (1930) republished in Thomas Levin, ed., *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 75-86. Kracauer's observations about the mass ornament give rise to his argument that the persistence of organized "mass ornament" at the human scale (the example he uses is the Ziegfeld Follies) reveals the failure of modernization to abolish ornamentation. The consequences of that failure, for Kracauer, provide insight into the relationship between industrial capitalism and mass culture. I borrow the language and concept from Kracauer without attending to his more thoroughgoing social analysis, because I think these two photographs recognize a similar social phenomenon but push their questions about that phenomenon in significantly different directions.

<sup>65</sup> The handwriting below the print (Figure 10) is clearly Evans's, and the caption on the mount indicates that the picture is "DEMONSTRATION AND PICKETING ORGANIZED BY COMMUNISTS // NY WATERFRONT." Time, Inc., online records reveal that Evans took a photograph for them of a newsstand full of communist news dailies in January of that year (also apparently never published). The September communist summer camp story was based on research done in mid-July and accompanied by text by Dwight Macdonald, who had spent the summer researching communism in America, according to Mellow, pp. 225-26. Mellow, who was unfailingly thoughtful and scrupulous in his research, nevertheless errs here in my opinion by attributing the tone of low condescension in Evans's photographs to an inflammatory and hostile letter written by Macdonald to his wife. It is not, as Mellow would have it, surprising that Evans's work in mid-1934 had "a political tinge." On the contrary, 1934 was a year when Evans and his friends, both the older crowd from *Hound & Horn* (which ended publication that year) and the new crowd from *Fortune*, were deeply interested in radical politics. Many, like Evans, were uncommitted, but others immersed themselves fully in the radicalism of the left.

Moreover, the subject matter of the photograph is as obtuse as its formal qualities. During the late spring of 1934, the longshoreman's union, the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA), which was at that time undergoing the highly contested process of consolidation under the leadership of Joseph P. Ryan, went on strike on the West coast. Eventually, the longshoremen's strike galvanized a massive general strike in San Francisco and threatened to upend the tenuous United States economy entirely. The earliest conflicts occurred first along the harbors of the west coast, then in the gulf states of Texas and Louisiana. The stakes of the strike revolved around questions of "open shop" recognition (open to unions) and came fast on the heels of pro-labor laws enacted by Congress earlier that year.<sup>66</sup> Although economic depressions are typically very bad for labor unions and labor activism, the years 1933 and 1934 were years of unusual demonstrations of strength and unity for American unions. San Francisco's longshoremen's strike of 1934 (which later became a general strike) was crucial for organized labor and the Left in general because the sheer scale of the mobilization was rare, and indicated the power of unions to mobilize American workers.<sup>67</sup> Evans's photographic response to the strikes, embodied in these exposures, is therefore counter-intuitive. The pictures were probably made while the longshoremen's strikes raged in California, between March and mid-summer. The signs these workers hold indicate their critique of the ILA union boss Ryan (one recurring sign reads "WHY? // DOES RYAN REFUSE // CALL OUT THE // NORTH ATLANTIC"), an unusual target for the generally pro-ILA New York dockworkers. The pictures themselves were probably made at a summer demonstration held by the far-left longshoreman's union as a protest against Ryan's refusal to call out the east coast members of the ILA in solidarity while on the west coast, the strike raged and led to violent confrontations between workers and the police.<sup>68</sup> The protest participants were identified by Evans on the recto inscription as "communists," although this was probably shorthand. In addition to being communists, they very well may have been politically radical union members whose critique of Ryan's negotiations with big shipping companies threatened to undo the centrality of the ILA within the shipping industry.<sup>69</sup> These men were likely to have had a direct relationship to the shipping industry, in addition to being communists, because their signs indicate a very pointed criticism of the union boss. Thus, paradoxically, figure 10, which in its

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<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the 1934 waterfront strikes in San Francisco, see Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1988), pp. 100-110. Kimeldorf is particularly instructive on the relationship between the conservative New York labor leader, Joseph Ryan, and the emerging radical unions on the west coast, led by an increasingly influential Harry Bridges, arguing that 1934 represented an unsustainable culture clash within the union movement. For general information about the relationship between labor laws and labor unrest in 1934, see Lichtenstein, pp. 20-97.

<sup>67</sup> For general background on the longshoremen's strikes in the 1930s and their broader context in American labor history, see Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990) and Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of American Workers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970).

<sup>68</sup> Kimeldorf, among others, details the escalating violence on the streets of San Francisco between May and July of 1934. *The New York Times* regularly provided updates on the strike to its readers during the entire period—they reported on the developing story, which encompassed port cities along both coasts at various moments—virtually every day between early April and late summer 1934.

<sup>69</sup> Despite the threat such internal dissension posed, the rallies were not huge. One rally was remarked upon by the *New York Times* on July 10, 1934 with an article titled "Demonstration Here A Dud" (A1).

visual mechanisms describes the permeable boundary between unity and isolation, also describes a crucial historical moment in which the goal of a unified class of American maritime workers was undermined by dissension about the nature of political and economic unity.

Evans's photograph is undoubtedly a critique of the headline-grabbing union activism that excited the country, particularly in 1933 and 1934, but there is little reason to believe that the photographer had a great investment in labor unionism *per se*. Instead, the photograph's real lesson may have to do with Evans's uncertainty about the usefulness of political identity in a larger sense, a topic that definitely occupied his mind during the same years. For instance, in letters to his friend in Moscow, Jay Leyda, on Nov. 22, 1933 and then the following Feb. 21, 1934, Evans opined that first, "The affairs of this country are supposed to be exciting at the moment but I don't feel it somehow, just feel pinched and nervous," and second, as I quoted previously, "I am fantastically mixed up, politically, and have often wished you were around for a conversation on certain events and theories."<sup>70</sup> Also, as I will discuss in chapter two, Evans had a close friend, a dedicated communist and film critic named Harry Alan Potamkin, who died in the summer of 1933, which seems to have inspired another burst of political self-examination. Evans's diaries and letters from the period are peppered with hostile references to the "leisure classes" and the "fleurs du capitalist mal."<sup>71</sup> The phrases themselves are easily overlooked as sour grapes, for despite his privileged background Evans was truly penniless during these years, but his comments were consistently grounded in the language of critique of *capitalism* in particular, indicating that he was engaged in a fairly thorough-going, if unsystematic, analysis of the politics of class.

It is not surprising that Evans's ambivalence would make its way into his photographs, nor—importantly—that photographs like this, where his political ambivalences figure so prominently, should also relate, even indirectly, to the subject of work. Evans's politics and his response to work were deeply entwined. Although he consistently refused a political identity, his writings during the early 1930s are steeped in a thorough, explicit, and at times idiosyncratic criticism of capital.<sup>72</sup>

Evans's photographs of the early 1930s, in particular those made on the streets of New York and at the coal dock in Havana, demonstrate that critique; they are engaged with contemporary politics by virtue of their focused engagement with the working subjects of capitalism. Although the photographs function outside the context of reform politics and make no claim to a revolutionary position or rhetoric, work and street life were a crucial aspect of Evans's photographic practice in 1933-34. Evans's subject matter reveals that the young photographer's curiosity (he turned thirty in 1933) about the

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<sup>70</sup> For excerpts from Evans letters to Leyda, see "Walker Evans," correspondence files, Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.

<sup>71</sup> Such discussions are scattered throughout Evans's 1933-34 diaries, WEA / MMA 1994.250.95-140.

<sup>72</sup> The most significant moment represented in the archive, in respect to a class-based understanding of politics, was in Evans's diaries: in 1933 Evans made an entry that delineated his attitude towards the revolution in Cuba (and, not incidentally, confirmed his thoroughly independent evaluation of the situation) and the difficulty of translating political gain into transformation of the public realm. After a heated discussion with Ben Shahn, a committed leftist, Evans wrote, "Cuba trying to settle a disappointing revolution. Arguments about it during dinner. Shahn of course thinks it is a social revolution for the good of the proletariat, while it was nothing of the kind. The proletariat gets nothing from it. Good for more respectable bourgeoisie and intellectuals." Evans diary entry, August 14, 1933, MMA/WEA 1994.250.95.

world was shaped by a deep understanding of the political function of capitalism in his moment; his photographs from these years provide evidence of that curiosity but, at the same time, they suggest a high level of uncertainty about the value of political identity or lack thereof. Evans's personal experiences gave rise to his approach to capitalism and to politics more generally. Far from springing forth as a fully formed ideology, Evans's approach to work and capitalism evolved over time via his perspective as a worker—first as a young office worker in the 1920s and then as a working photographer.<sup>73</sup> Evans's early rejection of conventional middle-class identity, embodied in his hostility towards his father's work as an advertising executive, and his failure in that realm (first on Wall Street, then selling photographs to advertising agencies) likely added significant poignancy and urgency to his approach to photographing workers.<sup>74</sup> However, Evans was not a man with a cause looking for the image of that cause. Instead, his own experiences of work and his thoughtfulness about the relationship of his experiences to a larger system of labor and employment, industrial capitalism, shaped his curiosity about what was going on in the world.

It is likely that one of the reasons that Evans printed and submitted the picture of the strike line in figure 10, for instance, as opposed to the other negatives he shot that day (Figs. 11-16 among them), is because of the purposeful stride of the smoking man in the center foreground of the photograph. Evans caught the smoker mid-step, with his hips jutting, his arm swinging forward and his hand blurred in motion, while his shoulders appear to remain loose, hanging behind his body. His movement is simultaneously forwards, backwards and around, and in that motion he not only becomes an independent character, but also a perfect contrast to the man at his right (our left). Their hands swing forward in near-perfect symmetry, but the fast moving blur of our smoker's hand is vibrantly alive compared with the metal stump at the end of his comrade's arm. Together, the contrast between them presents a comparison of tempo and of life experience and brings the picture fully into view as a double portrait; viewers can shuttle back and forth between the two men and envision two separate worlds of motion, of material things like fabrics and cigarettes, and of life experience. That the context is so clearly a demonstration prompts viewers to consider their life experience within the realm of work.

The photograph that Evans titled *Demonstration and Picketing...* reveals its maker's curiosity and interest in these men and their world. It explores their world through their physical presentation at the strike, and their unwitting presentation to the permanent record in the form of the camera. Although the photograph seems generally inclined towards an ironic or critical view of the concept of organized labor, Evans does not use it to make a definitive statement about these men, their work, or work in a more general sense. Instead, the visual contrast between each man prevents contemporary viewers from drawing a hard-and-fast conclusion about each man and his world.

The open-ended, unfixed qualities of Evans's strikers reveal a consistent aspect of his photographs of individuals in the streets during the early 1930s: he sought a high level of ambiguity in these quasi-portraits, in the sense that he deliberately formulated a mode of picture-making that left narrative meaning open and unfixed. He spent much of the

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<sup>73</sup> Evans's experiences with Manhattan offices are documented by Mellow, pp. 77-113 (occasional references).

<sup>74</sup> Mellow, pp. 76 (reference to Evans's father) and 111 (advertising).

early 1930s kicking against the pictorial traditions established by his predecessors, key among them Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and, equally importantly, the social documentary photographer Lewis Hine (all of whom were very active through the first decade of Evans's career). That Evans aggressively and bitterly rejected the precedent of art photography set by Stieglitz is part of the established reading of Evans, and is an important aspect of his development as a photographer.<sup>75</sup> But equally important, and less understood within Evans scholarship, is his thoroughgoing refusal of the example of Hine's work, with its deep investment in reform movements, its overt celebration of labor, and its single-minded dedication to the visual elaboration of an idea of the "deserving poor." Hine was a Progressive reformer. Evans was not. The most important challenge of Evans's early career was that of becoming a documentary photographer of everyday life without reproducing an idealized image of the "deserving poor" (and also, not incidentally, without becoming someone's employee). Neither a reformer nor a communist, neither a worker nor solely an artist, Evans formed his identity as a photographer through a maze of contradictions. He developed a visual language of ambiguousness and an understated, almost flat-footed pictorial repertoire not of spectacle and heroics, but of interstitial work times and street life. I interpret his choices as a deliberate effort to demonstrate refusal to participate in previous traditions of representing work within its narrative reformist context.

[*Demonstration and Picketing...*] proffers a somewhat unusual perspective on work and labor activism in the early 1930s. Evans made the photograph shortly after Lewis Hine published *Men at Work* (1932), a book that included selections from both his "Work Portraits" series and photographs made during his commission at the Empire State Building (1930-31). Hine's work suggests an entirely different world-view from Evans's, but it is a viewpoint that Evans is likely to have been aware of through the 1933-34 period, after the publication of *Men at Work*.<sup>76</sup> (Evans would have learned much more about Hine in 1938, after both photographers were included in Beaumont Newhall's *Photography 1837-1937* at the Museum of Modern Art, and after Evans's friend and peer Berenice Abbott became friends with Hine.<sup>77</sup>) If Evans was aware of Hine, as is likely,

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<sup>75</sup> Mellow bases his interpretation of Evans's complicated relationship to Stieglitz's legacy on the inconsistency of Evans's response to the older photographer over a period of almost thirty years (pp. 87-91), an inconsistency which makes sense over such a long period of time; Eklund also notes the contradictory nature of Evans's response to Stieglitz and remarks that Stieglitz's self-aggrandizement and seriousness about his trade provided a foil for the young photographer to work against in the establishment of an artistic identity (p. 32); Alan Trachtenberg, perhaps Evans's most important critical interlocutor, does not directly address Evans's perception of his relationship to Stieglitz, but his chapter devoted to Evans as a pivotal figure in the history of photography forms a near-precise parallel to his chapter on Stieglitz. Trachtenberg critiques Stieglitz for the same reasons that Evans struggled with Stieglitz's legacy: both Trachtenberg and Evans criticized the older man (legitimately) for his investment in traditional models of aesthetic accomplishment, which essentially divided photography's documentary potential from its expressive qualities, p. 174.

<sup>76</sup> Hine, *Men at Work: Photographic Studies of Modern Men and Machines* (1932) (New York: Dover, 1977).

<sup>77</sup> For more on the development of Hine's friendship with Abbott, see Daile Kaplan, *Photo Story* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), pp. xiii-ix and 105. Information on *Men at Work* and its influence is rather scattered. In the publication itself, Hine published a brief introduction that contextualizes the project by Jonathan L. Doherty. The project is almost completely passed over throughout the major volume on Hine, *America and Lewis Hine*, ed. Naomi Rosenblum (New York: Aperture, 1977). Both Trachtenberg and Maren Stange, in her book, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social*

then his work on the waterfront and elsewhere during the 1933-34 period was in necessary conversation with the older photographer. Even if Evans was not aware of Hine's work, he deliberately committed himself to a set of pictorial principles that were utterly at odds with the older photographer's world as it was articulated by the mid-1930s.

### **Social Documentary**

Major accounts of the history of American social documentary photography, starting with Beaumont Newhall's "Documentary Approach to Photography" (1938) have traditionally read a continuous—if fitful—line between Jacob Riis (whose work is not examined here) through Hine to the great documentary photographers of the 1930s.<sup>78</sup> More recent published accounts, however, such as John Raeburn's *A Staggering Revolution*, have questioned the continuity of this developmental trajectory, which depends upon a rather stable model of American progressivist politics for coherence.<sup>79</sup> Far from reading Evans as falling into that model like one more duck in a row, I read his work as evidence of active revolt against the intermeshing of political and aesthetic principles. At the same time, it is important to consider exactly what Evans would have seen in Hine's work, what qualities he would have associated (rightly or wrongly) with contemporary progressivism. By progressivism, I mean that strain of reformist politics that emerged in the late 1800s as a deliberate corrective to unfettered industrial capital. Progressivists such as Jane Addams (1860-1935), the founder of Chicago's Hull House, are famous for their efforts to integrate recent immigrants into American culture, but they also fought for the amelioration of working conditions for industrial laborers, and their advocacy can be credited with changing public perceptions about humane factory working conditions, safety precautions in the workplace, and the importance of sanitary housing.

Time was important to Progressive reformers, because public consciousness of industrial labor was tinged with the perception that workers experienced very long work days under conditions that involved rapid repetitive work. Although conflict over the length of the work day was not new by the end of the nineteenth century, reducing and standardizing the work day was a central ambition of progressive reform.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps for this reason, contemporary understandings of progressivism are now heavily influenced by the early twentieth-century turn towards efficiency. Early twentieth-century efficiency experts such as Fredrick Winslow Taylor (1856-1918) and Lillian and Frank Gilbreth (1878-1972 and 1868-1924, respectively) are the most prominent figures in a strain of progressive thinking that prioritized a high level of efficiency in the workplace. By

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*Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), have dedicated considerable attention to Hine in their histories of American photography and documentary photography, respectively, but neither has carefully examined the *Men at Work* project specifically.

<sup>78</sup> *Parnassus* 10 (March 1938), pp. 3-6.

<sup>79</sup> John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). See also Sarah M. Miller, *Inventing 'Documentary' in American Photography, 1930-1945*. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> See Montgomery on Taylor, pp. 178-79; on scientific management and its relationship to reform movements, pp. 216-256. Also see E. P. Thompson. "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1991), pp. 352-403.

dividing up the components of routine industrial tasks, Taylor in particular analyzed downtime in an effort to eliminate waste, and re-organized pay structures for industrial workers to maximize production and profit to employer and, in theory, economize the physical strain on employees. Taylor's work was so influential that his name became synonymous with the radical division of timed tasks in factory production.<sup>81</sup> The idea was to speed up the functioning of industrial tasks by eliminating unnecessary movements and also to improve pay-scales by offering higher wages for more efficient work.

One logical connection between progressivism and the emphasis on efficiency was investigative photography. Within progressivist movements, photographs played a central role providing evidence of industrial and living conditions among the working classes and the poor. Hine rose to prominence in the northeastern United States for his investigative photographs of working men, women and children, which were taken and published in a well-articulated campaign to alleviate abusive labor practices. Although he had worked independently in the 1900s and the 1910s making portraits at Ellis Island, Hine's work for large social organizations such as the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) and the *Pittsburgh Survey* form the basis of the modern idea of Progressive social documentary photography.<sup>82</sup> Hine offered contextual information about his subjects in the form of captions, and sought to minimize the presence of ambiguity and illegible action within his photographs. Thus, his ambition for his commissioned work was, as the art historians Alan Trachtenberg and Maren Stange have argued, effectiveness through clarity.

Trachtenberg explained the importance of clear information to Hine's work and progressivism more generally by way of describing the importance of the survey:

'Survey' was a key term in the reform outlook. A survey, like a map, assumes that the world is comprehensible to rational understanding and that understanding can result in *social* action. It assumes, too, that once the plain facts, the map of the social terrain, are clear to everyone, then change or reform will naturally follow. Reasonable men and women, the Progressive ideology held, would behave in their collective self-interest once they saw the true shape of their affairs. To see was to know, and to know was to act. On just such a pristine formula was Progressive optimism—and Hine's—based.<sup>83</sup>

For my purposes in describing Evans's inheritance from progressivism, what is important about Trachtenberg's formulation was the idea that for Hine, making pictures that allowed a high level of social description was a value unto itself because such pictures

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<sup>81</sup> Jill Lepore, "Not So Fast," *New Yorker* (October 12, 2009).

<sup>82</sup> For the definitive standing account of Hine's work, see Rosenblum. Unfortunately, Hine's work is often cited and referred to casually, but rarely deeply addressed, with the exception of Rosenblum's book and the chapter dedicated to Hine and Stieglitz in Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs*. Kaplan's *Photo Story* is a compilation of Hine's letters, which provides a fascinating glimpse of Hine's thinking that spans the early years of his career through his death in 1940 and demonstrates that his work got more interesting and complex in the final two decades of his life, despite the relative shortage of critical attention that his late work has yet attracted.

<sup>83</sup> Trachtenberg, "Ever—the Human Document," in Rosenblum, p. 126. Trachtenberg acknowledges the importance of philosopher John Dewey's contribution to both progressivism as a social movement and to Hine's own investment in progressive politics.

could impart social knowledge and catalyze improved social conditions. Two examples will illuminate this point. First, in Hine's work for the NCLC, one famous photograph (Fig. 18) is a portrait of a girl working on a loom at a textile factory. She is not alone, as another girl or woman in the background of the photograph appears to also work the loom. Although we cannot tell from the photograph their precise movements, the photograph clearly describes their physical spaces as contained by the factory machinery, and their attentions absorbed by the machine's intricacies. Hine's caption provides other information: "Sadie Pfeiffer, 48 inches tall, age not known, has worked half a year. She is one of the many small children at work in Lancaster cotton mills, Lancaster, S.C., November, 1908." Thus, Hine presents not only a description of the physical world of Sadie Pfeiffer, but also characterizes her by her size, her presumed lack of self-knowledge (no known age), and apparent typicality. Thus, Hine seeks to present not an isolated moment in time (although that description is not diametrically opposed to his ambition) but rather an entire system of social and factory production. As Trachtenberg writes, "To remove the mystery of how things get made, how resources get transformed into usable objects, was the persistent goal [of Hine's photographs]...."<sup>84</sup> The subject of Hine's photograph is not really Sadie Pfeiffer, but child labor as a consistent feature of southern textile production.

Another photograph, part of Hine's independent work portraits series of the 1920s, illuminates a different aspect of Hine's practice. In *Steam Fitter (Powerhouse Mechanic)* (1921, Fig. 19), Hine pictured a laborer with his body literally bent into a crescent shape that echoes the shape of the machine he works on.<sup>85</sup> His rounded back and rounded muscular arms resonate with the round wheel of the steam pump and each of the fasteners around it. Further, the length of his torso precisely fits within the diameter of the wheel, and his arms seem to be perfectly aligned and scaled to the massive wrench he holds. His body is literally in sync with the machine, in its scale and shape. Finally, and most intriguingly, Hine exaggerated the repetitive features of his body, so that his arms, legs, and prominent muscles all line up like the parts of a well-oiled machine. The repeated curves of the pipe-making equipment through the background of the photograph all echo one another and the steamfitter's back, reinforcing the perception that body and machine are alike, and that they are particularly suited to one another. Although the caption for this photograph (and in others throughout the "Men at Work" series) is relatively minimal, his clear ambition was to produce images of men whose bodies were symbiotic with machines—both existing as a blend of steel and human strength, both seeming to breathe as one. Hine described a variant of the *Steamfitter* in 1926 by writing, "the primary purpose is not to get a 'balanced' picture but to show the man with the wrench in order to emphasize his value in the industrial processes dependent on the piece of machinery for which he is responsible."<sup>86</sup> Both in the construction of his statement and in the composition of his photograph, Hine deliberately intertwined man and machine

<sup>84</sup> Trachtenberg, in Rosenblum, p. 120.

<sup>85</sup> Similar versions of *Steamfitter* were published in Hine's article, "Powermakers: Work Portraits by Lewis W. Hine," in *Survey Graphic* 47 (December 31, 1921), p. 511; in Hine's "He Photo-Interprets Big Labor," *The Mentor* 14, no. 8 (September, 1926), p. 46; and also as the frontispiece to Hine's *Men at Work: Photographic Studies of Modern Men and Machines* (New York: Macmillan; reprinted New York: Dover, 1977), 1932. The *Survey Graphic* reference is cited by Barbara McCandless in her entry on this work for Patricia Junker, et.al., *An American Collection* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 2001), p. 194.

<sup>86</sup> Hine, 1926, p. 43.

by way of characterizing a system of production that relied upon on their inter-dependence. The valorizing aspect of this photograph depends on the strength, even the virility, of its human subject, and stands in sharp contrast to the condemnation of a labor system that is manifest in his portrait of the child textile laborer, Sadie Pfeiffer.

Although Hine's photograph of Sadie Pfeiffer is very different from his later work, especially his more celebratory portraits of laborers like the *Steamfitter*, the unifying thread that connects them, and thus provides a framework for understanding both photographs, is the centrality of industrial labor itself as a condition not just of everyday life, but of existence itself. Labor forms both subjects, and the narrative legibility of each photograph is dependent upon understanding that each subject's world is made small by labor. There are no contingencies, no mysteries and no ambiguities to how these people spend their time and how they identify as subjects: labor is the defining term. For Hine, too, labor was the defining term. As a photographer, he seems to have almost exclusively sought commissions, employers and discrete projects. Still, the record of his life's work (written and photographic) reflects a deep sense of purposefulness and identity in all of his work, including the non-commissioned work. The fact that labor assumed a defining role in his photographs reflects both an honorific value that Hine ascribes to labor, and laborers, and also (in his earlier work) the political expediency of creating a coherent image of the "deserving poor." His progressive reform politics were given over to the fight for better working and living conditions for laborers and the entire arc of his *oeuvre* reflects his confidence that photographs could play a role in this fight.

Hine's efforts met with varying levels of success during his lifetime, but the consistency and moral clarity of his efforts make him the central figure in the history of social documentary. Although many photographers in the subsequent generation, including most prominently Dorothea Lange, also seemed to share the goal of political usefulness that marked Hine's work, by the 1930s the game had changed: the strength and intellectual energy of the left was not coincident with the Progressive movement, and Evans found reason to be critical of both organized systems of social amelioration and the radical politics of the left. Evans was articulate—both in his photographic practice and in his writing—about his refusal of Progressive politics and the once-clear relationship between progressivism and social documentary. His writing, often marked by its sneering tone, revealed his hostility towards an organized, documentary approach to social amelioration. An early example of his writing on this point is an unpublished, circa 1933 manuscript that addresses a photograph Evans made of a country family in Havana (Fig. 20). He wrote,

Here you come across a small group of people whose bodies have these things going on in them. This sort of thing is always being spoken about these days in words. You hear and see "starving" family. [It's only that] this event takes place now in a way that gets it into the press somehow [illeg.] some historical law "it has become an event that press men are told that's something to print in the paper, its gotten mixed up with government (or something) so its to be printed; [say,] there are even whole periodicals about it where its mentioned on every page, such as the "New Starvation." So that the words are worn out about this. Here however is a photo of a "starving family."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Undated mss., attributed to Evans, WEA/MMA 1994.250.4 (file 6). Rosenheim has privately contested the authorship of this document. I find no reason to doubt its authorship by Evans, although it is unusual

Lines like these are crystalline in their hostility, but pretty difficult to parse for actual meaning. I interpret Evans's riff in a number of ways. First, it's a ward against over-reading the condition of "starvation," an interior condition, onto the exterior signs of this family (their physical presentation), and so it condemns the interpretive work of generalizing about subject matter. Second, it borrows bureaucratic language of organized reform efforts, including progressive magazines like *Survey Graphic*. In that way, Evans implicates the role of the press in turning photographs into spectacle (a position that Hine sought and Evans rejected) and the role of the government in categorizing, thus dryly tabulating, human experience. In its final line, "Here, however, is a photo," Evans returns a certain dignity to the photograph itself as a messenger of some kind of information, however meager. To him, "'starving family'" as a phrase may represent a failure of description, but the persistence of the photograph, its mere presence ("here"), suggests the picture itself may retain a stubborn and dramatic intransigence despite the wordy gobbledygook that surrounds it.

It is tempting to read Evans's turn away from the kind Progressive-social documentary nexus that Hine represented (for him) as a turn away from language, but I propose that language was the more minimal rejection. Although Evans had zero investment in the kind of sociological caption that accompanied pictures like Hine's Sadie Pfeiffer portrait, by the 1930s Hine's faith in that kind of caption had waned, too. Given the fact that Evans had little to say about descriptive captions one way or the other and that he carefully (but elliptically) titled most of his works, his dislike of descriptive language seems not to have motivated Evans in the way that his dislike of overly determined pictorial legibility did. More than language or captioning, Evans rejected the forms of narrative legibility within pictures that structure our understanding of Hine's works, such as the steamfitter who literally fits the piping. Equally important, Evans rejected the underlying premise that rational understanding could or would translate into substantive social transformation. It is as though he regarded photographs like the starving family or figure 10, [*Demonstration and Picketing...*], as suited to straddle the line between being about Something Significant, and being mere plays in space—about a meaning so shifting that it might open onto nothing at all.

Evans's investment in highly-charged, socially relevant subject matter as in [*Demonstration and Picketing...*] would seem to belie my claim that his rejection of Hine's model was thorough. But the photographs seem to hang around the social scene as contra-positives, seeming at first glance to promise information they would not actually provide. As the next section of this chapter will demonstrate, during 1933-34 Evans shifted from working primarily with the play of space and light in architecture, where he engaged seriously with traditions of formal play in modern photography, into the social scene, where he developed a sustained interest in working people and street life as subject matter. Eventually, I will make the case that [*Demonstration and Picketing...*] works more like a portrait, less like a work picture.

### **Finding a subject**

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within the archive for Evans to describe in written terms his own photographs. I am completely certain that the handwriting on the manuscript, which is part of the Walker Evans Archive at the MMA, is Evans's.

Evans's trip to the New York waterfront in the summer of 1934 was anything but an exception to his general practice during that period. Throughout the years 1933 and 1934, in addition to the laborious process of making and selling photographs and completing commissions, he spent time on the city's streets, waterfronts and public squares, taking pictures of working people, or, more often, people not working. This work was not new to his practice, but it assumed new importance as it characterizes much of his non-commissioned photographic activity during the years 1933-34. Further, in at least one case, Evans published an older photograph under a more recent (false) date, which efficiently underscored its currency.<sup>88</sup> Rarely traditional portraits, either in the sense of studio work or in line with Lewis Hine's 1920s portraits of laborers, these photographs were also not exactly useful documents of economic, social and working conditions. Although women appear in these photographs, Evans focused much more regularly and seriously on men (one way in which the photographs under discussion seem to cohere as a group is its highly gendered focus). I will briefly discuss the broad contours of Evans's biography during this period, and then return to his photographs in order to characterize these male workers in the street scenes as part of a unified pictorial concern.

1933 and 1934 were very bad years financially for Evans, along with his circle of peers and for the country as a whole. Despite its extreme difficulties, for Evans the period was crucial because of a couple of major commissions and an overall clarification of his project as a photographer. That clarification may have been prompted by his trip to Cuba in the late spring of 1933 to take pictures for the journalist Carlton Beals's book, *The Crime of Cuba*. The book was a political *exposé* for American readers of the fall of Gerardo Machado's political regime in Cuba and made a pointed critique of American foreign policy towards Cuba since Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. Upon his return to the United States in the summer of 1933, Evans passed his time with a group of friends that included Ben Shahn, who was that summer working as an assistant to Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Center murals, and Jay Leyda, who was completing his film, *Bronx Morning* (1933), and preparing to leave the United States for Moscow to study film-making with Sergei Eisenstein. The cast of friends and acquaintances in Evans's life that summer was long, but Shahn and Leyda were central. Towards the end of the year, *The Crime of Cuba* was published.<sup>89</sup>

In November of 1933, Evans's exhibition of architectural photographs went on view at the Museum of Modern Art alongside an exhibition of Edward Hopper's photographs. The exhibitions were apparently not intended to run simultaneously, but did so because of a well-timed suggestion (and the donation of a large series of prints to

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<sup>88</sup> Eklund describes Evans's publication of *Posed Portraits, New York* in the literary journal *Hound & Horn* in 1933, "*Posed Portraits, New York* [was] almost certainly made in 1931 but postdated two years for currency." Eklund, p. 43.

<sup>89</sup> In a recent article, Jordan Bear has ably demonstrated that Evans capitalized on Americans' fascination with news reports about Cuba. Evans's own diary from the two year period after his trip reveals that like many other Americans, he too was watching the political situation there unravel on a day to day basis. Such evidence suggests that Beals's book would have had a ready—and prepared—audience. See Bear, "In the Morgue: Censorship, Taste and the Politics of Visual Circulation in Walker Evans's Cuba Portfolio" *Visual Resources* 23, no. 3 (2007), pp. 221-243.

the newly formed photographs collection) by Lincoln Kirstein.<sup>90</sup> It was probably during the first months of 1934 that Evans first made contact with *Fortune* magazine, which published in September a photo-essay by Evans that accompanied Dwight Macdonald's story about American communism (Evans may have started work on this project as early as January, although the plan for the group of images did not solidify until late summer). MacDonald's attitude towards his subject was revealed in his caption for Evans's photographs. Under the subtitle "THESE ARE COMMUNISTS," he wrote,

The human side of the Communist movement is suggested by these pictures, snapped during a prowling through Camp Nitgedaiget near Beacon, New York. . . The big event of the weekend is the mass meeting on Saturday night when you listen to songs like *Poor Mister Morgan Cannot Pay His Income Tax* and sing the *Internationale* yourself with clenched fist upraised. But after the mass meeting the floor is cleared and everyone dances gaily to petty bourgeois jazz. . .<sup>91</sup>

Evans would mine this same breeziness and calculatedly cool language in his later descriptive texts, although he did not mimic MacDonald's hostility towards Communism.

In the spring of 1934, Evans took a couple of jobs, one offered by his friend Joseph Verner Reed, a former classmate at Phillips Academy, Andover, to make pictures at his family resort, the Island Inn, in Florida, and another offered by Edith Halpert at the Downtown Gallery to make photographs of an exhibition of American folk art.<sup>92</sup> Throughout 1933 and 1934 Evans maintained his connection to the Harvard-based literary journal *Hound & Horn*, publishing photographs regularly through the close of the journal in the fall 1934 issue.

We have the benefit of knowing much about Evans's experiences in 1933 and 1935, because the Walker Evans Archive has his diaries for those two years (in both volumes, entries are particularly rich for the summer months), but the 1934 diary, if it ever existed, is lost now. Nevertheless, in 1933, Evans noted his financial woes on a regular basis, discussed some political events, although rarely in impassioned terms, and made frequent references to communism and capitalism.<sup>93</sup> We cannot know whether the 1934 diary would have engaged similar issues, but Evans's world in 1934 was certainly continuous with that of 1933. (The diaries were crucial to his biographers and form the basis of Mellow's interpretation of Evans's life during this period.) The most important evidence of continuity may be the simple fact that during the nearly two years between Evans's return from Cuba in June, 1933 and his late winter trip to the South with the wealthy textile manufacturer Gifford Cochran in 1935, his curiosity took him increasingly to the streets of New York City to work through an emerging set of ideas about photography, as well as labor and street life, and finally the necessary relation between these terms.

Due to complications with undated negatives, it is virtually impossible to determine exactly how many photographs Evans took in 1933 and 1934 and precisely

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<sup>90</sup> Evans seems to have had much less control over the installation and terms of exhibition for this project than he would for the later project, *American Photographs*, which is the subject of chapter three. There is no documentary evidence to indicate that he dictated the hang.

<sup>91</sup> Dwight MacDonald, "The Communist Party," *Fortune* 5 (September 1934), p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> Mellow discusses Halpert, p. 201; Florida pp. 220-224; *Fortune* pp. 225-226.

<sup>93</sup> WEA/MMA 1994.250.95-97.

how they divide up between commissioned and speculative work. He was clearly working with at least three cameras during this period, but his pictures on the street were primarily made with his Leica, which took 35mm roll film (it seems to be the case that during 1933 and 1934 he also regularly used a right-angle viewer when photographing in public with this lightweight, handheld camera). By 1933, Evans had experience with a variety of different cameras, including a large-scale view camera, the 4x5 convertible viewfinder-rangefinder, and a much smaller Kodak folding camera that his father sent him, which also took roll film.<sup>94</sup> In the streets, Evans opted for the speed associated with the relatively new Leica.<sup>95</sup> Although the WEA counts over ten thousand 35mm exposures, most are undated and the precise sequencing and chronology is, in many cases, approximate.<sup>96</sup>

Despite remaining questions about precisely how many photographs Evans made in the streets of New York during the period between the summer of 1933 and the early spring, 1935, there appear to be at least a dozen rolls of 35mm film exposed, probably during this period, that examine street subjects and in particular workers on city streets.<sup>97</sup> Evans was a famously slow worker, so even this seemingly modest number represents a significant group, particularly given the fact that with the exception of the notable 1933 group of photographs from Cuba, the period 1933-34 is generally regarded as a time of minimal fresh production by Evans, a fact made more poignant because by 1933 Evans could claim a steady stream of gallery shows in New York and had begun to establish his importance as a photographer of architectural views.<sup>98</sup>

In 1934, Evans demonstrated that he saw the importance of his practice not only within the context of the architectural work, but also, vitally, as producing new

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<sup>94</sup> Mellow, p. 76. The finest treatment to date of Evans's technical choices is Jerry Thompson's *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). Thompson knew Evans's working methods intimately and is extremely helpful on technical issues relating to Evans's printing, because in Evans's final years Thompson acted as assistant and close friend to the photographer. The drawback of Thompson's book is that he uses a number of evocative quotations and identifies the date of a number of works, without offering any citations for his information on either front.

<sup>95</sup> Thompson, p. 9. See also Anthony Lane, "Candid Camera," *New Yorker* (September 24, 2007) for a cultural history of the Leica.

<sup>96</sup> One key to chronology is circumstantial but convincing. Between 1931-33, Evans enjoyed a number of gallery exhibitions but did not show any of this work. By spring 1935, more of his work is accounted for because he was working on location, first on a private commission in the South and then on location for the Resettlement Administration (RA). These street pictures, made in New York during a period when Evans was based almost exclusively in the city, are by process of elimination (as well as some dating in the archival record) most likely products of 1933-34.

<sup>97</sup> Many of these cannot be securely dated but curators at the MMA use circa dates (often of the period between 1928-1933 or 1930-34) on the basis of film stock, subject matter or printing history. I have cross-referenced three 35mm film sequences from the WEA with extant prints from the Time, Inc. archive, now in private collections, in order to securely date them as 1934. Although the stakes of precise dating are low and except in certain circumstances it is beside the point, my assumption on the basis of subject matter, exhibition history, and Evans's changing interests is that many street scenes, possibly in the range of 150 negatives, in the 1994.253 sequence (the 35mm slide files) and another dozen in the 1994.254 sequence (4 x 5 inch film negatives) were made during this two-year period.

<sup>98</sup> Mellow and Rosenheim provide standard accounts of Evans's exhibition and publication history. See also Rodger Kingston, *Walker Evans in Print* (Belmont, Mass.: RP Kingston Photographs, 1995), and Andrea Nelson, "Chronology," in Sharon Corwin, Jessica May, Terri Weissman, *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 87-100.

photographs of urban types. When he prepared a list of thirty-six photographs to send to the Soviet Union with the politically active New York bookseller Harry Goldwater, probably late that year, his list was heavy with recent street subjects and confirms that Evans printed a number of the exposures and considered them relevant for exhibition. The list began with more than a dozen people-less subjects, including the Chrysler Building under construction, Manhattan signage, and *Brooklyn power house chimney* [sic] and *clothes on the line* [sic] but at number sixteen the titles took a distinct swerve towards a peopled urban landscape. The twenty-one final photographs on Evans's list were as follows: *6<sup>th</sup> Ave. (Negress)*; *Negro longshoreman*; *Union square scene* ([illeg.]); *Soldiers, Lindbergh Day*; *Soldiers, Byrd Day*; *Lovers, Coney Island*; *Four Sportsmen, Danbury Fair*; *Group of Bathers*; *Trademen in caps, bloomingdales* [sic]; *Quicklunch*; *Knickabockers, Danbury*; *Traffic, Borough Hall*; *Three men in caps, Bloomingdales*; *Lady Driver, Bronx signboard*; *Coney Isl. Beach, larger group of bathers*; *Grain elevator* [illeg.: with?] *curved shadows*; *grain elevator* [illeg.: with?] *rectilinear composition*; *6<sup>th</sup> Ave. & 42<sup>nd</sup> from* [illeg.]; *Chrysler under construction, half steel*; *Chrysler under construction, whole steel*; and finally, *Commodore & Graybar, rear view*.<sup>99</sup> These pictures were made over the entire course of the period 1928-1934 and traverse Evans's chosen subject matter, but a distinct group of the pictures were made recently as of 1934 and focus on working people in city streets.

That Evans sent work to the Soviet Union may be read as a political gesture unto itself, but it would be difficult to pin down the exact nature of that gesture—Evans was undoubtedly interested in the Soviet Union and discussed communism and socialism with his friends, but his diaries reveal that those conversations often devolved into exhausting, inconclusive debates. Evans may also have seen it as a functional place to show photographs, in positive contrast to New York—he would have had insight into this matter because one of his closest friends, Leyda, lived there in 1934 while he studied filmmaking with Sergei Eisenstein.

The *Negro longshoreman* that Evans refers to above may be one of his Cuba coal dock workers, which I will discuss below, but it was more likely to be a picture titled by Evans and made in New York in 1928, which documents Evans's early interest waterfront workers (Fig. 21). Several other notable items from the Goldwater list stand out and were probably more recent pictures. Evans's reference to a Union Square scene, for instance, was almost certainly a reference to a print made from two sets of negatives Evans made in Union Square around 1934 (this would have amounted to forty exposures and an uncertain number of prints). In the first set of negatives, Evans spent time on the sidewalk photographing people wearing signboards or pushing carts, such as a woman advertising the Gypsy Sandwich Shop, a street vendor, and the striking salesman (Figs. 22-24). Evans deemed the third picture in this group strong enough to print and send to *Fortune* (although it was not published). Within the context of the rest of the reel of film, Evans's striking salesman—figure 24—first appears to be a particularly abject sandwich board advertiser, basically alone on the city's streets and damned to walk them indefinitely. Evans emphasized both the isolation and the relentlessness of the man's task

<sup>99</sup> "Sent to Russia with Goldwater," undated list, in Evans's hand, pen, MMA/WEA 250.4 (3). The date is secured by the reference to Union Square scene, which were made in 1934 and also by fact that 1934 would have been when Leyda in Moscow was ready to receive the photographs and assist with the exhibition there. See Mellow, pp. 218-220.

by tilting the camera lens towards the pavement to suggest the close relationship between the striker and the long expanse of sidewalk. This frame is also the only exposure on the reel in which the central figure has his back to the camera and in which Evans sought to isolate rather than contextualize his subject within a busy street environment.

When read in the context of Evans's contemporary photographs of strikers, this picture of a salesman striking "for humane conditions" takes on an additional set of meanings and a darker cast. The isolated striker, photographed from behind, is both advertising a cause and isolated from his peers, making his claim to an effective strike, by definition an exercise of collective action, inconceivable. Evans's photograph of the lone white-collar figure implies that this salesman is shilling a variation on the same kind of alienated commodity as the Gypsy Sandwich Shop figures. By representing such a vague cause as "humane conditions," and by walking alone as one more urban advertiser, the man seems subject to the strike—like an employee—rather than an agent of effective political mobilization. With great economy, Evans's photograph illuminates aspects of a complex political subjectivity—although perhaps the subjectivity of the photographer as much as, or more than, his subject. By presenting the striker alone, isolated and turned from the camera while wearing a sandwich board commonly associated as much with commercial advertising as with political action, Evans suggested ambivalence towards collective action in the public realm, and towards labor politics and radical politics more generally.<sup>100</sup>

Evans made a second reel of photographs in Union Square of men lounging and sleeping in the urban park (see Figs. 25-27), which present a contrast to the signboard carriers. The men pictured are not at leisure, but instead exhibit the static postures of the urban unemployed (or under-employed), wearing rumpled suits or the clothing of tradesmen, and sleeping on the park's benches or public markers. Several from this group were printed, and Evans sent one, a cropped version of figure 26, to *Fortune* for review, although it, too, was not published. This photograph, among other photographs of urban sleepers during the early 1930s (including several major pictures of sleepers in Havana's *parque centrale*; Evans's famous photograph of a drunken sleeper on New York's South Street, later reproduced in *American Photographs*; and an early photograph of an upright sleeper on the Brooklyn Bridge, see figure 28), constitutes a small suite of unconscious men in public places. Evans's photographs of sleeping men are among the most charged of his street subjects, because the men in them are so difficult to read as part of a single community. Neither workers resting, nor strikers taking a break, nor even hungry individuals waiting in breadlines, these men are the antithesis of the working poor. Instead, they appear to have dropped out of the public realm in virtually every sense, save for their physical presence. 1933 and 1934 were among the two worst years of the Depression, when unemployment was unequivocally at its height, almost certainly making the sight of men sleeping in public a regular one in New York City.<sup>101</sup> Still,

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<sup>100</sup> I would characterize this ambivalence as one of being aware that there is no simple correlation between direct action in the public realm, for strikers or revolutionaries, and real benefit to the masses, as Evans learned in Cuba.

<sup>101</sup> Another photographer, the portraitist Nell Dorr, also described the experience of photographing men sleeping in public in 1933-34. See Dorr's entry in Margaret Mitchell's *Recollections: Ten Women of Photography* (New York: Viking, 1979), pp. 84-86. For information about unemployment rates and labor during the Great Depression, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 20-53.

Evans's interest in the subject suggests an internal dialog between sleeping men and striking men. Unlike the hapless disorganization of the strikers in figure 10, these men sleeping in public totally refuse the social order: their posture indicates a rejection of all politics, all efforts at economic and social organization, and is deliberately un-reformed. Rather than serving as a model for the idealized poor, these men, sleeping in public during the day, represented a total abandonment of the social norms that ruled everyday life. The subject may have interested Evans for precisely these reasons. As with the photographs of strikers who have adopted the tactics of urban advertising, or even those whose real target was the union itself, Evans's photographs of sleepers are marked by nihilism, suggesting a rejection of the standard models of social amelioration.<sup>102</sup>

The photograph that Evans called *Quicklunch* in his Goldwater list was likely to have been the circa 1930 photograph of office workers eating in a Manhattan lunchroom (Fig. 29), but it may equally have been a photograph of laborers eating their lunch on a Manhattan stoop (Figs. 30-31). These exposures (later printed, at least one—figure 30—is in the collection of the Getty Museum collection) were embedded within a role of film that Evans shot sometime in 1934. Evans began with two exposures of a group of men sitting in front of a storefront while very clearly having a conversation with one another (Fig. 32). In the following exposure (Fig. 33) a delivery worker lies asleep on top of a stack of cardboard boxes. (We know he sleeps during his lunch because this photograph immediately precedes the laborers on the stoop, indicating a very short time lapse between the two shots.) Unlike the group of sleepers on Union Square, where the implication is that the men are unemployed, the close correlation between the truck logo ("Trucks for Hire"), and the sleeper atop a dolly stacked with boxes, implies this man's nap has been squeezed out of his work day rather than being a substitute for it. The rest of the roll of film, which is partially reproduced and discussed by the art historian and curator Douglas Eklund in the Metropolitan Museum's 1999 exhibition catalog, was exposed in front of a movie theater (Fig. 34). Eklund writes, "[It] beautifully documents the way Evans worked: loitering near his prey, he snapped away until recognized, at which point he circled around into the street and came back to the sidewalk in search of new material."<sup>103</sup> By looking at the page that Eklund reproduced, which represents twelve of the twenty total frames on the roll, one can instantly see Eklund's point, vis-à-vis the theater pictures, but the top three pictures of lunching workers do not cohere as easily to this argument. The issue of mutual exchange of gazes, of being caught, is not a pressing issue in the top three frames, and so the subject of the photographs (rather than the process of photographing) is their most salient aspect. More important, perhaps, is the fact that they are engaged in their own world of lunching. From one exposure to the next each man's head moves just slightly leftward, although whether this was caused by a shift in conversation or an exterior movement is irretrievable.

The number of variables makes it impossible to determine precisely what percentage of Evans's total *oeuvre* the street pictures of the early 1930s represent, but several factors legitimize my case that the photographs I have thus far described, and select others like them, form an important and coherent pictorial concern for Evans

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<sup>102</sup> Rosenheim offers an alternate reading of the sleepers, interpreting them as part of Evans's larger dialogue with Surrealism. Rosenheim discussed this issue during his Walker Evans seminar at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fall 2004.

<sup>103</sup> Eklund, p. 46.

during the 1933-34 period. Evans by 1933 had completed his work with Kirstein on a major project recording nineteenth-century architecture in New England, and so his time was occupied increasingly by getting and executing commissions such as the Cuba and the Florida trips, and working on his film *Travel Notes*, which was shot in 1932. The street photographs, which number in the dozens, constitute a respectable body of photographs for Evans to have made independent of any commission (although the *Fortune* communism project did emerge at some point in 1934). Moreover, it was in 1934 that Evans began to formulate the project on American cities that he described in an unsent letter to Ernestine Evans and his own miscellaneous clippings from that year include several items describing new books of American places, picture books specifically intended for adult audiences.<sup>104</sup> It is highly possible, even, that the project was more organized than it appears now: Evans may have spent time on the streets of New York in order to test out the idea of creating a semi-sociological photographic account of the city streets, his own picture book for adults.<sup>105</sup> If this is the case, the book that Evans originally conceived would have had a much more pointed relationship to city

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<sup>104</sup> Letter discussing the possibility of a book from Evans to Ernestine Evans (no known relation), 1934, J. Paul Getty Museum Department of Photographs, 84.XG.963.42. Four items from MMA WEA 1994.250.91 (file 21) relate to the subject of photobooks: first, a fragment of a review by Robert Little dated July 6, 1932 from *New Republic* of newly published book called *America as Americans See It*. On page 214, Little writes, “*America as Americans See It* is better as a suggestion for future books than as a finished product. A wonderful volume waiting to be done which would describe America, to ourselves as well as to strangers, entirely by means of pictures—photographs of American machines, factories and landscapes, portraits of American facts of low and high degree, intelligent suggestions from news photographs and the contents of the Sunday rotogravures. . . . The book about America for foreigners is yet to be written. Americans themselves. . . are too close to the ground, too preoccupied with their own small provinces, enthusiasms and irritations—mainly the latter. We are good tree specialists, but when we write about the forest we become confused and a little grouchy;” second, a single piece of paper, typed and undated, with a single word in Evans’s hand “Lippincott” (Lippincott was the publishing company that hired Evans in 1933 to make pictures for *Crime of Cuba*. The paper states, “We would like to hold the question of the photographic book in abeyance for a few days as one of our authors wants to write a book of impressions on contemporary American scenes and in case he decides to do this, it is barely possible that a direct tie-up might be made. I have made a copy of the Walker Evans project and am returning the original herewith. . . . As soon as this matter has been decided I will write you again;” third, a sheet torn from *The Publisher’s Weekly* (March 31, 1934), pp. 1285-86, with the following item circled by Evans’s hand: “Appealing to the Eye // *The Publisher’s Weekly* has seen many signs that the books of pictures for an adult audience are coming into their own, a fresh example of this tendency being seen in the volume on “Trains” by Robert S. Henry. . . . The fascination of the volume comes from absorbing through pictures the story which type would convey less effectively. If we are not mistaken, there is an assured future for this type of book;” finally, from an article called “Publishing Parade” in *Advertising and Selling* (Oct. 12, 1933), p. 64, Evans clipped the following notice: “*Collier’s*, which can print one of John Flynn’s bright and bitter denunciations of big business with one hand and grab an advertising contract with the other, continues to believe that reader interest is what advertisers buy, now adds a staff photographer to gain additional realism. No ordinary shutter snapper, for Thomas makes subjects as everyday as his last name into pictures as unusual as his first. . . . The smart men at Crowell have thus filled a real need. Except for the intimate records of Dr. Saloman at *Time-Fortune*, and the work of Remie Lohse and a very few others in *Stage* and *Vanity Fair*, publishers don’t do as much as they could with photographs. Most of them, even in the news-magazine field, rely on the news-photo agencies, which, money-losing adjuncts of newspapers and news-reels that they are, cover only the obvious. General news-pics assay about three good shots to the ton.”

<sup>105</sup> In diary entries in July and August of 1933, Evans discussed his efforts to meet with Leonie Sterner to get her to support a book project. WEA/MMA 1994.250.95.

streets and the political economy of work than the book he completed in 1938, *American Photographs*.

In addition to considering a book of city subjects, Evans also spent time in the 1933 and 1934 creating a visual and verbal catalog of city subjects for a short documentary film—all focused on the street. A further document in the archive indicates the centrality of the workers in city streets subject matter: Evans and Leyda developed a shooting script for a film in 1933 that was almost entirely set in the city's public spaces at the start of a work-day, and tracked the working class as they filled the streets and subway cars.<sup>106</sup> Although his diary reveals that Evans spent time with friends and possible collaborators talking about the feasibility of such a film, the only known film he ever completed was *Travel Notes*, based on footage he shot in Tahiti in 1932 and apparently never shown in public.<sup>107</sup> Still, Evans spent a great deal of time with Jay Leyda in 1933 and worked with him as Leyda completed *A Bronx Morning*. The two men's collaborative film would almost certainly have built on the themes of *A Bronx Morning*, which itself was a short, silent, carefully constructed sequence of shots of the early morning hours in the city—the hours before the city comes alive with movement. In it, a newspaper blows around subway lines, laundry hangs on outdoor clotheslines, and fruit vendors set up for the day on otherwise empty streets. *A Bronx Morning* reflected Leyda's knowledge and study of Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's 1920 film, *Manhatta*, particularly because it referred to a single time of day (*Manhatta* chronicled a day in the city), although the later film lacked *Manhatta*'s narrative structure and its literary references. While *Manhatta* used Walt Whitman's 1860 *Leaves of Grass* to reinforce the narrative framework, *A Bronx Morning* completely eschewed language and did not seek to describe the passing of time.<sup>108</sup>

Given these unfulfilled ambitions, there are three probable venues Evans sought for his photographs from 1933 and 1934 of working people in the streets of New York: first, *Fortune* as a somewhat limited context, and second and third, respectively, a book of pictures or a film. My point here is simple. Evans made a lot of pictures of the type I describe during these two years; he tapped into a volatile and politically loaded street life in order to make a first comprehensive stab at chronicling American life. That many

<sup>106</sup> MMA/WEA 1994.250.4 (file 11). "Outline of first sequence," typed, n.d., with notations in W.E. and another hand (probably Leyda). This film was to combine still shots (noted in the script with the word "Leica" and the movement of workers on the street) with motion. It was organized around the contrast between working people and the leisure classes, and was divided up by time frame. At 5:30 the city is empty and the frames focused on empty thoroughfares and subway tracks; by 9:30am the subways have been filled with workers, the workmen have entered the factory, attendants on the upper east side have walked the dogs of their rich employers, bankers have arrived on Wall Street via yacht and the unemployed have formed a line outside government offices. Evans's handwritten notes at the end of the script reinforce the clear organization of the film as a sequence of comparative rich/poor frames, as well as the second level of contrast in the film between movement and stillness: "NOTES," Evans wrote, "prisoner behind bars followed immediately by bank teller in case // dowager of old school getting out of motor [car]; 2 liveried men attending."

<sup>107</sup> See Jenna Webster, "Ben Shahn and the Master Medium," in Webster, Deborah Martin Kao and Laura Katzmann, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, ca. 2000), pp. 75-96.

<sup>108</sup> The literature on Paul Strand, such as Rosenthal and John Rohrbach's dissertation, reveals that the collaboration between Sheeler and Strand over *Manhatta* was very tense, and that it was Sheeler who insisted on including the Whitman passages, over Strand's objections. See Rohrbach "Art for Society's Sake: The Photographic Visions of Paul Strand," Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1993.

were not printed, that the projects as Evans imagined them in 1934 did not pan out in the forms he originally intended, seems now like a triumph of art over document, but I propose this may not be a wholly accurate reading. Instead, the photographs use the volatile street life to work out a set of formal problems that pertained directly to his practice as a photographer, but in 1933 and 1934, the problems were in-dissociable from the realm of the social, the political, and the everyday.

Evans had already begun to work in this terrain as early as the late 1920s, when his biographers date his commencement of a serious photographic practice. Several early photographs are notable for prefiguring the series of street workers from 1933-34, including Evans's famous photograph of three men in suits eating at a luncheonette and Evans's series of photographs of workers watching the expansion of Bloomingdale's in 1928-29.<sup>109</sup> Together, these pictures establish the concerns that dominate many of the later printed pictures from the 1933-34 series and each sequence was represented in the group that Evans sent to Russia (although none of them were included in *American Photographs*). In these early shots, the main action appears to be happening outside the frame, so the viewer is sent into a process of deferment: we are watching, though the mechanism of Evans's camera, other people watching events unfold. Information about what those events are is inaccessible, but as viewers we are treated to the spectacle of other peoples' sustained attention.

At the Bloomingdale's construction site in 1928-29, Evans shot half a roll of film (WEA/MMA 1994.251.313-316), of which at least two were printed (Figs. 35-36). His interest in the scene was focused almost exclusively on the ground, and in the key exposures, the two that were definitely printed, Evans photographs the backs of a trio of male onlookers, each in a workman's cap. The men watched the building go up from across the street with *contraposto* poses, hands on hips, and gazes fixed on the upper reaches of the new building (which is, not incidentally, nearly completely off the frame of the given photograph). In order to take the photographs, as with many others, Evans stood behind the men, watching them watch while other men worked. The implication of the photographs is that the men are talking about the project, about the building, although it is not clear whether they are construction workers on break or passersby observing the progress of the new building. One senses from their poses and their similar dress that they, too, are construction workers, that they know the construction site and understand the nuances of construction well enough to discuss the building's progress.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Various other examples of this aspect of Evans's practice exist, including two extremely important early portraits of women on the street that I do not analyze in depth: *In Fulton Street*, and *Sixth Avenue*. These were portraits Evans showed regularly; they are among the best-known of his photographs and are the subject of much attention within scholarship on his work. I do not deal with them here because despite their prominence, they are unusual for his early *oeuvre*.

<sup>110</sup> Although this photograph offers a precedent to the 1933-34 pictures under consideration, the Bloomingdale's workers, like selected other photographs from the late 1920s through 1932, are actually fairly easy to identify as workers. Their speculative poses are clearly legible as such. Other photographs from the period, including such famous photographs as the workers loading the neon "Damage" sign into a truck as well as a series of pictures of laborers working deep within a quarry and others involving workers hanging large signs (WEA/MMA 1994.251.294 and 493), share this level of legibility. Although the distinction is a fine one at first glance, Evans's interest shifted in 1933 from making pictures of people clearly identifiable as workers and placeable within the context of, for instance, the work day, or the routine processes of industrial capital, to making pictures in which the subjects seem to be of that world, but are not entirely legible within it.

For one of the most famous photographs from his early career, of office workers eating lunch at a lunchroom counter (Fig. 29), Evans stood on the street and made pictures of a trio of men as they ate their lunches inside a glassed-in lunchroom in Manhattan (Figs. 37-40). The drama in the photograph is the play of light against the plate glass window of the lunch counter, as the reflections of another trio of men eating lunch, clearly in conversation with one another, echo the faces of the central figures who stare blankly out the window. The faint reflected image of the photographer himself occupies the center of the scene, and dancing light effects throughout the photograph prompt viewers' to skim their eyes across the surface of the picture. Skimming, by definition a quick motion, puts viewers into the place of fast-moving passersby, and our imagined transit past the lunch counter heightens the impression of frozen stillness in the three men who sit and stand while they eat lunch and stare out the window. Although one man appears to recognize that Evans held a camera, the entire suite of pictures suggests that instead of staring blankly ahead, the lunchers are witnessing something specific happening in the street outside. As in the Bloomingdale's picture, here the subject is working men looking into a space to which we, as viewers, have very limited access. The action takes place outside the bounds of the pictures, but our attentions are held by the trio of men, all of whom are unprepared for the presence of the camera, who do not consciously present themselves in front of the camera as subjects (they are in mid-bite), but are instead fully absorbed in another drama.

Meanwhile, another set of men reflected in the glass window appear to talk to one another, oblivious to the camera and the rest of the street. Their presence, and the implied presence of mind that comes from focusing on a conversation, forms a subtle counter-point to the lunchers and increases the impression that Evans's lunchers are completely reactive and outwardly focused. It is hard to know precisely what to make of the outward focus, although a comparison with one of Evans's 1931 photographs (Fig. 41, printed in *Hound & Horn* in April-June 1933) suggests an important criterion for understanding these pictures and those that followed in 1933-34: that of portraiture.

### **“Unstaged Revelation”**

The art historian and curator Doug Eklund, in his discussion of the *Hound & Horn* spread for the 1999 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, gave *Posed Portraits* a 1931 date on the basis of its having been made with a glass-plate negative, a large format which required the subjects to pose deliberately for the camera because of prolonged set-up and a long exposure (at least in comparison to the 35mm exposures, see Fig. 41).<sup>111</sup> Eklund described *Posed Portraits* as conveying the “effect of unstaged revelation,” and described the picture,

It centers around the pose, something Evans usually saw as a cardinal sin of his medium and an instrument of fakery. In this rare vision, however, the two workers pictured have arranged themselves into a display of unforced nobility in which the short-order cook exhibits the relaxed contraposto and cool gaze of a Bronzino on the Bowery.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Eklund used the information about the negative to back-date the photograph, which Evans published with a 1933 date, p. 43.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Eklund's statement is very helpful because it provides a very elegant formal description of this photograph but also because he uses terms, such as "unforced nobility" and "unstaged revelation," that seem almost entirely in line with the kinds of terms that Evans himself would have enjoyed but that also reflect a contradiction within the posed photographs. Eklund's careful phrasing points up the complicated relationship between the deliberate pose of the staged portrait and the presentation of the unanticipated and unself-conscious self. The repeated shift between careful self-preparation for the camera, as in a posed portrait, and the unplanned portrait, in which subjects either are not aware of the camera or are somehow themselves despite the camera presence, marks Evans's portrait-making through the 1930s.

Eklund makes a vital observation about Evans's work, but I do not agree with his statement that Evans opposed the making of posed portraits because it is inconsistent with the record of Evans's practice. Some of Evans's posed portraits count among the most important pictures of his career. His interest in portraiture is frequently characterized as an adjunct aspect of his documentary practice, but this is not the case; instead, Evans demonstrated a keen interest in shuttling back and forth between posed portraits with their strong impression of fully aware, self-conscious presence, and the impression of deferred or absorbed consciousness that he achieved in his studies of passersby—pictures that I will refer to as unposed portraits because of their ubiquity, their consistency and their continuity with the posed portraits. The street and worker scenes suggest that the balance Evans sought was unstable and perpetually loaded with a strong, reactive sensibility about human subjectivity under the pressures of everyday life. Trying to make a sizable body of portraits outside the context of a traditional portraiture practice constituted not just a deliberate decision, but a decision that called into question the practices of social documentary and formal portraiture. Evans's experimental efforts in the early thirties reflect what he would later refer to as "documentary *style*."<sup>113</sup> When he later hedged his bets on the full import of the term documentary, Evans remembered the experimentation in his early work and sought to put distance between his own work and a "simple"—so reductive as to be an inoperative historical category—concept of documentary practice. (The other reason he used that term was that by the 1970s Evans increasingly labored to solidify his intellectual place within a broad trajectory of American photography, as discussed in chapter three.)

In 1931, Walter Benjamin alluded to the same phenomenon in a description of nineteenth-century photographic portraiture by describing the way that people settle into their portraits, as though the long duration of early exposures resolved the tensions and falseness of the posed portrait:

'The synthesis of expression brought about by the length of time that a model has to stand still,' says Orlik of the early photography 'is the main reason why these pictures, apart from their simplicity, resemble well-drawn or painted portraits and have a more penetrating and lasting effect on the spectator than more recent photography.' The procedure itself taught the models to live inside rather outside the moment. During the long duration of these shots they grew as it were into the

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<sup>113</sup> Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March-April 1971), p. 87.

picture an in this way presented an extreme opposite to the figures on a snapshot.<sup>114</sup>

Benjamin found these early portraits interesting because the exposure was long enough for the sitters to surpass the pose of instant photography and to come into their own self-presence, as though the freeze of the camera could be obviated if time was stretched to allow the sitters to relax into themselves, returning to their unself-conscious presence. Benjamin—writing long after the technology of photography had decisively changed towards faster and more mobile cameras—longed for these early portraits, and the presence of their long-dead sitters, but did so with the benefit of hindsight. As early as the 1880s, the medium had been transformed into a different animal entirely. For Benjamin, writing fifty years later, portraiture was invariably impoverished as the middle classes became educated and savvy about posing. Neither “unstaged” nor “unforced,” portraiture without the apparatus of the large camera and the extended exposure lost its association with the realm of the magical and became a labored expression of middle-class identity.

Benjamin’s wishfulness, shared across the Atlantic Ocean by Evans, or so the photographs suggest, floundered on the perception that freezing oneself into a smile for a flashing camera was a very different form of self presentation than could be achieved by patiently sitting in a still position, waiting for the camera to register your likeness. The changed temporal experience of the photograph affected it completely—to freeze is to make oneself wholly available, for a fraction of an instant, to the snapping of the shutter. This is an act of banality; while sitters freeze into learned poses and camera-ready smiles, their ready presentation to the camera signifies a thorough education about how to pose for cameras. But the presentation had been internalized to the point where it was hardly noticeable, and sitters—lost in their own belief in the magic of unique likeness—could easily forget that they participated in a highly social ritual of preparing themselves for a portrait.

In contrast, older portraits such as unique daguerreotypes, tin- and ambrotypes, and even early paper prints were much more conventional, but according to Benjamin paradoxically fresher in their presentation of subjects. Their sitters were clearly learning the ropes of photographic portraiture at the same exact moments that their likeness burned onto a glass or metal plate. Of equal importance, the comparatively slow temporality of early photographic exposures meant that sitters had to settle into their poses (sometimes with the aid of movement-inhibiting furniture), waiting for light and chemistry to do their work.<sup>115</sup> What their patience allowed, paradoxically, was a measure of abandonment of focused self-presence. These terms seem at first glance opposed, but

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<sup>114</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography” (1931), as translated by Stanley Mitchell for *Screen* 13, no.11 (Spring 1972), pp. 8-17. Benjamin here quotes the Berlin graphic artist Emil Orlik’s *Über Photographie* (Berlin, 1924).

<sup>115</sup> Grant Romer discusses the relationship between technical and chemical demands and the temporality of early photographic portraits, particularly daguerreotypes, in his essay, “‘A High Reputation with All True Artists and Connoisseurs’: The Daguerreian Careers of A.S. Southworth and J.J. Hawes,” Romer and Brian Wallis, eds., *Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes*, exh. cat. (Gottingen: Steidl, 2005), pp. 21-51. For a more general discussion of early portraiture, see Barbara McCandless, “The Portrait Studio and the Celebrity,” in Martha Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1991), pp. 49-75.

the ability to relax out of the freeze and into the pose, Benjamin implied, allowed for a deeper, less practiced, sense of the self to register visually.<sup>116</sup>

For both Benjamin and Evans, the pose itself was a historical phenomenon, subject to material and technical pressures.<sup>117</sup> Given their perceptions about the contemporary state of the genre, both men shared an interest in and respect for August Sander's massive typology of German society, which was published in abbreviated form in 1929 as *Antlitz der Zeit* (commonly translated as *Faces of our Time*). Evans referred to Sander's book, approvingly, as a "careful editing of society."<sup>118</sup> Sander's goal of organizing what he referred to as the faces and types of people in German society into an elaborate class and professional hierarchy was the most systematic portraiture project of the period, and bore strong echoes of early portrait practices in its technical, conceptual and visual respects. The project seems, at first glance, in line with the racist social organization of the Social Democrats. In fact, the project was condemned and confiscated in Germany by the Nazis. The most obvious reason for its unsuitability within the political ideology of Nazi Germany was its open inclusion of the official outcasts of German society—the artists and other creative professions, its insane and homeless, its prisoners. Further, the art historian George Baker has convincingly suggested that the source of discomfiture for the entire project is the presence of the Freudian uncanny, or the unbidden reappearance of motifs.<sup>119</sup> Baker argues that throughout Sander's series of portraits, the details that add up to whole individuals cannot

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<sup>116</sup> In 2006, the contemporary American photographer Sally Mann was the subject of a documentary by Steven Cantor about her work entitled *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*. In the documentary, Mann described her own experience of taking large-scale portraits of herself and her family using a nineteenth-century wet-plate collodion technique and the temporal challenge that is involved in posing for these pictures. My own description derives from my reading of Benjamin and Evans, but is also influenced by Mann's perceptive description of the period of free thinking and the process of losing one's self-consciousness while posing for a long period of time.

<sup>117</sup> Further evidence that temporality and portraiture specifically were germane to Evans's practice, even as early as the early 1930s, comes via a historical study of portrait photography by Ben Maddow, a lifelong friend of Leyda and a close collaborator with James Agee in the early 1930s. Maddow, a screenwriter, documentary filmmaker, and photography critic, published *Faces* in 1977, but his analysis of Evans's work in that book precisely echoed—word for word in some places—his 1938 review of Evans's *American Photographs* (written under the pseudonym David Wolff for *The New Masses* (Oct. 4, 1938): n.p., as found in Evans's archive of materials relating to the exhibition and catalog, MMA / WEA 1994.250.57, file 23). Maddow's text, a compilation of a lifetime of writing on photographs, centered on the relationship between the technical and the temporal transformations in the medium and how those transformations affected portraiture specifically. Maddow's central question was whether the insight and perception wrought by a painter as [he] slowly constructs the portrait and "the particular is constructed into the general," could be approximated by the photographic portrait, and his response throughout the book is that photographic portraits have their own temporal particularity, albeit one that changed through the history of the medium. Maddow's approach to the history of photography owes its debt to the changing historiography of the medium in the mid-1970s, but his essential insight into the temporality of the photographic portrait was already present by the mid-1930s and seems carefully keyed in to the language of temporality and portraiture that Evans and his peers used. See Maddow, *Faces: a Narrative History of the Portrait in Photography* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), p. 31.

<sup>118</sup> Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5, no. 1 (October-December 1931), p. 127. Evans was interested in Sander's project not least because it was a book—in the essay he reviewed a series of photo books and formed a cryptic history of the medium of photography. In this respect, it forms a fine counterpart to Benjamin's "Short History," and both reveal a direct interest in Sander.

<sup>119</sup> George Baker, "Between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait," *October* 77 (Spring 1996), pp. 72-113.

be assimilated into the larger hierarchical system. For instance, the bourgeois widower and his sons' poor posture at first glance seems like an aspect of their particular identities, but one sees the repetition of their hunched backs in other pictures, including a portrait of a homeless urban wanderer. Upon seeing repetition of details like bad posture, viewers recognize the instability of the hierarchical system because its subjects cannot and do not exclusively conform to their slots within it.

Baker's larger argument about the political context and psychoanalytic implications of Sander's project may not have been part of what Evans recognized in *Antlitz der Zeit*, but his primary insight into the relationship between posing and unconscious presence puts words to the visual phenomenon that seems to have caught notice of both Evans and Benjamin. I characterize that visual phenomenon as the wavering back and forth between alert self-consciousness and the traces of the unconscious in photographic portraiture (which can be understood, in Baker's account, by using concept of the uncanny). As I argue above, both men saw the to-and-fro motion in historical terms, and as a function of the temporal particularity of the photograph. While early portraits contained the play of presence and absence in a single image, by the 1930s Evans found the achievement that Eklund identifies in *Posed Portraits*, and which Evans himself recognized in Sander's work, to be elusive. He preferred to work back and forth between the street portraits, where there was absolutely no studied self-presentation to the camera, and formal portraits of working people, as in a group of portraits of the Cuban coal dock workers of 1933, which I discuss below.

The idea of historicizing the pose has the elements of a vastly complex theoretical problem; at the same time, its narrative for the photographic medium takes the form of a relatively straightforward twinning of history and technology. The photographic pose can be understood within three broad historical moments. First, during an early period in which cameras were very slow and produced unique objects, sitters sought out portraits and patiently sat for them, remaining in pose for a pre-determined amount of time, and, in Benjamin's conception, came into a certain mode of consciousness—an awareness of self—during the exposure. Thus, the invention of the camera offered the middle classes a fresh avenue of self-representation, but there was a period of contemplation built into the technical requirements of the medium.<sup>120</sup> That period of contemplation, the pose, was wrapped up for these generations of sitters in the process of presenting themselves and waiting, so the implication is that the time delay built into the exposure the possibility of being simultaneously present and in repose, an idealized and historical state of consciousness.

During the second period of the photographic portrait's history, the temporal register and the concept of the pose changed radically. Although it roughly dates to the invention of the flexible film camera and the early availability of photographic technologies to amateurs in the late 1880s and persisted through Evans's own period and certainly beyond (although Evans considered his work and the embrace of documentary style to constitute a third period of photographic history), this second period makes more sense conceptually than temporally. It is essentially the model of portraiture and the

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<sup>120</sup> Romer has demonstrated that the technology of early portrait photography changed fast, and that within two decades (between 1840 and 1860) exposure time for studio portraits was vastly reduced, even though the process of making a unique positive image was otherwise relatively unchanged. See Romer, pp. 262-488.

period of its technology that Siegfried Kracauer described in his 1927 essay on photography. Like Benjamin, Kracauer found photographs fascinating, but unlike Benjamin, Kracauer saw little redeeming value in them, citing their value as evidence of the role of historicity in modern life, which had taken over from memory. For Kracauer, the photographic portrait was a thin thing that dissolved under close scrutiny into a blanket of dots and details, like snowflakes, and revealed more about fashion than about subjectivity. Fashion, like photography, is bound to time, but Kracauer's analogy was bitter: "Photography is bound to time in precisely the same way as *fashion*. Since the latter has no significance other than as current human garb, it is translucent when modern and abandoned when old."<sup>121</sup> As cameras sped up, prints were transformed from individual objects to multiples; the overall cost of the photographic portrait was lowered not just at the level of consumption but also at the level of production (amateurs could buy and make their own pictures); and the pose was sped up and conventionalized. Subjects were no longer sitters, but could freeze for an instant in a candid but camera-specific smile.<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, Kracauer's analysis is split between a family portrait of his grandmother as a child and a portrait of a movie starlet posing for press photographers, but he does not engage in a conversation about the portraits' differences in terms of function, technology and affect. Instead, he used both portraits as the basis for his critique of photography's role in a culture that had been thoroughly reworked by industrial capitalism. Kracauer does not share Evans's and Benjamin's yearning for early photographic portraits; his critique, however, essentially falls upon (and arises from) the paradigm of the second generation of photographic portraits that I propose.

The challenge for re-invigorating the photographic portrait (which Evans may never have seen in those terms precisely but which is nevertheless reflected in his early portraiture practice) was that of recuperating some aspect of the unself-conscious presence of early photographic portraits. Although Evans later experimented with large format cameras, in 1933-34, the stakes of his portraiture practice were closely linked to his investigation of fleeting temporality, and more specifically of the temporal experience of the rapid camera exposure. Evans could not re-create naiveté of the photographic process in his subjects, but he could approximate that effect by catching his subjects unawares, by focusing on their absorption into their own world, their own moment, rather than relying upon the standard tradition of photographic portraiture in which the subject presents himself to the camera. This was a tradition that, by Evans's time, was lost, but some of the qualities of human subjectivity that come across in those early beloved portraits were not wholly unrecoverable using faster new camera technologies.

In the period 1933-34, Evans consistently used several visual strategies to emulate what to him was a desirable quality of perception in photographic portraiture: the simultaneous engagement and abandonment of self-consciousness by a sitter that founders on their lack of knowing self-presentation to the camera. The primary strategy was of course to focus on the off-frame, seeking out subjects whose attention was fully

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<sup>121</sup> Kracauer, "Photography" (1927), Levin, p. 55.

<sup>122</sup> On the subject of early American snapshot photographs, see Dianne Waggoner's essay, "Photographic Amusements" in Sarah Greenough, et. al., *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978: From the Collection of Robert F. Jackson*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2007), pp. 7-72. Waggoner's essay discusses the early development of snapshot culture in the United States, and discusses the ways in which snapshots prompted people to look at the camera as part of everyday life as opposed to a special piece of equipment wielded only by working professionals.

absorbed by some exterior spectacle, and appeared to be engaged not for a second but for a prolonged period of time. Another strategy, equally important, was the visual appearance of absent-mindedness and human habits. People appeared to be more themselves in inverse proportion to their focused self-consciousness (as in the swinging stride of the communist longshoreman in [*Demonstration and Picketing...*]). Finally, Evans sought people who were not paying attention to him. He effectively negated the practiced pose before the camera entirely, preferring not the good luck of “unstaged revelation,” or even the chance impression of “unforced nobility,” as in *Posed Portraits*, but the reliable freedom of the unself-conscious subject.

Evans’s two versions of the *Penny Picture Display* help to illuminate the broader stakes of his investment in portraiture (Figs. 42-43). Both pictures were made in 1936, well after other pictures under consideration in this chapter. Evans made the photographs from the exterior windows of small town “penny picture” operators, and in both cases, the pictures themselves were made with the large view camera on 8 x 10 inch negatives, but their subject matter is the display of hundreds of tiny, fast and cheap portraits of the local citizenry of Birmingham. The photographs can legitimately be interpreted as a critical commentary about cheap studio photography and its role in the integration of mass commodity culture and everyday life, but Evans’s own response to the picture, when he discussed it in the early 1970s, focused on the act of posing. The picture pleased him, he said, because all of the people in it had posed for the camera once, and then as a group all of their portraits posed again for him, for perpetuity.<sup>123</sup> Evans’s late statement is revealing because it puts basic language to the relationship between posing and temporality that the photographs evoke through purely visual means. More than being about portraiture, the photographs invoke a disjunction between smiling and striking a pose for the rapid exposure camera, and the longevity of the photograph. By re-photographing the penny portraits in mass, under the sign of the studio, Evans revealed in plain sight the homogenizing force of the fast, cheap studio portrait.

Temporality emerges from within the tiny portraits as a key aspect of their interpretation. Evans carefully printed the National Gallery of Art’s distinctly different version of the penny picture theme (Fig. 43) in order to bring out its most subtle details: the small portraits hang roughly in pairs. Between the pairings, one can read relationships—subsequent generations, young lovers, etc. One reads the passing of time within each dyad, which brings the photographs out of the polarized realm of the instantaneous versus permanent and into the realm of the human experience in time. Because one imagines in these pairings human relationship extending in time beyond the moment of the penny picture exposure, they are able to essentially beat the camera and beat the tyranny of the pose. Further, in this version, the hanging strips of portraits hang at a slight angle to Evans’s camera lens, and therefore recede in space, visibly occupying a shallow depth of field.<sup>124</sup> The difference between the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s famous version (Fig. 42), which was taken through a window (we know this because of the blaring word “STUDIO”) and the National Gallery version (Fig. 43), perhaps reflects

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<sup>123</sup> Evans is quoted by Mellow as saying, “It’s uproariously funny, and very touching and very sad and very human. All these people had composed themselves in front of the local studio camera, and I bring my camera, and they all pose again together for me. That’s a fabulous fact,” p. 303. I cannot find the original source of this quotation, and unfortunately it is not cited by Mellow.

<sup>124</sup> Alexis McCrossen pointed this out in conversation with author, May 2007.

Evans's interpretation of the possibilities of portraiture. He moved from an utterly flattening response to studio portraiture, where every portrait is independent and unique in its moment to a whole other understanding of portraiture. Evans's second version of this subject returns time and space—the occupation of time and space—to the sitters in the portraits. By doing so, Evans's photograph returns the particularity of subjectivity to them as well. What is unexpected in the model of subjectivity that emerges is that there is no necessary twinning of subjectivity, as an expression of personhood, with the uniqueness in time of the photographic pose. The uniqueness of our facial features, our likeness, cannot compensate for the routinized procedure of the penny portrait pose—instead, Evans's concept of selfhood is that its uniqueness can only be demonstrated by a relaxing of the confines of the camera-specific pose into the baggy context of the time and space of everyday life.

The *Penny Picture Display* photographs represent Evans's crystallized perspective onto portraiture and the pose, but in the years preceding that achievement, as I have attempted to demonstrate, Evans bounced back and forth between the street scenes and posed portraits. There are a significant cluster of portraits before 1933, so identified on the basis of the historical genre of a focused study of an individual (some, as in the case of *Posed Portraits*, are clearly posed, but in others the subject is caught unawares). Evans did not begin systematically addressing the concept of the portrait, however, until his trip to Cuba in the late spring of 1933, when he came away with several important photographs of Cuban workers.

In late May, 1933, a full year before his work on New York's waterfront, Evans traveled to Cuba for three weeks on behalf of the Lippincott publishing company, in order to make photographs to accompany a book by the American journalist Carlton Beals, *The Crime of Cuba*. During that time, he made over 100 photographs, working back and forth between his large-format view camera and much smaller negatives.<sup>125</sup> It is clear from the quantity of his production during the trip that the experience of being in Cuba galvanized him as a photographer—he made a large number of photographs. Because this trip has been very extensively discussed in print, and because the scope of my argument about the Cuba trip is somewhat limited, I am going to confine my own discussion of Evans's Cuba work to a series of portraits of coal dock workers against a white wall.<sup>126</sup>

At some point during his stay in Cuba, Evans made his way to the pay window near Havana's docks, where coal dock workers queued at the end of their work day, many carrying their own shovels on their way home for the day. The sunshine was

<sup>125</sup> Mellow counts "four hundred or more" photographs from this trip, p. 181.

<sup>126</sup> See Gilles Mora, *Walker Evans: Havana 1933* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), pp. 8-23. For a narrative discussion of Evans's time in Cuba, see Mellow, chapter 8, pp. 172-192. In the series, Evans worked with at least two cameras, and clearly worked back and forth between them to make a sequence of negatives (over a dozen are large-scale) that became the basis for much of his subsequent printing. Only one of the negatives made it into the book, but the quantity of the images and the unusual effort that Evans put into this group specifically is somewhat rare in his oeuvre. Evans worked with a few key kinds of subjects, and during each period of his career the variety of subject matter is somewhat limited, but with few exceptions, he did not make a regular practice of making variations on the same picture over and over. One of the reasons this group of Cuba portraits is interesting is because he was clearly working towards *something*—be it a formal problem or a social expression (or both)—and because it clearly marked a point in which he thoroughly engaged with the problem of portraiture, a problem he would take back to the States with him after he completed the Cuba project.

bright, and many of the men were covered in coal dust after their day's work of unloading unprocessed coal from large ships in Havana, which had the effect of literally blackening them and thus obscuring their natural skin color.<sup>127</sup> Evans asked the men to pose in front of a white wall, which reflected the bright afternoon sunlight. It must have been hot; many of the men's faces shine with coal dust and perspiration. Some smiled tentatively for Evans's camera, although it is difficult now to distinguish their smiles from squints against the sun. The men appear to have been patient, shifting positions, posing and waiting while the young photographer—who apparently spoke no Spanish—maneuvered his two cameras and his tripod. It is unclear whether Evans paid them for their time—it is not impossible that he did, but no evidence exists to indicate an exchange of money.<sup>128</sup> Either way, Evans made approximately fifteen exposures of these men, from which he printed at least a dozen locatable pictures immediately upon return to the United States. The quantity of photographs in this group indicates that Evans saw something of interest in the sequence and paid enough attention to produce multiple exposures and careful, good-quality prints from many of the exposures, and, more remarkably, multiple variations on individual exposures.<sup>129</sup>

This group of portraits is interesting because it is both unusual and sustained. Evans stuck with the group of coal dock workers, re-assembling them in printed versions (Figs. 44-47) and clearly thinking through effective compositions for an essentially formally reduced subject—men standing against a white wall with their faces and bodies stilled, focused on the camera. Further, the darkness of their skin and the brilliance of the wall accentuate the range of grey in their clothing, as well as the textures of their clothes, skin and hats. The pictures have no narrative coherence, even as a group; instead, the entire suite of pictures revolves around issues of illegibility. The men's relationship to one another is unclear, as is their relationship to the camera, and finally, most importantly, their race. The coal dust blackens each man's skin, and it is very difficult to read their features and assign a secure racial category. Far from being an inverted version of American minstrelsy, which trades on a fairly stabilized concept of racial identity, the coal dock workers are insecure as racial subjects. Their portraits reflected Evans's developing interest in portraiture because they simultaneously represent a radically simplified composition and the slow, deliberate observation of details. These formal qualities create the impression that the photograph can describe a coherent world and a legible subject, but the more one pushes against them to read the racial identities of these men, the more frustrating the photographs become. Instead, the photographs are very

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<sup>127</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby made this point in conversation, fall 2003.

<sup>128</sup> There is no evidence that Evans ever paid his subjects to make their photographs, although his archive of negatives makes it very clear that at other moments, he often stood to gain; indeed, portraiture-for-hire was one aspect of his practice (now almost entirely unremarked upon). One lesson to be drawn from the sheer number of early portraits of non-paying, presumably unpaid, strangers is that in fact Evans was quite effective at making contact with people and soliciting their time for portraits. Mellow described Evans and James Agee's first contacts with the Tenge, Fields and Burroughs families in Greenville, Alabama, as a result of Evans's initiative, pp. 312-313.

<sup>129</sup> The best printed record of the variety of prints Evans drew from the Cuba series is reproduced in Judith Keller's catalogue of the Walker Evans collection at the J. Paul Getty Museum. See Keller, *Walker Evans: The Getty Museum Collection* (Malibu, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995), pp. 86-88. This point is also demonstrated by Thompson, pp. 79-83.

much about tone and texture, deflecting even the most casual effort to read their subjects' racial subjectivity.

Evans did not come upon the model of the unyielding portrait, as it developed in the coal dock worker photographs, through internal investigation alone, although I believe that his achievement with this group spurred his interests upon return to the United States. Instead, the portraits are consistent with the overall project of Beals's text on Cuba. Beals's book, ostensibly a description of the incipient fall of Gerard Machado's failing dictatorship, actually dwelt on two subjects: race and the failure of American foreign policy in Cuba. Although Evans denied reading Beals's text before his trip to Cuba, the centrality of this group of portraits belies his claim. Instead, Evans picked up on Beals's description of race in Cuba: rather than existing as two poles of a two-race social system as in the United States, race in Cuba was nuanced and the social environment was rich (and, to Beals, sensual) by virtue of the elaborately coded racial hierarchy.<sup>130</sup> Evans's photographs engaged with Beals's thesis on the insecurity of racial identity in Cuba, but they did so as a deliberately flat-footed counterpoint to the author's semi-sexualized descriptions of mysterious, racially unidentifiable women by evoking the everyday world of men and physical labor.<sup>131</sup>

Evans's response to Beals extended also into the territory of United States-Cuba foreign relations. Beals used the book as an opportunity for an extended discussion of United States government's failure in Cuba as a result of the 1898 Platt Amendment, and his thesis was that the powers the US granted itself for subvention of foreign governments had artificially propped up the Machado regime for domestic economic purposes.<sup>132</sup> Both the stability and the violent downfall of the Machado regime were functions of the US's wavering commitment to the young country. Evans would have been very familiar with arguments about the US's role in Cuba's revolution, as well as the general contours of the social unrest there, from New York daily newspapers, which covered the Cuban revolution closely. In Cuba, Evans was keenly attuned to the cultural signs of American imperial presence. Evans's attention to movie theaters and newsstands, which virtually burst with news of the American entertainment industry, is a frequently cited example of the photographer's awareness of the scale of American cultural presence in Cuba, but the coal dock workers are equally entwined with the United States. Although the coal may have been mined in Cuba's easternmost province

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<sup>130</sup> It wouldn't have taken Evans much reading to pick up on Beals's racial theme. Although Beal starts the book with the sentence, "The major tones of Cuba are black and white" (p. 17), a page and a half later he writes, "Gradually I realized what a complicated blend of peoples, ideas and frustrations is Cuba—not the melting pot of Mexico, for Mexico is always stark. . . . In Cuba colors flow into each other. Whatever starkness exists arises from the black and white dominant, a peculiar life-technique, utilizing many tints, yet resulting in one dominant impression" (p. 19). Beals, *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia, Penn.: JP Lippincott, 1933).

<sup>131</sup> Beals used descriptions of women throughout the book in order to address the issue of race, but prominently in the first quarter of the book by describing a woman named Fela, pp. 40-44.

<sup>132</sup> The Platt Amendment was enacted in February, 1901, despite the United States' pledge of 1898 to stay out of Cuba. The statement (amended to the United States declaration of war against Spain) stated that the United States had "the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty. . . ."

<<http://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/teller.html>>

and shipped to Havana for conversion and use, American mining companies were active players in Cuban mines and shipping industries during the early 1930s.<sup>133</sup>

Interestingly, this aspect of the coal dock workers portrait series has not been a focus of discussion in previous examinations of Evans's Cuba works, nor was it central to the complex spread of photographs that Lippincott actually ran with the first edition of Beals's book, despite the fact that by August of 1933 the *New York Times* ran regular news articles on trade issues with Cuba. Only one of the coal dock worker portraits was printed (Fig. 47). Evans's deal with Lippincott was to produce sixty-six photographs, twice as many as the publisher would print. It is unclear, historically, what role Evans had in choosing the final sequencing of the photographs, although Jordan Bear convincingly argues that the sequence itself, if not the choice of images, was probably authored by Evans.<sup>134</sup> The portrait that was printed is actually the most clearly legible in terms of the racial category of the worker in Evans's printed photographs, as the man depicted is not covered in black coal dust and his full lips key into stereotyped representations of mouths and lips as a site of racial difference between African- and European-Americans. Lippincott's choice was so dramatically different in tone from the rest of the portraits Evans made on site that it has the paradoxical effect of heightening the racial ambiguity and general lack of legibility (of facial expression, of action, of relationships within the pictures) within the corpus as a whole. Nevertheless, from the quantity both of exposures and of finished prints that Evans made at the time we can ascertain that the series was an important aspect of his work in Cuba.

Evans's portrait session with the dockworkers occupies one model of the portrait—slow-going, posed, and with a composition reduced to its simplest elements. Evans made another portrait during his time in Cuba that occupied the other end of the spectrum: his portrait of newsboys surrounding a kiosk in Havana (Fig. 48). This group portrait of the young workers is one of the most graceful compositions in Evans's entire *oeuvre*, with the entire composition spinning around an invisible pivot. Each boy's face appears in slightly different profile, and their superficially similar features and matching shirts and hats, along with the repetition of magazine covers plastered against the newsstand, reinforce the perception that we are looking at a single boy as he moves through space. Like the photographs of workers in New York City streets from 1933 and 1934, this portrait was clearly produced without the knowledge or willingness of its subjects. Also like that portrait, the swirl of activity gives the picture its organization without suggesting narrative coherence. Instead of engaging in recognizable activity (such as selling the newspapers or shining shoes), these boys' movements are hard to map onto typical activities.

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<sup>133</sup> Cuban American economic interdependence was deep in the early 1930s, including in the energy sector of the economy. Cubans apparently wanted to buy more coal from the United States than they could, according to "Big Cuban Market Awaits Our Goods," an article in the *New York Times* (August 26, 1933): L3. Still, Cuba had its own mineral resources, including coal, which was mined primarily in the eastern part of the island. American interests like the Bethlehem-Cuba Iron Mines Company, an extension of Bethlehem Steel, were crucial to the cultivation of those mines. See T. Philip Terry, *Terry's Guide to Cuba, Including the Isle of Pinea with a Chapter on Ocean Routes to the Island: A Handbook for Travelers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926). Rosenheim and Samuel Duncan both have my thanks for helping sort out the question of where the coal came from.

<sup>134</sup> Bear, pp. 221-43.

To refer to these two series both as considerations of the practice of portraiture may seem like a stretch. Moreover, while the group of coal dock workers is easy to categorize within the tradition of photographic portraiture, reading the boys at the newsstand in similar terms may strike some readers as fanciful. I interpret it as a portrait because the term creates a framework for understanding how this work fits into Evans's cluster of interests at this time. The boys at the newsstand are portraiture subjects within the context of Evans's street photographs of unknowing (and unknown) subjects that appear throughout the next two years of his practice, primarily in New York. Evans's goal during this period, if it can be articulated as a result of the photographs and exposures he made, was to move back and forth between one mode and the other, the fully frontal formal portrait and the often multi-figural portraits of people in city streets. He increasingly used the streets as the ground from which to make portraits of the city's working people.

The two modes of portraiture are distinguished by formal as well as temporal differences: while the studied portraits of the coal dock workers were made against a white wall, with a relatively slow view camera; the urban boys, and the photographs from New York that followed, were made with quick moving roll film cameras. The second group is portraits made by a passerby, with little or no pretense to conversation, connection or acknowledgement. While one group, the coal dock workers, represents pictures clearly made in the mold of the posed portrait, the other group, of mobile, disconnected boys, represents a temporally present mode of portraiture in that it is clearly a photograph made quickly and on the sly. The move from one mode to the next clearly opened up for Evans a new set of possibilities for the kind of information that could be wrought from a picture of a human subject.

Perhaps deeper insight into Evans's interest in portraiture can be gained by looking at the work and writing of his close friend, Jay Leyda (1910-1988). Leyda is best known as a film scholar and a historian of nineteenth-century literature. Between 1930 and 1933, though, Leyda made a number of portraits of friends in New York. When Leyda moved to Moscow in 1933 to study with Sergei Eisenstein, he took his cache of pictures with him and planned a small, one-person exhibition for himself at the Museum of Western Art. Leyda occupied an interesting position in Moscow between 1933 and 1936, when he returned to the United States to work in the burgeoning film department at the Museum of Modern Art: he was a crucial link between the intellectual and artistic elite in Moscow and American enthusiasts for avant-garde Russian art. It was, for instance, Leyda who helped arrange for Alfred Barr and Jere Abbott to see and have access to important Russian artists during this period; further, Leyda made information about art in Russian collections available to American critics, artists and the public at large. From Moscow, Leyda collaborated with curator Romana Javitz and arranged for the shipment and display of photographs from the New York Public Library's new picture collection. If Evans's photographs were displayed in the Soviet Union during this period, it would have been Leyda who arranged for their exhibition (although there is no evidence within Leyda's correspondence with Evans, nor in his own—incomplete—archive of manuscripts, that the exhibition took place). Leyda's papers indicate that he planned an exhibition of his own portraits, *People of Contemporary America*, at the Moscow Museum of Western Art, at some point during his time in Moscow.

Leyda, already knowledgeable about the history and theory of avant-garde art in Moscow, wrote in the press blurb that his goal for his exhibition of American portraits was to produce a version of what he referred to as “Reality without Realism” [sic]. He wrote,

All of these photographs were taken on a very simple theory: to attack each person who is to be photographed, as a new problem, photographically and characteristically—so that the finished photograph can never be confused with any other medium (painting, etching, etc.), and also that the photographed person’s character or emotions or work or habits are as visible as his face. To light a face and photograph is not enough. One must make an effort to see and understand what is behind the face, and your reaction to what you find there.... That reaction must become as much a determinant of the photograph as is the camera. So that the finished photograph reflects the period, the class and circumstances of the person as clearly as the person does in life.<sup>135</sup>

Leyda’s portraits are almost completely unlike Evans’s, and Evans never used this kind of language to describe his practice. Still, many of Leyda’s portraits were made in Evans’s presence and milieu (Evans also sat for Leyda), up to and including the period of three months between Evans’s return to New York from Cuba and Leyda’s late summer departure for Moscow. Although the language that Leyda used to describe his intentions was clearly influenced after the fact by his engagement with Russian artists and theories of modern art (which were already passé by the early 1930s in the U.S.S.R.), his steady interest in the expressive possibilities inherent in portraiture was almost certainly a subject of conversation among the young men in 1933. Leyda’s insistence on the way that a portrait (in this case, a finished work of art) “reflects” a person’s social status “as clearly as the person does in life,” is clunky as a turn of phrase, but its corresponding conviction is interesting: somehow the photograph should stand apart from the person (not be beholden to the face or unique likeness) and yet still tell the story of its subject’s standing in the social world. Leyda’s professed interest was not in personhood precisely, but in getting beyond the face: moving past the unique look of an individual to examine how they project themselves socially. (My interpretation of Leyda’s remarks depends is affected by his repeated use of the phrase, “the face,” which in its use of an article rather than a possessive pronoun (“their face”), implies a distinctly impersonal reading.) In a 1971 interview, Evans said, “I’m interested in people as part of the pictures and as themselves but anonymous,” perhaps unwittingly echoing Leyda’s earlier sentiment.<sup>136</sup>

Although Leyda’s portraits are very different from Evans’s longer and more nuanced examination of portraiture, a few aspects of Evans’s project are present in Leyda’s project description. Specifically, Leyda allows that the face is the thing to be got around, it is a necessary obstacle. Faces are overly associated with uniqueness and personhood, and both Evans and Leyda had an interest in figuring out ways to make

<sup>135</sup> Jay Leyda, typed undated mss., Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Museum of Western Art file, Tamiment Library, New York University. For more general information about Leyda, see the issue of *October* dedicated to Leyda’s legacy, which includes a chronology, bibliography and selected examples of his photographs. *October* 11 (Winter 1979).

<sup>136</sup> Paul Cummings, “Oral history interview with Walker Evans, Oct. 13-Dec. 23, 1971,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Transcript available online: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/evans71.htm>.

photographs that evaded the strict association between likeness and self in order to tell stories that are fundamentally about how people are formed by the social world. In this context, both of Evans's two key portraits from Cuba make sense, and we can better understand the stakes of the entire range of unposed portraits that followed from the Cuba trip. The coal dock workers, in their unreadable racial identities, their personal features transformed by labor, their personal relationships and affections unreadable within Evans's photographs, seem to offer the classic example of portraiture subjects that reflect their social identity rather than selfhood. The process of peeling away uniqueness and individual subjectivity of these men is incomplete in Evans's portraits, and their considerable drama plays out as the gap between their faces as masks and their faces as the sign of their unique personhood (as understood within a humanist tradition).

From a different perspective, but equally trenchant, the newsboys are keyed into the same conversation about how to put forth "reality without realism." Leyda's idea can be understood as the ambition to present the social world, the experiences and conditions of a person without trading on the idea that realism gives rise to a facile representation of unique personhood. Evans's picture invokes Leyda's ambitions by throwing "unique personhood" into question. Here, four newsboys appear (with the suggestion of a fifth), none fully frontal with the camera. One figure, on the far right of the picture, looks warily at the photographer, but the others are not visibly aware of Evans's presence, and appear in profile. Viewers notice, instead of the boys' poses, their motion, their uniformity of dress, and what appears to be their purposefulness within their social environment. Yet the direction of that purposefulness is unreadable. However aligned their overall look, and however coordinated their movement, uniformity is undone by difference: by the one man's observation and engagement with Evans; by physical similarities between the figures that do not give way to identical likeness; by the fact that the boys are not swirling around an imagined center but instead move in independent directions. The seeming choreography of the scene belies its improvisational quality. As in figure 10 of the striking "communists," the force of assimilation and syncopy in this photograph is paired with the forces of disorder, of individuality, and of entropy. Also as in figure 10, this photograph prompts the reminder that curiosity about these boys, and the social world in which they live, motivated Evans's practice.

Where Leyda had formulated a theory of portraiture that allowed the possibility that the social world could enter portraiture as part of one's visual presence, his own portraits were largely conventional: intense, brooding individual subjects posed for the camera, in isolation from their social world. Evans was clearly interested in Leyda's ideas, but his deeper experience with the camera and the practice of photography, his curiosity about its specific properties and its history, most especially its historical relationship to temporality, forced him, starting in Cuba, to push beyond the conventional posed portrait, and towards the model of street pictures represented by first the boys at the newsstand and then, later, by the picketing communists on New York's waterfront.

Among the notable results of Evans's efforts during the period 1933-34 is that he managed to maintain a precise balance between banishing and embracing the idea of his subjects as unique, particular or even individual subjects. The boys at the newsstand and the longshoremen at the coal dock, even the picketing communists, are presented as something more nuanced than social types, but something other than self-consciously unique in their subjectivity. It is clear from the consistency of his interests and approach

during this period that the balance Evans achieved was, to him, a desirable visual quality, as well as a function of his curiosity. In my description of the waterfront strikers, I attributed Evans's production of that picture to his interest, or curiosity, about them—the similarities and differences between the two central men; the ways in which work and life were intertwined to create their overall (and unforced) presentation to the camera. The quality of balance that I describe here is the artistic payoff of Evans's efforts to move beyond the practiced pose of contemporary photography, to re-invigorate photographic portraiture in the era of the fast camera.

A key element in the balance I describe is not just what kind of information Evans wanted to convey in his photographs, it is what kind of information he could withhold. The limitations on the kind of information that Evans's street photographs offered were just as important as the impression that they offered a direct transcription of the world, an aspect of his work that current photographers still remark upon regularly.<sup>137</sup> Evans is celebrated for understanding something about the camera, and the limitations and possibilities of photographs themselves. What the photographs under discussion in this chapter do not reveal, across the board, is too much about the "life and times" of their individual subjects. In figure 10, the loose line of men presents a great deal of information that adds up to habits, conditions of everyday life, and even ambitions as viewers read backwards from the photograph itself into the lives of its subjects. At the same time, some basic information goes missing: what do these men do on the days when they are not picketing; what do their bodies look like while they work; what are their working conditions like; what is their ethnic identity; where do they live? Actually, a lot of information about everyday experience is simply not on the table. This kind of presentation would have been unthinkable to Lewis Hine, whose photographic practice, as exemplified by his photographs of the unnamed steamfitter and of Sadie Pfeiffer, acknowledged labor as their subjects' primary environment. In contrast, Evans's photographs seem to offer no such primary environment.

The innovation of Evans's work as a refusal to give too much information is nearly invisible in the generations subsequent to Evans, because his insights into the relationship between photography and narrative have been thoroughly adopted by other photographers. Still, in the early 1930s, Evans was mining a new model of documentary photography; Evans's work of 1933-34, from Cuba through his initial, serious engagement with the South in 1935 (the subject of the next chapter) represent a period of fervent development, particularly with regards to human subjects. It was only in 1938, when he returned to his oeuvre of the entire decade with his exhibition, *American Photographs* (the subject of the final chapter), that what can be read as fundamentally experimental took on the burnished quality of what Evans himself termed "establishment."<sup>138</sup>

If Evans's early effort to banish narrative from documentary registration had its roots in his rejection of the model of social documentary he found available along with his interest in the expressive possibilities of portraiture, then works like figure 10, [*Demonstration and Picketing...*], found their corollary response over a decade later, in

<sup>137</sup> Jeff Wall discussed this balance in Evans's words in a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in November 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Cummings, n.p. See also Trachtenberg's discussion of Evans's "establishment," in *Reading American Photographs*, p. 238.

Evans's "Labor Anonymous" portfolio for *Fortune* magazine (1946, Fig. 49). In this early photo-spread that Evans created for *Fortune*, he went to downtown Detroit and took photographs of working people on a Saturday afternoon.<sup>139</sup> Evans waited until people walked by, either individually or in couples, and tripped his camera exposure. The published result is a grid of portraits of passersby, mostly unaware of the camera as they pass it by on a dreary stretch of sidewalk. Although this group was made over ten years later and after the war, the collection of portraits of unnamed passersby reveals more similarities than differences with its earlier, less organized cousins, the subject of this chapter. Where Evans's early thirties documentary photographs demonstrate ambiguity about the relationship between politics and work by virtue of the variety and restlessness of Evans's engagement with them, the later group is crystalline in its refusal to make physical heroes of its worker subjects. Sameness marks the later group, a sharp contradistinction to the fresh air and subtle mysteries of the picketing communists.

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<sup>139</sup> Mia Fineman discusses this group as well as offers an interpretation of Evans's interest in portraiture in her essay, "Notes from the Underground," in Rosenheim, pp. 112-113.

## Chapter Two: Time Made Visible

If [Evans's] vision is timeless, what it sees is not. . . . Indeed, its stability and imitation of eternity only further emphasize how instable, how rotted with time its subjects are.<sup>140</sup>

After several years of contract-to-contract employment, and large swaths of time in which he enjoyed no discernable source of income, one imagines that it must have been a relief to Walker Evans, in June 1935, to get work with the federal government.<sup>141</sup> When he took his position with the Resettlement Administration that summer, Evans understood from correspondence with project administrator Roy Stryker that his responsibility was to make photographs that directly pertained to the Depression and could be used to demonstrate its effects.<sup>142</sup> At the time, this must have been a fairly slippery task, because, as William Stott has argued, to many contemporaries, the Depression was difficult to understand because it was basically impossible to see. Stott quotes an anonymous 1938 reviewer in *Life*, who noted, "Depressions are hard to see because they consist of things not happening, business not being done."<sup>143</sup> One can easily (and without a great imaginative leap) extend this statement to include work not being attended to, and so when Evans traveled to the South he continued to seek out the kind of subject matter that had occupied his years of work on the streets of New York and in Cuba: primarily working people whose bodies are not engaged in the acts of labor, but also uninhabited buildings, unoccupied public spaces and other forms of vacancy, or gaps in utility. Indeed, in the South, Evans made a habit out of photographing *down-time* as a condition that could only be implied visually, not necessarily seen under ordinary circumstances, and highly ambiguous when it did come into visibility.

In the vast majority of photographs Evans made in the southern United States, work itself does not appear. Instead, men who look to be of working age and social class sit at the edge of levees (Fig. 50), idle on public streets, sometimes in the presence of women (Fig. 51), occupy the porches of rooming houses (Fig. 52) or shop-front benches

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<sup>140</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 288.

<sup>141</sup> Evans's diaries confirm this impression. See 1933 and 1935 (1934 is missing), WEA/MMA 1994.250.95-97.

<sup>142</sup> Evans's correspondence with Stryker is scattered throughout the Walker Evans archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see in particular 1994.250.57. The correspondence is more completely recorded in the Records of the Farm Security Administration at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Evans's relationship with Stryker is described in Jeff L. Rosenheim, "'The Cruel Radiance of What Is': Walker Evans and the South," in Rosenheim, et.al., *Walker Evans*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 69-85; it is also described in James Mellow's biography, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 255-56; 265-272. The grudging tone of Evans's correspondence with Stryker indicates that he was less than enthusiastic about the role said photographs were to play in the development of ameliorative legislation. As I mentioned in the introduction, Evans worked for the Resettlement Administration (RA) from July 1935 through February, 1937. Later in the spring of 1937, the agency changed its name to Farm Security Administration (FSA), which persisted until 1942, when the unit was turned over to the Office of War Information. In reference to Evans's employer, I will refer to the RA. In reference to the longer history of the agency, I use RA/FSA. For the most comprehensive analysis of the RA/FSA's Historical Division, see Maren Stange's "Tugwell, Stryker and the FSA Photography Project," in *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 89-131.

<sup>143</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression*, pp. 67-8 (*Life* quotation in footnote 2).

(Fig. 53). Although Evans was not the only photographer in the South to photograph unemployment—many of the other RA/FSA photographers did so as well—his particular approach is still notable for its consistency, and in the fact that humans are not the only social entities that are not working. Train tracks are empty (Fig. 54), works of antebellum architecture appear abandoned (Fig. 55), fields are empty of their farmers (Fig. 56) and factory towns are characterized entirely by architecture rather than the bustle of human presence (Fig. 57).<sup>144</sup> Evans's subjects are not necessarily the unemployed—it may be Sunday (as in the levee picture), they may be waiting for work or to have such necessary services as a haircut. Moreover, the infrastructure of the built environment, such as the train tracks in Edwards, Mississippi, may have fallen out of use, or may merely be unoccupied at that moment. Even the most cursory examination of these photographs reveals that while they are freighted with references to labor and utility, their precise take on the matter is elusive.

Evans's photographic output in the South falls into relatively few categories, although overall, there is a tremendous concentration of his life's work, in terms of sheer quantity of photographs, packed into what amounts to roughly three years from the spring of 1934, before his employment with the RA, to February 1937, when that employment ended.<sup>145</sup> During this period, both in his private work and his photographs for the RA, Evans took photographs of antebellum and later architecture, with particular attention to large homes, rooming houses, shantytowns, and company housing, churches, and storefronts, many of which are populated by passersby; he also took photographs of signs, billboards and posters; soil erosion; streets and highways; and people left destitute by flooding. This chapter addresses two important sets of photographs within this larger oeuvre, the first depicting a group of men standing in front of barbershops in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the second a group of portraits and family pictures of the Fields, Tingle and Burroughs families made during an important trip to Hale County, Alabama, both from 1936. Each group comprises several dozen negatives and their corresponding prints—which number in each case at nearly one hundred known vintage prints in major collections. Overall, there is a significant difference between what Evans shot and what he printed, at least in terms of raw percentages: while the negative archive is full of architectural photographs that were never printed, the photographs of human beings were printed in a much higher proportion. The two groups I will focus on here are very unusual in his overall oeuvre because Evans printed from the negatives extensively, working and reworking compositions through cropping and selective printing of the negatives.

In basic ways, Evans's photographs of nonworking people in the South, both prints and negatives, reflect precisely on their moment. His tenure as an RA photographer coincided with two of the most aggressive years of Roosevelt's New Deal

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<sup>144</sup> Figure 55, Evans's photograph of the interior of the Belle Grove Plantation, near New Orleans, was made before he joined the RA, but at least one version of the print is now in the RA/FSA files at the Library of Congress. Why Evans sent it to Stryker is not clear.

<sup>145</sup> The Library of Congress lists approximately 543 negatives by Walker Evans in its RA/FSA files. While an employee of the RA, Evans split his negatives, sending some back to Washington and keeping many for himself. Although it is impossible to estimate the precise number of negatives he made and kept, my experience with his work from this period indicates that for every single image he sent to Stryker, he was likely to have kept two to three for himself. The Metropolitan Museum of Art estimates his entire negative oeuvre to be approximately 40,000 images.

recovery efforts, and the purpose of the RA/FSA was: first, to remake American agriculture into agricultural industry, and also, to improve standards of living and production on the farms throughout the South and Midwest (primarily) by rationalizing, modernizing, and industrializing farming practices.<sup>146</sup> Both within the context of the RA/FSA mission, specifically, and throughout American culture in the 1930s, jobs, labor, employment rates and working conditions—be they agricultural, industrial, or white collar—were crucial indices of the health of the nation. That joblessness and underemployment seemed to be everywhere, affecting millions of people at varying levels throughout the decade, was an experienced reality that could not be substantiated by statistics—government agencies had a notoriously difficult time keeping track of actual rates of employment (and semi-employment, wherein companies drastically reduced the hours of their employees so as to keep as many people as possible on the payroll).<sup>147</sup> It is because of the scale and length of the employment crisis of the Depression that what might otherwise have been a painful but manageable, even anticipated (although not in its particulars) economic occurrence instead threatened the long-term viability of industrial capital in America. The effects of the crisis were felt by Americans who struggled to eat, but also by those who had begun to enjoy the pleasures of mass consumption on an unprecedented scale during the 1920s.<sup>148</sup>

Given the centrality of joblessness as an aspect of the Depression, it is not surprising that Evans and his peers took photographs of men and women who were out of work. (It is consequential that these were also the years of a celebration of labor by hundreds of muralists and sculptors working on public buildings, and by other photographers, such as Lewis Hine, who published *Men at Work* in 1932.) Joblessness, as a theme, occupies an important place in the RA/FSA photographs from this period, and Evans's peers had varying strategies for making visual sense out of non-utility, stillness, and the ceasing of labor. Dorothea Lange and Marian Post Wolcott are probably Evans's most important contemporaries in this respect. In some cases, their file photographs bear remarkable likeness to Evans's. Still, both figures approached the issue of unemployment, overall, as a genre of photography unto itself. People who were out of work were pictured in queues, often, as in Lange's photographs from 1935 in San

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<sup>146</sup> The RA took over from previous government agencies charged with agricultural oversight, and its mission was to coordinate and centralize federal administration of agricultural relief efforts, which had the three-pronged mission of land control, resettlement of rural populations and rehabilitation of people who lived on unproductive land. See Resettlement Administration's *First Annual Report of the Resettlement Administration* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936). See also: Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). For a gloss on this material by an art historian, see Maren Stange's *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary in America 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 105-06. Stange's research in this area is extensive, as is Susan Edwards's in her *Ben Shahn: A New Deal Photographer in the Old South*, Ph.D. dissertation (City University of New York, 1996).

<sup>147</sup> Stott, pp. 68-69. More recent economic history work on the Depression addresses lingering questions about what why the economic crisis lasted as long as it did and how deeply felt its effects were, particularly for labor. See Michael A. Bernstein, "Why the Great Depression was Great: Toward a New Understanding of the Interwar Economic Crisis in the United States," in Fraser and Gerstle, pp. 32-54.

<sup>148</sup> In the introduction to her book, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Rita Barnard addresses the continued presence, even the vibrancy, of consumer culture during the Depression.

Francisco (Fig. 58), and 1935-36 from California's central valley and wide swaths of the southwest, when she developed a strong pictorial language of gatherings of unemployed men (Fig. 59). Lange also took photographs of agricultural workers who were demonstrably in the process of relocating their families, in many cases by simply packing a few belongings and hitchhiking (Fig. 60).

Whereas Lange, from her home base in California, focused more often on issues of migration and agricultural mechanization, Marion Post Wolcott spent more time in small Southern towns, which meant that like Evans she often represented people at leisure gathered in public, or semi-public, spaces. In works like *Coal-Miners' Card Game on the Porch, Chaplin, West Virginia*, 1938, and *Haircutting in Front of General Store on Saturday afternoon, Marcella Plantation, Mileston, Mississippi*, 1939 (Figs. 61-62), Post Wolcott focused on leisure specifically, and used both a deliberately legible subject matter and an explanatory title to clarify one aspect of the relationship between work and leisure: workers, specifically coal miners, play cards; their sons look on. Haircuts take place on Saturday; public space links private enterprise of a general store with the well-being of a community. Within the nexus of Post Wolcott's photographs and their descriptive titles, communities and ways of life start to coalesce for the viewer.

One way of interpreting the quiet, out-of-time quality of Evans's photographs from the same region as the work of his contemporaries may be to acknowledge that Evans did not share their ambition to make visual and rhetorical sense of the scenes they witnessed. While peers like Lange and Post Wolcott rendered pictorial legibility by picturing people who are clearly doing something (or who are doing something that is clear to viewers), Evans did not. Instead, as in his portraits from the Northeast and Cuba, which I argued in Chapter One specifically refute the narrative dimensions of Progressive-era documentary photography, Evans seems again to have sought narrative ambiguity in his photographs. For example, in his *Untitled [Barbershops, Vicksburg, Mississippi]*, 1936 (Fig. 1), while the three men Evans photographed have a distinct relationship to the camera, which is the subject of their gazes, their relationships with one another, and with the Savoy Barber Shop behind them, is fascinating, but ultimately inscrutable. Importantly, however, the full suite of photographs of these men, the primary subject of this chapter, *does* start to produce a narrative, or at least present the constituent elements of narrative: recurring figures, movement in time. Instead of a coherent story emerging out of the individual photograph, Evans used suites of photographs to set up narrative elements. Those fragments essentially describe the relationship between motion and stillness. Fixing on that relationship was a demonstration of Evans's commitment to exploring the camera's capacity to record time, but was also revelatory of the cultural, political and economic reality of the South. Just as the men in Vicksburg seem to be merely standing around, but perhaps are up to something that we viewers cannot access, two models of behavior--*doing nothing* versus *doing something*-- described two ideas about how one might cope with the Depression. Evans's photographs suggest that those two models existed in uneasy relation to one another.

As evidenced by his work between 1935 and 1937 for the New Deal administration, then, Evans's response to the Depression was unconventional. Despite the centrality of this group of photographs to his oeuvre, no single print exists that is utterly typical or fully defines this period; rather, its richness as a corpus is sustained by a

series of photographs that retain the power to astonish. In the two bodies of work that I focus on in this chapter, from Vicksburg and Hale County, there is a strong parallel, because both trips had a specific structure that forced Evans to focus his energies on a single problem for a relatively long duration, and in doing so, he produced a coherent body of work that we can now use to measure both the ambitions and relative successes of his efforts. In many cases during this period, Evans both made use of multiple exposures of a single site, and printed multiple, exhibition-quality prints that differed significantly in their cropping of the negative. This particular detail of Evans's printing history is not mere arcana, but an organizing principle of multiplicity that can be read from exposure, to print to publication history throughout Evans's *oeuvre*, but particularly in this two-year period. Such a multiplicity of prints, as well as the reappearance of images in differently cropped compositions, tends to reinforce the quality of animation and narrative overall.

This chapter proposes that the result of Evans's formal experimentation was a photographic practice that aimed to convey movement, in stark contrast to the camera's usual traffic in stillness. To produce mobile southern subjects in 1935-1937 made them specific as people, and consequently made it hard for viewers to turn those same people back into static, stereotyped representations of poverty, indolence or the backwardness of the South. Moreover, to bring attention to the specificity of his subjects had a political valence, which I will also question in this chapter by exploring the peculiar and historically specific blend of communism and agrarian politics surrounding Evans. While Evans's subjects are demonstrably "off the clock," and not assimilable to the forms of repetitive, efficient motion that characterizes industrial labor, Evans assured that they do appear mobile and—in subtle but important ways—unpredictable in their mobility. It is this second characteristic of the photographs that gives viewers pause. Evans's southern subjects are not merely poor people, static symbols of the American underclass, the *doing nothings*. Instead, the mobility of Evans's subjects through photographic sequences ensures that viewers recognize the contingent, temporally- and spatially-specific circumstances of their existence.

### **Traveling South**

When Evans began traveling regularly to the American South in 1934, he had already had significant contact with, and contacts in, the region, and there is a great deal of "backstory"—part biography, part cultural history—that helps us understand the particular nature of Evans's response to southern subject matter. He had traveled through parts of the South only twice, first on a night-train to Charleston, South Carolina at the end of December, 1930, which he documented not through photographs but through his datebook, writing: "Dec. 31. Saw Georgia landscape with convicts, boarded *Cressida* and sailed," and for a second time in January, 1934.<sup>149</sup> On the second visit, Evans again traveled from New York, this time in the chauffeured car of Joseph Verner Reed, a

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<sup>149</sup> WEA/MMA 1994.250.55(6). The *Cressida* was the yacht owned by Oliver and Isabel Jennings; Evans joined the couple and their friends as the photographer and filmmaker on a four-month trip to Tahiti that commenced on January 1, 1932. Some photographs survive from the trip, but for Evans it was most notably the occasion to gather footage for his (only) short film, *Travel Notes* (1933).

boarding school friend whose family owned the Island Inn, in Hobe Sound, Florida.<sup>150</sup> In Florida, Evans made some photographs of Reed and others but also—more importantly—began developing a repertoire of southern subjects. Evans had a new 4 x 5 Graflex camera and an 8 x 10 view camera, and had begun regularly photographing subjects with both cameras.<sup>151</sup>

In 1935 Evans's relationship to the South deepened and became more substantial for several reasons. First, on the strength of his work photographing nineteenth-century houses in New England with Lincoln Kirstein and John Brooks Wheelwright, he was offered—and took—a job with wealthy, Connecticut-based Gifford Cochran. The men traveled through parts of the South with Cochran's chauffeur and Evans photographed examples of antebellum plantation architecture for a book Cochran intended to write (but never did) on the subject.<sup>152</sup> The men traveled by car for two months, and spent the majority of their time in the vicinity of New Orleans, where Evans met his future wife, a Wisconsin native named Jane Ninas Smith (later, Jane Ninas Evans). Evans returned to New York after the Cochran project was effectively exhausted, and later that year he was hired by Stryker as an "Information Specialist" for the RA. Evans worked consistently (if not continuously) for Stryker until the early spring of 1937, about 18 months. He also took time in the summer of 1936 to work on the project in Hale County, Alabama with James Agee that was tentatively titled "Three Tenant Families," but would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> This information comes directly from Rosenheim, pp. 55-56 and his footnotes 7 and 9. Very little is known about Evans's time at boarding school, although according to Mellow he attended the Loomis Academy and Mercersburg Academy before graduating from Phillips Academy in 1922 (pp. 32-4). Evans's family was affluent and socially prominent, if not wealthy, which is likely to have helped Evans to make many of the key connections that would sustain his career through the Depression.

<sup>151</sup> Evans wrote to Jay Leyda from New York on March 27, 1934: "I'm just back, spent some time in South Carolina on the way up from Florida. Almost broke but—couple of jobs in sight and I have a car and a swell Graflex 4 x 5 camera with an excellent lense" [sic]. Correspondence file: Walker Evans, in the Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Archive and Library, New York University, New York. This letter was previously quoted in Jerry Thompson's extraordinary *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 98. Thompson's essay in that volume provides the most consistently helpful understanding of Evans's photographic techniques, including the observation that Evans often took multiple photographs not just of the same subjects, but of the same subject with multiple cameras (pp. 9-17). The book is excellent, but it is seriously marred by the fact that quotations and excerpts from written documents are un- or undercited, and are therefore often difficult—in some cases thus far impossible—to track down their context.

<sup>152</sup> Kirstein may have introduced Evans to Cochran. Evans was presumably hired because he had traveled extensively with Kirstein and Wheelwright through New England starting in 1931 to photograph examples of Victorian architecture. Cochran's book would have been intended as a pendant to the New England volume, but neither book materialized. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the New England project instead became an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "Walker Evans: Photographs of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Houses," (Nov. 16 1933-Jan.1, 1934, Mellow p.213). One of the photographs was also published by Kirstein in the MoMA *Bulletin* in a short article on the same subject: "Walker Evans' [sic] Photographs of Victorian Architecture," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 1, no. 4 (Dec. 1933), n.p.

<sup>153</sup> The project was initially intended for publication in *Fortune*, slated for late 1936. Agee's text soon ballooned beyond the purview (or interest) of *Fortune*, and eventually the publishing house Houghton Mifflin picked it up and published the text and photographs, to mixed reviews and poor public reception, in 1941. Evans was on furlough from the RA during this period; his deal with Stryker involved him sharing the photographs with the agency. During the fall of 1936, from mid-September until probably mid-November, Evans worked on developing the first set of photographs from Hale County, which he assembled into two albums as a maquette either for the final book (an unlikely prospect) or as a proposal

Evans spent the majority of his time traveling, by car or train, through a fairly wide swath of the South and western Pennsylvania. His home during these two years was alternately Washington, D.C., where he lived for a time in a boarding house and for a time with his sister and her family, or his apartment on Bethune Street in Greenwich Village, where he intermittently worked on documenting the Museum of Modern Art's *African Negro Art* exhibition.<sup>154</sup>

During the early spring of 1936, Walker Evans traveled by car to Vicksburg, Mississippi. He stayed in the area from February 14 to March 3, taking photographs in Vicksburg and the nearby towns of Edwards, Natchez, Jackson and Pontchatoula, Louisiana.<sup>155</sup> He was there in an official capacity: Evans had sent Stryker a general itinerary for his trip through the Vicksburg area, writing, first, that the photographs were to be "still photography, general sociological nature," and specifying, further, that he would travel to

Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois river towns, [to] gather typical documents, main streets, etc., in passing. Ditto Mississippi river towns. Select one of these towns . . . for more thorough treatment if time allows. Follow Mississippi, gather rural material in passing. Memphis, Natchez. Antebellum plantation architecture, flower of which is concentrated in Natchez. Highest development of American classic revival architecture. Mississippi Negroes between Natchez and New Orleans.<sup>156</sup>

Evans's memo is deliberately vague, and thus presents a contrast to Stryker's famous "shooting scripts," in which he sent photographers lists of subjects to track down during their fieldwork.<sup>157</sup> In those scripts, Stryker requested fairly specific information. For instance, in one document that Stryker circulated, which dealt primarily with domestic subjects, he made the following list under the sub-category, "Home in the Evening:"

Photographs showing the various ways that different income groups spend their evenings, for example:

Informal clothes

Listening to the radio

for a film. He sent these albums to Stryker. See Beverly Brannan and Judith Keller, "Two Albums in the Library of Congress," *History of Photography* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 60-66., and Rosenheim, 1999, pp. 104, fn 194.

<sup>154</sup> See Virginia Lee Webb, *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>155</sup> Evans covered a lot of ground on that trip: his itemized schedule of travel records over 200 reimbursable miles, indicating that although Evans spent the nights in Vicksburg, he spent much of his daytime light behind the wheel—including a brief trip to New Orleans on the night of the 14th. "Itemized Schedule of Travel and Other Expenses," Roy Emerson Stryker Papers, Archives of American Art, NDA 8, frame 1227. Information about this trip is also gleaned through Mellow's biography, pp. 286-293.

<sup>156</sup> "OUTLINE MEMORANDUM," Stryker Papers, AAA, NDA 8, frame 1219.

<sup>157</sup> Stryker described the shooting scripts and the process of preparing photographers for travel in Nancy Wood, "Portrait of Stryker," in Wood and Stryker, *In this Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 13. In his interview with Wood, which served as the basis for her essay, he described the scripts somewhat more vaguely than the extant scripts suggest. Wood quotes Stryker: "The bureaucratic web was such that my so-called official assignment memos—the photographers' shooting scripts—went like this: Bill posters; sign painters—crowd watching a window sign being painted; sky writing; paper in park after concert; parade watching, ticker tape, sitting on curb; roller skating; spooner-neckers; mowing the front lawn."

Bridge  
 More precise dress  
 Guests.<sup>158</sup>

For Stryker, the idea seems to have been that these views could provide a descriptive window onto the relationship between class, leisure and material culture. The difference between the proposal Evans sent to Stryker and Stryker's more exhaustive scripts was largely one of potential narrative specificity.

Still, in light of the importance of the scripts for Stryker, the administrator may have seen value in Evans's memo because it described the kinds of views the photographer sought. Yet Evans's resulting photographs suggest another intention altogether. As a group, the Vicksburg pictures constitute an ambitious attempt to make sense of several key phrases from Evans's itinerary, phrases the photographer freighted with real importance. They are: "still photography," "typical documents" and "in passing," and each reflects fundamentally on Evans's understanding of his medium and indicates that this trip was as much an opportunity to explore the nature of his own photographic practice as it was a hunt for views. His general descriptions of subject matter indicate that Evans's was not aiming for a specific set of scenes or to demonstrate discrete Depression-era phenomena. Indeed, the resulting photographs are remarkably ambiguous in terms of their subject matter. Although photographs such as *Street Scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi* (Fig. 53) literally depict working-age men sitting on a sidewalk outside a barbershop, Evans's photographs are not mere representations of "working men" or "the unemployed." Instead, the open-ended subject matter seems to suggest that Evans adopted a remarkably indeterminate attitude towards work and unemployment.

While in Vicksburg, Evans took over a dozen photographs with his 8 x 10 view camera, as well as at least one with a smaller-format, hand-held Graflex camera, of men sitting in front of a row of barbershops (Figs. 1-3; 63-67). The photographs record how these men passed part of a day, but they also record Evans's movement down the street, where he at times made exposures with the lens directly parallel to the façade, and at times photographed from a slightly oblique angle (Fig. 64-65). There are two series of barbershop photographs, one set focusing on the facades of a trio of barber shops, the other recording the interaction of a trio of black men and a single car (with a white passenger) in front of the shoe shine barber shop (Figs. 53 and 68). It is not clear whether these two series were taken on the same street (although this does not appear to be the case).

The cast of figures in the photographs are fairly consistent—Evans obviously wanted to get people coming in and out of the frame, rather than study a single figure over and over again, but the three men in front of the Savoy Barber Shop were of particular interest to Evans (Fig. 1). Although they seem basically aware of the photographer, his presence does not move them to acknowledge him, at least in any way that is clearly recorded in the series. This tendency is made clear by figure 3, where the central figure turns his back to the camera, although there are a few exceptions, such as figure 2, where the men appear to pose. The men's apparent awareness and intermittent dismissal of the photographer is probably a function of Evans's process: he used a tripod. Large format cameras sitting on tripods are notable for seeming intrusive at first, and then

<sup>158</sup> "Selected Shooting Scripts" (1936), as reprinted in Stryker and Wood, p. 187.

become basically furniture and are often forgotten by their subjects. As the men in the photographs do not seem to be actively engaged with Evans's camera, but are clearly moving in conversation with one another, it is probably the case that Evans stood still there long enough to become uninteresting.<sup>159</sup> We do not know what Evans said to the men in the street, if anything, but by comparing figure 1, where the men seem to look directly at the camera, with figure 3, where they do not, is to realize that in the course of Evans's time on the street, the men's attention shifted either towards the photographer, or away from him.

One of the reasons that this series is so interesting is because the group of photographs represents more than an example of seeking a single iconic image through a series of out-takes, as is frequently associated with small format, roll-film photography. Evans's use of the large format camera, in which each image is produced from a single (expensive) sheet of film, is not consistent with the faster, more mobile and characteristically intrusive practice of shooting with a small format, roll-film camera. Instead, Evans composed and shot each large-format exposure carefully and comparatively slowly, sometimes even changing the lenses while the camera sat on the tripod, and made compositionally distinct prints by using the full negative as a plate from which to draw multiple final images. For instance, figures 66 and 67 both draw from the same negative (the same negative Evans used to print figure 1). Although Evans left indications of the presence of the central figure, both are studies of individual subjects. These men reappear in other prints from this series, as in figures 2, 3, 63 and 64. These prints are not mere experiments; Evans regularly exhibited and published photographs in slightly varied forms. For instance, fully 26 out of the 100 prints that were included in the exhibition *American Photographs* were published in alternate form in the accompanying catalog (see Appendix A).

Each of these photographs is the same in terms of subject matter, but they are unmistakably different as prints. We see, for instance, a change in orientation in three of the four figures, indicating the passing of time, a shift in attention or a change in the course of conversation. Evans cropped the photograph in the darkroom to suggest a closer perspective. The overall effect of examining the group of photographs is that the figures seem to *move*. We literally have a difficult time keeping track of them and are aware that as the day passed, the camera recorded their movements. As viewers, we are also aware that we do not, and cannot, know exactly what they are doing, or how their movements add up. It is not clear, for instance, whether these men are waiting for work, or are hanging out because they have nothing to do or because it is a Saturday, or are simply waiting for haircuts.

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<sup>159</sup> The phenomenon of the disappearing large-format camera is one that other photographers discuss. Joel Sternfeld, a photographer who is also known for his use of the large-format camera, described using the camera in public by writing, "...After a certain period of time people believe that you *belong* there, that you are part of the landscape, or that you are official." Email correspondence with the author, 3 June 2010. This line of argument puts me at odds with James T. Curtis, whose chapter on Evans in his book *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) makes the claim that Evans explicitly choreographed his subjects in the interest of shifting the terms of production from more-or-less "straight" documentation to self-conscious art production. Although I believe that Evans was self-conscious about art as an end unto itself, I do not find the polar distinction between art and documentation convincing, nor the claim that he choreographed the Vicksburg barbershop photographs.

Another photographer who was present and assisting Evans, Peter Sekaer, also made pictures that day (Fig. 69), and by comparing his work to Evans's, viewers can see how the men experimented with photographing along the length of the sloping street (Evans's figures 64-65). These oblique perspectives, in contrast to the controlled, elegant lines of prints made from directly across the street, suggest quick execution because they appear to be the product of a handheld camera; thus, they actively create a visual form that conveys the phrase "in passing." The diagonal line of the pavement, the comparatively broad sweep of information about the inter-relation of the occupants of the sidewalk, and the apparently "artless" composition of these two images suggest the desire to convey information about the entire relationship of buildings, people and street in a single frame. The comparison between the more dynamic works from either end of the street and the more static works made from across the street draw attention to the deliberateness of Evans's other compositions, such as figure 1, as a simple frame in which to highlight the main action—the men's interactions and movements.

That Evans arrived in Vicksburg already attuned to ambitious questions about temporality and movement in still photographs seems fairly certain—he had experimented with both concepts in writing and in previous photographs as early as 1927, when he made an apparently unique self-portrait in a "Photomaton" machine, or a photobooth, in New York (Fig. 70).<sup>160</sup> The rawness of the photograph is instructive about the emotional tone of Evans's early self-representation (he was 24), but also about his interest in the limitations of the camera mechanism itself. Evans must have shaken his body rapidly to trick the camera's quick exposure and produce the blur, which here is the sign of life and of presence. It is also the sign of Evans's interest in exceeding the camera's capacity to be absolutely particular about time. In a 1931 book review for *Hound & Horn*, he wrote, in a similar vein:

The element of time entering into photography provides a departure for as much speculation as an observer cares to make. Actual experiments in time, actual experiments in space exactly suit a post-war state of mind. The camera doing both, as well as reflecting swift chance, disarray, wonder, and experiment, it is not surprising that photography has come to a valid flowering—the third period of its history.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> On the possibility this is a "photobooth" picture: according to Babbette Hines, in *Photobooth* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), n.p., "Patented in 1925 by Siberian immigrant Anatol Josepho, the Photomaton (the original name for the photobooth) was born.... [H]e came to the United States to develop the first machine. His efforts were immediately rewarded. The *New York Times* proclaimed in its headline: 'Slot Photo Device Brings \$1,000,000 to Young Inventor.' ... Mr. Morgenthau told the *New York Times* that they planned to 'make personal photography easily and cheaply available to the masses of this country and do in the photographic field what Woolworth has accomplished in novelties and merchandise [and] Ford in Automobiles.'" The MMA has the print of this self-portrait in its collection, possibly cropped from its original dimensions, and a copy negative in the Walker Evans Archive, but the original negative is not extant, which is highly unusual as nearly all of Evans's negatives are accounted for by either the MMA or the FSA collection at the Library of Congress. Although I cannot prove that this was a Photomaton picture, the circumstantial evidence is persuasive.

<sup>161</sup> Walker Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5, no. 1 (Oct.-Dec. 1931), pp. 125-128.

The phrase "... as much speculation as an observer cares to make," offers a calculatedly cool invitation to viewers to take temporality as an independent source of interest, but the authoritative tone of this statement contrasts with the seeming passion of his self-portrait.

Evans's interest in the temporality of photography would not have surprised his contemporaries—Lincoln Kirstein noted publicly and privately that Evans spoke animatedly about making camera-time visible.<sup>162</sup> Further, Evans was in good company in expressing his enthusiasm. He was likely to have known his photographic predecessor Edward Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* photographs, as well as other time-and-movement based photographs by Muybridge.<sup>163</sup> Further, there were critical models that may have mattered to Evans as much as photographic precedents. Although we cannot know for sure whether he read Walter Benjamin's contemporaneous essay "A Short History of Photography," the philosopher's formulation of photography's relationship to time may have struck a cord with Evans. Benjamin wrote in 1931,

While it is possible to give an account of how people walk, if only in the most inexact way, all the same we know nothing definite of the positions involved in the fraction of a second when the step is taken. Photography, however, with its time lapses, enlargements, etc., makes such knowledge possible.<sup>164</sup>

For Benjamin, the camera's capacity to make the instantaneous visible to the naked eye was the basis of the medium's particularity, and—although he would not articulate this until 1939—of its political charge. It was not only the expanding possibilities of still camera work, but also the range of spatial and temporal possibilities offered by film that forced Evans, like Benjamin, to define the specificities of still photography. As I shall discuss below, Evans spent much of the 1930s writing to friends and in his diaries of his great desire to make motion pictures, but he made only one, in 1933, and so the ambition seems to have been, for the most part, a genuinely productive failure.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> During a period of time in which Kirstein's diaries were closed to researchers (from before 2004 through late fall, 2006), I had access to Jeff Rosenheim's notes on the diaries (2005-06), which confirm that Evans spoke to Kirstein about his interest in photographing time. Kirstein first published a discussion of Evans and temporality in his 1933 essay for the MoMA *Bulletin*.

<sup>163</sup> Muybridge's work was known widely in the 1930s and was included by Beaumont Newhall in his 1937 omnibus exhibition, *Photography 1839-1937*, and its catalog of the same title (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937).

<sup>164</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," as reprinted in Michael Jennings, trans. and ed., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* volume 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 507-530. Evans may have known the work, although he almost certainly did not read German. His good friend Hans Skolle shared German works with him from time to time, and his 1931 essay included a review of the German August Sander's 1929 *Antlitz der Zeit*. Terri Weissman has demonstrated the extent to which German photography and thinkers influenced Evans's friend the photographer Berenice Abbott, and it seems reasonable to think that Evans had at least some significant access to German photo-culture by the early 1930s. See Weissman, "Documentary Photography and Communicative Action: The Realisms of Berenice Abbott," Ph.D. dissertation (New York: Columbia University, 2005), pp. 26-87.

<sup>165</sup> Evans's diaries from 1935 and 1936 frequently discuss his efforts and desire to make a film, as do his letters to Jay Leyda during the period that Leyda studied film in Moscow (1933-36). See Evans's diaries, WEA/MMA 1994.250.95-97, and his correspondence with Leyda in Leyda's collected papers at the Tamiment Library as cited in fn 11. Mellow discusses film, pp. 336-41, as does Webster, pp. 75-96. MMA has a copy of Evans's only film, *Travel Notes* (ca. 1933). Leyda's only film, *A Bronx Morning*, made ca. 1931-32, is of interest as well.

The Photomaton picture prompts a comparison with Evans's 1936 photograph, *Penny Picture Display, Savannah* (Fig. 42), made shortly after the trip to Vicksburg but before Evans got to Hale County, Alabama, in July of 1936 (which is discussed in chapter one). Although this work can be read as dismissive or overly ironic, a biting critique of the role of photography in mass culture, this is not entirely fair. Evans's career-long practice of making portraits indicates a sincere and non-ironic—if not unquestioning—interest in what could be conveyed by the straightforward portrait, such as aspects of time and space, or forms of particularity, self-interest and presence. Evans's earlier fascination instead offers another way of reading this picture. The suddenness of the penny picture operator's photographic activity is here contrasted with the slow exposure time Evans would have used to make this precisely detailed 8 x 10 inch sheet film negative, and with Evans's implicit acknowledgement of the operator's patient hand-work, cutting and pasting small prints together to produce the grid of portraits.

Evans and Agee traveled to Hale County at the end of July, 1936, shortly after he made the Savannah Penny Picture photograph. Evans was on furlough from the RA, and the men spent around three weeks in Hale County, where Evans photographed and Agee took down written impressions of the Fields, Tingle and Burroughs families and their homes. Their project was to be a study of tenant farming for *Fortune* magazine. As Jeff L. Rosenheim has argued, what was of interest about tenant farmers to both Agee and Evans was that although they were among the poorest class of working Americans, they did not qualify for New Deal relief efforts because they were not technically among the unemployed.<sup>166</sup> Although part of the RA/FSA's mission was to re-organize rural agriculture and abolish tenantry, rural tenants in 1936 worked continuously and were not in a position to expect government relief. The project was thus particularly freighted in its approach to issues of labor and human utility from its inception. In both the cluster of photographs and the 1941 version of the book, signs of work are everywhere present but relatively few photographs address the subject directly. This occlusion is in contrast to Agee's writing, a large chunk of which is given over to close description of physical labor.

Evans took nearly one hundred photographs during the men's trip to Hale County, a significant number for a man who was slow to make exposures and who used multiple cameras. Although *Fortune* rejected the project shortly after the men's return to New York in August of 1936, Agee continued to work on the manuscript and eventually produced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He and Evans chose a series of prints to include in the final version (published to critical acclaim but few sales by Houghton Mifflin in 1941) at the front of the book, before the frontispiece. Despite their segregation from the text, both men considered the photographs integral to the structure of the entire work. In 1941, Agee wrote to his editor, "We are anxious to make it clear to everyone that this isn't an 'illustrated' book—that the photographs and text are a collaboration, each of full importance to communicating our subject."<sup>167</sup> Evans and Agee proffered this point regularly.

Like the history of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in general, Agee's sentiment is well known to the book's audiences, but its frequent iteration does little to unsettle the idea that this photo-text collaboration was a series of photographs appended to a text. If

<sup>166</sup> Rosenheim, et.al., *Walker Evans*, p. 104, fn 192.

<sup>167</sup> James Agee Papers, Correspondence, series III, 12.5. Harry Ransom Center, UT-Austin.

the photographs aren't illustrative, they seem so, perhaps because it is very ambitious to suggest that readers hold one object and recognize in it two separate narratives that interweave but are not meant to substantiate one another. Although critics who have responded to this book have often corroborated the essentially collaborative nature of the 1941 volume, I shall put this issue to the side in order to focus on the production and circulation of the prints themselves.<sup>168</sup> Evans himself hedged his bets on the success of Agee's ambition—he exhibited, published and circulated prints from the Hale county series both before *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* came out and independently throughout his career. (Like the Vicksburg prints, many of the works from Hale County were printed and circulated in variant forms.) His major project during the fall of 1936, after he and Agee returned to New York, was to create a two-volume notebook of photographs for Stryker at the FSA that reflected his actual photographic activity in much greater detail than the final published volume of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>169</sup> Further, although the 1941 edition of the book included a mere (and much celebrated) 31 photographs, each fully distinct from the previous image, each subject isolated temporally and spatially, Agee died in 1955 and Evans alone revised the photographs for the second edition to include 62 images in a grouping that more closely resembled his original notebooks.<sup>170</sup>

Two portraits of Allie Mae Burroughs, for instance, were used extensively by Evans, but never in the same context, or side-by-side (Figs. 71-72). Instead, figure 72 became associated with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in its various iterations, and figure 71 is more closely associated with his 1938 exhibition catalog, *American Photographs*. (Evans made four exposures—all large format—of Burroughs, but only printed these two.<sup>171</sup>) Although Allie Mae Burroughs's visage is perhaps the most recognizable of Evans's photographs and is prized within the genre of documentary photography for its powerful simplicity as well as its singularity, it is clear that Evans's "portrait" of Burroughs is not one iconic image but two pictures. In one, Burroughs's lips are tightly drawn and reinforce the severity of the wooden wall behind her head. Her head is slightly to one side, and she seems to glare at Evans from beneath a squint. In reading them together, Burroughs face changes shape slightly, the line of her mouth turning slightly upwards, her head nodding a bit. Burroughs stares straight into the camera with steadiness and intensity in each of the photographs, contributing to the strong sense that Evans's portraits of her reflect a moment of exchange between her and

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<sup>168</sup> This critical bent is true of the key text that relates to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, William Stott's final chapter of *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Stott writes, "Though their styles were different, Agee's and Evans's deepest meanings were the same; theirs was, as Evans says, 'psychologically and emotionally a collaboration.' Both used the form of the social documentary to say that social problems, whatever their magnitude or poignancy, were of subordinate concern, and that the true center of man's existence where he affronted the 'normal predicaments of human divinity,' lay elsewhere," p. 266. His citations are from an undated—probably early 1970s—interview with Evans, as well as Hilton Kramer's review of Evans's 1971 MoMA exhibition in the *New York Times* (Feb. 7, 1971):II, 27.

<sup>169</sup> See Brannan and Keller, pp. 60-66, for a detailed account of the notebooks.

<sup>170</sup> First edition copies of the book are relatively difficult to access, but the sequence of photographs is reproduced in Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Abrams, 1993).

<sup>171</sup> Rosenheim, et.al., *Walker Evans*, p. 89. A third print, made from a negative that Evans sent to Stryker, is in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. It is unlikely to have been printed by Evans.

the photographer. Her furrowed brow and pursed lips create the impression of a serious and sustained visual engagement with the camera, and yet her other physical aspects, such as her tightly drawn lips and alert neck, suggest a physical response to the camera, and by extension to Evans, that is equally compelling. Together, the two photographs suggest an interaction between Burroughs and Evans—a pause, a conversation, a moment of self-presentation and transformation before the camera. Seen in tandem, singularity as an operative principle, with its associated values of iconicity and timelessness, dissolves into another set of values and associations: multiplicity, specificity, contingency and interaction.

Other photographs of the Burroughs family and their land work very differently. In two sequential pages prepared for the LOC notebook, Burroughs sits with her children on the porch of their home (Figs. 73-74). On one page, Evans included two cropped exposures of a similar scenario—Burroughs sits in her rocking chair and interacts with her children. On a page that follows shortly thereafter, Evans included a portrait of the entire façade of the Burroughs home that included a detail of the Burroughs family on the porch, in roughly the same grouping as in the other two photographs. As we read from photograph to photograph, the family moves just slightly. Just as for the men in Vicksburg, Evans seems to have waited until his camera would be forgotten and took pictures of the children and Mrs. Burroughs passing time on their porch. The family's mobility and their engagement with one another, rather than their response to the camera, are key terms for understanding this group.

For the “porch” group, Evans took the larger format photograph either from a few paces behind the other two, or perhaps with a different lens (he sometimes switched lenses while keeping his tripod stationary). In each print, the movement between the principle figures is relatively minimal—one child absents herself from the scene, a toddler walks from his mother's side to his sister's—but the cropping is altered from one image to the next, as though in order to highlight a different aspect of the family's interaction, their movement. In series, the figures are animated, brought into interaction with one another and into a form of engagement with the world that is temporally and spatially specific. More than the Vicksburg group, these photographs have an overt (if low-key) narrative, describing the passing of the day.

William Stott published a crucial response to Evans's work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1973 when he included an extended discussion of the book in his *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. While most of the book surveys, via primary records and secondary reading, the broad genre of documentary during the 1930s, his attention to Evans has a different tone: both the strength and weakness of his essay is that it was clearly influenced by his conversations at Yale with Evans near the end of the artist's life, when Evans actively sought to secure and define his legacy. Stott recognized that the crucial issue in the production of the photographs was the very slippery concept of self-presentation, and he argued that because Evans let his subjects, in effect, prepare themselves to face the camera, the series constitutes an unusual representation of the poor. Instead of being “mere” representatives of their class, Stott argues, Evans allowed his subjects to accommodate themselves before the camera and thus became subjects rather than its objects. He writes,

There is nothing candid in Evans' [sic] best photographs, and little of the exposé; he does not glimpse but frankly, interminably, stares. His subjects are conscious

of the camera, of its manipulator, and of the unknowable audience behind it. They are not taken off-guard; on the contrary, they have been given time to arrange and compose themselves for the picture. In some of the portraits one can feel the subject gently holding his breath until the shutter snaps and the ordeal of being seen is over.<sup>172</sup>

Stott's emphasis in this section is clearly upon the individual portraits, and his response to the other photographs from Hale County, such as the group on the porch, is not part of this critical picture. The wonderful image that he evokes of the portraits, with their strong temporal dimension and their intensity of exchange, describes much of the quality that makes the portraits so enigmatic. Stott's emphasis on singularity and stillness is a function of his reading of the unity of the text and photographs, as well as on his romantic view of Evans's project. Evans was, by the early 1970s, no longer a restless and experimental artist but an established master of still photography who was intent on defining the medium. He did so variously, and furiously, in his own notebooks as well as in public lectures and interviews.<sup>173</sup> Together, Evans and his most sympathetic critics over-determined the practice of documentary photography; the consequence was that projects like Hale County and Evans's original ambitions for its public realizations were vastly simplified—their complex ontological status and multiple audiences were effectively forgotten in favor of the “timelessness” of the 1941 edition of the book.

In fact, it may be the case that Evans conceived of the notebook as a proposal, or even a maquette, for the production of a film. Brannan and Keller proposed this reading in their response to the formal qualities of Evans's 1936 notebooks, and Evans harbored a strong desire, particularly between 1935 and 1937, to make a second film.<sup>174</sup> He and Agee corresponded during the fall of 1936 over the possibility of returning to Hale County in the winter of 1936-37 to make a documentary film based on the three families with whom they worked in the summertime.<sup>175</sup> Evans wrote regularly to his friend Jay

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<sup>172</sup> Stott, p. 268.

<sup>173</sup> Among the best-known of his lectures were those at Oberlin College and University of Texas, Austin, in 1974 and at Radcliffe, 1975. He was interviewed by Leslie Katz for *Art in America* and by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art in 1971. See Jerry L. Thompson, *The Last Years of Walker Evans* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

<sup>174</sup> Brannan and Keller write: “Although it is most probable that Evans had the printed page in mind when he assembled the two Library of Congress albums, the newly proposed sequence, based on the penciled numbers on the versos of the album pages, suggests a cinematic organization. The arrangement of the prints on loose-leaf album pages calls to mind a maquette or movie storyboard for a documentary film,” p. 64. They follow up in the next paragraph by reminding readers that Stryker, too, was deeply invested in films, and had ambitions to work with documentary film.

<sup>175</sup> See Evans/Agee letters, James Agee Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Series II: Correspondence, box 11, folder 12. In an undated (ca. fall 1936) letter to Evans, Agee writes “J. Leyda has seen or written you of possibility of [a] short you and I might make for NY Kino (what a name). I keep thinking a swell 20 minutes cd be done out of tenant families, detail, & country in the dead of winter; but have no[t] rounded it out yet.” It seems to be the case that the two men worked out funding for the project in conjunction with Leyda. They apparently never made the films, however, possibly because Floyd asked to borrow money and they refused. Agee wrote to Evans: “I wd like like hell to do it. // By scraping the very cervix of my bank account I could, in collaboration with you. // But you can even less well afford it than I can. // And we both know damned well he couldn't pay it back by next fall. // So we'd become either, Moe and Joe Bountiful, or, as bad or worse, creditors to a friend who has too [many] creditor[s] now. // And our visit in as Rich Guys wd become still more [illegible] and, Floyd being who he

Leyda of his desire to make films, he wrote of it in his diary, and when the Hale County plan dissolved he schemed with Ben Shahn to get an FSA commission to make a film based on the workers' housing community in Greenbelt, Maryland (which was never completed).<sup>176</sup> Parts of the LOC albums, like the porch scenes, seem to mimic the movement of a camera through space and the way that a movie camera registers motion and alters its own viewpoint via the motion of its operator. In the porch group, the movement is across and forwards, as though the operator of the camera were moving towards the family and shifting his or her viewpoint across the porch simultaneously. One close comparison to the effect of this group is Dorothea Lange's series of photographs of Florence Owens Thompson in a California agricultural camp (Figs. 3-5), although Lange herself never sequenced the *Migrant Mother* photographs as a group, as Evans did with the series of family photographs on the porch.<sup>177</sup> The suite of photographs related to *Migrant Mother*, unlike Evans's sequences, came to light as the result of the outsize fame of a single photograph.

Despite this obviously close linking of Evans's work with film, I do not believe that he failed to parlay his southern work into a film exclusively because of an administrative glitch, a financial obstacle, or another unidentified nuisance. By the mid-1930s, Evans was one of the better-known working photographers in the United States, and was well connected to New York's burgeoning film community (which prominently included Leyda). Despite not having lots of capital at his disposal, if Evans had truly sought to make films, he had access to the resources of others. But instead, during the period 1935-1936, Evans's interest in motion and stillness revealed themselves as a consistent play with the conventions of film in order to reinforce the visual expression of "experiments in time and space" using still photography. In chapter three, I will discuss his 1938 exhibition, *American Photographs*, and will elaborate on the implications of Evans's commitment to the medium of still photography within the context of institutions of modern art in America, but here I want to suggest that human movement and atemporal stillness are consistently in tension with one another in photographs that Evans printed, exhibited and published. I will do this first by looking again at photographs from the Hale County group, and then by returning to Vicksburg.

Evans photographed each of the families, and printed the photographs of family members in roughly sequential order (Burroughs-Fields-Tingle) in each edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He showed particular interest in Bud Fields, the father of Allie Mae Burroughs and the husband of Lily Rogers Fields. Although Evans's portrait of the

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is, wd get still tougher in future. // Also the 2 other families' jealousy must be counted in." To my knowledge there is no record of Evans's response.

<sup>176</sup> See Leyda/Evans correspondence in the Jay and Si-lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Series 2, box 3, file 33; Evans's diaries, 1933-1937, WEA MMA 1994.250.95-98; the Greenbelt project is meticulously documented in Jenna Webster's essay, "Ben Shahn and the Master Medium," in Webster, Deborah Martin Kao and Laura Katzmann, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, ca. 2000), pp. 75-96. Despite Webster's efforts (and my own), the Greenbelt films are unlocated. Webster did, however, reproduce one photograph, by Shahn, of Evans wielding a movie camera on-site in Maryland (it is a modern print in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum).

<sup>177</sup> Standard references on Lange are, first, Milton Meltzer's *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978); James Curtis's *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); and Elizabeth Partridge, et.al., *Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

Fields family is well known, it, like the portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, is actually one of multiple prints. Evans showed two versions side-by-side in *American Photographs* exhibition in 1938 (Figs. 75-76; neither appeared in the exhibition catalog), and four separate prints related to the same session in the 1941 version of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (see Figs. 77-80; these prints were also printed for the LOC albums). Although the photographer's position remains the same in both *American Photographs* prints, Evans offers the viewer a clear sign of subjects re-arranging their various positions (or, shuffling) by tracking the movement of children, the cat, and especially of the elder Mrs. Rogers (mother of Lily), whose headless body in figure 75 reinforces the impression of the photograph's contingent boundaries. One point of continuity and seeming stillness between the two pictures is that Lily Rogers Fields's left foot tends toward the same position. The impression of such a tendency is consistent with other pictures from the group—possibly made on a separate visit—in which Mrs. Fields appears in profile (Figs. 81-82). Since her overall body position has changed slightly, the position of her foot can be read as a tendency, a habitual posture, or even a choice to pivot her body weight around a still point so as to leave her sleeping baby undisturbed.

In these two photographs, as is consistent throughout the Hale County series and in other series, such as Vicksburg, from the same period, Evans carefully produced photographs whose most subtle visual quality is the presence of passing time—they imply shifting and shuffle within the course of the photographic sessions; they forcefully imply the contingent circumstances of a photograph's production; and they juxtapose the circumstantial (such as the presence of the cat at Lily Rogers Fields's feet) with the recurrence of unchanged signs (such as the position of her feet). What is vital about Stott's response to Evans is his effort to describe a phenomenon of perception: the juxtaposition of change and obdurate material sameness. Sameness is brutal—it is a reflection of poverty of means, poor health, and unchanging conditions. It appears in photographs as a kind of visual form of irreducibility, and prompts viewers and critics to make statements about the essential qualities of poverty. At one of his most troublesome moments (yet responding to a real phenomenon in the pictures), Stott writes,

... In another sense, these people *are* simple: they are *there*, unhidden; complexities and all, they are visible. What one sees, looking at them and the things they touch, is an incapacity to dissemble. They and their lives are wholly exposed. [original italics]<sup>178</sup>

The initially baffling and deeply distressing claim—particularly because it comes under the guise of a celebratory critical gesture—does respond to a fundamental visual quality of the photographs. But by looking primarily at the photographs that were published in collaboration with Agee for the 1941 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (he compares the two versions), instead of gauging the full range of exhibitions and publications for which they appeared, Stott missed a crucial dialectical aspect of the Hale County series: if stillness is the sign for unchanging, unending, and irredeemable poverty, the impression of movement and presence of time are the signs of human life, mobility and potential transformation.

In the Hale County series, the stakes of Evans's practice were very high because he was working with human subjects and knew that he had a national audience for the

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<sup>178</sup> Stott, p. 274.

photographs. But his interest was not new—he had been working in the same direction for months, especially at Vicksburg. Evans had addressed the problem of representing movement and passing time in Vicksburg in the barbershop groups, but he also found another locale there to explore the same ideas from a completely different perspective. Vicksburg's National Military Park provided Evans with subject matter for another series of photographs that address the relationship between stillness, motion and the passing of time: Civil War memorials (see Figs. 83-84). These photographs were probably taken within days of the barbershop groups and their presence reinforces the depth of his preoccupation with the contrast between movement and stillness.

Evans made his exposures at the military park from a low angle, isolating the sculptural monuments from their context in the military park and reinforcing the singularity of the figures. Within each photograph, the allusions to movement, such as the horse's waving tail or the arm position of the soldier from Rhode Island, are overwhelmed by their monumental sculptural presence. Where apparent stillness gives way to the impression of movement in the barbershop series, here Evans used the camera to further immobilize these already static representations of dynamism and vitality.

Just as Evans had formed impressions of the south before his time in Vicksburg, he also had a rich and complex relationship to the Civil War and its memorialization. He knew the photographs of Mathew Brady, and also a 1933 *Hound & Horn* essay by Charles Flato that poignantly represented his generation's response to Brady's photographs.<sup>179</sup> In it, Flato argued that it fell to the photographer to reconcile official versions of history with the subjective experience of history. He wrote, "The practicing historian too often loses sight of the fact that between the social or the political condition that made for the 'cause' and the recorded fact in history, there is always the human element, a fact unpredictable and deceptive."<sup>180</sup> I believe that this proposal that the photographer is a type of anti-historian, or a mediator between the objective force of history and its subjective experience, is a very suggestive context for understanding Evans's work. It may have also motivated Evans's low, isolating point of view in these sculptures—he subtly pitted the medium of photography against sculpture by exaggerating the monumentalizing effect of the huge official memorials. Evans thus demonstrated that memorial sculpture could not capture that difficult thing in history, the unpredictable human element.

Evans's interest in the Civil War was strong, but the contemporary history that he sought—and was being paid to record photographically—was the Depression. Evans found in Vicksburg a satisfying ricochet between Civil War history and contemporary history and he was able to parlay those forces into a meditation on movement, stillness, and the passing of time. But he also found a town in the midst of another transition, and his response to this transition cannot be divided from his formal investigation. This second fact imbued his "typical documents" with the force of a specific response to the town's working men: Vicksburg in February of 1936 was preparing for a new garment

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<sup>179</sup> Alan Trachtenberg addresses the Flato essay and the fact that Evans worked on reprinting Brady photographs for the FSA, pp. 231-35. At this point, the photographs that were produced during the war by the Brady studio were all attributed to Mathew Brady. Many of those mis-attributions have since been untangled. See Jeana K. Foley, "Recollecting the Past: A Collection Chronicle of Mathew K. Brady's Photographs," in Mary Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), pp. 189-207.

<sup>180</sup> Charles Flato, "Matthew [sic] Brady, 1823-1896," *Hound and Horn* 7, no. 1 (1933), p. 38.

factory to be built as an anchor to the local cotton industry and to take advantage of cheap labor; the town's population of African-American unskilled laborers, who had long worked as longshoremen, constituted a ready labor force.<sup>181</sup> Even though two years later the 1938 WPA Mississippi guidebook reported that "As [of] yet the city's chief business comes from the river that shaped its destiny," the possibility of a transformation in the town's relationship to industrial capitalism—and the renewed viability of capitalism—must have hung in the air.<sup>182</sup>

Throughout 1936 the South reverberated with the effects of the Supreme Court's declaration that the Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933) was unconstitutional. In brief, the act was meant as a stabilizing force for farmers—administrators of the act paid farmers not to farm all of their soil, thus creating higher demand for agricultural products and raising prices overall. Its effects were dramatic, but were much more beneficial to landowners and independent family farmers than poor tenants and laborers. As Gavin Wright demonstrated in an essay on Southern land and labor, southern industrial development (long considered sluggish by American social scientists) was actually developing at a brisk pace during the first decades of the twentieth century, but because the markets were regional—as opposed to nationally competitive—wages and other forms of "social investment" (like education) were extremely limited, so southerners experienced the negative effects of industrial growth without its benefits.<sup>183</sup>

Although it is unlikely that Evans followed the complex political and legal fate of this act, it was widely reported in southern newspapers and was part of a broader move towards industrialization of agriculture that accelerated during the 1930s. This transformation was uneven in its application but had a very public face. Evans almost certainly would have seen an article on the front page of the *Vicksburg Evening Post* on January 21, 1936, that described the state governor's top priority as "balancing agriculture with industry." Had he turned the pages of the newspaper to page four, he would have seen a full-page advertisement for Mississippi Power and Light Company which described the company's top priority as "balancing farm and industry." If Evans had missed the newspaper that day, any of the preceding days in January or following days in February 1936 provided similar headlines.<sup>184</sup> The New Deal government was clearly betting on rapid industrialization as the South's best hope for economic recovery. Because of his friends on the right and the left, and because of his generally critical orientation towards capitalism in his 20s and 30s, Evans would have understood this to be

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<sup>181</sup> See Frank T. De Vyver, "Labor Factors in the Industrial Development of the South," *Southern Economic Journal* 18, no. 2 (Oct. 1951), pp. 189-192. Other studies of the Southern textile industry emphasize how racially divided factories were. The question of whether Vicksburg's unskilled African-American population would be hired into the factory, or whether they would have been passed over for white workers for technician's jobs, is unresolved here.

<sup>182</sup> American Guide Series, *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State* (1938), p. 267. The headlines of the Vicksburg newspaper during the period that Evans was in the town, were given over not to the building of this factory but to the conclusion of the federally-funded Agricultural Adjustment Act and to the building of roads and industrial infrastructure in the region.

<sup>183</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South / New South* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), Chapter 3.

<sup>184</sup> No byline (AP), "Hugh L. White Assumes Governorship," *Vicksburg Evening Post* (Jan. 21, 1936): 1. I am grateful to Robyn Fleming at Watson Library, MMA, for tracking down this newspaper, which was particularly difficult after Hurricane Katrina struck the region in which most of the historical newspapers of Mississippi are housed.

a controversial gamble, as likely to address the needs of the class that Evans referred derisively to as the “fleurs du capitalist mal” as the subjects of his photographs.<sup>185</sup>

The argument about Evans’s photographs that I have made thus far is that what seems on first glance to be a series of discrete records of stillness and absence actually represented a balance between the motion of film and the stillness of old-fashioned large format picture production. Further, the balance itself conveyed an ambition for photographic practice, that it could capture “the unpredictable human element in history,” in Flato’s words. During the 1930s, “contemporary history” meant not war but mass economic hardship. Evans saw himself as taking part in the representation of this history. It was his job as an FSA employee, and his calling as a photographer.

### **Friendship and Politics**

The task of the rest of this chapter is to reinforce the claim that I have made that Evans’s formal choices were not politically neutral (even if they were also not fully resolved in their political commitments) by establishing Evans’s social milieu as an intellectual and political context for his formal inquiries into temporality and labor in the South. As I have noted, the photographic vocabulary for movement and temporality that he developed directly opposed the “scientifically managed” models of predictable, regularized and fast-moving human labor that characterized industrial capitalism in America (and which Evans anticipated for the South, as the New Deal response to the Depression).<sup>186</sup> This helps to explain how his work seems lightly engaged with, but not indebted to, the better-known leftist political programs of the 1930s; he was by no means dedicated to the active socialist and communist circles in New York, yet simultaneously opposed progressive reform ideology (including that of his employer, the RA) as I discuss in chapter one. Superficially, Evans’s work and personal history even suggest his dedication to the romantic, antebellum version of southern life proposed by the conservative literary circle, the Southern Agrarians. Yet although the unpredictability of human movement conveyed in the photographs from Vicksburg and Hale County actively resists the regularized temporality of industrial labor, the presence of human liveliness, motion and interruption also disrupts stereotypes about the static forms of class and racial division that sustained the Agrarians’ political model.

Although I began this chapter by arguing that Evans knew the South physically, and photographically, before 1935, and that he had a context for understanding the Civil War as well, he also had other specific understandings of the South gleaned from friends and colleagues, and filtered through the anti-modern lens of the Southern Agrarians. Evans’s relationship to the Agrarians is traceable because of his network of friends more than because he explicitly stated a literary interest in their work, but he was undoubtedly aware of the importance of the agrarian movement generally. For this reason, one must place the Southern Agrarians within the context of a political and social mix that influenced Evans’s thinking and his work.

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<sup>185</sup> The reference appears in Evans’s journal, WEA/MMA 1994.250.4(8).

<sup>186</sup> Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) invented the term and practice of “scientific management” to characterize an approach to industrial labor that sought increased efficiency through the breakdown and analysis of specific tasks, which could then be infinitely repeated by unskilled workers. See Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States 1880-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

Evans's friendships are clearly traceable through his archive and his professional history. He was a man who relied greatly on his friends, worked and thought in close collaboration with others, and prioritized his social relationships. Evans is criticized now for his seemingly conservative and bourgeois attachment in the 1950s to his Century Club membership and his rather preening social machinations, but what seems to contemporary viewers as almost farcically exclusive was, for Evans, merely a continuation (and perhaps formalization) of the intense attachment to friends and "circles" that defined his early career.<sup>187</sup> Evans's first years of serious photographic activity must be understood within the context of his engagement with the *Hound & Horn* literary journal, published by Lincoln Kirstein between 1927 and 1934, and associated with Harvard.<sup>188</sup> We know this for several reasons. First, aside from Kirstein, Evans remained friends with many of the journal's contributors for most of his life, among them most prominently were James Agee, Thomas Mabry, Ben Shahn, A. Hyatt Mayor, Bernard Haggin and Stark Young. Others of note for their important early friendships with Evans are Hart Crane, Sylvia Saunders (the sister of Olivia Saunders, James Agee's first wife),<sup>189</sup> John Wheelwright, Muriel Draper and Harry Alan Potamkin. The *Hound & Horn* fostered, and was aligned with, the group that would immediately move on to found or staff the Museum of Modern Art (Mabry, Alfred Barr, Jere Abbott, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, Dorothy Dudley, Edward Warburg and—not directly—A. Everett "Chick" Austen); it published the writing of committed communists and anarchists (including Potamkin, Charles Flato, Max Nomad and Moe Bragin—the pseudonym of Ben Fields), and published Jere Abbott's description of his travels to Soviet Russia (where he spent time with Evans's friend Leyda, who studied with Sergei Eisenstein at the Moscow film school); Kirstein and his colleagues published photographs by Evans and others like Berenice Abbott, Jere Abbott (no relation) and Sylvia Saunders, as well as stills from Eisenstein's films, the films of the Viennese-American filmmaker Henwar Rodakiewicz (which included one frame that was clearly taken by Evans but not attributed), and those of Ralph Steiner; within the future publishing community, *Hound & Horn* published Matthew Josephson, who would go on to found the *New Republic*, Malcolm Cowley, Archibald MacLeish and others.<sup>190</sup> The

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<sup>187</sup> In one instance of such criticism, Luc Santé described Evans as follows in a short biographical essay: "The character who in his later career...seemed primarily interested in joining clubs and effecting English mannerisms and collecting Lobb shoes, just doesn't seem big enough for his work." *Walker Evans* 55 (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>188</sup> *Hound & Horn* is anthologized several places, among them Leonard Greenbaum's *The Hound & Horn: The History of a Literary Quarterly* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), Mitzi Berger Hamovitch, ed. *The Hound & Horn Letters* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982) and Lincoln Kirstein's memoir, *Mosaic* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1994). The magazine's archive is at the Beinecke Library at Yale.

<sup>189</sup> In *Hound & Horn*, Sylvia Saunders published photographs that are breathtakingly similar to Evans's photographs of Saratoga Springs, New York (and the US Grand Hotel)—same vantage point, same light conditions, same compositional sensibility, same time frame—alongside a short essay by Charles Flato that discusses the hotel. Evans and Saunders must have traveled there together to make the photographs. She was a landscape and floral photographer and lived in New York, and although the nature of her relationship with Evans is unclear (she is not mentioned in his diaries or ephemeral papers), references to Sylvia appear in Agee's letters to Evans. Agee collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT-Austin.

<sup>190</sup> Within the context of Muriel Draper's essay, "America Deserta," *Hound & Horn* published a series of film stills from Henwar Rodakiewicz's (unfinished) *Face of New England*. Included in the group was a print of from Evans's otherwise unpublished graveyard photographs. *Hound & Horn* 6, no. 2 (Jan.-Mar.

number of people associated with the *New Republic* in *Hound & Horn* is very long, and the connections Evans made in this circle clarify how he was introduced to future friends such as Philip Rahv.<sup>191</sup>

This is a heady group to have been associated with, but it seems quite clearly to have been the case that this group of writers and artists formed the permanent basis for Evans's professional connections—he maintained long-term associations with nearly all of them in one way or another. One might ascertain from the list of *Hound & Horn* alums represented here, among whom Evans was prominent, that the group solely represented an emerging generation of figures within the art and publishing worlds, but the primary mission of the journal was literary, and to that end they published major poets and literary critics and covered with close attention the late 1920s transcontinental debates on literary humanism. In the 1930-31 volume, the magazine shifted its emphasis explicitly towards politics, publishing first a review by Mabry of the Southern Agrarians' anti-modern manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, in 1930 and thereafter extensively publishing the work of Allen Tate and his Agrarian colleagues.<sup>192</sup> In fact, Mabry—who would go on to be an important early administrator of MoMA—earned a master's degree in literature from Vanderbilt University in 1930 and had been a student during the formation of the Fugitive movement in Nashville.<sup>193</sup>

The importance of time and temporality in Evans's work was clearly articulated in the pages of the *Hound & Horn* as well. In a book review in the Sept.-Nov., 1931 edition of the journal, Evans included the extraordinary passage on the relationship between photography and time (which I quoted in chapter one). His interest in temporality seems in tune with the backward glance of Flato, more so, perhaps, than with other modernist models of speeded up time. In defiance of any expectation that new versions of photographic temporality would concern themselves overtly with modernization or the contemporary world, Evans wrote, "Suddenly there is a difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a stack of decades."<sup>194</sup> Evans in that statement efficiently distanced himself from the self-consciously old-fashioned qualities of much Pictorialist photography and instead embraced a photographic practice that engaged the past directly through the evidence of time's accumulation in the modern world. Although he wrote this statement before his time in the South, the idea of photography's historicity runs through his southern work.

Evans's desire to land upon his own project of documentary photography must have developed both in dialogue and in opposition to trips with Kirstein and Cochran, whose ideas were to use Evans's photographs of nineteenth-century homes as a preservative and an elegy for an antiquated, rarified form of bourgeois life. The "stack of decades" was most evident in architecture. As Kirstein wrote of the Victorian

1932), series unpag., between pp. 231-232. For confirmation that the print was made by Evans, see WEA/MMA 1994.253.318-.320.

<sup>191</sup> Mellow, p. 449-50.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Dabney Mabry, "Look Away, Look Away," (book review of *I'll Take My Stand*) *Hound & Horn* 4, no. 3 (Apr.-June 1931), p.437-38.

<sup>193</sup> On Mabry and the Agrarians, see Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 291-2. Some biographical information comes from conversation between author and Mabry's daughter, Eliza Mabry, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fall 2005.

<sup>194</sup> Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5, no. 1 (October-December 1931), p. 126.

architecture photographs in 1933, “The focus was sharpened until so precise an image was achieved, that many of the houses seemed to exist in an airless atmosphere, much as they exist in the airless nostalgia for the past to which Edward Hopper in his noble canvases pays a more personal tribute.”<sup>195</sup> Kirstein’s comparison of Evans to Hopper is less indicative of a comparison between painting and photography than of his own perception of the two artists’ common orientation towards place and time. Kirstein, more than any other single person, consistently and clearly iterated his conviction that Evans’s photographs had to be understood as fundamentally temporal documents. In the 1938 catalog essay to *American Photographs*, Kirstein again alluded to Evans’s particular relationship to time by writing, “His eye is on symbolic fragments of nineteenth-century American taste.”<sup>196</sup>

These references to time and temporality in Kirstein’s writings are important, partially because they indicate something of the substance of the men’s conversations, but also because these references themselves are rhetorically very peculiar. They seem to suggest that the properties of temporality that belong to the medium of photography are analogous to those that belong to the experience of time passing in the real world. Thus, the medium itself, with its double relationship to permanence and fleetingness, became the occasion for a substantial and continued interrogation of time in a broad sense, even—as I will argue in the section that follows—a political sense. Although it is not the case that photography is the only medium that can produce a meditation on the passage of time (as is clearly demonstrated by Kirstein’s likening of Evans and Hopper), Evans recognized that its power to do so was significant.

It is an inconsistent but consequential fact that the journal moved during the early 1930s not only towards the work of the Southern Agrarians (whose criticism of capitalism was motivated by a desire for a return to pre-industrial, pastoral sectionalism) but also published work by Marxists and the far left. This bifurcation marks not Kirstein’s desire to publish the far right and the far left simultaneously, but reflects both the social connections between Tate, Stark Young and other Agrarians living in New York, and a shared anti-capitalist, anti-fascist conviction that drew together discourses that would fully divide later in the decade.<sup>197</sup> (Another publication that drew together both discourses, briefly, was the prominent communist journal, *New Masses*; in it, Tate published an article in the January 1927 issue.)

By the mid-1930s, Evans had read and knew the Southern Agrarians both because of the strong connections of the *Hound & Horn* group to Allen Tate in particular, and because of other social circles that came into being in the meantime. The poet Hart

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<sup>195</sup> Kirstein, “Walker Evans’ [sic] Photographs of Victorian Architecture,” n.p.

<sup>196</sup> Kirstein, “Photographs of America: Walker Evans,” in Evans, *American Photographs*, cat. (NY: MoMA, 1938), p.195.

<sup>197</sup> Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), p. xlv. First published 1930. The Twelve Southerners were: John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Gould Fletcher, Lyle H. Lanier, Allen Tate, Herman Clarence Nixon, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, John David Wade, Henry Blue Kline and Stark Young. There is no shortage of scholarship related to them. The most recent printings of *I’ll Take My Stand* are edited by Louis Rubin, Jr., who wrote a long and flattering introduction to the text and include short biographies of each of the figures written by Virginia Rock (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, reprint 1962). (Originally published 1930s by Harper & Bros.) I rely on the more critical history offered by Michael O’Brien in his book, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). See also, John Bradbury, *The Fugitives* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1958).

Crane, a close friend of Evans's during early 1930s, lived on occasion with the Tates in New York; Agee and Mabry, from Tennessee and Kentucky, respectively, were intertwined with the Agrarians; finally, Evans spent time at the writer Julia Peterkin's South Carolina plantation most likely on the basis of an introduction by their mutual friend Stark Young, another Agrarian who lived in New York and was active in the musical and dramatic circles in the city.<sup>198</sup> Peterkin is an important figure because Evans stayed with her while working in the Southeast while he was employed by the RA, and because her exaggeratedly romantic literary treatment of African-American subjects in her novels and memoirs can now be securely historically connected to the Agrarian circle.<sup>199</sup>

*I'll Take My Stand*, the anti-modernist 1930 symposium that made famous the group of southern writers who called themselves the Southern Agrarians, is a collection of twelve essays and an introduction that coherently argues first for a return to a pre-industrial agrarian economy in the south, second for sectionalization, and third for the virtues of natural social hierarchies that attend to stable societies (slavery goes unmentioned in explicit form). The arguments of the book are not fully unified, but they do have a remarkable consistency, and the themes of their critique of capital are shared. The internal strength of the Agrarians' arguments have to be balanced against their frank and deep conservatism, their overt class bias and racism, and the authors' fundamentally romantic conception of a "return" to a pre-industrial way of life, which I explore here in order to probe the connection between their concept of time and temporality, and Evans's. I will address the problematic aspects of the book after I discuss its basic proposals, which I think merit a clear response not only for their internal logic but also for the apparent seriousness that readers like Evans seem to have recognized in them. In a 1995 essay on *American Photographs*, Doug Nickel made the connection between Kirstein (not Evans, directly) and the Southern Agrarians, arguing that he was interested in their work because, "[They] proposed a history that effectively explained the social upheaval of contemporary America and provided a humanist, anti-materialist critique of America that was as strenuous in its own way as that of the Marxists."<sup>200</sup> Nickel did not pursue this comparison, but I intend to because I believe that the points of connection between the agrarian manifesto and the culture of mid-1930s left communism are numerous and extremely important.

In the introduction to the volume, the writers (identified as "Twelve Southerners") make the argument that industrialization in America has caused more ill than good health for the nation's economic and moral sensibilities. What is interesting about this work is that its particular logic echoes Karl Marx's *Capital* at more than one point because it argues not just against the surface corruption of contemporary culture but for its

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<sup>198</sup> Although in his biography of Evans, Mellow credits Ernestine Evans with introducing Evans to Peterkin, it is far more likely that Young, a good friend of both (Walker) Evans and Peterkin, introduced them. I say this on the basis of letters between Young and Peterkin that date from 1929 in the Ransom papers at the Harry Ransom Center, UT, Austin, and because in contrast to this very real connection between these figures, I can find no connection between Ernestine Evans and Peterkin (or any literary figures in the South).

<sup>199</sup> Peterkin is best known for writing *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: R.O. Ballou, 1933). The first edition had tipped in photogravure portraits of African-Americans in a romantic, Pictorialist tradition by Doris Ullman.

<sup>200</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, "American Photographs Revisited," *American Art* 6 (Spring 1992), p. 92.

structural inadequacy. Without referring to Marx, the introduction draws upon his very specific methodology of describing the structure of capital in its most “pure” form, and then critiquing the transformations on everyday life that capital as a system (rather than its application) has wrought. At the heart of their criticism is a clear and bracing observation:

The tempo of industrial life is fast, but that is not the worst of it; it is accelerating. The ideal is not merely some set form of industrialism, with so many stable industries, but industrial progress, or an incessant extension of industrialization. It never proposes a specific goal; it initiates the infinite series.<sup>201</sup>

For Evans, what is germane in this proposition is the centrality of time, which was already an important photographic pre-occupation. The idea of speed and relentlessness described in this statement was a fairly standard trope of photographic practice, and formed (in antithesis) Evans’s investigations. Thus, Evans went to great lengths in order to reverse the representation of time as moving forward at an accelerating, even mechanical, pace in order to describe a slower, more unpredictable pace of everyday life.

The Agrarians’ argument against the dynamism of industry has several consequences. For the most part, it suggests that the surface hostilities of the book, such as its critique of contemporary manners, of how people spend their leisure time, and of using money instead of community as a primary bonding agent between people, are not independent problems, but that all are merely symptoms of a more trenchant and permanent—under industrial capitalism—condition. The stability of southern culture in the antebellum period (suspending for the moment the reality of antebellum culture’s *instability* because of slavery), they argue, was entirely upended by the demands of capital for constant transformation of the means of production, independent of natural or agricultural cycles. Capital is regarded here as a destabilizing force because the introduction of the cash system, of credit and of mechanized means of mass production forces people to spend money they do not have and become indebted to strangers, and therefore to always work against the clock to avoid interest; it forces employers to do everything in their power to reduce their dependence upon laborers, which dislocates families and destabilizes community organizations; it produces a highly abstract notion of leisure time which has to be partitioned off from productive time and spent (paradoxically) in the same “brutal and hurried” manner as the working day.<sup>202</sup>

Because they recognized a close twinning of the cultural and economic factors in everyday life, the Southern Agrarians refused New Humanism, the literary movement of many critics of their generation, which was propounded and defended in the pages of *Hound & Horn*. They wrote: “We cannot recover our native humanism by adopting some standard of taste that is critical enough to question the contemporary arts but not critical enough to question the social and economic life which is their ground.”<sup>203</sup> At the same time, despite their obvious parallels with Marx’s writing, they wholly refused communism, which was also predicated on the close relationship of economic and social

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<sup>201</sup> *I’ll Take My Stand*, p. xlv.

<sup>202</sup> *I’ll Take My Stand*, p. xlii.

<sup>203</sup> *I’ll Take My Stand*, p. xlv.

forces, because they argued that it *celebrated* the unification of industrial progress and cultural homogenization which they decried.<sup>204</sup>

The premise that persists throughout *I'll Take My Stand* is fundamentally related to the experience of passing time, which is why I believe that Evans was sensitive to the text as he traveled South. This temporal thematic is the source of the best and worst qualities of the book. The overall argument is that the antebellum south (they use the term pre-industrial, but allude quite clearly, if not explicitly, to the antebellum economy, including slavery) was governed by a model of time in which all culture was bound to natural (agricultural) cycles of labor, sociability and rest. The residents of the South, therefore, experienced social relationships that were stabilized because of the cyclical character of everyday life. Life under industrialism was governed by the accumulation of credits and interest, and overseen by stopwatches—quite literally after Frederick Winslow Taylor and the concept of scientific management became famous in the 1910s. As a result, the social order and everyday culture experienced shifting hierarchies and instability. Their argument is reminiscent of Marx's famous formulation in the "Communist Manifesto" that "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."<sup>205</sup> Marx's poetic statement is one way of understanding how seemingly solid social relations bear little weight under capitalism, because new means of production force money, rather than history and circumstance, into the center of human interaction.

In 1967, this basic argument would be re-rehearsed and solidified as a historical phenomenon, albeit from a very different perspective, by E. P. Thompson, whose astonishing essay, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism" was published that year. While the essay modestly proposes to investigate the production and use of clocks between the early modern era and the onset of the industrial revolution in western Europe, Thompson's conclusions are far-reaching. He concludes that, "a general diffusion of clocks and watches is occurring (as one might expect) at the exact moment when the industrial revolution demanded a greater synchronization of labour," which allows him to shift his emphasis in the essay, writing:

What we are examining here are not only changes in manufacturing technique which demand greater synchronization of labour and a greater exactitude in time-routines in *any* society; but also these changes as they were lived through in the society of nascent industrial capitalism. We are concerned simultaneously with time-sense in its technological conditioning, and with time-measurement as a means of labour-exploitation.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Allen Tate knew Marx's work, and had published in the late 1920s in the *New Masses*. He seems to have been utterly unimpressed by Communism, but the overall structure of *I'll Take My Stand* betrays clear understanding of the principles of *Capital*. Further, and more fascinating, in a short letter to Lincoln Kirstein dated 3 February 1933, Tate urged Kirstein to consider the work of several antebellum southern political theorists, writing that "Their immediate purpose was political theory, but a whole philosophy was set forth. . . . These men knew their Marx thoroughly, and it is amusing to see the neo-Communists discovering Marx for the first time in the U.S." Mitzi Berger Hamovitch, ed. *The Hound & Horn Letters* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 181.

<sup>205</sup> *Marx-Engels Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 475-76. Here I've borrowed from Marshall Berman's translation, which appears in his use of this quotation in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 21.

<sup>206</sup> E. P. Thompson. "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1991), pp. 368 and 382, respectively.

The shift is in the direction of understanding how the dispersal and incorporation of clocks into working class life forced factory time, regulated time, into place as a measure for everyday life, so that time is parceled out—this much for work, this much for me, and so on. As it becomes a measure it also becomes a valuable possession—something to be fought for, something to be fought over, because it comes to be regarded as having an independent value. What the Agrarians both noticed and deplored was the new reality that instead of Southerners living in a flow of time, *occupying* time, people began to value it as a commodity and parcel it out for sale. In this regard they precisely echo Marx, who described the sale of labor under industrial capitalism,

The proprietor of labour-power must always sell it for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself.... He must constantly treat his own labour-power as his own property, as a commodity, and he can do this only by placing it at the disposal of the buyer, i.e., handing it over to the buyer for him to consume, for a definite period of time, temporarily.<sup>207</sup>

The complex and paradoxical result of the transformation he described was that this new understanding of time would infect all forms of social and economic life, that the maxim “time is money” would come to dominate social, political, religious and cultural life by replacing previous hierarchies (you follow orders because this man is your boss) with new and contingent hierarchies (you follow orders because you have sold your labor and are “on the clock” *at this minute*).

Thompson is careful to avoid the value judgments over the two poles I sketch above—do you follow orders for one reason or another?—but the conservative bent of *I’ll Take My Stand* is rooted in the agrarians’ fierce and unwavering conviction that point ‘a’ has fundamentally redemptive human value, and point ‘b’ is a disaster. This conviction is what makes the agrarian’s position and rhetoric so extreme, and so utterly problematic, not least because position ‘a’ strongly recalls the bitter history of slavery. On the one hand, their defense is explicitly mounted for the sake of such cultural values and institutions as traditional courtly manners, religion, an orderly racial and class hierarchy and the rather amorphous way of life—identified by Tate as “tradition”—that attends rural sectionalism. On the other hand, both their critique and the values they seek to defend are associated with what they imply was a fully stabilized and harmonic culture that existed in the south before the Civil War. Their tacit desire for the restitution of slavery and courtly southern culture rested on the fiction that in the antebellum period, before the abolition of slavery and the institutionalization of industrial capitalism, southern culture actually *was* stable and harmonic.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 271. First published, 1867. The entire chapter from which this passage comes is of interest on this point. It is, “Chapter 6: The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power.” See also Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>208</sup> The position of the Twelve Southerners *was* radically conservative, even in its moment. This point is adequately summarized by quoting briefly from a book that appeared and was reviewed simultaneously to *I’ll Take My Stand*. In *The Industrial Revolution and the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930), a historical account of industrialism after the Civil War, Broadus Mitchell and George Sinclair Mitchell used frank terms to describe nostalgic agrarians, writing “For those Sons of Confederacy who have taken up the old cry in a false note I have no respect.” Later, they described leadership of the antebellum south by

It is hard to know exactly what Evans made of the specific proposal of *I'll Take My Stand*—he did not leave a written record of his response and neither the body of his photographs nor their chosen audience explicitly addresses the Agrarians. Yet his use of multiple images of a single subject, and his emphasis on the movement of southern subjects over the course of time (the time of the shoot), subtly contested their romantic schema about southern life. Instead, Evans's photographic model of "being in time," required a focus on qualities of immediacy and specificity.

While Evans did not respond in print to the symposium, his friend Mabry did, and Mabry's review of *I'll Take My Stand* is both sympathetic and ultimately critical, and may offer a deeper sense of Evans's own response to the text. Although the review clearly demonstrated respect for the overall project of the agrarians, Mabry also betrayed substantial skepticism about how they might transform their criticisms into a political program. He wrote, first, that "It is the person who has sold his mind and energy to the machine but whose spirit and emotional life is stunted and bitter who will dismiss this book," and then, in the following paragraph, "[Although] they will doubtless defend themselves by saying they have not tried to write a book on economics, it is only by doing so that their position will become valid."<sup>209</sup> Mabry's position was that the interdependence of international economic systems was already foretold long before the Civil War, and that the south's secession would have slowed, not prevented, the southern region's participation in a global economy. He avoids the issue of slavery altogether.

Evans and Mabry's early responses to the symposium had several years to develop: the full effect of the symposium on Evans and his circle unfolded over the entire decade of the 1930s. The Agrarians began to publish extensively in *Hound & Horn* during the early 1930s, and Tate was named regional editor for the South in 1932 (the journal folded in 1934); Mabry was fired from his high-level administrative position at MoMA in 1939 and returned his family to rural Tennessee, where he farmed tobacco in a clear response to the agrarian ideal (and apparently struggled to break even); Agee seems to have read and mimicked sections of Andrew Nelson Lytle's essay, "The Hind Tit" (in which Lytle describes a day in the life of a typical rural farming family) as a model for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

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writing, "They grew into a personality pleasing aristocracy, allowing the Poor Whites to be shouldered aside in penury and ignorance. Their vaunted chivalry was thus a mockery." They continued by describing the legacy of the agrarian's idealized southern gentleman, "We paid him too much honor while he lived, and furthermore sad reminders of his handiwork are all about us in the South this long time afterward: poverty, race hatred, sterile fields, the childish and violent crowd gulled by the demagogue." All quotations taken not from the book but from its review by Arthur Krock, "Industrialism and the Agrarian Tradition in the South," *New York Times* (Jan. 4, 1931): BR2. Krock's review of *ITMS* is harshly critical of both its nostalgia and its impracticality. He identifies the crucial weakness of the text, which is that you cannot say, rationally, that Southern culture is so distinctive and preciously individual that it merits congressional protection without providing some evidence for the distinctiveness of southern culture. Krock's last sentences are thus: "[This reviewer] would like timidly to point out to the Twelve that, if Southern culture and tradition assay to a fraction of the estimate and if Southern people are really as individual as described, industrialization will be absorbed by the South without a loss of sectional distinction. What is more alarming than all this, to the oversigned, is that Southern audiences, in town, city and at the forks of the creek, enjoy the shoddiest movies precisely as do audiences in Lowell, Mass.; Herrin, Ill., or in the Bronx, N.Y."

<sup>209</sup> Mabry, p.437.

Evans maintained close friendships with two Agrarians, in addition to Mabry. He corresponded with Stark Young and shortly after *American Photographs* started traveling, in January 1939, Young wrote to Evans (somewhat cryptically to contemporary readers), “I have thought often of you....One sees some of the cause or source of that astonishing true quality in your pictures: you seem to have no judgments to pass, merely intelligent placing of all things in people and in the visual world.” Much later, in the 1950s, Young again mentioned Evans’s photographs in a letter, writing, “But as I have told you before, the impact of your photographs is unique. That great distinction within very often and astonishing plainness—that strange, secret accuracy in the whole effect....”<sup>210</sup> Evans also maintained a friendship and correspondence with Robert Penn Warren through the 1960s, when both men taught at Yale University.<sup>211</sup>

Over the course of the 1930s, *I’ll Take My Stand*—along with Mabry, the Agrarians, and Julia Peterkin—gave Evans a literary frame for understanding southern culture and its temporal dimension. Whether Evans actually read this book is unknown. I am positive that he did, but even if its authors were merely part of his milieu, their ideas were articulate and transferable enough that he was certainly aware of the arguments. It is also very possible that he not only read the book, but that he shared it with Ben Shahn.<sup>212</sup> More importantly, the book seems to have given Evans a justification for interpreting the antebellum period as a temporal home for a now lost way of life. However romantic this notion was, it was concrete and specific. The book suggested that time itself had a flexible quality—it could be incorporated into a critique of culture, and could be understood as both tangible and flexible. We live in time, we pass through time, we occupy time, and we waste time. Evans must have recognized the implicit contrast between time as a *pace*, which one either sets for oneself or is forced to follow, and time as a world-historical force, which is pre-determined, a set order. The idea of these two forms of temporality co-existing was not an exclusive intellectual contribution by the Agrarians. Historian Stephen Kern, in *The Culture of Time and Space*, demonstrated that the increased urgency of global synchronization between 1880 and 1914 was the occasion for western-cultural fascination with time’s duality. For Kern, that duality is a function of felt time, Bergsonian time, on the one hand, and universally standard time, clock time, on the other.<sup>213</sup> In more recent work, Mary Ann Doane argues that inherent to modernity is the perception that time has two distinctly different registers, although she identifies them differently than Kern. First is the world historical time whose vastness and continuity is experienced only as a void and the second is the infinitely divisible, infinitely saleable time of industrial capital.<sup>214</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Stark Young to Walker Evans, January 3, 1939 and June 5, 1956. Correspondence files, “Y,” WEA/MMA 1994.260.22.

<sup>211</sup> Correspondence files, “W,” WEA/MMA 1994.260.21.

<sup>212</sup> In an Archives of American Art interview, Bernard Bryson Shahn recounted a list of books Shahn took with him when he drove through the South on his FSA trip. Included were Stryker’s “required reading,” *North American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* (1925), and a copy of *I’ll Take My Stand*. Pamela Meecham, “Oral History with Bernard Bryson Shahn,” Archives of American Art (July 3, 1995), untranscribed.

<sup>213</sup> Stephen Kern, *Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>214</sup> Of her own project, Doane writes: “Are these two tendencies within modernity—abstraction / rationalization and an emphasis upon the contingent, chance and the ephemeral—irreconcilable? Do they simply represent two different modalities or attitudes operating independently during the same time period, each undisturbed by the other? It is the wager of this book that it is possible to demonstrate their profound

The most rhetorically extreme elaboration of the division between felt time and historical time in *I'll Take My Stand* was famously articulated by Allen Tate, who concluded his contribution to the volume with these lines:

...How may the Southerner take hold of his Tradition?

The answer is, by violence....

Since he cannot bore from within, he has left the sole alternative of boring from without. This method is political, active, and, in the nature of the case, violent and revolutionary. Reaction is the most radical of programs; it aims at cutting away the overgrowth and getting back to the roots. A forward-looking radicalism is a contradiction; it aims at rearranging the foliage.<sup>215</sup>

Tate's statement *is* rhetorically extreme, but it functions more as a wail of protest than a basis for functional political transformation. "Tradition" stands in for the system of laws, behaviors, hierarchies and religious practices that characterized (white European-American) Southern culture before the Civil War and emancipation. Thus, the quotation is sufficiently inflammatory that critics of *I'll Take My Stand* seize on it as evidence of the reactionary basis of the text, which it certainly is. It is also one of the only places in the entire volume where an author frankly, if merely rhetorically, mentions that what is at stake in the southern agrarian project is a violent redress of the shift to a wage-labor economy that happened in the wake of the Civil War and emancipation. What was on the line for Tate was turning back the clock on the Civil War, on emancipation, on industrialization of the south and of the introduction of mechanization to rural agriculture.

Evans was unlikely to take literally the implication that racialized slavery should be implemented to prevent white people from having to sell their labor on an hourly basis, or that there is something inherently "natural" and superior in human agricultural labor in contrast to mechanical. It is likely that in the two and a half years between the publication of Mabry's review of this book and Evans's trip to Cuba in 1933, he simply was not paying a great deal of critical attention to race in America. His diary is peppered with Anti-Semitism during this period in a way that can most charitably be described not very well thought-out, but not at all with references to African-Americans. With one notable exception (*42<sup>nd</sup> St., New York, 1929*), he did not take photographs of African-Americans until 1934. Letters to Evans from his friend Hans Skolle have scattered references to African-Americans, sometimes including the word "nigger," but Evans appears not to have ever addressed that subject specifically in his responses to Skolle.<sup>216</sup> It seems to be the case that until the trip to Cuba, which forced Evans to think about race and in some sense radicalized him, as I address in chapter one, he was not actively paying attention to race in America. Evans was, however, exceedingly sensitive to the nuances of Tate's argument about time because of his own interest in the temporal dimension of still photography.

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connection, their interdependence and alliance in the structuring of temporality in modernity. What is at stake is the representability of time for a subject whose identity is more and more tightly sutured to abstract structures of temporality." Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency and the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp.10-11.

<sup>215</sup> Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," *I'll Take My Stand*, pp. 174-5.

<sup>216</sup>Skolle/Evans correspondence files, WEA/MMA 1994.260.25.

Although he was perhaps aware of the emerging presence of the Agrarians as early as 1931 and in the years that immediately followed, Evans's attention was focused close to home, as I discuss in chapter one. He prepared his work professionally—for exhibition, sale and magazine publication—and had also traveled with Kirstein in the spring of that year for his first architectural (photography) tour of New England.<sup>217</sup> Throughout the 1930s, Evans's friendship with Shahn remained strong, and his diary reveals that during the early 1930s, Shahn's politics (he was communist in sympathy)—as well as other friends, like Harry Potamkin and Jay Leyda, seems to have been a frequent subject of conversation. During July and August of 1933, Evans kept a remarkably rich diary, and in it he recounted his interactions with both men, which often included conversations about politics and communism.

It is entirely legitimate to deny Evans was a Communist, as most scholars have.<sup>218</sup> Further, Evans's engagement with the left and communism during the 1930s was irregular and stormy. But the idea that he lacked interest in the swirl of ideas that communism fostered, particularly during the early 1930s, is more unlikely. At that time, Evans *was* engaged in thinking about contemporary politics, and expressed confusion and interest in his letters to friends such as Hans Skolle and Jay Leyda, as well as in his journals.<sup>219</sup> Further, his friendship—a friendship that fostered political conversation—with Ben Shahn throughout the 1930s was one of his more sturdy relationships during that part of his life. Shahn, an active and committed partisan, introduced Evans to Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo, which eventually led to Evans's commission to document Rivera's ill-fated Rockefeller Center murals (the photographs are the best surviving records of the murals; they were published by *Vogue* in 1934).<sup>220</sup>

In the summer of 1933 Evans's friend Harry Potamkin, a *Hound & Horn* film reviewer and an active participant in American communism and New York's burgeoning film community, died. Evans was present at the hospital, and had given blood on Potamkin's behalf.<sup>221</sup> It is likely to have been Evans or Kirstein who wrote the short unsigned obituary on Potamkin for the following issue of *Hound & Horn*. The obituary expressed admiration for Potamkin's efforts to open a film-school in New York and for the seriousness of his political conviction. It was an admiration that both men apparently felt for Potamkin.<sup>222</sup> But it is important to recognize that admiration synthesized both the film-maker's professional ambitions and his political fervency.

<sup>217</sup> For a full bibliography of what Evans published during the period 1931 to 1935, see Rodger Kingston's bibliography, *Walker Evans in Print* (Belmont, Mass.: R.P. Kingston, 1995).

<sup>218</sup> See Douglas Eklund, "The Exile's Return," in Rosenheim, et.al., *Walker Evans*, pp. 42-43; see Mellow, pp. 195-211; Trachtenberg, p. 247.

<sup>219</sup> See WEA 1994.250.95-.97 (1933-35 diaries) and 1994.260.1-30 (correspondence).

<sup>220</sup> Mellow, pp. 202-206.

<sup>221</sup> Entry for July 19, 1933. 1933 Diary, WEA/MMA 1994.250.95.

<sup>222</sup> Evans wrote of the night that Potamkin died in his diary on July 19, 1933. WEA 1994.250.95. For the *Hound & Horn* obituary, see anonymous, "Comment," in *Hound & Horn* 7, no. 1 (Oct-Dec. 1933), pp. 3-4. This was incidentally the same volume of *H&H* in which Charles Flato published his essay on Mathew Brady on pages 35-41. Under his own name, ruminating about the history of the magazine, Kirstein wrote in 1934, "My two painter friends, "Philip Reisman and Ben Shahn, and Harry Potamkin, encyclopedically informed about the movies and the first practising [sic] communist I had ever met who literally burned with his ideas of social abuse and exploitation, had shown me the great richness in revolutionary subject matter." Kirstein in the *Harvard Advocate* 121 no. 2 (Christmas 1934), as republished by Mitzi Berger Hamovitch, ed., *The Hound & Horn Letters* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 20.

Further, it is not incidental to my appraisal of Evans's politics that the communist-left community of film-makers in New York and abroad was highly politicized, and saw film as a potentially political medium. In his 1938 survey called *Documentary Film*, the British film-maker and associate of Leyda's (at least as early as 1935), Paul Rotha, described the necessary relation between film production and politics as an expression of the urgent need for mass political education and film's apparently unique capacity to fulfill that need.<sup>223</sup> The reason documentary film needed to fill that role specifically was because politics had become an essential part of everyday life. "Politics, for example," he wrote,

are daily becoming of increasing interest to millions of people who only a few years ago regarded their discussion as abhorrent. Not politics in the old meaning of the word, perhaps, but politics embracing economics, sociology, culture, and in many cases, religion. The almost terrifying political storms which have taken place during the last fifteen years and which are taking place to-day, together with the inevitable disturbances of the immediate future, are rapidly becoming the concern of the ordinary person no matter how secure he or she may at present like to feel. Civilization to-day, in fact, presents a complexity of political and social problems which have to be faced by every thinking person.<sup>224</sup>

After establishing the need for mass education using the rhetoric of materialist analysis (although not invoking Marx directly), Rotha argued that documentary film, as opposed to industrial capitalism's studio-based cinema, would fill that need:

It is absurd to suggest that cinema, with its powers to enlarge the public's social conscience, to create new standards of culture, to stir the mental apathies, to build new understandings and, by virtues inherent in its form, to become the most powerful of all modern preachers—it is absurd to suggest that it can be left in the hands of commercial speculators to be used as a vehicle for purposeless fictional stories. There must be a world outside that represented by the entertainment film. There must be sources of production other than those demanding only profit. There must be kinds of cinema and ends to serve other than those which portray and artificial world conceived under mass-production methods at the dictates of the balance-sheet. There is—the world of propaganda and education.<sup>225</sup>

Rotha's lengthy writing offers both a relatively accessible expression of the hopes the left held throughout the 1920s and 1930s for documentary film as a politically radical and influential form of expression because of its appealing formal features and its potentially universal audience. (His writing was likely to have been known by Evans, who almost certainly knew the thrust of his argument.) These qualities of the medium were the basis of its appeal to radical film-makers and form the basis of much of the response to film by the critics of the Frankfurt School, most notably Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin (we have little to no evidence that Evans ever read these men's writings on film, although Leyda did, and corresponded with them).

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<sup>223</sup> See Leyda/Rotha correspondence in the Jay and Si-lan Chen Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Series 2, box 7, file 32.

<sup>224</sup> Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938), p. 33.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.

The years between 1933 and 1938 were the period in which Evans was both most personally invested in film as a medium, and most willing to take seriously the communist or leftist commitments of his close friends. These interests are everywhere demonstrable: during the summer of 1933 he executed *Travel Notes* while in the near-daily company of Leyda, Potamkin and Shahn. Based on a 1932 trip to Tahiti, it was Evans's first and apparently only finished film. (The following fall, he offered Rodakiewicz his own prints to use as stills for a film-in-production, which were printed in *Hound & Horn*.) Over the course of the next five years, through the *American Photographs* exhibition, Evans actively sought to make a film, a desire that is well-documented in the FSA files and in his letters to Leyda. This manifested itself in a project he proposed to Stryker in conjunction with Ben Shahn, which was apparently begun but never completed (and the printed frames are now unlocated); as well as the filmic qualities of his *Three Tenant Families* album.

It is unclear how closely aligned politics and medium were, from Evans's perspective. If he saw a form of film-making that was not rooted in radical left politics, he chose not to pursue it. Nor, obviously, did he ultimately cast his lot with the left and pursue film-making full-time. Instead, in the wake of his success with *American Photographs* (1938), Evans's photography practice was steadily divided from his interest in film. He took work with *Time* magazine as a movie critic (without a byline) and reviewed mass-market Hollywood films as well as some war-related documentaries made for general distribution. But by this time Evans had also discontinued the practice of making photographs that have an organic, movement- and time-based relation to film.<sup>226</sup>

Undoubtedly, there was a close correspondence between Evans's interest in film and leftist politics for a short period of time, and that interest became anathema to Evans's more professional interests after 1938. Further, the flirtation with communism cannot be divided from the powerful presence of the Agrarians in the intellectual community fostered by the *Hound & Horn*. If Evans reconciled their divergent programs in his own still-developing response to industrial capitalism, the third important component of Evans's political subjectivity during this period was his total and exceedingly lucid rejection of Progressivism, as I argue in chapter one. This, too, had both a political and an aesthetic component.

Although Evans was clearly interested in the possibilities a government job offered (and his work clearly flourished under its auspices), his famously contentious relationship with Roy Stryker was a major aspect of his employment at the RA, and was rooted in Evans's pre-existing hostility towards photography that he saw as propaganda. In a draft of a letter to Stryker that probably pre-dates his employment, Evans wrote,

Never make photographic statements 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 far-sighted thing to have done. No POLITICS whatever.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>226</sup> Kingston tracked down the Evans reviews in *Time*, pp. 87-89, although it is not entirely clear how Kingston determined attribution of unsigned articles.

<sup>227</sup> WEA/MMA 1994.250.4 (12). Memo in WE hand, no date. Printed in Thompson, p. 112. An undated memo in a nearby file more bitterly and more personally responds to Stryker: "Things you really think of

It is unclear whether Evans ever sent this letter, although it seems unlikely.

It is hard to know exactly what Evans is reacting to in these angry notes. On another part of the page Evans describes his terms of employment (specifically, his technical needs), so I believe that it was written before Evans had experience with the government project. Indeed, he was hired in the summer of 1935, when the project was fairly new and before it had much media attention at all. Yet while Evans had rejected the kind of Progressivism he associated with Stryker and the RA, both for its proponents' faith in technocracy and rationality as the means to improving everyday life, his true ire seems reserved for its embrace of mass media as an instrument of such improvements.

Although it is tempting to see the file as a vast—or even monumental—effort to document the depression's effects on American agrarian life, in 1935 Evans perceived clearly that the file had two motivating impulses. The intentions of Roy Stryker and his boss, Rexford Tugwell, were to run the Resettlement Administration within the ideological frame of a reformist Progressivist model of education, rationalization and uplift. They sought widespread amelioration through re-organization, which involved in part a systematic documentation of the social realities of rural life. Although the men found the federal government relatively hospitable to their mission, the task of continuously selling the mission of the RA/FSA also fell to Stryker and his photographers. The file was intended for immediate use by journalists, picture editors, social scientists preparing reports for Congress, and officials throughout the government, but the photographers' responsibility ultimately was one of public persuasion—the success of New Deal programs was bound to the continued reelection of the New Deal government. Paul Vanderbilt, who archived and organized the file in the late 1930s, in 1963 described the dual purpose of the project:

While the photographs made by the FSA team were constantly sent out for publication and were indeed used for the purpose for which they were made (tear sheets and copies of publications in which these pictures were used were kept and were at one time and perhaps still are in storage in the Library of Congress, as an adjunct to the main file of originals now deposited there), it is not this use which attracts attention now. It is the main survey file itself as an entity, as a record, as a historically and photographically meaningful document of America.<sup>228</sup>

Vanderbilt reads the double nature of the file as publicity and record-keeping to be a function of its change in use over time, but Evans's unsent memo belies that claim and suggests that the existence of the file can be regarded as a form of wish or hope present from a very early date that the FSA photographs would serve not merely as publicity for government relief efforts but as a permanent photographic monument. Of course, Evans's view was essentially private—he apparently did not send that memo to Stryker but instead signed the papers that certified him as an Information Specialist with the RA.

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me. 1. that you picked me up from a state of obscure poverty // 2. that I benefited from having a govt job // 3. that you gave me my chance and defended my kind of work." WEA/MMA 1994.250.4 (18).

<sup>228</sup> Paul Vanderbilt, private memo discussing structure of FSA, 1963. WEA/MMA 1994.250.86.1. For a thorough discussion of Vanderbilt, see Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in Beverly Brannan and Carl Fleischhauer, eds., *Documenting America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 43-73.

Maren Stange, in her retrospective evaluation of the file, identified a kind of aesthetic trade-off that may have motivated Evans's resistance to the RA. In her effort to understand why it was that the most artistically exceptional members of the FSA photography unit ceased working for Stryker between 1937 and 1938 (she refers specifically to Evans, Lange and Shahn), Stange described the project's heavy-handed bureaucracy and mission of rural improvements as having an aesthetic component: in order to really work as a file photograph, and to be universally available as a sign of the need for rural improvements, Stryker (and his employer, Tugwell) increasingly came to demand that photographs read less as specific, contingent objects, and more and more as interchangeable signs for rural poverty. She wrote,

The subjects of FSA photographs were presented to their mass audience shorn of social and cultural vigor and interest, not only by framing and composition but also by text, caption, and graphic arrangements that made of local particularities, collectivities, and attachments simultaneously examples of outmoded 'social emotions' and nostalgic evocations of a receding popular life.<sup>229</sup>

Stange describes a process of stabilizing an image of rural poverty by forcing its visual representation to take on a graphically unified and decontextualized look. Stange argued that such a process of stabilization used the mass media to conceal the actual forms of human and communal loss that Americans sustained in the transition to a rationalized rural economy. Stange's criticism—while in no way nostalgic for the antebellum social order that the agrarians celebrated—suggests sympathy with many aspects of 1930s critiques of modernization such as that of the agrarians.

Although some critics have been more generous towards the FSA photography project, there is no reason to believe that Evans would have been. Stange's criticism is particularly helpful in understanding Evans's hostility to the RA/FSA (as he interpreted it) because she directs readers to read the visual signs that were associated with the mission of the program. Lack of context, lack of contingent circumstance, lack of idiosyncrasy, lack of specificity, these are descriptive terms that Stange identifies as the defining features of an FSA photograph.<sup>230</sup> They also precisely negate the concepts I have argued that Evans attempted to convey in his photographic practices of 1935-37 because each "lack" is an implicit refusal of the crucial category of experiments in space and time. Evans was no fool; although he was unsympathetic to the capital-friendly rationalizing discourse of Progressivism, the coincidence of the RA/FSA's approach to rural poverty with its approach to still photography made for a much more insistent hostility and rejection of Stryker's project by Evans.

To conclude, I have been directing readers towards a reading of Evans's photographs as deeply invested in a field of competing political discourses, and have argued that Evans's consistent photographic response to his human subjects, southern workers, is the sign of his active engagement with those discourses. Although we can

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<sup>229</sup> Stange, pp.129-130.

<sup>230</sup> Stange is not alone, Alan Trachtenberg's essay on the file itself describes the way that the organization of the FSA file, commenced in 1938, also directs users towards semantically-open interpretations of the photographs. See Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly Brannan, eds., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 43-73.

never divorce Evans's interest in these political discourses from aesthetic structures that were also of interest to him, such as film, I have argued that we can speculate on the political effects of Evans's work. His photographs from 1935-37 pick up the aesthetic terms associated with this fascinating range of political postures that do not align with our contemporary understandings of the right or the left. Instead, Evans's work suggests a moment in United States history in which the Depression posed such a challenge to industrial capitalism that a number of different possibilities—which themselves are no longer viable—seemed not only tenable but imperative. Still, one reason that trying to pin Evans to a tightly circumscribed political identity is useless is that *his* interest was primarily about photography and the specific nuances of the medium itself. In the next chapter of this dissertation, I shall address the consequences of this statement more fully by investigating Evans's relationship to the developing concept of American modernism as well as to the Museum of Modern Art and his 1938 exhibition, *American Photographs*.

Chapter Three: ‘The Work of an Artist’: Re-Reading *American Photographs*

The two previous chapters of this dissertation have dealt specifically with Evans’s photographs and their relationship to Depression-era issues of employment and utility. Here, I turn to Evans’s 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *American Photographs*, and its accompanying catalog, which was the occasion for Evans to print many of the exposures from his previous years’ work and to define his central corpus to that point. Thus, Evans’s own work and working life are at issue in this chapter; he is the worker that concerns me. Although the exhibition is rightly regarded as a watermark for the institutionalization of photography as a fine art on the grounds that it was the first major solo exhibition by a photographer at MoMA, it is also a crucial gauge of Evans’s ambitions and expectations for his own practice. Because of the high degree of control that Evans exercised over the exhibition and catalog, and his evident satisfaction with its result, a careful examination of Evans’s choices reveals a good sense of his ambitions circa 1938, which had both professional and conceptual dimensions. Professionally, Evans used the exhibition to valorize the labor of the modern artist against that of the salaried worker; conceptually, Evans used the exhibition to probe the relationship between the local in American culture and the forces of systemic change that produced a more unified national culture during the 1930s. Far from being unrelated goals, this chapter argues that the burden of *American Photographs* was to demonstrate that a practice of photography could bear the weight of narrating contemporary history.

The professional and conceptual aspects of Evans’s ambition meaningful in the larger history of documentary practice, although each ambition reveals Evans’s dubious, even romantic, understanding of the history of modern art. The first, to valorize the labor of the modern artist, reveals that Evans perceived the need to assertively declare the nature of photographic work as a specifically artistic form of endeavor that could not be sustained through workaday employment. As he would declare in a letter to the RA/FSA Historical Division manager, Roy Stryker, while preparing the exhibition, “The museum... is bringing the thing out as an example of the work of an artist, [and] is not interested in this respect in whom he has worked for or with.”<sup>231</sup> His declaration seems somewhat over-determined (for many viewers, even hypocritical) because it derived from Evans’s dual perspective as both an independent worker and a contract employee. The declaration also appears to be Evans’s gesture of bad faith towards his employers and the larger support network that sustained his artistic endeavor in the 1930s. Further, it put Evans at some odds with his peers in the 1930s, many of whom celebrated the integration of artistic labor with more traditional models of labor (even industrial) as a demonstration of common cause between artists and the working class. On the face of it, Evans’s gesture was deeply unsavory, both because it implied that his goals involved reinforcing a retrograde hierarchy of artistic labor, and also because the claim itself was false—his actual working conditions were far more integrated with other models of work (even artistic work) than the exhibition demonstrated.

My goal here is to put these criticisms aside and give Evans the benefit of the doubt, at least rhetorically, by asking what he stood to gain and lose *as a worker*, and

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<sup>231</sup> Typed letter, Evans to Stryker, July 16, 1938. WEA/MMA 1994.250.57, file 57.

what the stakes were for photography more generally. This dissertation has focused thus far on making the case that sussing out the nature of the photographic medium itself was a crucial aspect of Evans's 1930s practice. I propose here that Evans came to see the medium's flexibility, its easy adaptation to language and other peoples' agendas, as its soft spot, in need of shoring up through rhetorical claims on its own behalf. That claim was the maker's independence, and a distinct category of production called "art" (paradoxically, problematically, and virtually ahistorically) provided the vehicle for Evans to make that claim. In the 1960s, when the practice of photography was very different and the nature of photographic history had solidified into a clearer story, Evans would tie the production of *American Photographs*—and its catalog—to a prestigious literary tradition, but the exhibition itself is emphatically anti-traditional and anti-literary, and even, because of Evans's rhetorical refusal of the institutions that supported him, anti-institutional.

Instead, the exhibition provided viewers with an experience of photography as a metaphor for an individual moving through space and took into account features of consciousness itself, such as repetition and doubling back; the unsteady nature of signs; and irregular, even eclipsed perspective. The independent, sentient body in motion was the exhibition's primary narrative instrument. Evans offered this experience in the interest of producing a narrative about traveling through America at a moment of momentous historical change—the Depression. Although the second structural polarity, the tense dislocation of the local for the national, is far too broad to accurately encapsulate the complex nature of historical change during the 1930s, its overreach does little to diminish the power of Evans's conceptualization of contemporary history and the power of photography to narrate historical change. In other words, the exhibition itself conveyed a narrative that covered both a national, historical transformation and an argument about the nature of photography.

Thus, *American Photographs* was an unusual exhibition, in its moment and historically. Unlike the catalog that accompanied the show, which contained a selection of 87 discrete images, mostly uniform in size and scale, each picture separated from its peers primarily by subject matter, then secondarily by white gutters and a blank facing page, the 100 photographs in the exhibition often repeated one another, very partially or nearly completely, and were presented in a variety of formats. Some were large, others quite small; some were matted and others were merely adhered to masonite and hung with no protective glazing.<sup>232</sup> A division in subject matter, "people" and "architecture" ordered the book, but was not the organizing principle for the exhibition. Rather, Evans chose clusters of related photographs and interspersed them through the exhibition space, as his photographs of the hang and related documents reveal.

Previously, our understanding of *American Photographs* as a project, and its historical legacy, has principally been based on our broad access to the exhibition's catalog, not least because in his later years Evans himself insisted on the literary nature of his achievement.<sup>233</sup> In contrast, one goal of this chapter is to reveal the historical and

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<sup>232</sup> See Appendix A for a list of works in the exhibition and Evans's documentation of the hang.

<sup>233</sup> For discussion of literary metaphor, see Evans's comments in Leslie Katz, "An Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March-April 1971), p. 84. Three key essays on *American Photographs*—by Alan Trachtenberg, Douglas Nickel, and Lew Andrews—follow roughly the same tack in their interpretation of the importance of the exhibition catalog. Trachtenberg, "A Book Nearly Anonymous," in

experiential specificity of the exhibition as opposed to its long-lived companion catalog, and to question the terms of the exhibition's success by refuting the show as *the* landmark event that brought Evans and his practice passively and permanently into the closed ranks of high modern art production. Although this general understanding has long been codified within studies of Evans's work and the history of photography as a fine art, the success and importance of the exhibition can be interpreted as one aspect of a long-term demonstration of Evans's commitment to modern art as a forum for interrogating the medium of photography and the nature of photographic labor.

The character of the modernism to which Evans aspired did not emerge as a passive process, but instead was a result of his actual working conditions throughout the decade. For Evans, to be a modern artist—as opposed to a documentary photographer, an employee—was to enjoy the freedom to organize his time and work life according to his own needs and wants, fully (if arguably) removed from the industrial model of salaried work that he had come to reject in principle, even if in practice his work life was dominated by commissions from large institutions, including MoMA. At the same time, the exhibition demonstrated Evans's thorough understanding of photography as a medium of representation that could easily be adapted for narrative purposes (far more so than documentary as a contained subject); for him, making photographs was an enterprise shot through with the characteristics of perception itself: unevenness, repetition, temporal and spatial compression, and plays of scale. Paradoxically, on both fronts, Evans cast his ballot for a model of modern art that was still in active formation at the museum.

In this chapter, I explore the following points in succession: First, that the American objects exhibited by MoMA in the late 1930s were often much more experimental, much more varied, and much less clearly related to modernism as we now understand it—a formal investigation into the terms of fine art production—than those in the museum's exhibitions of European painting and sculpture during the same period. This schism is at least partially a function of the museum's involvement in a broader cultural discourse about the usable past, but the consequence of the museum's investment, for Evans, was a professional situation that manifested itself as continuity between his different projects (at MoMA and elsewhere), such as his proposal to sell picture postcards anonymously in the museum's gift-shop, his documentary photographs of their African art exhibition, his own catalog and exhibition, and his peripheral involvement in the establishment of a picture collection of the New York Public Library. These projects seem radically incommensurate, given how bifurcated photography is now between commercial and fine arts practices, but in 1938 there was a commonly accepted level of continuity between them.

Instead, and second, the formal problems of movement and transformation that form the basis of the photographs discussed in the previous chapters appear in *American Photographs* under the renewed guise of repetition, juxtaposition and variation. Evans's formal choices for his exhibition specifically repudiated the description of the Depression on offer by the photo-journalism in magazines and newspapers, even those that he had fairly close ties to, like *Fortune*. His photographs do not merely represent the cultural effects of the Depression but also rehearse the difficulty of representing the nation in a

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*Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), pp. 231-285; Nickel, "American Photographs Revisited," *American Art* 6 (Spring 1992), pp. 79-97; Andrews, "Walker Evans's *American Photographs*: The Sequential Arrangement" *History of Photography* 18 (Autumn 1994), pp. 264-271.

time of transition. Evans's use of repeating images, unexpected juxtapositions and variations in the size of his prints function as a description of the social and economic transformation of the United States, which itself was occasioned by the economic crisis of the Depression. The description is not a direct transcription, as we usually take for granted in documentary photography, but cumulative. It relied on experiential as well as illustrative clues to suggest patterns of repetition and sameness in the landscape. The overall depiction is the breakdown of the regional economy and its substitution by a national economy of brands, logos, and the movement of capital. In this model, the concept of "American" in *American Photographs* takes on a somewhat murky cast.

With the exhibition, Evans made an important argument not just about the America on view in the photographs, but about the nature of photographic work. Evans's intention in planning the exhibition was to direct viewers around the gallery space as though he were directing them through the vast space of the United States. He pushed his viewers to see the world as though through the photographer's eyes, and reminded them repeatedly that they were looking at the world through the very specific eyes of a mobile, perceptive and patient photographer. One way he accomplished this strategy was to present photographs as objects as well as images. Although the show was not self-referential in terms of including subject matter that overtly referred to his own life, it was very self-referential in the sense that it described his footsteps, his gaze and his working processes. With *American Photographs*, Evans effectively announced that artistic freedom and autonomy were essential to his work. The force of his announcement is what Evans remembered in later years, when he characterized the exhibition as his "calling card" to the "established" world of modern artists and critics.<sup>234</sup>

Finally, although the exhibition and subsequent interpretation of the catalog have become the basis for Evans scholars to link up his photography with a larger theoretical investment in photography's ontological relationship to language, the idea of "reading" Evans's photographs as it has been developed thus far in critical literature depends almost entirely upon reading the *American Photographs* catalog at the expense of the exhibition itself.<sup>235</sup> Although the metaphor of "reading" Evans's photographs is closely associated with a late twentieth-century theoretical stance, one that reflects the difficulty of finding an adequate language for describing photographs, it has the significant limitation of becoming a highly determinant methodology (and one that is patently at odds with Evans's practice). The lesson to be gleaned from my historical analysis is that Evans's photographs, and *American Photographs* in particular, are highly valued for their usefulness within an intellectual tradition, but that what is lost in such a valuation is a clear understanding of the historical circumstances involved in their production.

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<sup>234</sup> Towards the end of his life, Evans himself contributed to the idea that the exhibition and catalog marked a clear line of distinction between the period before he "arrived," and the rest of his career. He discussed the issue directly in Paul Cummings, "Oral history interview with Walker Evans, Oct. 13-Dec. 23, 1971," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Transcript available online: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/evans71.htm>. Also see Trachtenberg's discussion of Evans's "establishment," in *Reading American Photographs*, p. 238.

<sup>235</sup> Trachtenberg, Nickel and Andrews all substitute the catalog for the exhibition in their analyses. An important resource, printed after each of those essays was published, is Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Abrams, 1995), which reproduces the original sequence of photographs in the exhibition, based on Evans's negatives of the hang, pp. 162-197.

## The Museum of Modern Art

Although Evans's 1930s career was deeply intertwined with the RA, MoMA played an important and consistent role in his early career. The museum itself was founded in New York City in 1929 by a group of wealthy collectors of mostly European modern and contemporary art. The founders were, primarily, Lillie Bliss (whose bequest of European paintings in 1933 formed the nucleus of the museum's permanent collection), Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Mary Quinn Sullivan. Together, they tapped A. Conger Goodyear to serve as the first board president, and very shortly thereafter filled out the board of trustees. The trustees hired Alfred Barr to run the new museum.<sup>236</sup> Before taking the position at MoMA, Barr had been a graduate student at Harvard and was part of the loose circle of young people in the United States trained in formalist art history and invested in contemporary art, which included Evans's close friend, Lincoln Kirstein. Barr and his friend Jere Abbott contributed to *Hound & Horn*, they were aware of the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art (the HSCA), and they traveled regularly to American galleries and European venues hospitable to contemporary art. Like Kirstein, who would be a key early supporter of MoMA both financially and through committee work but would eventually go on to found the New York City Ballet, and Abbott, who would work with Barr at MoMA during the early 1930s before leaving to become director of the Smith College Art Museum (an institution would later serve as a venue for *American Photographs*), many friends and colleagues from Harvard and the HSCA would be crucial to the young museum.

Many historians dealing with the early years of the museum, even tangentially, have generally taken for granted that modernism as a tendency, or Modernism as a stable category of production, was fully understood by the museum's early administrators and trustees, and that within their ranks there was some consensus about what that meant.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> See Goodyear's recitation of the founding of the museum in his *Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), p.14. See also Sybil Gordon Kantor's *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002). Chapter 6, "Modernism Takes its Turn in America" recounts the founding of MoMA quite scrupulously. I use her book for its excellent research, despite my conviction that Kantor's extreme sympathy towards Barr prompted her to over-emphasize his role in the establishment of the museum as well as to provide a more coherent intellectual history of the institution than I believe exists. An example of rhetoric I find arguable in Kantor's book: "From the beginning, he seemed to be preparing for a role without precedent. Although he belonged to a group of people going in the same direction, he was able to forge ahead because his passion was focused and his courage steadfast as he mapped a teleological course for modernism" (p. xxiii). In fact, one might argue that the fact that Barr was fired as director of the museum by its trustees in 1943 should seriously undermine encomiums about his steadfast leadership—his power was not secure.

<sup>237</sup> The history of MoMA is extremely well-documented, both by the museum's own former staff, as in the case of essays by Goodyear and James Thrall Soby, and from outside scholars with a broad range of interest. These works run the gamut from Kantor's biography of Barr, to Russell Lynes's gossipy *Good Old Modern*, to Mary Anne Staniszewski's book on the history of installations. See Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). MoMA's own recently published history is *Art for Our Time* (New York: MoMA, 2004). A recent dissertation on the MoMA during the 1930s that I draw from is Jennifer Marshall's "The Stuff of Modern Life: Materiality and Thingness in the Museum of Modern Art's *Machine Art Show, 1934*," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005. A general review of the artistic currents of the period with two chapters on MoMA is Joan Saab's *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Saab's focus, not surprisingly, is on MoMA's design exhibitions of American art. There are also several essays by art

In fact, this is only partially true. It *is* the case that Barr's skills and interests were steadily focused on modern European painting and sculpture, and the first trustees' collections were similarly concentrated. It is also the case that the museum's first efforts at showing modernist painting by Americans were not well received, either by the chairman of the board of trustees, Goodyear, or even by the general public. In his recounting of the second exhibition of American art in 1930-31, Goodyear wrote, "In general the show cannot be said to have been greeted with applause. One writer found it 'had the mediocre taste of \$.70 beef,' and another thought 'Many of the men who contribute to the entertainment have been set up, as it were, like tenpins, to be knocked over.'"<sup>238</sup> This evaluation by Goodyear is in contrast to his recitation of the high attendance figures and critical successes of the year's European exhibitions.

This pattern continued for some time. The museum had trouble successfully exhibiting working American painters and sculptors, even as other organizations, such as Kirstein's HSCA and Holger Cahill's Newark Museum, did not run aground with similar exhibitions. Alfred Stieglitz's gallery, An American Place (1929-1946), was an extremely prestigious local venue for American modernism, and Stieglitz's initial antipathy for MoMA may have negatively influenced the museum's relationship to the American modernists of the Stieglitz circle.<sup>239</sup> In 1934, Barr and the trustees hired Dorothy Miller (who later married Cahill) as Barr's assistant and an in-house expert on American art. The museum's first successful exhibitions of American art both reached back in time: in 1930 the museum exhibited *Homer, Ryder, Eakins* and in 1933 they exhibited *American Folk Art* (this exhibit was curated by Cahill, acting director of the museum while Barr took a yearlong leave of absence) and *American Sources of Modern Art*.<sup>240</sup> Miller and Barr apparently worked out a semi-formalized system even before Miller was hired, wherein contemporary painting and sculpture by American artists would be de-emphasized, but American production in other areas, such as photography, film, design and architecture would be permanent aspects of the museum's curatorial

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historians that overlap with these museum histories. Two important examples in terms of photography specifically are Douglas Crimp's "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject" (1981) Christopher Phillips's "Judgement Seat of Photography" (1982), both reprinted in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning / Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 3-12, 15-46. Phillips's essay evaluates the history of the photographs department at MoMA, starting with the 1935 hire of Beaumont Newhall as the museum's librarian, and later the first curator of photographs. His essay does not address Evans's 1938 exhibition, which was curated by Evans, not Newhall.

<sup>238</sup> Goodyear, p. 25.

<sup>239</sup> Stieglitz had been in business for some time by the time An American Place opened in 1929. His previous galleries, 291 and the Intimate Gallery, were dedicated to Modernism more generally and there Stieglitz showed the work of contemporary European artists. In many cases Stieglitz offered Europeans their first American exhibitions. Stieglitz's longstanding status in the art world, his abhorrence of institutions, and his decisive attitudes about its organization and hierarchies, was fundamentally incompatible with MoMA's mission, and he was largely alienated from the new organization. Stieglitz did, however, organize MoMA's 1936 exhibition of John Marin's work, but his stormy relationship with the museum prevented him from enjoying an exhibition of his own work there until 1943, or a sustained influence on the museum's curatorial programming. See Richard Whelan's biography of Stieglitz, *Alfred Stieglitz, A Biography: Photography, Georgia O'Keeffe, and the Rise of the Avant-Garde in America* (New York: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 521-522. On Stieglitz's marginalization at MoMA, see also John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 19-29.

<sup>240</sup> Goodyear, Appendix H, n.p.

mission.<sup>241</sup> Because photography was essentially regarded as part of the larger constellation of production that would be included in the museum's programming (even before the department was formally established in 1940), and because Kirstein was socially connected to the museum's earliest patrons and administrators, Evans's fate was connected to the museum from its inception. Still, the real money, interest and power at the museum were clearly tied up in European painting and sculpture.

It is highly plausible that there were several factors at play in this basic exhibitions schism at the museum that reflect administrative prerogatives and also illuminate broader aspects of modernism's reception in the United States. The first and most important factor in the museum's exhibition history was its founders' collections, and the expertise and interest of Barr, which was rooted in European art. Although American modern painting during the early 1930s found successful exhibition contexts at other institutions, the institutional tendency at MoMA was to seek out American objects that either reflected on the relationship of modernization and everyday life, as in design exhibitions, or on native vernacular aesthetic traditions, as in Cahill's folk art exhibit. A similar sort of bifurcation happened when the museum assembled its African art exhibition in 1936, in which such everyday objects as eating utensils were exhibited alongside ceremonial and sculptural objects.<sup>242</sup>

That MoMA could be simultaneously exclusionary about what precisely constituted modern art and yet highly catholic in its approach to design reflects a formative interpretation of modernism, one articulated by Goodyear. In the preface to his book he labored over an operative definition of the museum's commitment, concluding,

Here is a hint of one great basic virtue of modern art. It interprets to our eyes the daring and swiftness of life today, the energy and power that we have harnessed, the pattern that lies buried in our apparent confusion.<sup>243</sup>

Goodyear's apparent intention in this statement was to be blandly celebratory and to disqualify nothing that might be of value to his museum's well-being, but the chair's choice of words is revealing. The idea that modern art's role is to interpret modernization and, more specifically, to make manifest certain "buried" (or "subconscious") patterns, binds the production of art in the modern world to a very specific series of demands: that of mediating between modern life and its human subjects; that of revealing a hidden logic that dictates modernization; that of rendering the conditions of modern life into an aesthetically engaging object. In this case, speed—swiftness—is a key word, and reinforces the broader attunement to temporality that Evans knew well. The virtue of

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<sup>241</sup> Kantor, pp. 238-39. It is helpful to remember that the Whitney Studio Club, founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1918, became the Whitney Museum in 1931, with Julianna Force as its first director. That institution was dedicated to the collection and exhibition of painting and sculpture by living artists. The Whitney's collection and proximity to MoMA (its entrance was on West 54<sup>th</sup> Street from 1931 until 1966) may have factored into the acquisition and exhibition decisions at MoMA. MoMA founded its Industrial Design department in 1932, with Philip Johnson as its senior member.

<sup>242</sup> Evans was hired by Mabry to produce a master set of photographic records of the objects on view during the exhibition, and his photographs document the range of utility such objects had. His photographs do not provide a record of the exhibition design itself, nor is it discussed by Staniszewski. For the most exhaustive account of this project, see Virginia-Lee Webb, *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>243</sup> Goodyear, p. 12.

Goodyear's near-anthropological description—for his own purposes—is that it largely forces the burden of inventing modern art onto its local culture and suggests that modern life immediately reflects the state of modernization in its immediate context. No wonder, then, that MoMA's first decade of exhibitions reflected such variation and inconsistency of approach from continent to continent.<sup>244</sup>

As the 1930s wore on, it became more and more difficult to mount all-European loan exhibitions because of increasing tensions, and then war, in Europe. This did not immediately prevent the museum from offering its audiences a steady diet of modern European painted masterpieces. The museum was able to address museum-goers throughout the country via their elaborate touring-exhibition program, which at that time was the second-largest in the country next to American Federation for the Arts.<sup>245</sup> But it did force the museum to seek out American artistic production to fill out its exhibition calendar. The emphasis continued to be American “stuff” rather than American painting and sculpture, but the museum actively cultivated a fascinating dialogue between contemporary forms of production and much older American craft traditions.<sup>246</sup>

Thanks to the efforts of Lincoln Kirstein, Evans's work was immediately perceived as adaptable to this mission, which, to a certain extent, was bound up in a larger cultural discourse about “the usable past,” or the idea that contemporary American art must draw on the native traditions and culture of the United States. The quintessential example of this type of exhibition was the 1934 exhibition of Evans's photographs of nineteenth-century architecture in New England juxtaposed with Edward Hopper's paintings of architecture. The exhibition presented Evans with his first official connection to the museum, although it was already staffed by a number of his friends and contacts from the HSCA. As I discussed in the previous chapters, the exhibition showcased photographs of “Victorian” architecture that Evans took while traveling with Kirstein and John Wheelwright in eastern Massachusetts and the surrounding area in

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<sup>244</sup> Goodyear and the other trustees of MoMA at this point effectively broke rank with the circle of self-conscious modernists in New York—the Stieglitz circle—and defined the direction of the museum far outside the terms dictated by Paul Rosenfeld's *Port of New York* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924), the major previous articulation of American modernism and one that was closely associated with Stieglitz's influence and direction. Further, Goodyear's statement about the nature of modernism effectively depoliticized the term and drained the practice of modern art production from its relationship to patronage (and power). Given that Goodyear himself was a powerful patron, this move was not surprising, even though at the time of his writing, in 1943, two important textual accounts of modernism were in active circulation in New York, those by Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro.

<sup>245</sup> The Van Gogh exhibition of 1935, for instance, was a major cultural phenomenon and toured the United States in over ten venues, to huge audience acclaim. This exhibition is the subject of Steve Spence's essay, “Van Gogh in Alabama, 1936” which argues that Evans's work from 1935-36 must be understood in light of the “Van Gogh craze” sweeping the country. *Representations* no. 25 (Summer 2001), pp. 33-60.

<sup>246</sup> This basic schism was interpreted differently by Saab, who argues in *For the Millions* that at MoMA two contradictory impulses were at work during the 1930s, the first the impulse towards sacralizing modernism, and the second towards “desacralizing” it and using the powers of the museum to forge a closer connection between art and the American people. For Saab, the prominent role of industrial design in the museum's programming during the early 1930s is a sign not only of the museum's commitment to “tastemaking” but also of its commitment to conveying the ideas of modern art to a large and democratic public. Point taken, but Saab does not read the same schism between domestic and foreign objects that I do, arguing instead that the museum took American art very seriously in its moment. This is patently at odds with Goodyear's history, and forgoes a nuanced account of the ethnographic thrust of MoMA's programming.

April of 1931.<sup>247</sup> For the purposes of the exhibition, the paintings and photographs served as both records of passed American architectural traditions and as examples of contemporary art production. This project provides the first important example of Evans's involvement in the "usable past" discourse, although that discourse already played a role in the logic of the museum's American programs.

Despite the project's collaborative nature and its overall importance to Evans's own developing sense of the relationship between temporality and photographic practice, Kirstein took a characteristically out-sized degree of credit for the project, writing in his journal,

The Victorian houses that Jack Wheelwright and Walker Evans and I have been photographing are really remarkable. At least part of my life consists in filling up the ledger of the indigenous past, in recording these places, and in time [sic] which by accident and preference I know best.<sup>248</sup>

Kirstein's phrase, "ledger of the indigenous past," implies that for him the photographs were of interest because they preserved supposedly pure examples of the past, or the relics of the nineteenth century. It is curious that Kirstein is discussing homes that were (and he knew this) deliberately architecturally eclectic in their moment. His phrase "indigenous past" implies a willful lack of acknowledgement about the role of cosmopolitanism in American architecture generally, even though many of the buildings they photographed are vernacular. Although it would be a mistake to put too fine a point on this matter, Kirstein was part of a generation of young and intellectual social elites for whom American history was something to be mined and ever so slightly condescended to, as is typically the case with the modernist mania for primitivism, no matter how deeply felt the enthusiasm for remote people or their culture.

Kirstein subsequently gave one hundred of these pictures to the Museum of Modern Art, and thus guaranteed them a place next to the Hopper paintings in the 1933 exhibition calendar (and himself a memorable essay on the subject in the Museum's *Bulletin*).<sup>249</sup> A few examples from that series seem to cohere precisely to Kirstein's formulation, such as the iconic photograph of the façade of a house in Nyack, New York

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<sup>247</sup> The best written accounts of this trip were undoubtedly made by Kirstein, who also identified the architecture by the historically dubious adjective "Victorian." Unfortunately, for many years his diaries were off-limits to researchers while Martin Duberman prepared a Kirstein biography. James Mellow published sections of the diaries in his biography of Evans, however, and Jeff L. Rosenheim generously shared his own notes on the diaries with me. Mellow quoted Kirstein at length. See *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp.136-138. In a section in which he discussed the practical accommodations the group had to make, Kirstein touched on the relationship of photography to time, writing, "I felt like a surgeon's assistant to Walker. Cleaning up after him, and he a surgeon operating on the fluid body of time. Some satisfaction in exhausting a given locale of its definite formal atmosphere—so rich, exuberant, gracious and redolent of a distinguished past." Kirstein, *Kirstein diary* (1931), p. 264. New York Public Library Performing Arts Division. Reprinted in Mellow, p. 137.

<sup>248</sup> Kirstein, *Kirstein diary* (1931), p. 265. New York Public Library Performing Arts Division. Reprinted in Mellow, p. 137. It is certainly the case that Kirstein was present when Evans was taking the photographs, and he was also one of the instigators of the trip and a generally motivating force for Evans during his early career. It is difficult to ascertain, however, what role Kirstein took in identifying sites to photograph.

<sup>249</sup> Kirstein, "Walker Evans' [sic] Photographs of Victorian Architecture," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 1, no. 4 (Dec. 1933), n.p.

or the water pump in Kennebunk, Maine (Figs. 85-86), in which the photographs, each taken from a slightly oblique angle, present each house as a curio, something that unavoidably gestures towards another time by virtue of being encapsulated by its own idiosyncrasy.

The majority of the photographs from the series, though, do not cohere to Kirstein's summary interpretation, or to his idea, however poetic, that the houses "seem to disintegrate between snaps of the lens."<sup>250</sup> The majority of the photographs in the MoMA collection are more accurately represented by Evans's *Greek House, Dedham, Massachusetts* (Fig. 87), in which the home was partially converted into an insurance office, and in which the viewer can see the tops of cars parked on the street. In another photograph from the series, *Greek House, Somerville, Mass.* (Fig. 88), Evans focused his attention on a single "Greek" building, undoubtedly converted from a nineteenth-century home into a Public Library, as signage suggests. Evans included in the composition an adjacent tree and telephone pole, forcing an unsubtle comparison of two vertical forms, one natural and the other a sign of modernization and the accommodation of the urban landscape to its industrial infrastructure. Viewers can see the tops of other houses in the background, suggesting the presence of a dense suburban neighborhood. In this photograph, as in Figure 87, Evans clearly understood these buildings not as shells or elegies to time gone by, but as signs of the constant re-adaptation of public spaces. Further, in *Valentine House (1851) Cambridge*, Evans photographed a large single-family antebellum home from the perspective of the driveway, notably in use by 1930 as a place to park the car (Fig. 89). Overall, the photographs document the re-use of houses, their transformation and accommodation under new circumstances.

The series invokes temporality acutely, but it does so in order to suggest points of connection between the past and the present, rather than to elegize or "damn with faint praise" nineteenth-century American architecture. In light of the presence of the contemporary world in these photographs, a wide gap begins to open up between Kirstein's various musings on the "airless nostalgia" of the photographs and Evans's own explicit formulation of photographic temporality as a kind of telescoping, which he published in *Hound & Horn* in 1931: "Suddenly there is a difference between a quaint evocation of the past and an open window looking straight down a stack of decades."<sup>251</sup> The ambition to make past and present touch in space via the mechanism of the camera, as Evans described it here, characterizes much of his photographic practice throughout his career.

Evans was not alone in his early efforts to think through the relationship between photography, place and the passing of time. As early as 1930, Evans made contact with Berenice Abbott, another young documentary photographer in New York. Abbott spent much of the 1920s in Paris, but in 1929 returned to the United States, partly because she saw opportunities for herself in New York both in terms of professional opportunities and the rich subject matter of the United States, and also because she had recently purchased, with the art dealer Julien Levy, the recently deceased Eugène Atget's archive of prints and negatives. Abbott introduced Evans to Atget's work in depth, as she published *The World of Atget*, a book Evans praised in his 1931 essay for *Hound & Horn*. In general, Abbott had a much rockier relationship with MoMA than Evans did, but, like Evans, she

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5, no. 1 (October-December 1931), p. 126.

conceived of photography as intervening in time and both artists were influenced by the example of Atget's work in the streets of Paris.<sup>252</sup> Further, at this time both were motivated by a shared perception that within the basic architectural forms that give shape to cities and towns is a narrative about history itself. So aligned were their early investigations that shortly after Evans's roadtrip with Kirstein and Wheelwright, Abbott traveled to cities along the mid-Atlantic region with the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, also making photographs of architecture.<sup>253</sup> Abbott's continued attention to the relationship between architecture, history, and the built environment of the city would lead first to her solo exhibition in 1934 of city photographs at the newly opened Museum of the City of New York, and then in 1939 to the publication of her major work, a book entitled *Changing New York*.<sup>254</sup>

Both Abbott's and Evans's attitudes towards temporality, as well as the museum's exhibition schedule in the early 1930s, reflect period pre-occupations with the concept of the "usable past," a phrase coined by the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks in a 1918 essay in the literary journal *The Dial* that became extremely important to artists, writers and arts administrators during the 1930s. In "On Creating a Useable Past," he argued that American writers and thinkers are too committed to everyday practicality and the slavish recounting of history, making them overly encumbered by their own nation's lack of "cumulative culture."<sup>255</sup> For Brooks, American history and its recitation by historians forces writers into practicality as though into a corner, making them produce dull literature. The future for them lay in re-energizing their work by mining the "usable past," a cultural repository that is a force of invention as much as anything else. Brooks wrote,

The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value. But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it conceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? . . . The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens of itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choices.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> On Abbott's relationship to Atget, and Atget's influence on American photographers of the 1930s, see the introduction to Terri Weissman, "Documentary Photography and Communicative Action: The Realisms of Berenice Abbott," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2006. pp. 1-25. Evans discussed *The World of Atget* approvingly in his 1931 *Hound & Horn* essay.

<sup>253</sup> The photographs from that project became the basis of the 1934 exhibition at Wesleyan University Hitchcock organized entitled *The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties: American Cities Before the Civil War*. See Janine A. Mileaf, *Constructing Modernism: Berenice Abbott and Henry-Russell Hitchcock*, exh. cat. (Middletown, Conn.: Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, 1993).

<sup>254</sup> Bonnie Yochelson provides an exhaustive account of Abbott's career during the 1930s in her introduction to a comprehensive republication of *Changing New York* issued by the Museum of the City of New York. See Yochelson, introduction to *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: New Press and Museum of the City of New York, 1997), pp. 9-34. One point that falls beyond Yochelson's purview is that effectively Abbott's close relationship with MCNY during the 1930s echoed Evans's close relationship with MoMA (consequently, the relative fortunes of the two institutions has had a dramatic effect on the posthumous reputations of both artists; while MoMA has become one of the most powerful museums in the world, MCNY has struggled, sometimes literally in recent years, to keep the lights on).

<sup>255</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918), pp. 337-341.

<sup>256</sup> Brooks, p. 339.

Brooks's intentions in the essay itself were fairly clear: both his generation and his general inclination were geared towards the elimination of parochial Victorianism—and what he regarded as primness—and the entrenchment of a more adventurous American literary practice. Still, the essay caught the imagination of a generation of young artists and critics because it proposed that America might actually have a cultural patrimony worth mythologizing (and that the myths themselves might have a generative effect on American arts and letters). This idea, still relatively daring within intellectual circles, took hold as these same Americans watched Europe struggle to recover from World War I, and then, in the 1930s, descend again into the chaos of political unrest and war. If Europe could not be the bastion of western art and culture, the logic went, American history would start to matter in new ways.

For the next 24 years, until the publication of Alfred Kazin's 1942 review of American literature, *On Native Grounds*, literary critics would make similar arguments, although the historian Alfred Haworth Jones has demonstrated that the enthusiasm for the "usable past" showed itself during the decade *before* Brooks's essay. Haworth Jones also noted that there is a significant transformation of the concept between the radicalizing tendency Brooks suggested and the far more conservative efforts to mine American history that characterized its use in the 1930s.<sup>257</sup> Haworth Jones's point was that in the 1930s the concept went from the exhortation to intellectual adventurism to the search for an identifiable set of traditions, usually regional, that suggested stability and permanence as the basis of American culture—such stability stood in pointed contrast to European upheaval. The "usable past" concept in operation in the 1930s had a catch-all utility: it served Holger Cahill in his capacity as the head of the Federal Arts Project as a mode of exhorting artists to mine local traditions in their FAP-sponsored artworks, but it also played into the leftist intellectual effort to bolster representational art in the mid-1930s.<sup>258</sup> Kazin's book, representing the tale end of this critical arc, did not exhort writers to mine the usable past but evaluated their efforts to do so, and thus attempted to define the character of critical literature that permeated all forms of cultural production.<sup>259</sup>

In his final chapter, Kazin provided a thoroughgoing account of how photography figured into the idea of the "usable past" as it flowed through literary and intellectual circles in the 1930s. Kazin began the essay by discussing the flourishing of reportage-style literature and criticism during the 1930s, and quickly narrowed in on the relationship between photography and writing. He explicitly focused on photography as an idea as much as a practice, and referred to the ascendance of the "idea of

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<sup>257</sup> Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (Dec. 1971), pp. 710-724. Haworth Jones writes, "Not only the motives which drove American writers during the Depression to rediscover their national heritage differed from those of the prewar generation. In its substance, too, the past which they recovered was unique. . . . They undertook to recover the traditional values and principles which the national experience had validated. Unlike the Young Radicals, the generation which turned to history during the 1930s was preoccupied with the tested and the permanent," pp. 717-18.

<sup>258</sup> This may be because it implied that familiarity itself was a positive value. Warren Susman's essays on this topic offer a crucial historical account, "The Culture of the Thirties" (1983) and "Culture and Commitment" (1973), in *Culture as History* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), pp. 150-210.

<sup>259</sup> Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Literature* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995), p. 497. First published by Viking Books in 1941.

photography.”<sup>260</sup> He acknowledged that some photographs, such as those by Evans himself, actually defy the simplistic contemporary use of photography. Still, the notion that photographs were eclipsing language as the primary mode of description during the Depression was his central argument in evaluating the “literature of crisis,” or writing during the Depression. The explosion of photography formed what Kazin called a “vivid storehouse of impressions,” which corresponded perfectly to the “vast storehouse of facts” (two phrases that appear on the same page) that typified the period. Kazin labored to characterize the different approaches to registering the social landscape which dominated journalism, literature and criticism of the period. He developed several strands of this argument that fit together somewhat clunkily, but which basically constitute the rationale and consequences for his larger assertion that photography is *the* descriptive language of its moment. The first and most important thread of his argument was that photographs were the medium of the masses, and of mass culture generally. The emergence of photography as a primary medium of description was closely linked to its mass appeal, and to its ability—unique in history—to describe the concept of mass culture through its descriptive thinness, its objectivity, its exclusive focus on surfaces and its speed of execution. Second, the crisis literature of the thirties revealed a wide (if not deep) interest in contemporary history and in regional culture and bespoke a desire among Americans to claim a distinctive cultural history and patrimony. Third, Americans’ interest in their own culture and in the “crisis literature” of the period, was not just a result of these internal pressures. Instead, American appetites were made keener because of a shared perception that their culture was dissolving in the face of the failure of American capitalism. Further, they worried that such as dissolution would be doubly disastrous as the United States was poised to become the repository of western culture as fascism destroyed traditional forms of culture in Europe.<sup>261</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Evans and Kazin would know one another personally through shared connections in New York’s small publishing world, but there is no evidence that they knew one another in the early 1930s. Kazin’s evaluative response to the usable past concept would encompass Evans’s work with James Agee on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (published 1941) but would not directly address either his earlier

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<sup>260</sup> Kazin, pp. 488-89.

<sup>261</sup> Kazin’s essay contained echoes of Sigfried Kracauer’s essay entitled “Photography” (1927) in Thomas Levin, trans. and ed., *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47-63. One signature moment of that essay was when Kracauer—who, like Kazin, was concerned primarily although not exclusively with the press photograph—described photographic detail as “snow” (p. 51). The metaphor was meant to describe the way that the detail crammed into the surface of the photograph made it impossible for photographs to demonstrate a hierarchy of value through purely internal means (this is the near opposite to Roland Barthes’s concept of the *punctum*, as articulated in his *Camera Lucida* (1980), which effectively organizes the photograph in terms of its affective value). Kracauer’s concern with photographs was that they are the visual equivalent to historicism rather than history, which constituted, for him, an untenable ethical position. I imagine that Kazin’s 1941 text constituted at least an indirect response to Kracauer, whose ideas would have been readily available to Kazin in New York through shared social connections, even if the text itself proved elusive (I do not know that it was). Kazin’s response to the idea that a photograph offers mere information, “snow,” is fascinating because it returns again to the concept of the usable past and accepts it not as a period trope but also as an ethical position. He writes, “[In] that signal literature of empiricism which embodies the failure of so many to discriminate between the pen and the camera, between the need for the past and the comforting surface of that past, is the record of what most deeply interested the contemporary imagination. Here, in this body of writing, is evidence of how deeply felt was the urge born of the crisis to recover America *as an idea*.” Kazin, 498.

Victorian architecture project or *American Photographs*. Still, his assessment bears weight on Evans's work through the decade and is particularly instructive in its wavering sensibility about the narrative potential of photographs: on the one hand, Kazin saw photography as a primary mode of description; on the other, Kazin regarded this development not fully as a cause for celebration. Still, he articulated the stakes for a critical photographic practice that would not merely provide a blanket description of America in crisis but would instead produce a narrative account of contemporary history. Those stakes were consonant with Evans's practice, wherein an argument about medium was the essential precursor to his meditation on America. Although Kazin's critical account followed the exhibition by five years, *American Photographs* constituted a demonstration of the narrative authority of the photographer as well as an historical account of the Depression.

*On Native Grounds* moved far beyond the often facile approach to the usable past concept that was current in New York in the 1930s, which sometimes seems to imply a period enthusiasm for all things American (and which dovetailed, in practice if not in theory, with colonial revivalism). For instance, the embrace of the "usable past" for some young Americans in the 1930s was tied up in the impassioned return to the United States for many who had traveled to Europe in the 1920s—as Abbott had done. Evans likely knew Malcolm Cowley's 1934 memoir, *Exile's Return*, which addressed the experience of Americans in France during the twenties and was an influential work among his urban artistic and intellectual milieu.<sup>262</sup> Cowley described the feeling of urgency amongst his peers to return to the United States at the end of that decade and to turn towards American culture to seek out native forms of expression. This exact issue must have been a conversation for Evans and friends like Abbott, whose return to New York in 1929 after nearly a decade in Paris was explicitly bound up with her desire to engage the United States.<sup>263</sup> Although he was a generation younger and a good deal wealthier than the 1920s expatriates Cowley described, Kirstein too traveled back and forth to Western Europe but invested himself in projects like his investigation into Victorian architecture.

Although being socially connected to those most invested in the "usable past" does not imply a shared mission, the concept itself mattered for Evans's practice because of its cultural pervasiveness, as well as because documentary photography as a genre developed within the larger social engagement with the "usable past." Photography provided the motivation for much of the cultural production on the "American scene" during the 1930s and made that scene not just tenable but necessary as subject matter. Further, Evans realized that the rhetoric of the usable past extended to MoMA, where contemporary understanding of American modernism in particular rested on several interlocking assumptions about universal modernism, as articulated by Goodyear: first, that vernacular American art production did constitute a "usable past" *par excellence*; second, that the vernacular production was characterized by its relationship to everyday

<sup>262</sup> Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the Twenties* (New York: Viking Books, 1934).

<sup>263</sup> See Hank O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982), p. 14. O'Neal quotes an undated interview (probably between O'Neal and Abbott in preparation for the publication of the book) in which Abbott, in the course of explaining her distance from the Stieglitz circle, said, "To judge America by European standards is foolish and a mistake. There was a new urgency here, for better or worse. America had new needs and new results. There was poetry in our crazy gadgets, our tools, our architecture. They were our poems ...."

life; and finally, that modernization itself, the rational order and design of factories, and the fast, urban pace of everyday life fed American modernism's most unique cultural expressions. In order for artists and writers to formulate a modernism that would be adequate to the actual conditions of American modernity, they had to look backwards and seek out the kinds of art, the patterning and formal qualities that fed most readily into contemporary ideas about the culture that under-girded modernization.

The "usable past" was undoubtedly both useful and active, but the exhibition schedule at MoMA cannot be understood as the elaboration of an articulate theory. The dual emphases on contemporary American design (including photography) and on nineteenth-century design reflect the effects of the concept, but do not constitute a complete institutional priority or prerogative. I also do not wish to collapse discourses surrounding design, literature and photography, although such a collapse is not completely inaccurate historically; the discourse of the usable past slipped from its original context in American literary criticism into larger discourses surrounding the arts in the United States during the 1930s and in the process took on a range of different valences which were adapted to a greater or lesser extent by artists of Evans's generation (and the institutions that supported them). Although the rhetoric of the usable past is part of the story of MoMA's relationship to Evans and to American modernism, it would be an error to bind Evans, his peers, or the museum to the concept too tightly. One important reason is that photography was unevenly implicated, as the Victorian architecture exhibition demonstrated. Cameras made historical records, and photographs could be pressed into service as such, but photographs and photographers occupied a range of positions vis-à-vis modern art: artifact, documentary record, and contemporary art on the one hand; artist and worker on the other.

These multiple uses of photographs and multiple identities of photographers were characteristic of the entire decade, and Evans's movement between different roles was not unusual (even if his response to it was). Instead, Evans's projects at MoMA throughout the decade suggest a fluid movement between the identity of artist and contract employee that he experienced from 1933 to 1938. The Victorian Architecture show and *American Photographs* were two of four major instances in which Evans worked closely with or for the museum during the 1930s, in addition to participating in two group exhibitions, *Fantastic Art, Surrealism and Dada* in 1936 and in *Photography 1839-1937*, a survey of the medium organized by Newhall, whose official role at MoMA until 1938 was as the museum's librarian. For that last project, Evans was asked to not only to include his own photographs, but also to make prints of Civil War negatives from the Mathew Brady studio.<sup>264</sup> In the summer of 1935, Mabry, then the executive director of MoMA, hired Evans to take photographs of the individual objects in the museum's "African Negro Art" exhibition, and to print them in five series for African-American colleges. The quality of these prints is in many cases very high—they were clearly made to last.<sup>265</sup> The following year, Mabry again struck a deal with Evans (this before the

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<sup>264</sup> Mellow, pp. 351-354.

<sup>265</sup> This project was organized by Mabry, who arranged for the five portfolios of photographs to go to African-American colleges for educational purposes. Mabry had a demonstrable commitment to African-American higher education: after he graduated from Vanderbilt's English department in 1930, he taught at Fisk University, an African-American school in Nashville, which became nationally accredited in 1930. This move had a detrimental effect on his relationship with his Agrarian mentors at Vanderbilt, such as Allan Tate. See Webb, pp. 13-46.

African sculpture project was completed) to produce a collection of photographs based on his own negatives suitable for postcards to sell in the museum's shop. In the latter case in particular, Evans as an employee precisely straddled the divide between contract employee and artist producing work-for-hire.

The postcard project is particularly instructive: its prospects collapsed in 1937 or early 1938 after Evans, Goodyear and Mabry failed to come to an agreement about the terms by which the postcards would be produced. In 1936, Evans and Mabry had corresponded about the possibility of Evans producing a series of postcards for the museum gift shop and Mabry produced an advance for Evans on this basis. Evans was interested in the smallness, portability, and relative anonymity of the postcard, and had a large collection of his own.<sup>266</sup> At some point during 1937 or early 1938, however, it became clear to Evans that this was not a commercially viable project. In order to repay his advance for the postcard project, Evans made a gift of 25 photographs to MoMA, including five printed on postcard stock.<sup>267</sup> Although the postcard project was a failure, his gift became an eventual catalyst for *American Photographs*.

When Mabry secured funding for the postcard project, Evans began producing unique prints of his large-format negatives on postcard stock. By comparing two of the postcards he produced with the negatives they were made from and a subsequent print also made from that negative, the postcards emerge as unique compositions that withstand the challenge (a significant one, given the blocky rectangular shape of conventional negatives) of a severe rectilinear format. Interestingly, he did not miniaturize the full exposure in order to accommodate the template of the postcard. Instead, he printed sections of larger negatives, effectively retrofitting their compositions, as in [*Savoy Barber Shop, Vicksburg, Mississippi*] (Fig. 67), a postcard made from the same Vicksburg barbershop negative as [*Barbershops, Vicksburg, Mississippi*] (Fig. 1). The postcard version isolates the man on the left as its sole subject and turns what is essentially a horizontal composition into a vertical. A similar movement is afoot in Evans's *Penny Picture Display* postcard, in which the completed grid of penny portraits in the large-scale photograph, *Penny Picture Display, Savannah*, is transformed in the postcard into a more abstracted vignette—one of indeterminate size (Figs. 42 and 90). Although Evans was interested and enthusiastic about photographs that seemed anonymous through their openness and simplicity, his postcards are notably particular and individualized, and compositionally independent. Further, the photographs have an obdurate strangeness to them and are uniformly non-idyllic. Instead, as in the photographs of the single man seated against a white wall and the indeterminate row of

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<sup>266</sup> These postcards, numbering around 9,000, were collected by Evans throughout his life and carefully organized by the photographer himself according to subject category. The collection is now part of his archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MMA/WEA 1994.264.1-111. For the correspondence with Mabry, see MMA / WEA 1994.250.72. Of particular interest—and amusement—is Mabry's exasperation with Evans for working slowly. On November 27, 1936, he urged Evans to work more quickly on the postcard project, writing, "You are so slow that we will all be dead before anything gets started." This episode has been discussed in print by Jeff L. Rosenheim in his essay for the *Walker Evans* exhibition catalog, "'The Cruel Radiance of What Is,' Walker Evans and the South," (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), p. 85. Recently, Rosenheim has published another book that reproduces many postcards from Evans's collection. See *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (Göttingen: Steidl in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

<sup>267</sup> MoMA acquisition numbers 404.1938.1-25.

smiling faces in the penny portraits, the postcards read as partial compositions—as though the goal was to declare that the eventual recipient of the card was literally missing out.

Postcard stock is not a particularly valuable printing material, and Evans clearly relished the prospect of mixing genres: each photograph was printed individually on paper meant for mass distribution. Although there were certainly administrative gripes between Evans and Goodyear, the project failed because Evans could not and did not make the postcard project successful on a large scale; he could not satisfactorily resolve the tension between anonymity as a general pictorial principle and the uniqueness, or individual authority, of each print. The postcard project may have been declared officially null at MoMA because Evans's method of production made it impossible to manufacture the prints in large numbers, but it was conceptually inconceivable at that scale as well. Evans could not straddle the divide between producing a useful product, the postcard, and a more carefully and individually authored fine art object.

Despite this moment of irresolution, if Evans's two hats at MoMA for much of the thirties are representative of the flexibility of photography's place in that institution, so too is his relationship to the New York Public Library, which promoted Romana Javitz to head of its newly-established picture collection in 1929.<sup>268</sup> Javitz spent much of the 1930s building up the picture collection of the NYPL. The picture collection, as it was conceived then and as it stands now, is a lending collection of photographs, some culled from magazines or newspapers, others from books de-accessioned by the library's collection or purchased for their photographs, and still others original prints. The intention of the collection was to teach the public how to read visual images and was very much in the spirit of philosopher John Dewey's belief that people should be educated in art. However lofty its goals, the library founded its picture collection as a response to the high number of requests it received for pictures of specific subject matter.<sup>269</sup> Javitz was democratic in her approach to the picture collection, taking photographs from mass media publications and from working photographers such as Evans, and adventurous in her loan policies: while Evans's friend Jay Leyda worked with Sergei Eisenstein in Russia, Javitz sent him many prints from the collection for long-term loan without a word of complaint or concern.<sup>270</sup> Evans and Ben Shahn were part of a loose circle of photographers in touch with Javitz, and in Evans's archive there are negatives of photographs he took of at least one of her public exhibitions of library material, an adult version of the traditional children's alphabet display, replete with images of gas masks and skeletons (instead of, for instance, geese and snowflakes).

Douglas Crimp, in an essay on the subject entitled "The Library's Old/The Museum's New Subject," critiqued Javitz's successor, Julia van Haften for her work of removing photographs from books and re-classifying them within the library's division of prints and photographs, which was a model (although Crimp does not address this) van

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<sup>268</sup> On Javitz see Anthony Troncale "Worth Beyond Words: Romana Javitz and The New York Public Library's Picture Collection," *Biblion* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1995), pp. 115-136, and Julia van Haften and Anthony Troncale, *Subject Matters: Photography, Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library*, exh. pamphlet (NYPL, 1998), n.p.

<sup>269</sup> Troncale, p. 115.

<sup>270</sup> See letters Javitz to Leyda, 1934-35. Romana Javitz correspondence file in the Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Papers, Tamiment Archive and Library, New York University, New York.

Haafteen borrowed directly from Javitz in her establishment of the picture collection.<sup>271</sup> The problem, for Crimp, was that this act demonstrated an attempt to “re-write” the history of photography as a fine art instead of contextualizing it as part of the history of writing, literature and information. Crimp’s argument against van Haafteen’s actions was that she was creating a false sense of linear history to a multi-faceted, multi-directional history of photographs, and thus producing art out of images that were intended to function as information. In fact, the library during the 1930s, and even through mid-century, had a robust hierarchy of value that privileged prints, paintings and rare books, and it reinforced its hierarchy aggressively through the publication of its *Bulletin* and the allocation of space and resources in its main building. Javitz, however, operated from the decidedly low-end of the scale, and the letters in her archive indicate that she often felt embattled and belittled for her comparatively democratic ambition of creating a lending picture library. She took photographs out of books not in order to elevate their status or value, but to make them available for lending and for a new, and to her vitally important, form of public education. According to library historian Anthony Troncale, the chief borrowers were at first theaters, advertising agencies, publishing companies and fashion houses, but increasingly under Javitz’s tenure they were foreign immigrants seeking illustrations of aspects of American culture.<sup>272</sup>

Javitz provided a context in New York for photographs and photographers to be collected in a *relatively* non-hierarchical, free-for-all atmosphere by operating with a clear mission of teaching “visual literacy,” a concept entirely in keeping with philosopher John Dewey’s ideal of public education.<sup>273</sup> Evans’s relationship with the library was long; he clearly found Javitz’s program engaging. He had worked at NYPL during the mid-1920s for a brief time (in the map library), and in the mid-1930s described in his diary spending time, often with Ben Shahn, in the reading rooms. Under Javitz’s direction the library eventually bought a number of Evans’s photographs from his 1933 trip to Cuba and his work in the American south from 1935-37. Also during Javitz’s tenure, the NYPL took in a near-complete duplicate set of FSA file photographs in the early 1940s, when the program was abolished and Stryker feared for the fate of the negatives. (The original project prints had not yet entered the Library of Congress, and the transfer to the NYPL was a secret. Javitz used them in the Picture Collection for a time but eventually took them out of circulation. The photographs have only recently been cataloged by NYPL’s Photographs Department.<sup>274</sup>)

Evans was part of a moment in which photographs could be many things to many people and institutions, including documentary records, educational instruments, advertising props, and so forth, and so it follows that photographers occupied different

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<sup>271</sup> Crimp, p. 7.

<sup>272</sup> Troncale, pp. 115, 122. One fascinating twist to the story that Troncale relates is Javitz’s unusual call-slip system, in which patrons who could not describe their requests in English were asked to draw a picture representing their request.

<sup>273</sup> See John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897) and *Art as Experience* (1934), as quoted by Trachtenberg in *Reading American Photographs*, p. 192-193.

<sup>274</sup> Troncale, p. 130, got his information from Javitz’s interview with Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, which accounts for the imprecise dating of the transfer. See Doud, “Interview with Romana Javitz” (Feb. 23, 1965), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Reel 3949. The current cataloging project information comes from Stephen Pinson, curator of photographs, NYPL, in telephone conversation with the author, April 2006.

roles in society. And yet at that same moment, the distinctions between these roles were still in flux, so Evans found himself occupying multiple roles at once, especially in his relationship with institutions like MoMA. Despite the obvious benefits this lack of definition afforded him as he sought to make a living during the Depression, the rest of this chapter will examine Evans's response to his situation, which was characterized by his aggressive refusal (in principle if not in practice) to be "staff photographer," in favor of the identity of "art photographer." To a certain extent he was successful: in 1938, *American Photographs* conferred recognition upon Evans as an independent artist on the basis of his previous work. But his effort at self-determined independent work also met resistance that year, when his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship for a second trip across the country to make photographs of unspecified subjects was denied. (He received the award two years later, in 1940.) Evans was evasive about his intentions in his application, and it is probably the case that one of the reasons he was turned down was that his former boss, Roy Stryker, served as one of Evans's references, in addition to Barr, Kirstein, Cahill and Harry Hopkins of the Federal Arts Project.<sup>275</sup> Stryker wrote an unfavorable letter. In it, he was blunt: he agreed with Evans's other referees about the high quality and great interest of Evans's photographs, but warned the committee that Evans worked hardest and best when his assignment was clearly articulated and the parameters of a project were defined in advance, preferably by a third party. He cited the success of the Hale County project as an example.<sup>276</sup> Stryker may have been merely expressing his own longstanding hostility towards Evans for what he (Stryker) perceived as his employee's foot-dragging when given too much freedom in the field. This is almost assuredly the case in part, but Stryker also seems to have genuinely felt that the structure, time-frame, and collaborative nature of the *Fortune* project were the magical combination that yielded the finest photographs of the young artist's life. In other words, as difficult an employee as Evans was, according to Stryker, his best work was that produced within a defined structure of employment.

In the final paragraph of his long letter, Stryker put his cards on the table and clearly expressed the rupture that underlay contemporary photography:

Mr. Evans suffers a great deal from a feeling that he is misunderstood and that he is not recognized as the artist he feels he is. This of course ties in to the controversy of which you are more conscious than I—"photography as art." I

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<sup>275</sup> Evans's statement of intention was in two parts. First, he wanted to continue work on the tenant farmer project in the expectation of a book on the subject. He wrote, "There would be between one hundred and two hundred pictures made to follow a prepared scenario, the outlines of which cannot be drawn here...." Second, he wanted to work on a second independent project based in New York, and described it in summary, "[A] photographic project undertaken in New York upon the general subject of metropolitan social analysis, aiming to produce non-tendentious contemporary history in pictures." In the statement that accompanied his application he wrote, "The nature of the work is not readily describable in words, and the direction it may take is unpredictable." See Walker Evans, Fellowship Application for 1938, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, New York. Photocopy of the application in author's personal files, courtesy of the foundation.

<sup>276</sup> Stryker's recommendation precisely contradicted the terms of Evans's application, and must have been disastrous to the success of the application as a whole. He wrote, "My point here is that Evans does his best photography when he is under a certain amount of pressure, and in an area where he recognizes certain limits in advance." See Stryker's "Confidential Report on Candidate," in Walker Evans's Fellowship Application for 1938, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, New York. Photocopy of the application in author's personal files, courtesy of the foundation.

think he would be much better off if he [recognized] that he is one of the few who are competent to make a great contribution in the documentary field, and forget about this controversy. It is perhaps this conflict which is accountable for a trait which some of us have regretted in Evans—a seeming inertia and a slowness in “getting going.”<sup>277</sup>

Reading this statement, it is hard not to feel sympathy for Stryker, who had, after all, acted as Evans’s boss between 1935 and 1937 and suffered, one imagines, no end of headaches during that time. Yet his response to Evans’s proposal underscores the differences between the two men vis-à-vis the place of photography within the larger world. Stryker used his opportunity to speak candidly (and privately) to make the case that Evans was better off working for someone, making photographs that reflected a pre-defined structure and purview, which he implied was the opposite of the “photography as art” model. Evans’s request was for funding that would allow him to duck out of the employment model of production entirely, and the case he made was that as a photographer he could tell a more coherent story if he did not have to answer to a boss.

Up until this point I have focused on demonstrating that Evans’s multiple employment situations were a product of the relative flexibility of institutions like MoMA and NYPL to photography’s position somewhat outside the hierarchy of art production. Yet the debate Stryker mentions, “photography as art,” has bearing here. The logic of institutional modernism in the American context required that photographs and their makers straddle numerous professional and artistic divides, so clear division was impossible, and for most people, not particularly important. Stryker, however, had a great deal to gain in his own professional life from the irresolution of the art/not-art dichotomy, and here brought up the already ancient debates about photography-and-art in order to criticize Evans’s irresponsibility.<sup>278</sup> For Stryker, the continued viability and stability of the concept of documentary, independent of modern art, was an ambition on philosophical and professional grounds. As a Progressivist, Stryker believed in the independent role of photography in education; as a bureaucrat, Stryker was defensive of the need for continued budget appropriations. There is no doubt that Evans was a difficult employee, but blaming his professional tardiness exclusively on his pretensions to art overstated the continued viability of an old dichotomy. In reality, Evans traversed a high-low trajectory during the 1930s, particularly at MoMA, because of an existing openness in the institution to the forms that American modernism might take and because of a widespread irresolution about the place of photographs and photographers within American institutions like MoMA more generally. Evans was financially invested in that openness, but still resistant to it—being the staff photographer made his work answerable to too many masters.

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Those debates run through the entire written history of the medium. Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) provides an introduction to the broad theme. Raeburn’s text provides a book-length account of the state of the debate (and its vacillations) during the 1930s. See in particular pp. 1-18, which offer an overview of the theme.

### “Show Ideas”

*American Photographs* offered Evans an opportunity to streamline his self-presentation and to exhibit work that was the product of a number of different jobs, including work for the museum, independent work, work for *Fortune*, and most importantly, work for the RA. Yet we can safely assume that casual visitors would not have known the provenance of each individual photograph, as they were not identified as such, nor organized by project or date. Exactly how they were organized is inconsistent, and despite its centrality within Evans’s career and the history of American photography generally, mysteries remain about Evans’s 1938 exhibition at MoMA, *American Photographs*. Archival material relating to the exhibition, including checklists and press information, touring schedule, hanging instructions and even photographs of the New York installation, has not previously been analyzed for its overall effect, so the exhibition is somewhat “invisible” in the public record of Evans’s career, especially in comparison to the corresponding catalog, which received much critical attention.<sup>279</sup> The situation of exhibition-blindness is not unusual: for Evans’s exhibitions earlier in the decade we know less, and for many museum and gallery exhibitions in the 1930s checklists and other information is often sketchy. We know that they happened, and often what was included in them, but infrequently how they looked to their contemporary audiences. This gap is regrettable, as the hang was an important issue for museum and gallery exhibitions during the period.

One of the aspects of MoMA’s program that made it notable was Barr’s practice of hanging two-dimensional artwork on the line rather than salon style, or “skied,” on neutral white or pale grey walls with space between them for viewers to rest their eyes.<sup>280</sup> The streamlined MoMA aesthetic, however, was not universal to the museum’s early exhibition history, as recounted by art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski. Exhibitions such as the primitive art exhibition of 1936 were crammed with works, and early exhibitions of photographs were split between newer and older models of exhibition design. Evans made a series of exposures during the run of his exhibition that documents the hang and reveals that Evans engaged Barr’s preferred model (See Appendix A), although with serious modifications. The exposures also illustrate the differences between the catalog and the exhibition in size, cropping, order and checklist, and provide the primary information about how the exhibition looked. They confirm the neatness and precision of the hang but give rise to questions of scale, pacing and spatial organization. The evidence of Evans’s negative records, and related documents that describe the exhibition specifically, confirm that these three qualities were very much at issue in

<sup>279</sup> See Trachtenberg, Nickel, Andrews.

<sup>280</sup> Paul Cummings, “Interview with Margaret Scolari Barr concerning Alfred H. Barr,” Feb. 2-May 13, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See transcript online <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/barr74.htm>.

The interaction between Barr and Cummings reads as follows:

Barr: [Speaking about an exhibition in Paris] In 1932 still in Paris pictures were being hung symmetrically and by size, not by content, not by date . . . .

Cummings: Salon style.

Barr: And they were 'skied.' Whereas in the Museum right there the first show in the fall of 1929 there were no pictures above other pictures, all the walls were neutral, and the pictures were hung intellectually, chronologically; nevertheless not in such a way that they would clash. In other words, if the colors were not harmonious then they would be separated. But if there were intellectual connections between a large and a small picture they would be hung close to each other so that they could be seen together.

*American Photographs*. Indeed, the hang and the procession of photographs, more than the individual items in the checklist, convey the experiential qualities of the exhibition; moving through the space, seeing photographs jump in scale, and recognizing repeating motifs, viewers saw a fundamentally new story about making photographs in America.

Was the story new because no one else was telling it, or because it presented documentary photography in a different guise than many viewers expected? New Yorkers in particular had several points of comparison in other exhibitions of documentary photography during the 1930s, the most important of which was Berenice Abbott's 1934 exhibition at MCNY, *New York Photographs by Berenice Abbott*.<sup>281</sup> In that exhibition, which was part of a series of photography shows dedicated to the transformation of New York City, Abbott began to establish the parameters of the project that would come to fruition five years later as the book, *Changing New York*. Her goal was to document the city in the active process of transformation, and so the photographs—and in particular works like her *Rockefeller Center*, 1932 (Fig. 91)—focused on picturing the city during the processes of ruin and rebuilding. In that respect, the exhibition offered a significantly tighter and more regional perspective on the process of historical change than Evans would take on in *American Photographs*. Other exhibitions during the decade, such as a 1938 exhibition of RA/FSA photographs at Grand Central Station in New York, provided important publicity for the work of the RA/FSA in rural agricultural regions, but the focus of this show—much like the presence of RA/FSA photographs in magazines and newspapers—was the RA/FSA itself, with informative captions playing a crucial role in contextualizing the photographs and the overall exhibition organized, like the RA/FSA file itself, by region.<sup>282</sup> The photographs, captions, and organization all coordinated to present a narrative of the government's response to the economic crisis. Further, the whole exhibition came together under the unified rubric of information about a particular aspect of American society under extreme duress.

In contrast to both previous exhibition models, Evans's exhibition must have looked startling and new. The answer to the question of why this would be the case, given the presence of other models of documentary, was likely a combination of subject matter and presentation. Many viewers experienced the newness of Evans's exhibition as a function of its subject matter: they questioned how representative the project was, asking themselves the question, "Is this America?" In private letters and public reviews (particularly in response to the catalog), people openly questioned the representative quality of the photographs, indicating their expectation that documentary photographs should be transparently representative of the nation they purported to describe.<sup>283</sup> The

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<sup>281</sup> Yochelson, p. 18.

<sup>282</sup> See John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 187-193.

<sup>283</sup> Below I will discuss the published reviews of the book. For the most part, private correspondence of viewers is inaccessible, but Evans's archive includes one revealing letter that the writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher sent to Frances Collins at the museum and Collins shared with Evans. In reference to Evans's book, Fisher expressed a generational shift in perspective, writing, "... The older, pretty-pretty elm-shaded village street with comfortable and not-at-all undignified or uncomely houses has evidently been photographed and referred to as 'American' till the honest younger generation are [sic] in active rebellion against the pretense that is American. So in natural wish to redress this balance, they weight their own presentation pretty far ... with the bare misery of the unsightly failures of our country to take advantage of its opportunities. This

pictures in the exhibition were exhibited with a minimum of text, they seemed to repeat one another, and their treatment, including Evans's refusal to hang them behind glass, emphasized their thingness rather than their thin transparency to the everyday world. For these reasons, the exhibition was difficult to assimilate into previous models of documentary practice.

We know from period documentation, as well as Evans's own photographs of the hang, that the photographer made good on his plan to present the works in the exhibition in small clusters: throughout the show, groups of five to six photographs demarcated individual themes—architecture and the built environment, signage, contextual portraits, and interiors.<sup>284</sup> The show started with a series of photographs of architecture—first, typological studies of wooden housing, including *Frame Houses in Virginia* (Fig. 92), then three broader views of small towns with rows of look-alike houses spread over the landscape (see also Appendix A for the entire sequence of Evans's installation photographs). Two of the extant installation shots (Figs. 93-94) reveal that the next sequence of the show was a group of crumbling, illegible or unclear signs, followed by groups that combined views of buildings with legible signage, such as *Penny Picture Display, Savannah* (Figs. 95-96). At the center of the exhibition were series of interiors and portraits, including those from Hale County and other small towns.

Throughout the exhibition, Evans demonstrated that he could exert narrative control via the typological, even clinical, photographic means that he approvingly described in *Hound & Horn* as an “editing of society.” Although the exact layout of the show and the museum's galleries is unknown, the sequences of themes was broken into small groups that would have been accessible to viewers who took any number of different paths through the space. Thus, the narrative of the exhibition, which viewers would have re-enacted and experienced as they moved through the galleries, was a vicarious retracing of the photographer's movement through the landscape.<sup>285</sup> That physical movement fostered comparisons in space and time, prompting the observation of subtly repeating clues in the visual environment and steadily building into the argument that the nation's culture was experiencing a historic transformation. The description of America that Evans offered, then, was not a direct transcription, but an accumulated impression that relied on the viewer's own experiences of seeing the same thing over and over again, as well as illustrative clues to suggest patterns of repetition and sameness in

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is useful, necessary. But they are no more truthful in saying ‘This is America’ than the pretty-pretty photographers who sell their photographs to Geographic Magazine.” Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Frances Collins, typed letter, August 29, 1938, WEA / MMA 1994.250.87, file 27. Collins had apparently written to Fisher to solicit a glowing statement for the book jacket, but she decided (understandably) to pass on this one.

<sup>284</sup> See the entire sequence of exhibition prints in Mora and Hill, pp. 162-197, or in the original negatives (which preserve a better sense of the relative scale of the works), WEA / MMA 1994.250.623-652. For alternate installation information, see Courter to Payne, Jan. 27, 1939, “Walker Evans's American Photographs, 1939” file, Smith College Museum of Art Archives.

<sup>285</sup> My argument here is indebted to Trachtenberg's essay, “A Book Nearly Anonymous” in *Reading American Photographs* in which he argues that the innovation of Evans's work was his discovery of photographic point of view as the crucial determination of narrative. However, I date Evans's innovation to the 1936 “Three Tenant Families” project, and the thrust of my argument differs from Trachtenberg's in its emphasis on the claim to photography's relationship to labor and in its examination of the exhibition rather than the catalog.

the landscape. But what kind of transformation did the accumulated impressions suggest to these imagined viewers?

If a number of Evans's choices vis-à-vis presentation announced to viewers that this documentary was something new, the photographs in the exhibition that depicted signs and signage suggested that representation itself was at issue. Throughout the exhibition, Evans used photographs of signs to announce the collected show as a set of signs in itself. Figures 93 and 94 reveal an entire wall occupied with photographs of vernacular signage, including movie posters, racially charged revues and graffiti. Evans juxtaposed the large version of the photograph of a decaying show-bill poster on the left with a movie poster photograph whose dimensions are more traditionally photographic, or closer to the size of a sheet of film negative.<sup>286</sup> The effect is double. First, we are reminded that the transformation of scale is a crucial aspect of photography. Although we usually associate photography with the power to miniaturize, here *all* sense of scale is altered. Second, in the larger, perhaps poster-sized print (Fig. 97 is a related version of this print), Evans forces viewers to read this object simultaneously as a showbill and photograph and thus brings these two terms into an explicit relationship with one another.<sup>287</sup> Scarred by destruction, the photograph flips back and forth between seeming more like a picture and more like a thing. Thus, even before one registers the electrifying content of this suite of pictures, the group provides a meditation on the properties of the medium of still photography and its place within a hierarchy of visual representations that are part of the public sphere.

The sign photographs were taken throughout the northeast and South, but they share a common visual language of the handmade, and they also share the aspect of being transformed by time and the elements—including humans. Careful viewers would have noticed that all of the signs were in some stage of decay, and that in at least one case, the decay was hastened by vandalism (Fig. 98). Visible throughout the advertisement for the Sunny South Minstrel Show are small holes in the paper—including through the eyes of the caricatured Mama figure—which is definitely the work of vandals. Vandalism does not seem to be operative in any of the other posters along the wall, but the deterioration in each of them seems like a recurrent fact—signs fall apart. It is interesting to compare the Sunny South showbill with the first advertisement along the wall, which advertises Silas Green's New Orleans-based all-Black revue (Fig. 97). The startling difference between the two representations of African-Americans had to do with the nature of the posters themselves: in one, an ad for Green's revue, the figures dance in finery, a visual reference not to racial stereotypes but to the standards of bourgeois entertainment. The ad for J.C.

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<sup>286</sup> The 1930s was a period of expanded use of the photographic enlarger, so it makes sense that Evans would have used the enlarger to create a contrast with older "contact print" sized prints.

<sup>287</sup> It is important that posters in public places were not generally made via photographic processes in the 1930s, so Evans's move here does not mimic the readymade. Instead, the scale of *Minstrel Showbill*, and other photographs from the exhibition, reflected recent technologies for photographic enlargement. By the mid-1930s, large-scale photographs made via enlargement (rather than mammoth plate negatives) were becoming more common in exhibition contexts, but were not the standard for most photographic printing. Evans's interest in enlargements put him at significant odds with the more self-consciously artistic photographers of his generation, notably the *f.64* group in the Bay Area, who prized the contact print. Their collective exhibition statement read thus: "The photographs exhibited...are contact prints made from direct 8 x 10 negatives...." See Therese Thau Heyman, *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography* (Oakland, Calif.: Oakland Museum, 1992), p. 52.

Lincoln's Sunny South Minstrel Show, on the other hand, offers crude caricatures of the standard tropes of Black antebellum figures. The close proximity of these two photographs suggests that along with the photographs as signs, and the signs that occupy the American landscape, that race in the United States has a symbolic character, too.<sup>288</sup>

The comparison of the two signs, further, brings them into unsteady initial likeness with one another, underscored by the fact that both are damaged, as are the movie posters and other signs along the wall. Entertainment takes many forms: white melodrama becomes a variant entertainment from black minstrelsy, the dance revue is right up against the oddness of "Gas A." All of these signs traveled, in the sense both that they advertised traveling shows, and they appeared on the exterior walls of different towns Evans visited in the spring of 1936. The crushed tin relics, decidedly immobile, are stacked along the right side of the wall and bring the wall's central photograph, the butcher sign, into focus. These more abstruse, more regionally specific signs evoke the relationship of the sign itself to architecture. Architecture, in Evans's lexicon, recalls both regionalism and history, so the ephemeral, transitional, and place-less nature of the advertisements is again brought into unsteady, uneven likeness as well as comparison with these older forms of identifying symbolism.

The wall of minstrelsy and movies introduces the theme of signage, but other signs reappeared throughout the exhibition. Their most notable form after the suite of showbill photographs is in the cheap paper bills advertising products like Coca Cola, Nehi soda, and 666 Cold and Fever Medicine. Throughout the exhibition, Evans included photographs of public spaces in the South that are covered with these particular signs. In no. 27, *Country Store*, the end of a short wall of photographs of wooden buildings (and shacks) Evans made a photograph of a nondescript building with signs around and over shuttered windows (Fig. 99). More intriguingly, the signs are arranged on the façade of the building in a pattern that is precisely mirrored from one half of the building to the other. In another case, two versions of *West Virginia Living Room*, one by that title (no. 60) and another by the title *Interior, West Virginia Coal Miner's Home* (no. 24) the Coca Cola ads are inside the house, like wallpaper (Figs. 100-101). (These two photographs from West Virginia are not isolated instances of signs making their way indoors, but they are an important and somewhat mysterious pair, which may have been made in the same house.<sup>289</sup>) Overall, it is impossible to divide the mere fact of the recurrence of signs and signage throughout the show with the photographs themselves, and the very fact of photography as a medium. The layering of forms of representation between sign, photograph, architecture, repetition—all of which unfolded in the literal space of the exhibition and the metaphoric space of the nation—provided a consistent reminder the show's primary ambition was a demonstration of representation itself.

The photographs of signs in the exhibition brought questions about representation to the surface, but other aspects of the show mined the same territory. Evans included a

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<sup>288</sup> My point here is blunter than that of serious investigation of the relationship between photography and semiology, which has been most successfully and seriously mined in essays by Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961) and "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), in *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 15-51. Trans. Stephen Heath.

<sup>289</sup> Whether they were made in the exact same house or not is difficult to confirm because both prints were made on 8 x 10 inch film negatives, and are thus not bound together like roll film. They were made in the same community, Scott's Run, West Virginia, within the same short group of days, however, and appear to be the only interiors Evans saved during that time.

number of forms of repetition in addition to the two Santa Claus images that may or may not have graced the same house. Thus, viewers had the experience of seeing the same thing over and over again. Repetition was not exclusively the terrain of individual photographs, some of which, like the Roadside Store image (Fig. 99), were constructed around the repetition of a single element, particularly architectural photographs. Repetition was also at issue in connecting photographs to one another: viewers saw the same signs re-appear in different photographs (such as signs for Nehi Soda and 666 Colds medicine). In two cases, Evans directly repeated himself in multiple photographs. The first two items in the show (Figures 92 and 102) are photographs of frame structures. The row of houses in near-profile in *Frame Houses in Virginia* (Fig. 92) literally reappears in the exhibition as number 18, a frontal study of the same houses (Fig. 102) with the same title. (This repetition appears in the book as well.<sup>290</sup>) The recurrent image of actual houses is only the most extreme example of repetition in the architecture pictures; Evans included a number of photographs in which the buildings look very much alike so there is some confusion in the show between buildings that actually repeat and buildings that appear to repeat. The two photographs were not placed next to one another in the exhibition, so one wonders how many viewers would have seen that the photographs depicted the same site. Their presence may instead attest to Evans's effort to produce the illusion of similarity and sameness in the visual environment. If viewers weren't expected to recognize these houses as actually repeating, they were meant to recognize them as loosely in conversation with one another: this is what frame houses look like in Virginia. As in the photographs of signs, Evans was suggesting the use of pictures as a kind of sign system, attuned to picking up forms of repetition and similarity in the landscape. As viewers walked through the exhibition, they would have been aware of the relationship between the particularity of a single location, a single viewpoint, and *how things look* in a more general sense. Repetition and variation are the clues to Evans's experimentation with how to represent ubiquity in the visual environment.

*American Photographs* was rich in portraiture, which complicated and deepened Evans's use of repetition. Two photographs that Evans exhibited on uniformly sized mats were a pair of portraits of the Fields family, from Hale County, Alabama, in their bedroom (numbers 51 and 50, Figs. 75-76), which I also addressed in chapter two. They were made during Evans's trip to Hale County with James Agee. The pair constituted one of the stranger contrasts of the exhibition, and neither picture was used for his catalog or *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the book that Evans and Agee published in 1941. It appears at first glance that the photographs represent the family assembling or disassembling for their group portrait, and thus record a passage of time between one exposure and the next. Such a reading would support the idea that what Evans has done in presenting them as repeating elements within this exhibition is to de-naturalize the act of posing: instead, between the two images we watch while the family prepares to face Evans's camera. This muddling with portraiture undermines the iconic presentation of the sharecropper's family, and prioritizes contingency, chance and specificity over iconicity and timelessness as pictorial values.

This initial reading depends upon our ability to read the absence of Mrs. Fields's mother's head, in the first photograph, as a residue of her motion—as though she were

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<sup>290</sup> Jeff L. Rosenheim originally noticed this peculiar detail in the book and very generously pointed it out to me. In this case as in others reflected in these pages, I'm grateful that he shared his insights.

moving into place. The photograph does not wholly support this reading, though; the elder woman is posed facing the camera and evidently unaware of her exclusion. Evans slightly lowered the camera to crop her face out of the composition (his decision was made when the picture was taken; the exclusion is part of the negative rather than a product of cropping). The effect is of someone standing, posing, engaged with the camera in expectant anticipation, and yet rejected by it. The camera operator made a decisive cut, without the knowing participation of his subject. Thus, the effect of Evans's cropping is to draw attention back to the photographer and to his decisions.

I do not suggest that the repetition of the Fields family pictures has a definite or complete meaning. As with the entire group of photographs that Evans made in Hale County, including portraits of the Burroughs and Tingle families, these portraits seem to be as much about portraiture as they are about their subjects, and the repetition draws us back to the moment of their making and the editorial work of the makers, albeit in a particularly unkind way. (A more generous reading might acknowledge that Evans himself used the brutal editing of the elder Mrs. Fields's head as an example of the way all subjects, even people, become subject to the camera.) The context of the two portraits of Fields family reinforces the impression that Evans pushed his audience to see photographic portraiture as a convention of representation. They were hung near other pictures in the exhibition that Evans included from the Hale County group, but next to a trio of unconventional portraits (Figs. 103-104, 30), each wrested from the everyday rather than properly posed. While the first two photographs on the wall explicitly refer to posing, the next three are unposed, instead capturing people within the flux of their everyday lives, unaware (as in the center photograph) or otherwise unprepared for the intrusion of the camera. The subjects along the wall are separated by wide gulfs of geography and life experience, but they are united in having some aspect of their self-presentation caught by Evans's camera.

In addition to the play of signs and repetition, one further way in which *American Photographs* presented a "new story" about both America and photographs was in its direct relationship to language. The close twinning of social documentary photography and descriptive language that reinforced the genre's usefulness and perceived veracity, and which was the basis of exhibitions like Stryker's Grand Central show in 1938, was nowhere to be found in Evans's exhibition, where the photographs were presented utterly unencumbered by captions or even titles (wall labels are nowhere to be found in the photographs of the hang; and no documentary evidence suggests a list of titles that viewers could use while they were in the galleries, although such a list may have existed). The photographs were about words, about identification and representation, but Evans refused the typical identification between pictures and words that attended documentary and trade photography. His friend, the critic Stark Young (a contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*), reviewed the show and struggled to describe the relationship between the pictures, "hang[ing] there on the walls as clean as light and sand," and his desire as a writer to give them an anecdotal voice, writing "[S]ome of them [are] so beautiful and right that you want to hit people over the head with words."<sup>291</sup> Evans's refusal to provide words pushed viewers to experience the space of the exhibition not as a bundle of social or geographic information, but as though they were traveling in the photographer's

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<sup>291</sup> Stark Young, untitled review from *New Republic* (Oct. 19, 1938), n.p., as found as a clipping in WEA / MMA 1994.250.57, file 23.

footsteps. One's own mobility through the galleries of the show provided a constant reminder of the photographer's mobility through the country.

In its many references to the photographer's freedom of movement, as well as the decisiveness of his choices, *American Photographs* was frankly self-referential, which further inverted the general rule of documentary photography as having a clear relationship to the everyday world. As a complete artistic project, it articulated Evans's increasingly sure-footed argument that making photographs was a very independent kind of work, one requiring total freedom from the constraints of the workaday world. Evans's professional claim in the exhibition was that his role was to create (and print, sequence and hang) representations, rather than just collect legible data. In a charged letter to Roy Stryker in preparation for the catalog (which I quoted in part at the beginning of this chapter), Evans clarified his own perception of his role at the museum, writing,

I think you know well enough what I am about to say, but let us not take any chances: this is a book about and by me, and the number of Resettlement pictures I have decided to reproduce ... has been determined solely on the grounds of my opinion of their worth as pictures. They form a part of my work, all of which is to be represented. The museum understands it this way, is bringing the thing out as an example of the work of an artist, is not interested in this respect in whom he has worked for or with.<sup>292</sup>

Although I argued above that there was in fact a high level of flexibility in Evans's role at the museum, this document is revealing for its frank ambition to be considered an artist rather than museum employee. Evans's multiple roles at the museum may have suited his need for income more comfortably than his ego. The letter also reveals Evans's clear desire to distance himself from his own situation as an employee. His words towards Stryker suggest an angry affront to Stryker's seniority, although by 1938 Evans no longer reported to him. (Stryker, of course, would have his revenge against Evans's impertinence and artistic claims in his letter to the grants committee of the Guggenheim Foundation.) Despite the level of personal separation from Stryker, there is an extraordinary paradox to Evans's claims about the separation of art and employment—that claim ran counter to his entire experience as a working photographer, and it also ran counter to the experiences of many (if not most) working artists during the Depression.

In his demonstration that the show would be “the work of an artist,” however, Evans made decisions well beyond merely supplying the photographs. He also carefully orchestrated their presentation. We know which pictures Evans included in the exhibition and their general cropping on the basis of the checklist and the installation photographs, but we also have a good sense of how the exhibition actually looked from a series of letters between two museum administrators. The letters between the Smith College Museum of Art, an exhibition venue, and MoMA describe Evans's priorities for the hang and give us a clearer idea of how he wanted the show to be executed. The installation instructions reveal that the exhibition was divided into clusters of four to six photographs, each hung very close together. As if in response to future criticism (such as Mellow's) that the exhibition was a throw-together, Elodie Courter from MoMA insisted that the groupings be maintained, writing to her counterpart at Smith, Elizabeth Payne:

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<sup>292</sup> Typed letter, Evans to Stryker, July 16, 1938. WEA / MMA 1994.57, file 57.

Mr. Evans has very carefully arranged the photographs into groups for exhibition. He gave a great deal of time and thought to this grouping in order to avoid any possibly monotony and to compare similar and contrasting forms and subjects. We must request your close cooperation in following the order given ...<sup>293</sup>

Notes from Smith's archive, and further correspondence, indicate that the show was installed as Evans wished, and the sheer volume of correspondence and clarification regarding its installation indicates that his instructions were not "business as usual." Further correspondence within the Smith records reveals that the sense of scale distortion which is apparent in Evans's exhibition photographs was continued through to the other venues as well—at one point the director of the Smith College Art Museum, Jere Abbott, made the executive decision to show the smallest works under a glass case, as he felt the works too delicate to hang on the wall without protection.<sup>294</sup>

The most intriguing aspect of the correspondence between Courter and Payne involved the surfaces of the prints. Although the exhibition had originally been promised as framed prints under glass, the prints came unframed, mounted to masonite and with a fragile, glossy surface texture that flummoxed the Smith staff. Payne wrote to inquire about precisely what was going on with the prints, and Courter responded with a fairly long description:

When we showed the photographs here they were mounted directly on white walls and since Mr. Evans did not want the photographs to be shown under glass or in mats we had to find another way to mount them. They are mounted with a very strong adhesive paste to Masonite, the only material we have found which does not warp, bend, crack at the edges or deteriorate with a great deal of handling. Then the edges of the Masonite have been taped with a black linen tape which comes already varnished. The surfaces of the photographs are quite unprotected and the gloss is Mr. Evans' [sic] own finish.<sup>295</sup>

This section of Courter's letter gives the best extant sense of what the photographs in the show actually looked like: glossy, unencumbered by frame or mount (and therefore probably scratched), slightly apart from the wall, of varying scale, and clustered into batches of complementary forms.<sup>296</sup> At least one photograph still with this treatment is in

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<sup>293</sup> Elodie Courter to Elizabeth Payne, Smith College Museum of Art, January 27, 1939. Smith College Museum of Art Archives, "Walker Evans's American Photographs, 1939" file. Important enclosures to Courter's letter were unpacking instructions and the promised list of ordered clusters, which do not precisely correlate to the order of the checklist or Evans's photographs of the hang in New York. In a few cases, Evans simply changed his mind about which pictures should be clustered; in others, Evans integrated a number of Northeastern architecture and farm interior photographs that were not included in the MoMA exhibition, and cut a number of photographs from the original MoMA hang. Either way, Evans maintained the general principle of repetition and variation that governed the MoMA installation, despite the changed checklist. Mellow's comments appear on page 382.

<sup>294</sup> Payne to Courter, Feb. 28, 1939. Smith College Museum of Art Archives, "Walker Evans's American Photographs, 1939" file.

<sup>295</sup> Courter to Payne, February 23, 1939. Smith College Museum of Art Archives, "Walker Evans's American Photographs, 1939" file.

<sup>296</sup> Some of the photographs in the MoMA installation of American Photographs were clearly mounted to large white boards, so the description that Courter gives is mostly, but not fully, coincidental with the installation. See installation photographs in Appendix A.

the collection of the Harry Ransom Center at University of Texas, Austin.<sup>297</sup> Unmatted, the support of the masonite backing changes the dynamic of looking at a paper print into the experience of looking at a thing: the photograph has weight and stands away from the wall. Via the visible material presence of the photographs, Evans prevented viewers from seeing them as mere images, windows onto a different part of the world; instead, their objective qualities reinforced the impression that each work was an artful construction unto itself.

Evans went into the experience with a significant exhibition history after a series of gallery and institutional successes in the early 1930s, and was sensitive to the practical demands of hanging a show as well as, in my account, the payoff of having a live, mobile audience for his work.<sup>298</sup> As Staniszewski notes, he was not alone. After the late 1920s, with a series of high profile and innovative exhibitions in Europe such as *Film und Foto* and *Pressa*, as well as the rehang of the Landesmuseum in Hannover, the rhetoric of exhibition design itself was hard to ignore for serious artists. This precedent would have been more so the case with artists who had a close relationship to MoMA, because Barr was highly conversant with new models of exhibition hanging and had in fact modeled his own hang on the work of Alexander Dorner at the Landesmuseum.<sup>299</sup> Staniszewski demonstrates that what is now so accepted as to seem invisible, the straight procession of works of art that unfolds in a linear fashion through sequential galleries, was unusual when Barr hung MoMA's first show. (She notes that Barr's first major curatorial innovation basically was this kind of hang, because his responsibilities did not involve choosing which works would go on view, writing that "[Barr] did not select the paintings for the Museum's inaugural exhibition, *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh*—but he did install them."<sup>300</sup>)

Although he was not invested in a design strategy for hanging the show in the model of European precedents, Evans was keenly aware that the lesson of those precedents was that the hang would tell its own story, which helps account for his role in the loose clustering of photographs and his determination that they should be presented without glazing or frames. He was negotiating a middle ground between the primitive art exhibition and the orderly hang of European paintings. Evans's choices are in stark contrast to the presentation of work in matching white wood frames at Alfred Stieglitz's An American Place gallery as well as the museum's own practice of framing photographs, as they did for Beaumont Newhall's major historical survey, *Photography 1839-1937*.<sup>301</sup> They are slightly closer in spirit to the exhibition choices made by Julien

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<sup>297</sup> *Tingle Family Singing, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936. Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 968:001:067.

<sup>298</sup> Aside from his continued relationship with MoMA through the 1930s, Evans also showed at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art exhibition in 1930, the Brooklyn Museum *International Photographers* show in 1932, the Albright Knox *Modern Photography at Home and Abroad* exhibition in 1932, and the Julien Levy and John Becker Galleries in 1931-32. See Andrea Nelson, "Chronology," in Sharon Corwin, Jessica May and Terri Weissman, *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 87-100.

<sup>299</sup> Staniszewski, pp. 16-23.

<sup>300</sup> Staniszewski, p. 61.

<sup>301</sup> John Rohrbach confirmed this point on the basis of his research on Eliot Porter's 1938 exhibition at Steiglitz's gallery, conversation with the author, December 2008. Phillips confirms the frame choices for Newhall's show, p. 23. Phillips writes of MoMA in the 1940s, "Typically the photographs were presented in precisely the same manner as other prints or drawings—carefully matted, framed, and placed behind

Levy, who showed Evans's work in his gallery several times between 1932 and 1935, and who preferred to float mounted photographs behind glass with no visible frame, as the museum also opted for in its 1939 exhibition, *Art In Our Time* (Evans participated).<sup>302-303</sup> That model was also used by Berenice Abbott for her 1934 exhibition of New York photographs at the Museum of the City of New York (Fig. 105), which Evans saw and knew well. Evans's awareness of newer exhibition design possibilities was clearly a product of his sometimes-friendship with Barr, but also resulted from other factors, such as the fact that in the months prior to his own exhibition at MoMA, the museum opened a major retrospective of the Bauhaus, complete with a section devoted to the Bauhaus exhibition design.<sup>304</sup>

Unlike the exhibition, the *American Photographs* catalog required major concessions to institutional prerogatives, ranging from the inexpensive size of the book (its literal proportions were a subject of correspondence between Evans and Frances Collins, the museum's director of publications); to the economy of leaving white gutters on each page; and even to the choice of arrangement and sequence of pictures, over which Evans claimed total control in the frontispiece of the book. His claim to total independence runs counter to the memories of multiple friends—including the most likely suspects: Collins, Kirstein and Mabry.<sup>305</sup> As Courter's letters make clear, though,

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glass, and hung at eye level; they were given precisely the same status: that of objects of authorized admiration and delectation.”

<sup>302</sup> Katherine Ware, “Between Dada-ism and Moma-ism,” in Ware and Peter Barbarie, *Dreaming in Black and White: Photography at the Julien Levy Gallery* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), p. 25. Against a backdrop of white, Ware writes, photographs were floated between panes of glass. “Attached horizontally along the gallery walls were two rows of moldings—two feet apart and painted the same color as the wall—that could be used to hold photographs in place under glass or to hold S hooks for hanging framed pieces.” Ware continues with another fascinating detail, “The trend among galleries at that time was to hang pictures so they had to be looked up to, but Levy decided to make the center point between the moldings at a height of five feet, a more earthbound approach.” Evans also opted for the center line at five feet (which is still common, with some variation, in American museums). In the installation instructions for the traveling version of Evans's show, Elodie Courter specified: “Measure the height of each photograph to place the pictures evenly at eye level line.” Courter, enclosure to letter addressed to Payne, January 27, 1939. Smith College Museum of Art Archives, “Walker Evans's American Photographs, 1939” file.

<sup>303</sup> In his request for Evans's photographs, Beaumont Newhall described his plans for the hang by writing, “After considerable thought on the matter, Alfred and I have decided that the most satisfactory way of showing the photographs will be on uniform white mounts 18”x14”, behind glass on a colored wall.” Newhall to Evans, typed letter, April 26, 1939, WEA / MMA 250.72, file 23.

<sup>304</sup> Phillips, in his discussion of the exhibitions that Edward Steichen curated in the 1940s and 1950s at MoMA, notes that Steichen opted for a look that sounds very much in line with *American Photographs* (if not motivated by the same intent). Phillips writes, “Even in exhibitions of ‘creative’ photography, the preciousness of the fine print was dramatically deemphasized. Prints were typically shown flush-mounted on thick (nonarchival) backing board, unmatted, and without benefit of protective glass. In addition, one could from time to time expect to encounter giant color transparencies, commercial press sheets and inexpensive prints from color slides,” p. 31.

<sup>305</sup> Regarding the gutters: see Mellow, p. 371. Quotes correspondence in WEA/MMA (Collins to Evans, May 4, 1938). Regarding the idea that Evans was helped in his sequencing by friends: Andrews's essay on *American Photographs* mainly aims to set the record straight about the design and production of the catalog. Andrews interviewed Collins in 1979 (she later married and became Frances Collins Lindley), who denied that Kirstein had a role in the planning of the catalog's sequence, and described “the process of organizing the pictures as a fairly casual one, with the pictures spread out on long tables and many friends and colleagues passing through and offering suggestions” (p. 265). Nickel's “*American Photographs*

Evans had a great deal of authority over the sequences in the exhibition itself as well as in how the photographs actually looked. In an undated set of notes that relate to the planning of the exhibition, Evans made the following list: “Show Ideas: small defined sections, people, faces, architecture, repetition, small pictures, large pictures.”<sup>306</sup> This list offers the sense that the exhibition promised for Evans an opportunity to exercise a range of photographic possibilities and to structure an experience of repetition and variation that would directly challenge the idea of a unified and orderly march of pictures. The word repetition, in particular, indicates that Evans planned for viewers to the exhibition to experience the phenomenon of seeing the same thing again and again, albeit each time under a slightly different guise (this is the effect that the installation photographs bear out). The experimental, and *experiential*, qualities of the exhibition suggest Evans’s efforts to find an adequate pictorial strategy for representing the complex American landscape and his own place as the author of a story about that landscape.

Although in many ways Evans left the details of the story open to wide interpretation, the idea that he was actively engaged in some kind of narration may be traced back to his interest in the historical precedent of Mathew Brady. As late as 1938, Evans was still working through Charles Flato’s argument about Matthew Brady (as I discuss in chapter two), to the point that he understood that argument as the key to his own project and the proper project of camerawork in general. Generally, he seemed to have understood Flato’s point to have been that by picturing the Civil War in its particulars, Brady accessed a different record of history—a history much smaller and more nuanced than the official record of the Civil War. In an early manuscript (probably a proposal) related to the *American Photographs* book, Evans wrote a characteristically dense statement of intention which drew together the medium of photography with Flato’s Brady:

One of the aims of the picture selection in this book has been to sketch an important, correct, but commonly corrupted use of the camera. A sentence from an essay on Matthew Brady by Charles Flato may illuminate the attitude behind this aspect of choice: ‘Human beings . . . are far more important than elucidating factors in history; by themselves they have a greatness aside from the impressive structure of history.’ There are movements and moments in history and we do not need military battles to provide the images of these conflicts, or to reveal the movements and changes or, again, the conflicts which in passing become the body of the history of civilizations.<sup>307</sup>

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Revisited,” however, was based in large part on Nickel’s interview with Kirstein (Kirstein by the 1980s rarely spoke about his relationship with Evans), who claimed a large role in the organization of the catalog. Although Nickel’s essay has been criticized for its over-reliance on Kirstein’s self-serving memory, his memory is in this case confirmed by Evans’s admission to Paul Cummings that Kirstein had in fact helped organize the book’s sequence. Although it seems mind-boggling that the issue of whether the sequence was determined by Evans alone or in conversation with others has occupied such a lively place in debates about Evans, the contest over authorship has thus far been regarded as the secret clue to whether or not sequence itself “matters” to the reading of the photographs. In a particularly problematic, but fascinating, section of his essay describing Kirstein’s politics and his out-sized influence on Evans, Nickel wrote, “The Evans of *American Photographs* suited Kirstein’s personal intellectual ambitions and, in retrospect, also suited a particular moment in our history. . . . Traces of this Evans will continue to beleague historians, so long as the book’s originating author is confused with the photographer Walker Evans,” pp. 94-95.

<sup>306</sup> “Show Ideas,” MMA / WEA 1994.250.57, file 5.

<sup>307</sup> Typed, undated mss., WEA / MMA 1994.250.57, file 11.

Evans's statement is very clear about the conceptual issues that helped him understand his own work, and to create the narrative arc of *American Photographs*. Those issues are interlocking: the sense of his own moment as being a time of momentous change to the "body of civilization;" the "greatness" of the human presence, which can narrate conflicts that seem hidden from historical view but actually make up the real currents of history; and the idea that there is an important moral component to making photographs that opposes "the corrupted use of the camera." Evans posited two bodies in this brief text—the human body, fundamentally a witness, and "the body of history," an abstraction. Although not opposed to one another per se, they are not the same, either. Instead, Evans regarded the role of the individual as essential to the narrative of the body of history, although he also implied that previous interpretations of history (pre-photographic?) had undervalued the role of individual witnesses of subtle changes in favor of grander, more cataclysmic narratives such as war. Thus, Evans's exterior project, the making of art that responded to the world, was explicitly tied to the more internal project, the establishment of the artist witness. I interpret the momentous transformation that Evans names but does not characterize not as the Depression, precisely, but as the uneven, irregular and yet sure shift from a regional to a national economy that the Depression hurried along.<sup>308</sup> Within Evans's statement the idea of the human actor can be interpreted as both the photographer and his human subjects.

Evans's idea about the relationship of the individual to history, that images of individuals play a role in elucidating a larger history, hinged on a dichotomy between the universal and the specific that is also relevant to the relationship between the region and the nation. One of the important ironies of the exhibition's reception was the extent to which reviewers focused on the way that the specific and the universal acted as local versus national. Almost without exception, critical commentators merged the two sets of opposing claims, nation/region and universal/particular, in their estimations of *American Photographs*. William Carlos Williams reviewed the exhibition for the *New Republic*, writing, "It is the particularization of the universal that is important. It is the unique field of the artist. Evans is an artist." Thomas Mabry, a close friend of Evans and the executive director of MoMA at that time, as well as a collaborator on this project, wrote for *Harper's* that, "Out of the confusion of our daily lives ... [Evans's] pictures remind us that no matter who we are or what our stature, here is our home. For if America has any quality uniquely its own, a quality of spirit, half squalid, half unbelievably beautiful, Walker Evans has found it ... ." Remarkably, even those reviewers who were not impressed by the show used the same grounds for criticism. S.T. Williamson reviewed the show for the *New York Times*, and declared, "The photographs are not typical of the common people so loved by God and Mr. Lincoln. Only of a submerged fraction."<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Lizbeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal*, a study of urban Chicago, examines this movement from local to national in satisfying depth. Although her study is not alone, one aspect of her argument that is valuable here is her attention to the ways in which everyday life and urban culture, including public architecture such as movie theaters, the physical layout of grocery stores and the presence of advertisements for national brands in public spaces, became significantly more representative of nationally-scaled brands and services during the Depression. According to Cohen, this movement was not new, but it was greatly accelerated. See Cohen's chapter three, "Encountering Mass Culture," in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 99-152.

<sup>309</sup> Evans kept these reviews. See WEA/MMA 1994.250.57, file 22.

Whether Williamson was responding to his own colleagues or to the show itself, his review suggests that both positive and negative critiques of the exhibition rested on its ability to universalize the particular. Whether viewers were moved to rhapsody or irritated by Evans's photographs, that criterion of judgment had a clear logic: they equated the specific "American" views on offer to a unified concept of America. The movement back and forth between representation of a small part and understanding of the whole comes as no surprise because it reflects the widespread cultural effort during the mid 1930s to define America as a repository of an independent cultural tradition. In other words, the equation reflected the "usable past" ethos that was so important at MoMA and the broader intellectual culture. As Kazin observed, the intense navel-gazing of the 1930s, of which the explosion of documentary photography was an important part, rested in large part on the perception that with the rise of fascism in Europe, American civilization would soon become the repository of the western tradition. Evans's exhibition, like many other exhibitions and publications of documentary photography during the 1930s, played into the interest in defining and mining all aspects of American culture, but it doesn't seem to have been fully satisfying to many viewers as an investigation into the "usable past" as most viewers understood the concept. Instead, as Evans wrote in his Guggenheim application that same year, his goal was the revelation of "contemporary history," which by definition for Evans was in flux.

Indeed, with its close association of portraits, signage and the built environment, as well as its attention to the experience of repetition, Evans pointed up the gap between the national and the regional and suggested the eclipsing of traditions of regionalism (the "usable past" itself) by a host of new nationally-scaled social and economic forces. By frankly making his photographs over into free-standing signs, more or less literally, Evans acknowledged that by nature, most signs freely circulate; they are not bound by locality but instead are mobile and disrespectful of the invisible boundaries between the local and the national. By demanding that viewers ask what the relationship between the local and the free circulation of the sign through broad swaths of the country, *American Photographs* recalled the uneven transition from regional to national economy that was underway through the 1930s. Far from providing a bedrock narrative of a stable cultural identity *à la* the "usable past" model, the exhibition privileged that which is transitory within the landscape and in American culture more generally, as well as the transitory nature of perception. It was a tricky move, loaded down by the rhetorical weight of Evans's claim of independence and the emerging institutional power of the museum, but such was the nature of his project.

### **Reading Photographs**

It is clear from the archival evidence that the exhibition *American Photographs* had a distinct narrative arc, but my goal has been to work against pinning that arc too tightly into a function of its sequential order. I have attempted to emphasize the experience of walking through the space rather than the more literary experience of seeing one thing after another and understanding a defined relationship between sequence and narrative. Part of my reason for doing this is that the actual layout of the exhibition may have been much more loosely organized than the sequential order of the book. (The fact that Evans clustered the photographs into conceptual groups would suggest that

viewers had at least a somewhat open path through the exhibition.) Regardless, my approach sets this interpretation of this project in contrast with previous scholarship.

In his own later, retrospective accounts of the exhibition and its catalog, Evans himself did not present a clear historical account of the exhibition. Stryker's hostile remark about Evans-as-artist resonates with contemporary readers because Evans himself seemed to corroborate them when, late in his life, he sought to define his contribution to the history of photography. In interviews during the 1960s, Evans would reflect on the importance of *American Photographs* and what it meant for his medium, which was the institutionalization of documentary photography as a fine art.<sup>310</sup> Evans had much to gain from burnishing his reputation with a retrospective account of *American Photographs* and from clarifying his primacy in the world of art photography of the 1960s. It does his reputation and achievements no damage to note that much of his own work during the 1960s took the form of lectures and teaching, and in much of that work—all informed by the art photography of the 1960s that centered at the Museum of Modern Art and celebrated immediacy as a crucial photographic value—he focused on defining his own achievements of the 1930s. Evans's memories were later given credence and scholarly weight by the historian Alan Trachtenberg, whose 1989 essay on the subject formed the cornerstone of his major account of American photography, a book entitled *Reading American Photographs*.<sup>311</sup> Trachtenberg demonstrated that the exhibition in 1938 not only established Evans as a master photographer in a very public sense, but also conferred upon documentary photography the legitimacy of its association with modern art. Gone, by the late 1960s, was the memory of documentary's early capaciousness as a genre.

Trachtenberg's warm account of Evans's ascension was in part informed by the two men's friendship. They knew one another in New Haven in the early 1970s, and there are kind letters back and forth. One page of notes from Trachtenberg's manuscript survives in Evans's archive—it had been turned over and used as scrap paper, inadvertently revealing that Evans had access to the younger man's writing on the subject of Evans's own photographs.<sup>312</sup> Trachtenberg worked on the project long after Evan's death in 1975 (*Reading American Photographs* was not published until 1989) but his approach to Evans was largely in place, and from this basic understanding he drafted a book that moved in time from antebellum American photographic portraiture—Brady's *Gallery of Illustrious Men*—to Evans's *American Photographs*. (That these two men would have served as bookends to his account is hardly surprising because Brady was Evans's longtime hero of American photography.) It is worth being generous in recounting the narrative of Trachtenberg's text, because it forms a crucial component of

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<sup>310</sup> In his interview, Cummings asked, "Did [the 1938 show] do anything as far as your photographic career was concerned?" Evans: "Oh, very much so. It was like a calling card. It made it. The book particularly was a passport for me. Sure. It established my style and everything. Oh, yes. And as time went on it became more and more important." This exchange was quoted in Trachtenberg, p. 238.

<sup>311</sup> Trachtenberg's other major essays on Evans are: "Walker Evans *Message from the Interior: A Reading*," *October* 11 (Winter 1979), pp. 5-16; "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in Beverly Brannan and Carl Fleischhauer, eds., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 43-73; and "Contrapuntal Design," in John T. Hill, *Lyric Documentary* (Gottingen: Steidl, 2006), pp. 228-233.

<sup>312</sup> See, for instance, WEA/MMA 1994.250.6, file 69. The file contains a page from an undated draft of Trachtenberg's essay on Evans for *Reading American Photographs*, with Evans's notations on the verso.

American photographic historiography and also because it is so clearly steeped in Evans's own version of the story, albeit Evans at the end of his life, not circa 1938. The book's persuasiveness in its story about *American Photographs* derives not just from Trachtenberg's authority or reasoning, but because the structure of his entire account of American photography leads directly to Evans's catalog.

The title *Reading American Photographs* came from two different sources. Its most immediate referent was the subject of its final chapter, Evans's catalog, but the word *Reading* not only signifies a shorthand description of the mission of the book, but an orientation towards American photography more generally. Trachtenberg, primarily a literary historian and working at a time in the 1980s when literary theory and history exercised an outsized influence over the humanities, turned to the metaphor of reading as a mode of understanding photography, and the title implies the argument of the book as a whole. Three interlocking themes dominate the book—first, that photographs are to be read like literature but that (second) they often tell a story through their detail that is, third, counter to other, more conventional, stories. Through much of its history, photographers' un-self-consciousness about these processes denied photography its relationship to the fine arts. In a chapter on Lewis Hine and Alfred Stieglitz, Trachtenberg compares the two photographers directly, finding fault with Stieglitz for his overly self-conscious approach to photography. This critique was shared by Evans, who wrote after a visit with Stieglitz in 1929, "He should never open his mouth."<sup>313</sup> Trachtenberg's Hine, however, was utterly unself-conscious in his pursuit of social documentary photographs, works that would be transparent as photographs and serve as agents of social change. In setting up Hine and Stieglitz as the two major predecessors—each with an extra-photographic ambition, art in one case, social transformation in the other—of the early twentieth century, Trachtenberg set the stage for Evans to become the natural heir to an as-yet-incomplete tradition.

The final chapter of Trachtenberg's book addresses Evans's work for *American Photographs* directly, arguing that the book's self-consciousness about point of view was not just another example of Stieglitz-style pretension but an entirely new animal. He writes,

For Evans discovered—and it has the force of an invention in photography—that the literal point of view of a photograph, where the camera stands during the making of the picture, can be so treated in an extended sequence or discourse as to become an intentional vehicle or embodiment of a cumulative point of view, a perspective of mind, of moral judgment.<sup>314</sup>

Trachtenberg's eloquent statement conveys a fairly straightforward idea. His argument about the catalog to *American Photographs* is that each picture is about point of view,

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<sup>313</sup> In a letter dated March 17, 1929, Evans wrote to his friend, the artist Hans Skolle, "Saw Stieglitz again. He talked at length. He should never open his mouth. Nobody should, but especially Stieglitz. He showed me some excellent photographs he had made: clouds, wet grass, the rump of a white horse, the bark of an old tree. As an example of his overstatement, he said of the tree bark photo: 'it was YEARS before I DARED do it.'" WEA 1994.260.25, file 10. Later, in an undated press release, written apparently for his own amusement, Evans wrote of Stieglitz, "After Stieglitz's real work was done, he became a very arty old man and a Wagnerian man if there ever was one—a great old fiddler and lace-maker." WEA 1994.250.7, file 13.

<sup>314</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 250.

about perspective (a point which has substantively shaped this chapter). One becomes aware of perspective via the most subtle of effects—Evans’s book’s utterly straightforward, perpendicular camera angles have the effect of tunneling viewer’s perspective and announcing to viewers what the photograph is *about*. Viewers only discover this as they traverse the book, realizing from page to page that they are experiencing a view onto the American landscape that is narrated by an individual, a single-minded author. According to Trachtenberg, viewers then have the option to contemplate the perspective onto the landscape that is on offer, or to question their own relationship to the land and landscape.

In Trachtenberg’s view, giving viewers the choice of what to see and asking them to examine their relationships to the American landscape constitutes the political contribution of *American Photographs* as a book. He stated that it rejects a standard political model completely (these photographs are not tinged by Progressivism, or what we understand to be the 1930s left ideology, for instance) but that it is not apolitical. Instead, Trachtenberg moves into the territory of modernism by finding in Evans’s work a strategy that engages viewers directly, pushing them to examine their own perceptions and their subsequent feelings and responses to those perceptions.<sup>315</sup> He writes,

Aesthetic experience . . . becomes political experience, a way of defining oneself in relation to a collectivity. By making us perceive in each successive image the presence of a changing society and its history, and our implication in what and how we perceive, Evans practiced a political art of the photograph, not a program of reform but social observation and critical intelligence.<sup>316</sup>

By asking viewers to be self-reflexive, in Trachtenberg’s view, Evans transformed photography into a pure medium—not a “just the facts, ma’am” documentary transcription, but instead a formal practice that was true to the possibilities and constraints of the medium, at the expense of particularity in subject matter. Although this element of Trachtenberg’s argument, too, has influenced the analysis of this chapter, it is a curious argument on its face, because Evans had no interest in “abstract” photography. Trachtenberg pushes readers to understand that particular subject matter *per se* was not the goal for Evans. Instead, Evans’s interest was to convey a story about vision, and about the experience of looking out into the world. The irony of Trachtenberg’s formulation is that subject matter simultaneously occupies a place of supreme importance and absolutely no importance—its existence is necessary in order for the photographs to work as Trachtenberg argues that they do, but the pictures are not about their subject matter in the conventional sense of defining and identifying one individual and unique thing. The issues of point of view and sequential organization were, for Trachtenberg, the keys that unlocked the castle of art. Evans’s invention became the motor that propelled Trachtenberg’s account not just of *American Photographs*, but his narrative of photography’s rise to a true art form within American visual culture more generally.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> It is important to note that two essays that deal directly with *American Photographs* both disagree directly with Trachtenberg’s finding that there is no internal politics to the catalog. Doug Nickel and Lew Anderson both read the importance of the catalog in its sequential ordering of the photographs.

<sup>316</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 285.

<sup>317</sup> Despite its elegance and lucidity, Trachtenberg’s argument has major flaws. Most importantly, he fails to take into account any actual predecessors for Evans, particularly Eugene Atget and Paul Strand, both

Trachtenberg found a way to make Evans's work a natural fit with the world of modern art by creating a hermeneutical system that almost exactly matched the formal ideals of the primacy of medium and disengagement from politics that were trumpeted by Clement Greenberg in the United States first in 1939 and throughout the mid-century.<sup>318</sup> Both Evans's and Trachtenberg's evaluation of the importance of *American Photographs* was essentially post-Greenbergian. It is even possible, if unlikely, that either man or both were in the audience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on November 15, 1972, when Clement Greenberg spoke on the subject of photography as an art form. On that occasion, Greenberg continued a line of thought that had appeared irregularly in his writing since the 1930s by defining what he considered the essential relationship of photography to literature:

Photography's dependence on literature, so far and still, is its ~~great~~ [sic] advantage.... Photography's great future—or great chance—is as a storyteller. It realizes this chance when it stays away from modern painting and rejects its influence—or at least sifts it imaginatively (as Walker Evans has done).<sup>319</sup>

What is important about Greenberg's account of Evans's work—which appears most clearly here but was already in print as early as the mid-1940s in equally abbreviated form—is, first, its structural alignment with his larger theory of modernism: photography had no recourse to abstraction in a real sense, because photographers always had to show their hand, the relationship of their pictures to the world.<sup>320</sup> If Greenberg's overall theory of modern art rested on the belief that an artwork's integrity is measured by its adherence to the confines of medium, then photography can only function as a modern art form if it

major figures and photographers whose work Evans knew well. Moreover, they were both photographers who steadily mined the territory of point-of-view.

<sup>318</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in John O'Brien, ed., *Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 5-21. Greenberg wrote art criticism for the *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1940 (when he assumed an editorial position) and for *The Nation* from 1942-44. Art historian Michael Fried's highly autobiographical introduction to his own collected essays, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), gives a sense of the prominence of Greenberg at mid-century, pp. 1-77 (references to Greenberg interspersed throughout).

<sup>319</sup> Greenberg, "Photography as an Art," notes on speech delivered at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 15 November 1972, Clement Greenberg Papers, box 27, file 15, Getty Research Institute, Special Collections, Los Angeles, California. Greenberg's interpretation of the proper place of photography was remarkably stable. In 1946, he complained bitterly of Edward Weston and compared his work unfavorably to Evans's, writing: "Evans is an artist above all because of his original grasp of the anecdote. He knows modern painting as well as Weston does, but he also knows modern literature. And in more than one way photography is closer today to literature than it is to the other graphic arts." Greenberg, "The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition by Edward Weston," from *The Nation*, 9 March 1946. As reprinted in Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O'Brien, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), p.63. Evans was less enthusiastic about Greenberg than vice versa. In a private letter to Romana Javitz in 1947, Evans referred to a recent review of Ben Shahn's work (one that pointedly argued that Shahn was a more important photographer than painter, which was almost assuredly unwelcome news) by writing, "Now the Greenberg piece! There's a lulu. What vocabulary, what confident throwing around of ideas made from talcum powder! Greenberg is in a nice business indeed. Gawd!" See Romana Javitz correspondence, New York Public Library Archives.

<sup>320</sup> For a careful accounting of Greenberg's published remarks on Evans (not the manuscript reference I cite above) see Mike Weaver, "Clement Greenberg and Walker Evans: Transparency and Transcendence," *History of Photography* 15 (Summer 1991), pp. 128-130.

rejects abstract forms and embraces description. Description, in Greenberg's view, is the defining condition of the photograph, and it relegates photographic practice—at its best—to a permanent association with anecdote, and with art that gathers the force of narrative through the accumulation of detail.

For Trachtenberg, gauging *American Photographs*' importance was a matter of understanding how Evans created a documentary form that would transcend the previously unbridgable divide between Alfred Stieglitz's investment in symbolism and Lewis Hine's admirable but propagandistic social documents. In both of those cases, Trachtenberg saw a limitation in the development of photography on formal grounds, because of the extra-photographic investments of its makers. For Trachtenberg, it was Evans who would fulfill the modernist ambition for a pure and disinterested artistic practice, and he could only do this by a feat of innovation that built upon photography's associations with literature. Trachtenberg saw Evans's work both within this tradition and as an extension of it. Hence, Trachtenberg celebrated the book of photographs, Evans's catalog, because it marked the invention of a unified photographic perspective, a point of view that was consistent but lacked its own investments. Evans himself almost certainly encouraged this line of argument—in a 1971 interview for *Art in America* he cited Gustave Flaubert as his artistic model and thus implicitly invoked point-of-view and literary realism as tools for understanding his artwork.<sup>321</sup>

The basic insight that Evans's artistic triumph resulted from his understanding of the essentially literary relationship of photography to language has had great currency in Evans scholarship. Its most decisive formulation was by Maria Morris Hambourg, curator of photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who wrote in 1999, Evans's sense of craft was largely brought over from his word-by-word concentration on literature. The synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a part is named to stand in for the whole, with him became a way to enter the world through its small, ordinary details.<sup>322</sup>

Hambourg's argument has several obvious sources, including Evans's late statements about the importance of literature to his formal development and Trachtenberg's highly influential argument. More important than these sources, however, were two other factors. First, in 1994 the Metropolitan Museum of Art accessioned Evans's entire archive from his estate, and came into control of his library, which contains volumes that date through Evans's entire life, and his correspondence and diaries, which in many cases describe his reading. With the 1999 exhibition, the museum announced, de facto, that it had completed cataloging Evans's archive. The curators' desire to understand not only how all of the pieces fit together—the books, letters, ephemera and photographs—but also the not-unreasonable belief that they would fit together securely was a strong motivation to read Evans's love of literature and his obvious pleasure in it as a basis for his photographic practice.

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<sup>321</sup> Evans said: "I wasn't conscious of it [in the 1930s], but I know now that Flaubert's esthetic is absolutely mine. Flaubert's method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyway used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treatment; the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity. 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." Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March-April 1971), p. 84.

<sup>322</sup> Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," in Rosenheim, et.al., p. 23.

Further, the roots of this theory almost certainly derive from the vast popularity and centrality of semiotics to understandings of photography in mid-century. Already by the late 1850s, Oliver Wendell Holmes had considered photography as a curious but literal form of equivalence—he surmised that eventually likenesses would replace money as the central currency of exchange. A century later, the specifics of Holmes’s thesis had passed out of the main currents of photo-historiography, but his initial forays into a semiotics of photography blossomed in the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes’ essays on photography, ranging from his earlier semiotic analysis of its role within advertising to his later, more ambivalent account of the relationship between photography, memory and language, *Camera Lucida*, solidified scholarly understanding of the medium’s close relationship to linguistic codes. The specifics of Barthes’s work are distant from my argument here save for their centrality to mid-century understandings of photography and his masterful linking of photographs with semiotics. This move was tremendously productive. It opened up many analytic possibilities for art historians and theorists of photography, but it also reinforced and added intellectual heft to a pre-existing, if episodic, bridge between photography and language. At a moment in which photography was coming into the market and coming into place as an important medium of modern art, Barthes’s argument added luster to the medium’s place within a highly valued intellectual tradition. To put the matter crudely, photography was coming into prominence as a brainy medium. For Evans, who had spent his life engaged socially and professionally with writers and critics, this move was deeply appealing.

There is no direct line from Oliver Wendell Holmes to Roland Barthes to Alan Trachtenberg. Nor is there a direct line from Clement Greenberg to Alan Trachtenberg. Still, biographical facts make these figures relevant. In 1965, Evans took a position on the art faculty at Yale. His prestige grew during this period—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was re-issued in 1960 to wide acclaim, something its authors did not experience the first time around, and Evans enjoyed a close working relationship with the Museum of Modern Art’s re-energized Department of Photographs after the 1964 installation of John Szarkowski as head curator in that department. That relationship culminated in a major 1970 retrospective of his work at MoMA. Despite the increasing public acclaim for his work, Evans faced Yale’s stringent mandatory retirement age in 1968, at a point when his work sold slowly and for modest amounts of money. He was often invited to give lectures and interviews, and was by all accounts a memorable speaker.<sup>323</sup>

In addition to being asked publicly to describe his work, his career, and his influences, Evans’s archive reveals that he also wrote regularly about his work—often in preparation for lecture, often scribbling down notes and thoughts about photography and his place in its world. He turned repeatedly during this period to several themes, among them the influence of literature on his work, the propriety of the relationship between photography and literature, and the role of sure-footed inspiration to photographic success. These themes were closely related, a point made clearly in an undated set of notes from the mid-1960s:

Photography is the visual action that is or can be closest to literature [and it] refers to prose, to poetry. It should be. Where it is not this is it utter trash. Therefore you are in practicing it gambling heavily. . . . A failed—an empty—photograph is

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<sup>323</sup> The most recent evidence of this is in John Hill’s essay in *Lyric Documentary*, in which he recounts Evans’s 1964 “Lyric Documentary” speech at Yale, pp. 12-26.

the bottomless depth of futility. Undertake it at your peril. Walk the dangerous rope which has no safety net.<sup>324</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Evans overtly named language as a metaphor for his own previous practice, writing:

[Photography] is a language by for and from the eye as music is for and by the ear. This is not to say by any means that the mind is not behind it, nor that it does not sometimes carry literary meaning.<sup>325</sup>

I use these two private notes to demonstrate Evans's late insistence on particular understandings not of specific photographs but of photography generally. His reliance on the literary metaphor was bound up with his late-in-life anxieties about money, as well, perhaps, as broader fears of irrelevance to the history of the medium. The fear of irrelevance may have been stoked by Yale's mandatory retirement age but was almost certainly assuaged in part by the steady stream of adulation Evans received the late 1960s and early 1970s—from curators, reporters, former students and historians. Evans presented to the latter group a coherent narrative of inspired development of his personal work and an attractive (if overly-smooth) functional definition of the art of documentary. He was referring explicitly to his work of the 1930s.

Evans's 1960s pronouncements about photography have had a surprisingly long life because their explicit intention was to give viewers and admirers a sure-footed guide to interpreting his photographs and the project of photography in general. But it is important that Evans and the critical community that has responded to his work since the early 1970s refer to *American Photographs* almost exclusively as a book rather than an exhibition. I would not deny the importance of Evans's book, but Trachtenberg and Evans both overstated its centrality for 1938, and let it stand for a modernist ideal that had more currency in the 1970s than in the late 1930s. In fact, the differences between the book and the exhibition were so marked that each provided a substantively different story about the nature of making pictures, the purpose of doing so, and the history that such pictures might illuminate.

Perhaps it was the luxury and completeness of Evans's success, his "establishment," that allowed the conversation about *American Photographs* to become a streamlined story about the establishment of photography within the art museum in America. What is lost in the streamlining is the struggles and contingencies specific to Evans's establishment, and the strong rhetorical claim about the relationship between art and photography that arose, first and foremost, out of his rhetorical claim about the nature of photographic labor and the narrative possibilities of a specifically photographic practice.

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<sup>324</sup> MMA/WEA 1994.250.6.53. This file is full of notes possibly reflecting early drafts of Evans's essay entitled "Photography" in *Quality: Its Image in the Visual Arts*, Louis Kronenberger, ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1969), which begins with the assertion that photography is the most literary of the visual arts.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The introduction to this dissertation promised that a story about Walker Evans in the 1930s would open up onto a broader story about the transition that transformed documentary photography from a marginalized progressive tradition into a central component of modern art in this country. My hope has been to provide a tight enough focus that Evans as a specific historical subject and his work, in its strange and exciting dimensions, could come into view as a particular case study, while also loose enough to breathe another perspective into a broad conversation about the shape and course of documentary photography in the 1930s. Evans's 1930s *oeuvre* retains its strangeness and its excitement because via stable compositions and unresolved narrative propositions, his prints suggest that the central problem of documentary photography is the problem of photography itself. The keywords that Evans's work evokes—medium, labor, authorship, ethics, and the art/document divide—are the keywords of photography's twentieth-century history. Whether his works nudged these concepts into centrality, or whether they merely tapped into the latent issues of a still-novel, still-strange, and a deeply powerful new medium, neither his work nor the keywords have passed peacefully into settled history.

Instead, both words and Evans's photographs have remained deeply contested aspects of modern and contemporary art, and visual culture at large. Moreover, the strangeness of the medium of photography has not been put to rest, even as film photography has passed out of use and a recent international symposium of scholars and artists asked the question, with apparent seriousness, "Is Photography Over?"<sup>326</sup> Although most of the respondents to the panel dealt with the consequences of technical issues related to the advent of digital practice, curator Charlotte Cotton answered "No, but it should be," and responded almost directly (if not by name) to the long shadow of Walker Evans, writing,

Will national and regional collections of photography truly reflect the histories of the medium as they now unfold if they continue to co-opt in a token fashion anything outside its core canon, whether it be the commercial industries of photography, amateur, or non-Western practices, as a way of seasonally updating a super-tired litany of:

- Road trips
- Street poetry
- Illustrations of political and social issues
- Lightweight conceptual art
- [...] The downright overproduced?<sup>327</sup>

Cotton's evident exasperation with the ascendance of a model of fine art photography (the "core canon") that Evans played a central role in establishing is both amusing and revealing. Her "super-tired litany" directly rehearses the subject matter of two generations of photographers' who were essentially raised on a steady visual diet of Walker Evans's photographs. Her accusation is that repetition and familiarity have

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<sup>326</sup> The symposium, "Is Photography Over?" was held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on April 22-23, 2010. Papers are online: [http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research\\_projects\\_photography\\_over](http://www.sfmoma.org/pages/research_projects_photography_over).

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

robbed photography itself (and its future) of the qualities of strangeness and excitement that I associate with his work from the 1930s.

How did Evans's work come to be implicated in the category of the "downright overproduced?" How did his work get "super-tired," to begin with? Is it possible that during the 1930s, Evans's tightrope performance between absolute formalism and his unsteady, uneven and frankly ambivalent response to the social world constituted a gamble? If so, the gamble took three forms, outlined in each of the preceding chapters. First, as I argued in chapter one, he ditched a traditional linkage between social progressivism and social documentary, leaving behind the clear language of captions and ancillary information, and even clear narration within the photographs themselves. Second, chapter two made the case that he left behind a romantic literary interpretation of the South, proffered by his peers, and instead produced photographs that offered an demonstrable uncertainty about what was going on there during the Depression. Finally, in chapter three I propose that he abandoned the employment model of photography as best he could, clinging instead to a model of artistic production that he associated with freedom and independence. In each case, Evans met his own uncertainty and irresolution about the relationship between politics, economics and society with a steady process of formal resolution, and in most cases I propose that the resulting photographs allow viewers (now as then) to engage with ambiguity.

Nevertheless, the stakes of Evans's great gamble were that his work would be interpreted as mere formal exercises, with the embedded connotation that there is an ethical abdication at the core of his practice. Such a vacancy gives Cotton's hostile litany its bite, but it is also the premise of art historian Terri Weissman's recent response to Evans. Weissman writes,

Evans presents a template of the American Depression that lends itself to symbolic aestheticization. This is to say, Evans's photographs of Depression-era America transcend their status of indexical documents marking a precise and limited moment in time, and are transformed into bigger symbols of American culture and its way of life, which in their beauty and exquisiteness wipe away the very specifics of the present they claim to depict.<sup>328</sup>

In other words, Evans's ambitious investment in formal rigor, his investment in the terms of media itself, are for Weissman the evidence of his unwillingness to let the qualities of specificity and contingency into his work. From this perspective, Evans's very formalism became a watertight barrier against engagement with the messiness and particularity of everyday life. Weissman's criticism of Evans underscores how risky Evans's gamble was, and how unwinnable.

Evans himself did not help matters, as in the early 1970s he ushered in the phrase "documentary *style*," and in doing so proposed a highly formal reading of his own earlier work.<sup>329</sup> The very phrase had the curious effect of negating the word documentary, subsumed as it is by the electricity of the word *style*. During the same period, as Evans reached retirement and began the effort to stabilize and define the nature of his own contribution to the history of photography, *American Photographs* came to be understood as a watershed in the published history of photography in the 1960s and early 1970s. The

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<sup>328</sup> Terri Weissman, *Documentary Photography and Communicative Action: The Realisms of Berenice Abbott*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2006, p. 148.

<sup>329</sup> Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59 (March-April 1971), p. 87.

factors were multiple, but included not just Evans's own pronouncements, but also Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski's embrace of the 1930s and the ascendance of documentary style and the emergence of a formal, semi-organized market for photographs. Even before this later period and the emergence of a true triumphal narrative, however, there was something about the exhibition that was a watershed for Evans personally.

The exhibition established Evans as one of the best-known photographers in the country, but the broad exposure did not correspond to a similarly broadened scope of interest on Evans's part, as though his energy for making photographs that offered a sweeping, historical view of the nation was exhausted. Instead, Evans's focus as a photographer became much tighter, more precise, and significantly less expansive. If he didn't look inward, exactly, he looked down. As of 1938, Evans started to make photographs in New York's subways as part of an extended independent project. He hid his camera under winter clothes, and thus returned to the theme of working people off the clock, and unaware of the camera.<sup>330</sup> Then, several *Fortune* projects in the early and mid-1940s returned again to this theme, most importantly his 1946 portfolio of photographs from Detroit called "Labor Anonymous" (Fig. 49), in which Evans took photographs of people who walked by his camera in downtown Detroit on a Saturday afternoon.<sup>331</sup> The location is well documented, but by virtue of their visual qualities alone, the photographs could have been made anywhere. A wall behind these workers fills the background, and the photographs depict a series of people walking by, mostly in three-quarter profile and apparently unaware of the camera. One man looks at Evans as he walks. The grid-like layout echoes *Penny Picture Display* (Fig. 42), but is grimmer.

The Detroit portfolio visibly and adroitly returns to the major themes that I have offered as dominant forces in Evans's work through the middle-years of the 1930s: work, personhood, the refusal of political identity, and the resistant suggestion of narrative. Still, the sense of contingency and open possibility that characterized work from the previous decade does not attend the *Fortune* sequence. The people in Detroit are easily legible in terms of class, largely by virtue of the defining features of their clothing, especially their hats. The accompanying text (without a byline but written by Evans) refers to workers, laborers and the "body of labor," but the photographs suggest industrial hierarchy instead.<sup>332</sup>

In this dissertation I have proposed that Evans spent much of the 1930s on a kind of balance beam, and that we cannot separate out the intensity of his investigation into photography itself from the thoroughness of his examination of the historical conditions of the Great Depression. The fact that Evans seemed to hop off the balance beam, both in his work of the following decade and in his own recounting of his career, may shed light on its precariousness for an individual actor, but it may also reflect the fact that photography itself was transformed into a far vaster field of practice, one labored into being (for better or worse) by his own success.

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<sup>330</sup> Mia Fineman, "Notes from the Underground," in Jeff L. Rosenheim, et. al. *Walker Evans*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 107-119; Sarah Greenough, *Walker Evans: Subways and Streets*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991).

<sup>331</sup> Evans described his method in the text that accompanied the portfolio, "Labor Anonymous," *Fortune* 17 (November 1946), pp. 152-53.

<sup>332</sup> Fineman, 112.

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Appendix A: Comparative list of works in *American Photographs* exhibition and catalog

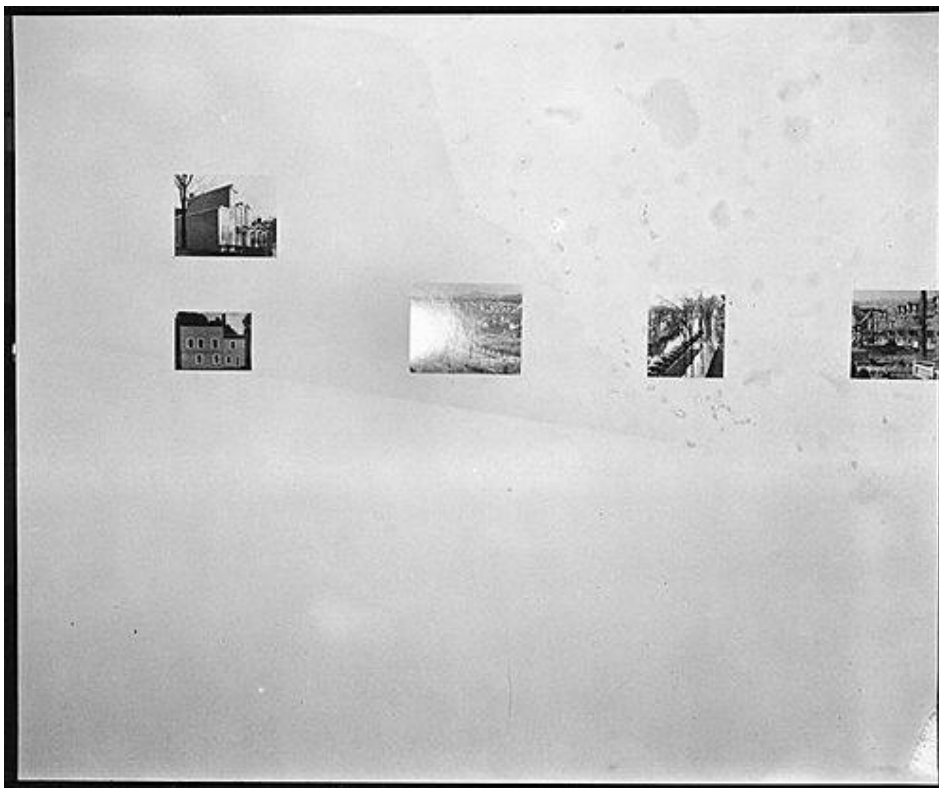
The exhibition checklist ordered objects in descending order from 100 to 1. In the catalog, *American Photographs* (hereinafter AP, parts I and II) numbers ascend, but there are two sections: I) People by Photography, and, II) Architecture by Photography. Out of 100 photographs in the exhibition, 54 overlapped with those reproduced in the book, although of that number, 12 prints were alternate or cropped versions. Evans reproduced 33 new or unrelated works in the book that do not appear in this list for a total of 87 prints.

The order of the hang simulated here is a reconstruction based on matching Evans's negatives of the hang with the known checklist (in order). There are places where the exhibition does not make sense, architecturally (where, for instance, corners are too close together) so it is possible that the photographs were not hung in order of their catalog number (as is not unusual in exhibitions, even today) or that they were hung through a non-traditional gallery space, which is also possible. These digitized negatives were Evans's own, and they are ordered in sequential negative number on 4 x 5 inch film (thus the reproductions here are slightly smaller than contact size).

The cropping of the photographs that Evans included in the exhibition in some cases differs from other known prints of specific images, as I discuss in chapter 3. The relative sizes of the prints depicted is also uncertain.

Evans's clusters here roughly approximate the written instructions Evans sent to other venues for how to hang the show, but the exhibition that circulated had more pictures (110) and was organized slightly differently.

All photographs in Appendix A are © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

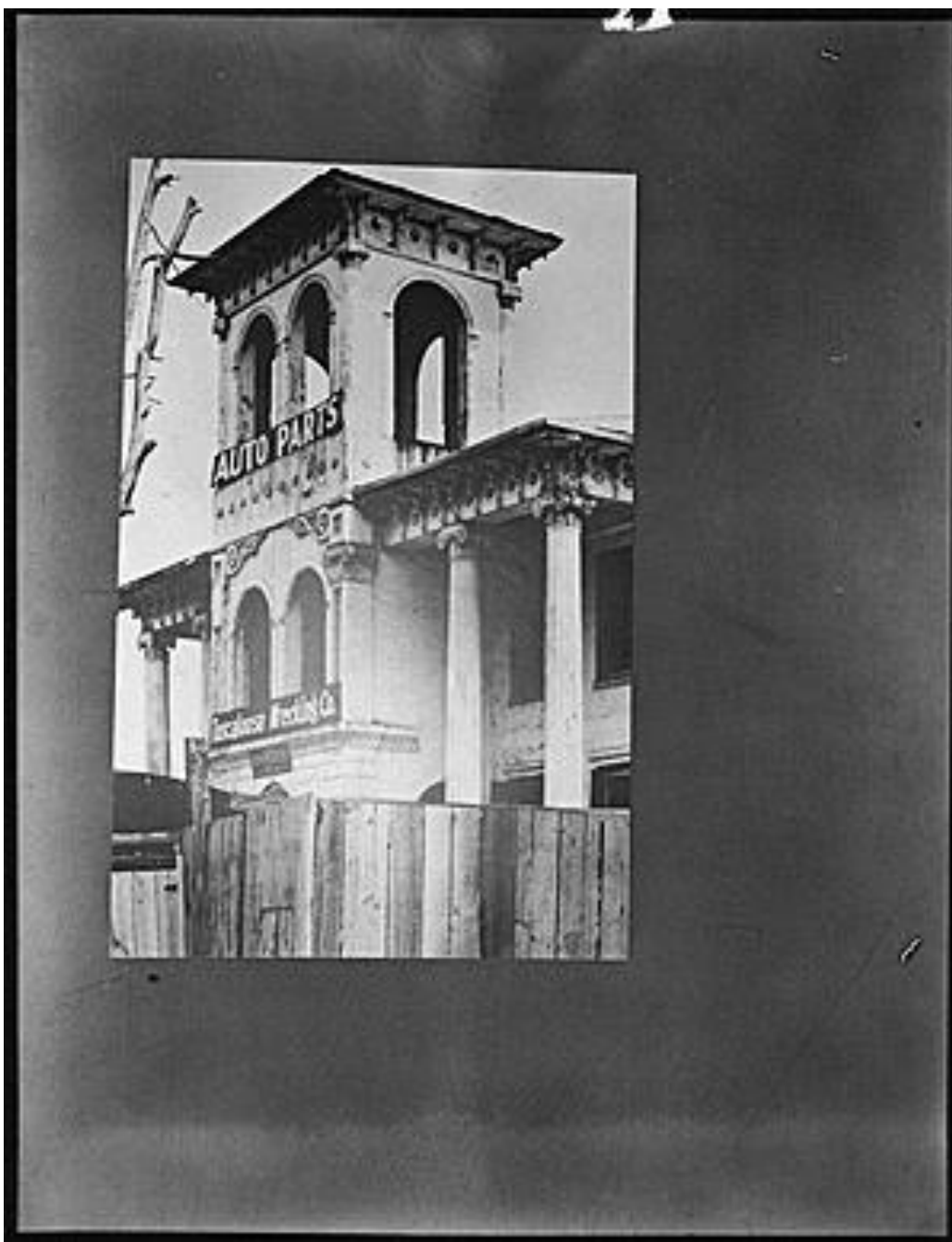


Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Walker Evans Archive (WEA/MMA) 1994.254.623

- 100. *Connecticut Frame Houses*, 1933 (corresponds to: AP II-20)
- 99. *Frame Houses in Virginia*, 1936 (AP II-22; related view of same houses in AP II-23)
- 98. *View of Easton, Pennsylvania*, 1935 (not included in AP, but variant view of same site appears at AP II-2)
- 97. *Main Street, Saratoga Springs, New York*, 1931 (AP I-27; related view of Saratoga Hotel at AP II-39)
- 96. *Street and Graveyard, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, 1935<sup>333</sup> (variant print of AP II-5; related view of Bethlehem AP II-6)

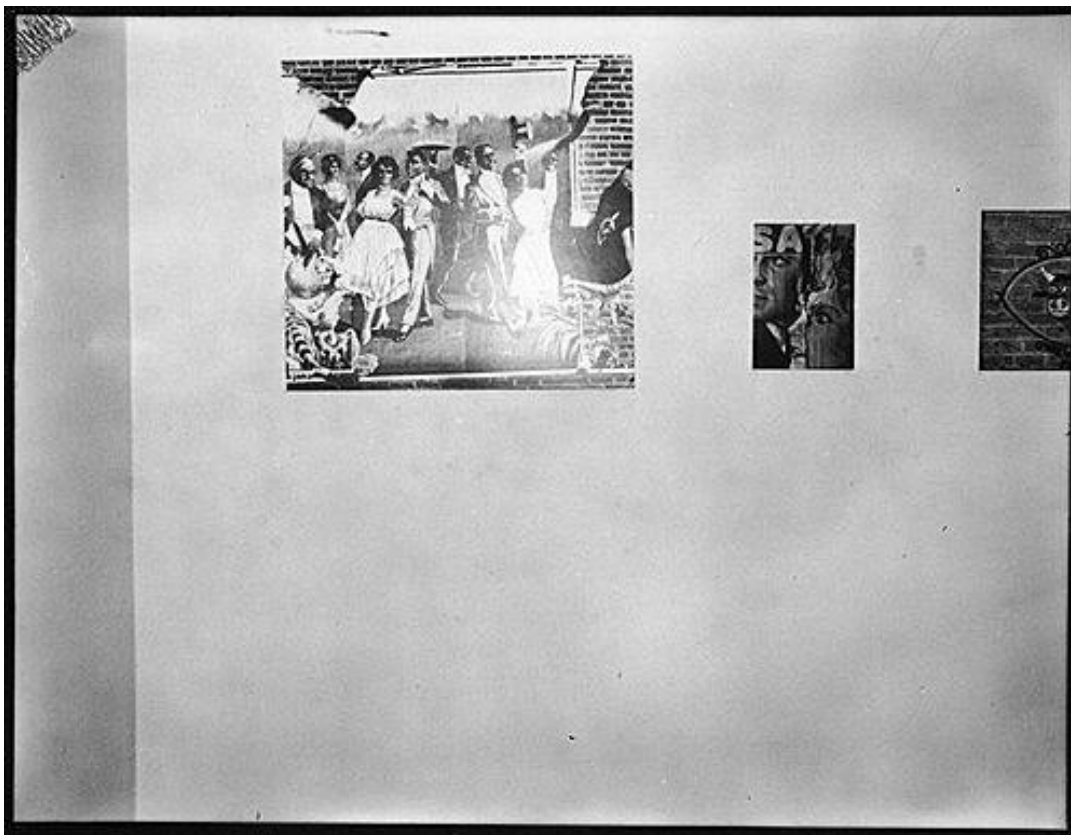
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<sup>333</sup> The photographs from Bethlehem and Easton, PA, as well as Phillipsburg, NJ, were made in 1935, although they were published with 1936 dates. For information about the history of such erroneous dating in Evans's work, see Rosenheim, 1999, pp. 75-77.



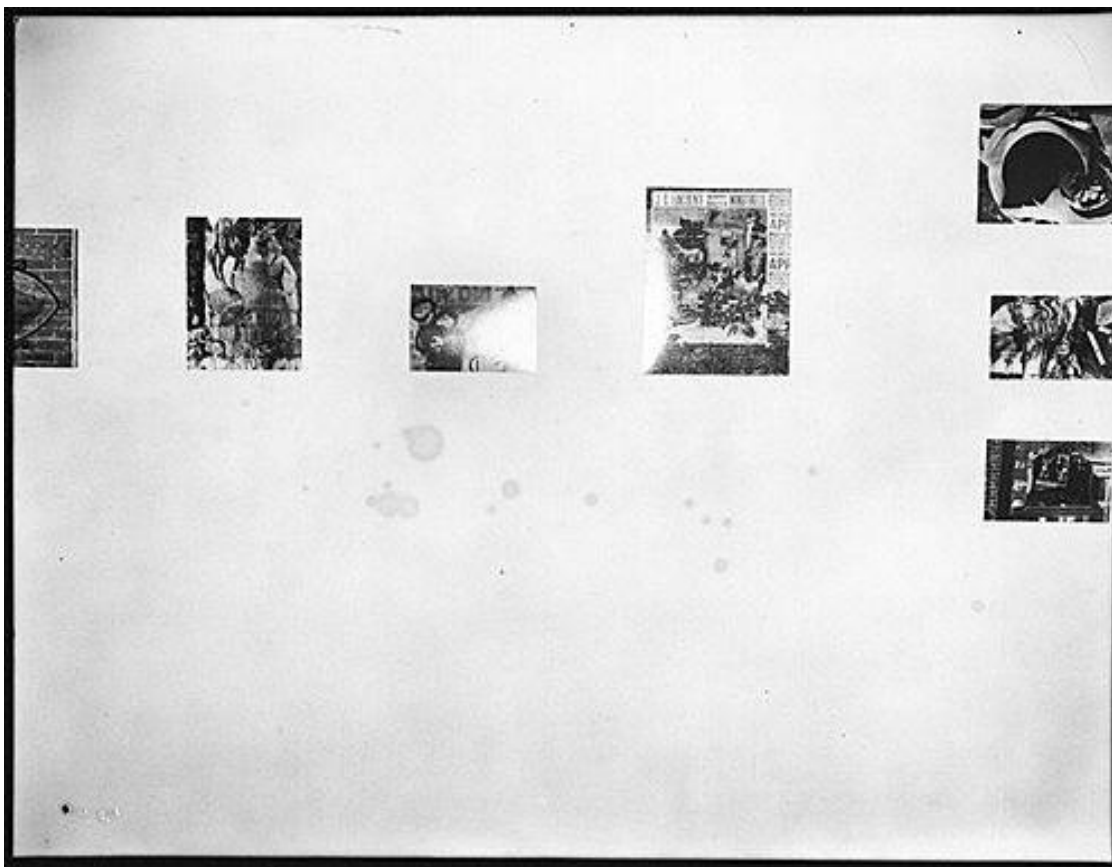
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, WEA/MMA 1994.254.624

95. *The Tuscaloosa Wrecking Company*, 1936



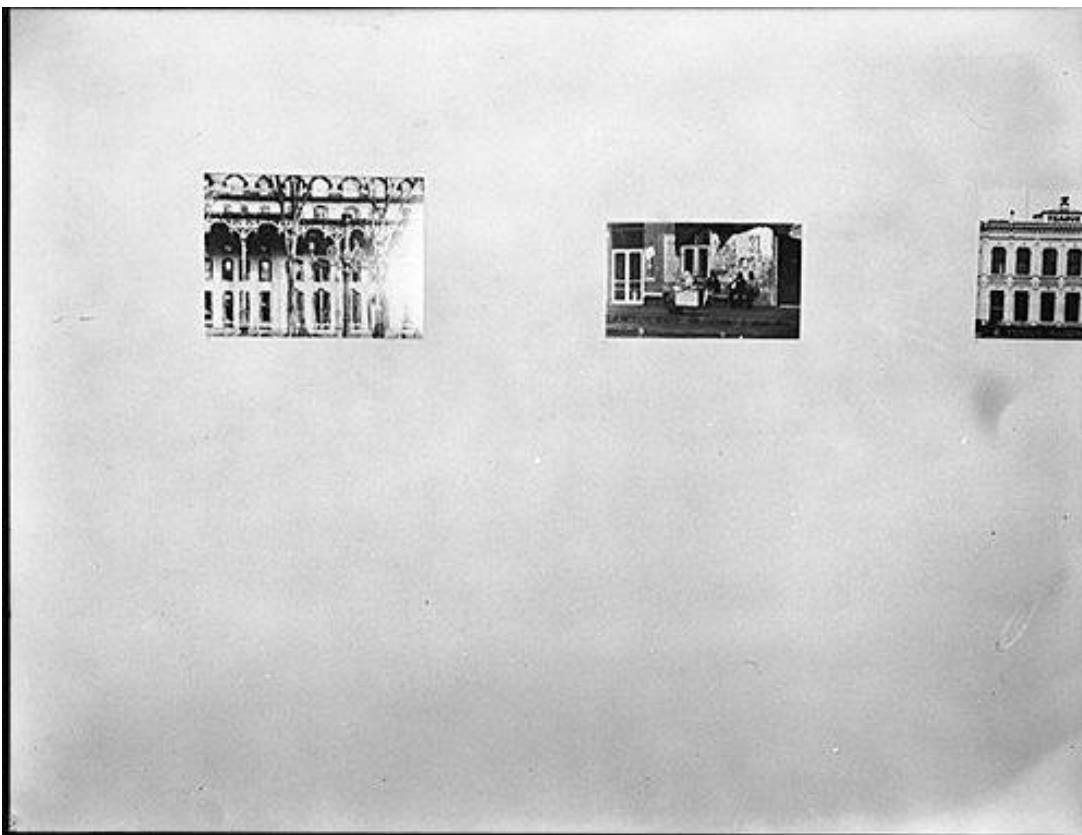
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.626

- 94. *Minstrel Showbill*, 1936 (variant print in AP I-42 titled *Minstrel Showbill Detail*)
- 93. *Torn Movie Poster*, 1930 (AP I-30)
- 92. *Butcher Sign, Mississippi*, 1936 (AP II-31)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.627

- 92. *Butcher Sign, Mississippi*, 1936 (AP II-31)
- 91. *Circus Signboard*, 1930
- 90. *Roadside Gas Sign*, 1929 (AP I-8)
- 89. *Minstrel Showbill*, 1936 (variant print cropping in AP II-34)
- 88. *Moving Truck and Bureau Mirror*, 1929
- 87. *Stamped Tin Relic*, 1929 (AP II-1)
- 86. *Tin Relic*, 1930 (AP II-37)



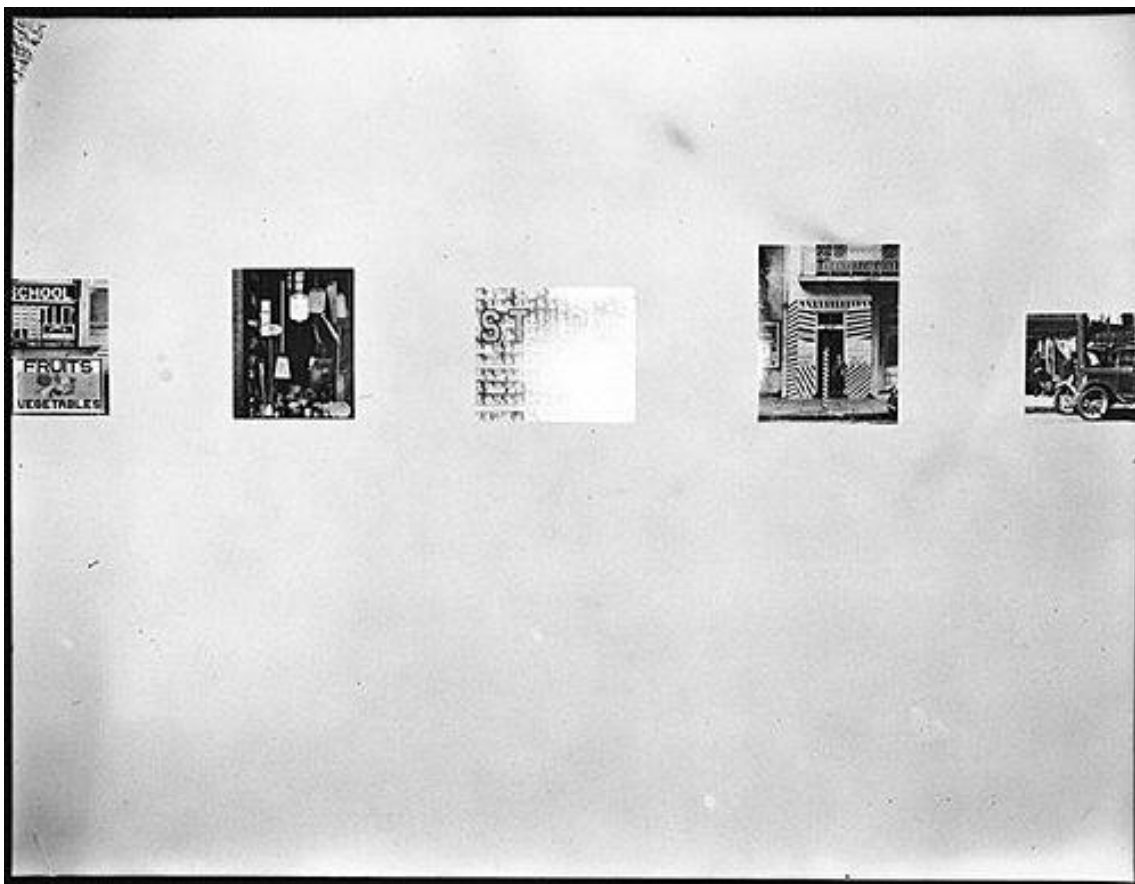
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.628

- 85. *Hotel Porch, Saratoga Springs*, 1931 (variant view in AP II-34)
- 84. *Sidewalk in Vicksburg, Mississippi*, 1936 (related shopfront view in AP II-30)
- 83. *Block Front in Montgomery, Alabama*, 1936



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.629

- 83. *Block Front in Montgomery, Alabama*, 1936
- 82. *Truck and Sign*, 1930
- 81. *Stable, Natchez*, 1936
- 80. *License Photo Studio*, 1934 (AP I-1)
- 79. *Signs in South Carolina*, 1936



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.630

79. *Signs in South Carolina*, 1936

78. *Household Supply Store Window, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, 1935 <sup>334</sup>

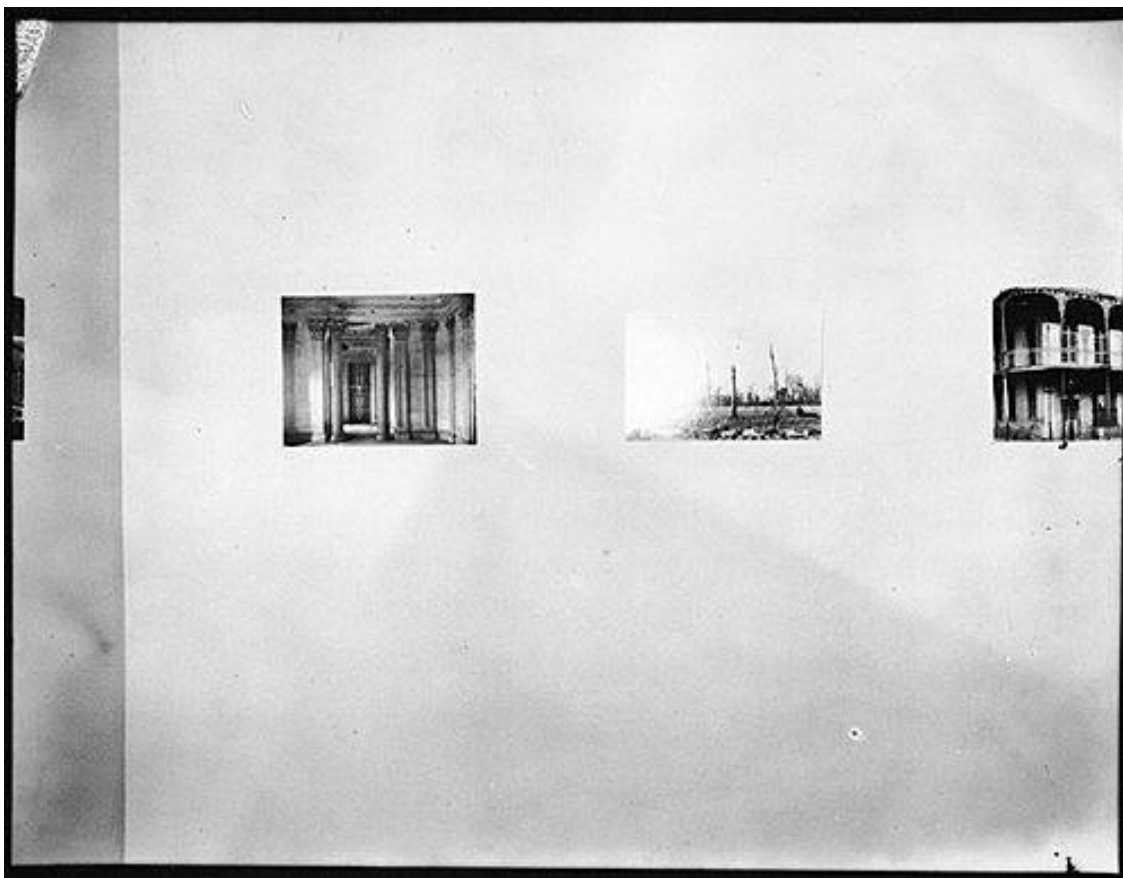
77. *Penny Picture Display, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1936 (variant print cropping AP I-2)

76. *Sidewalk Shopfront, New Orleans*, 1935 (variant print cropping AP I-5)

75. *Sidewalk in Vicksburg*, 1936 (variant view in AP I-24)

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<sup>334</sup> See footnote 1.



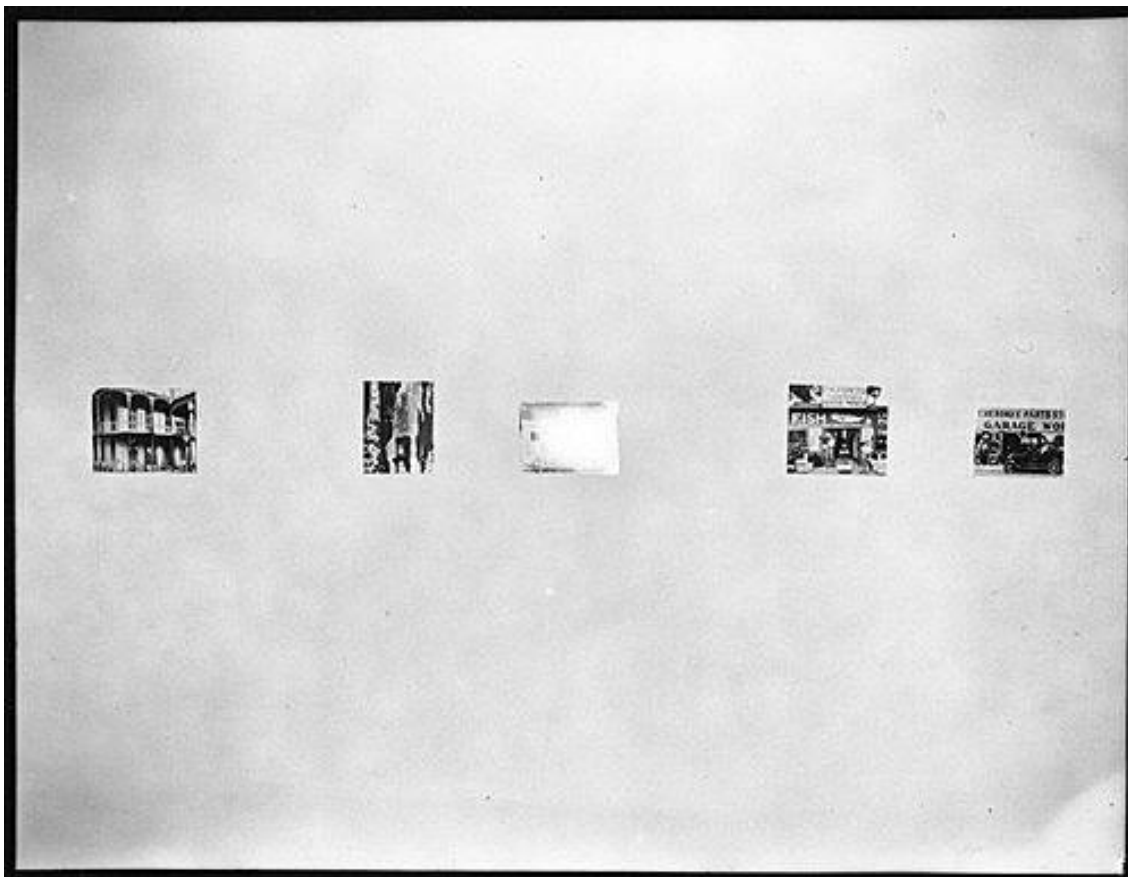
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.631

75. *Sidewalk in Vicksburg*, 1936 (variant view in AP I-24)

74. *Room in Louisiana Plantation House*, 1935 (more commonly known as *Room at Belle Grove Plantation, Near New Orleans*)

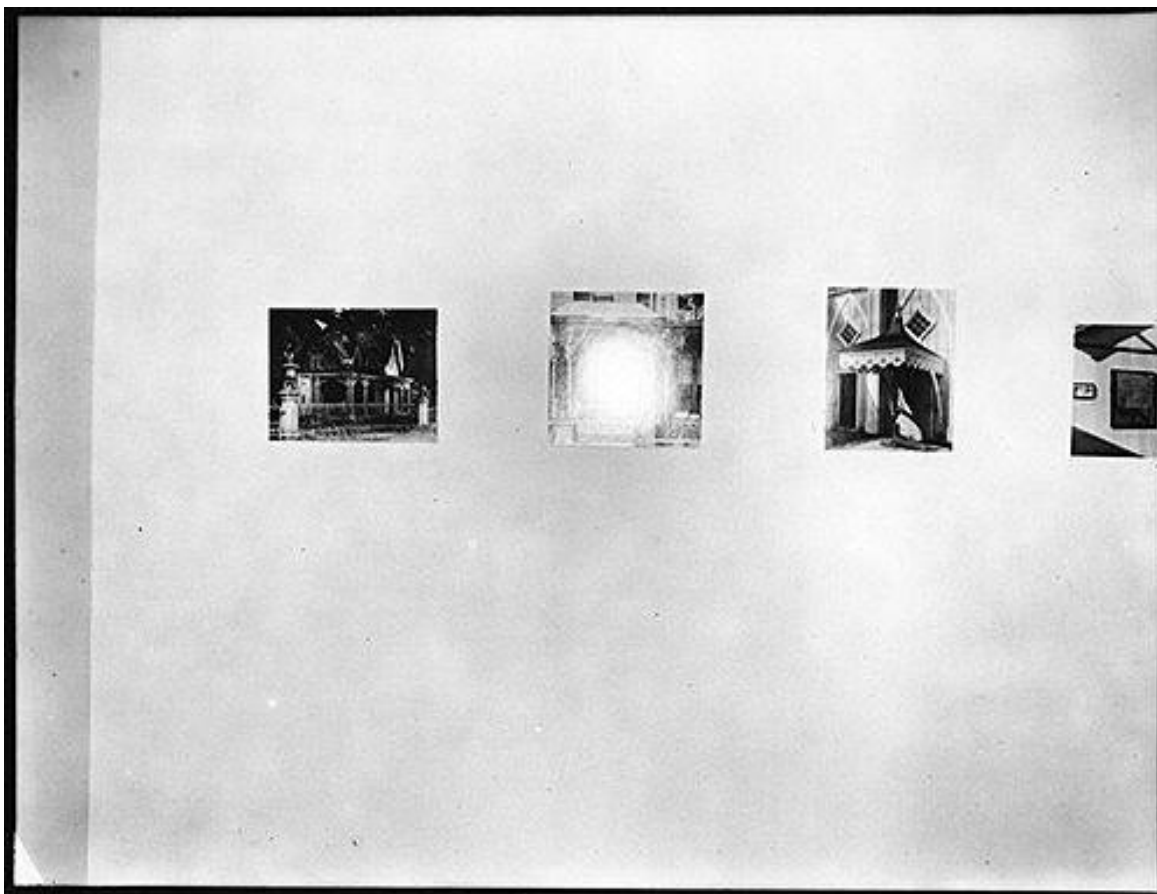
73. *Southern Farmland*, 1936

72. *French Quarter House in New Orleans*, 1935 (AP II-36)



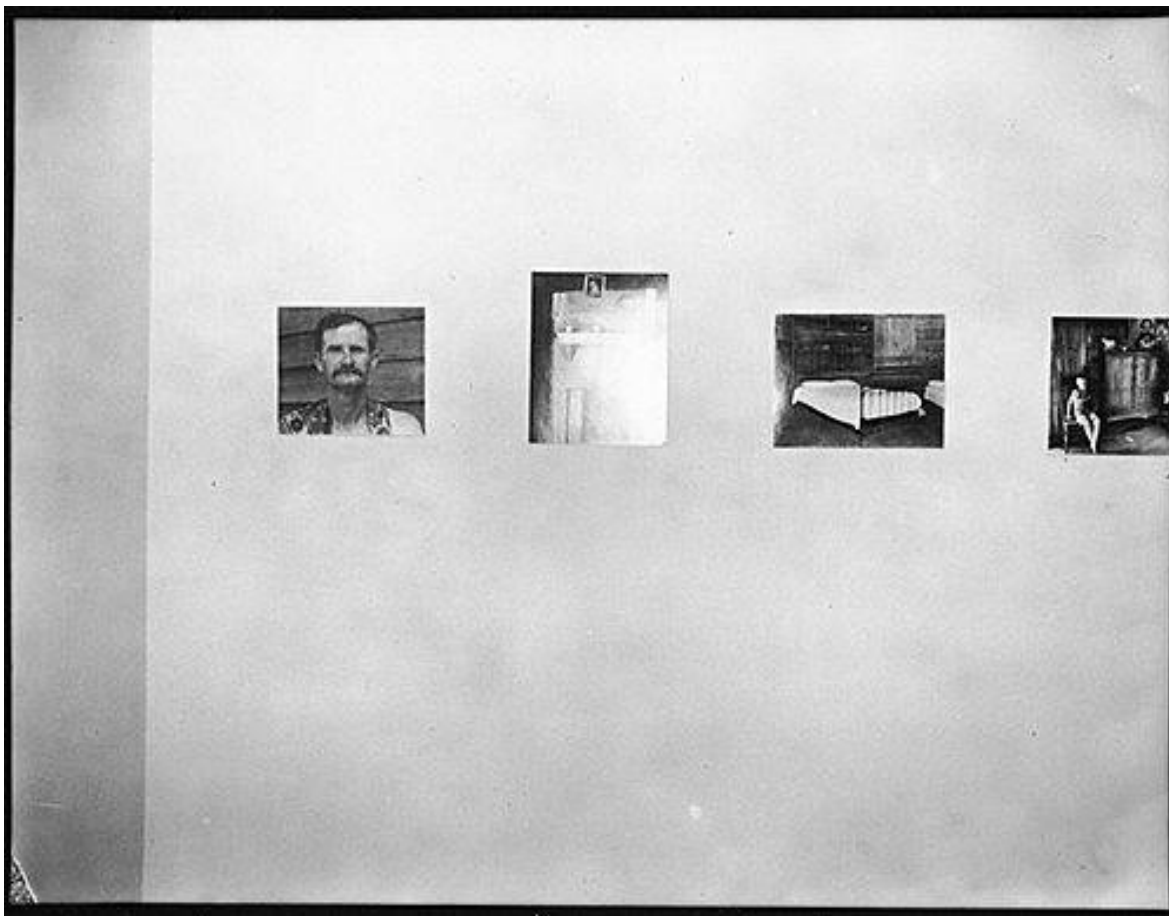
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.632

- 72. *French Quarter House in New Orleans*, 1935 (AP II-36)
- 71. *Fire Ruin in Ossining, New York*, 1929
- 70. *Church of the Nazarene, Tennessee*, 1936 (variant print cropping AP II-16)
- 69. *Roadside Stand Near Birmingham*, 1936 (AP I-35)
- 68. *Garage in Southern City Outskirts*, 1936 (variant print cropping AP I-25)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.633

- 67. *Gothic Gate Cottage near Poughkeepsie, New York*, 1931 (AP II-28)
- 66. *Birmingham Boarding House*, 1936 (possibly variant print cropping AP I-36; related boarding house view, *New Orleans Boarding House*, 1935, in AP I-37)
- 65. *Maine Pump*, 1933 (AP II-32)
- 64. *Clapboard House Front*, 1930



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.634

- 63. *Alabama Tenant Farmer*, 1936 (Bud Fields portrait)
- 62. *Fireplace, Alabama Farmhouse*, 1936
- 61. *Southern Farmer's Bed*, 1936
- 60. *West Virginia Living Room*, 1936



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.635

- 60. *West Virginia Living Room*, 1936
- 59. *Wall Detail, Alabama*, 1936
- 58. *Alabama Farm Interior*, 1936
- 57. *Alabama Tenant Farmer*, 1936 (Floyd Burroughs portrait)
- 56. *Tenant Farmer Child*, 1936 (Ida Mae Tingle portrait)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.636

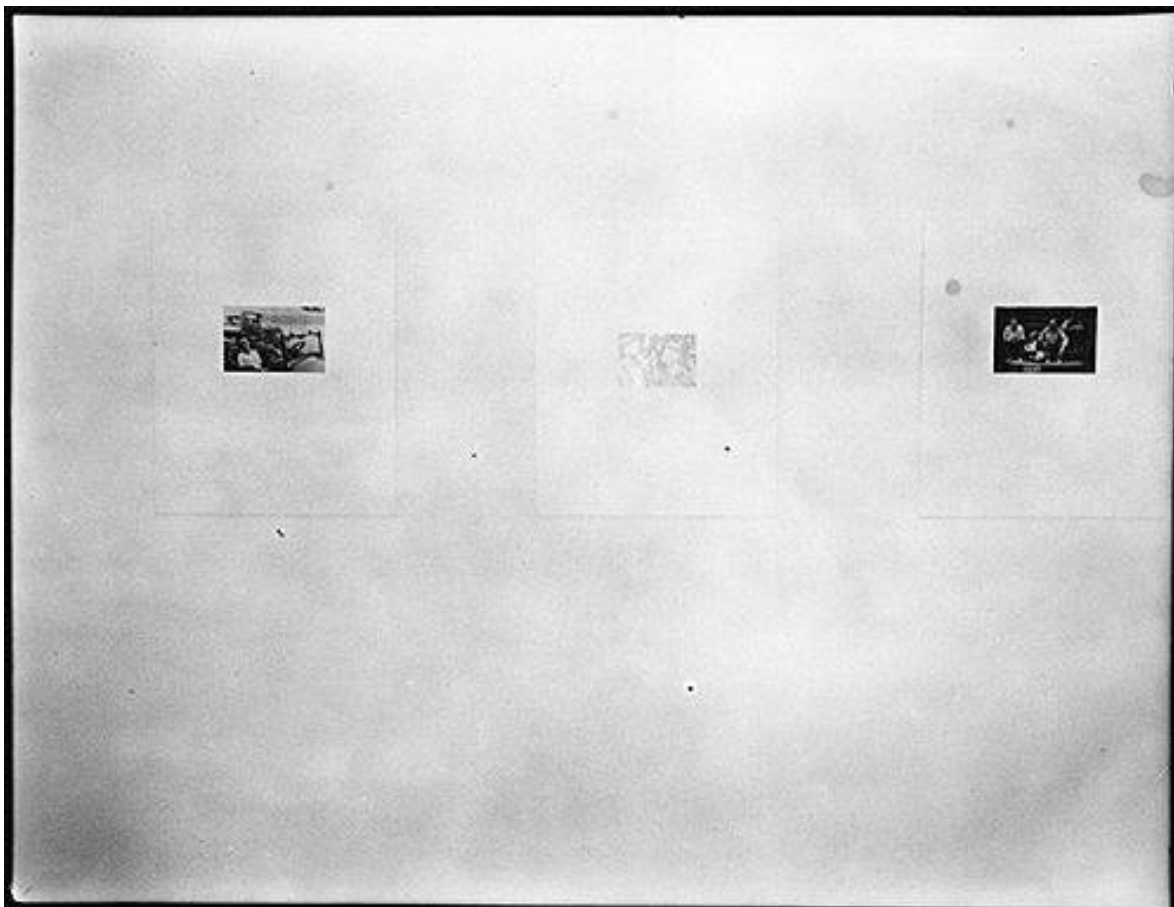
- 56. *Tenant Farmer Child*, 1936 (Ida Mae Tingle portrait)
- 55. *Tenant Farmer Child*, 1936 (Squeakie Burroughs portrait)
- 54. *Grave*, 1936 (more commonly known as *A Child's Grave*)
- 53. *Farm Kitchen, Alabama*, 1936
- 52. *Alabama Tenant Farmer's Wife*, 1936 (Allie Mae Burroughs portrait; variant view in AP I-14)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.637

51. *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Family*, 1936 (Fields family)

50. *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Family*, 1936 (Fields family)

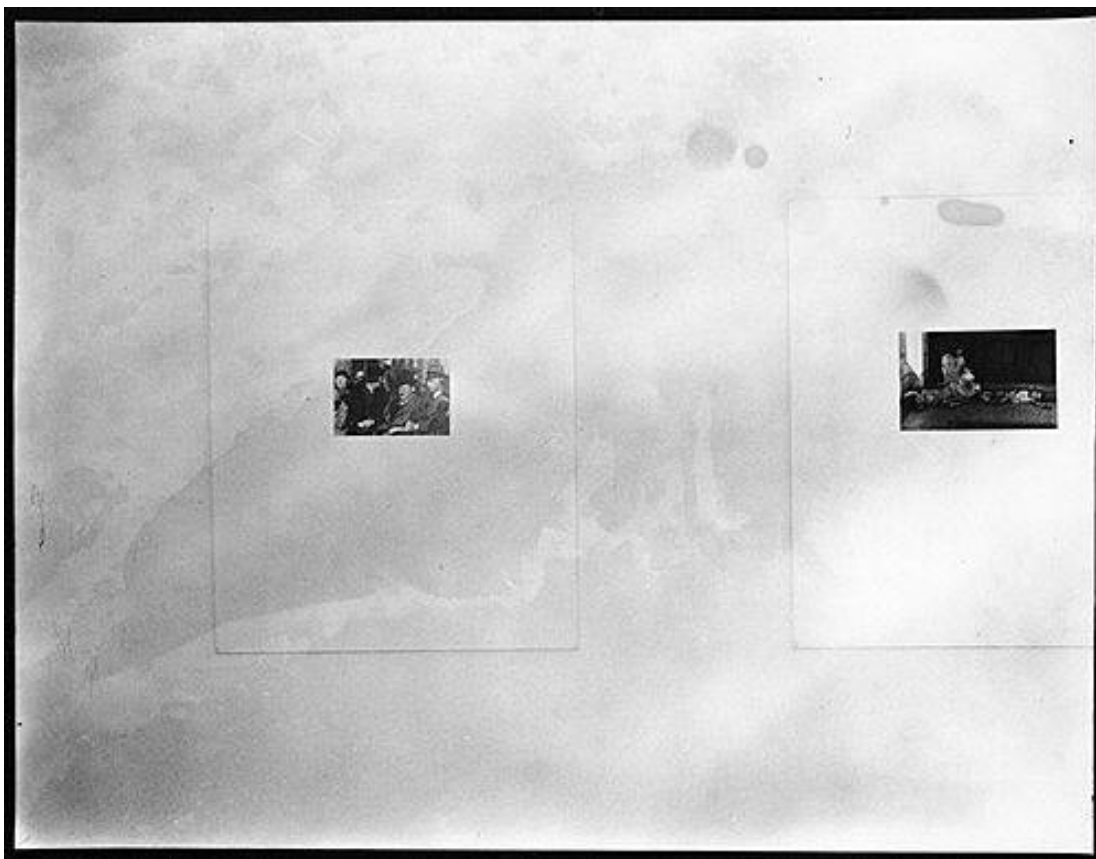


Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.638

- 49. *Parked Car, Small Town Main Street*, 1932 (AP I-10)
- 48. *Faces, Pennsylvania Town*, 1935<sup>335</sup> (AP I-3)
- 47. *Men Eating Lunch on Steps*, 1930

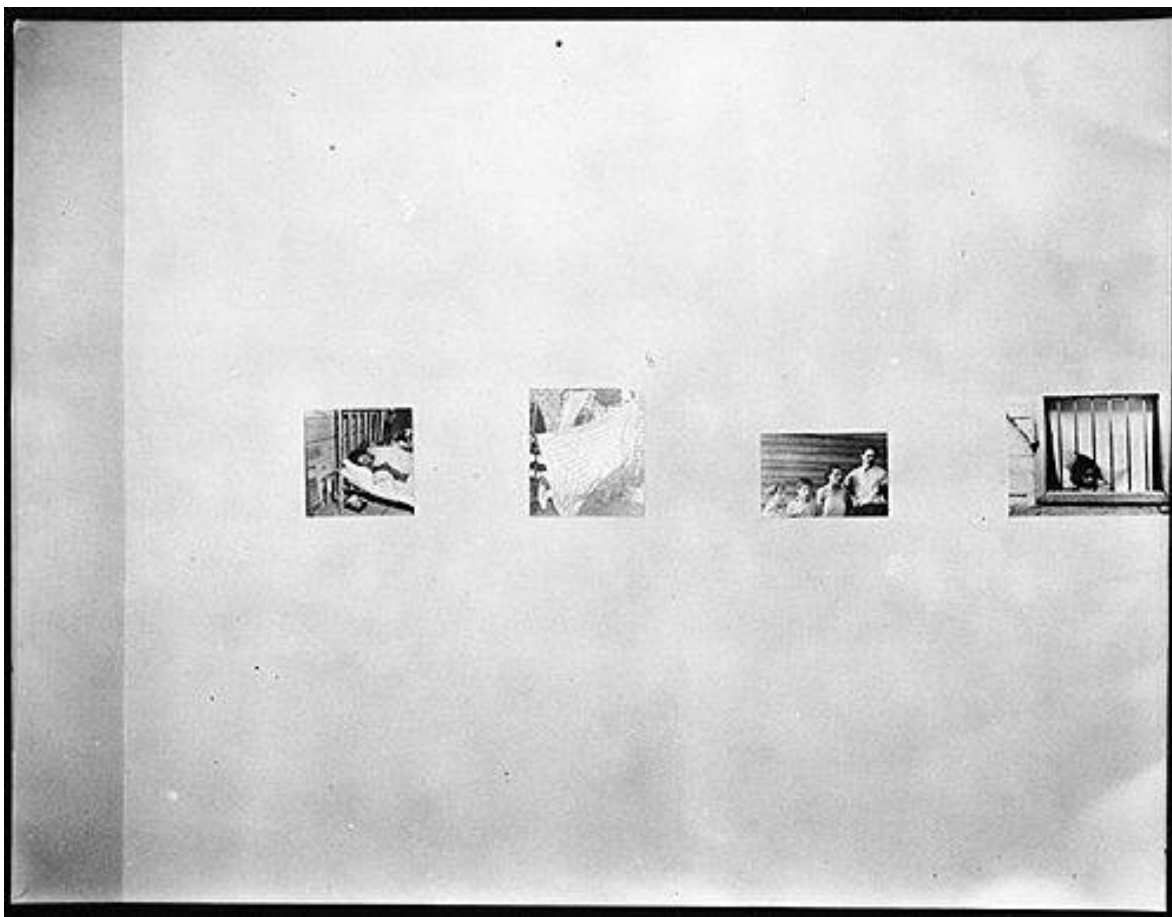
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<sup>335</sup> See footnote 1.



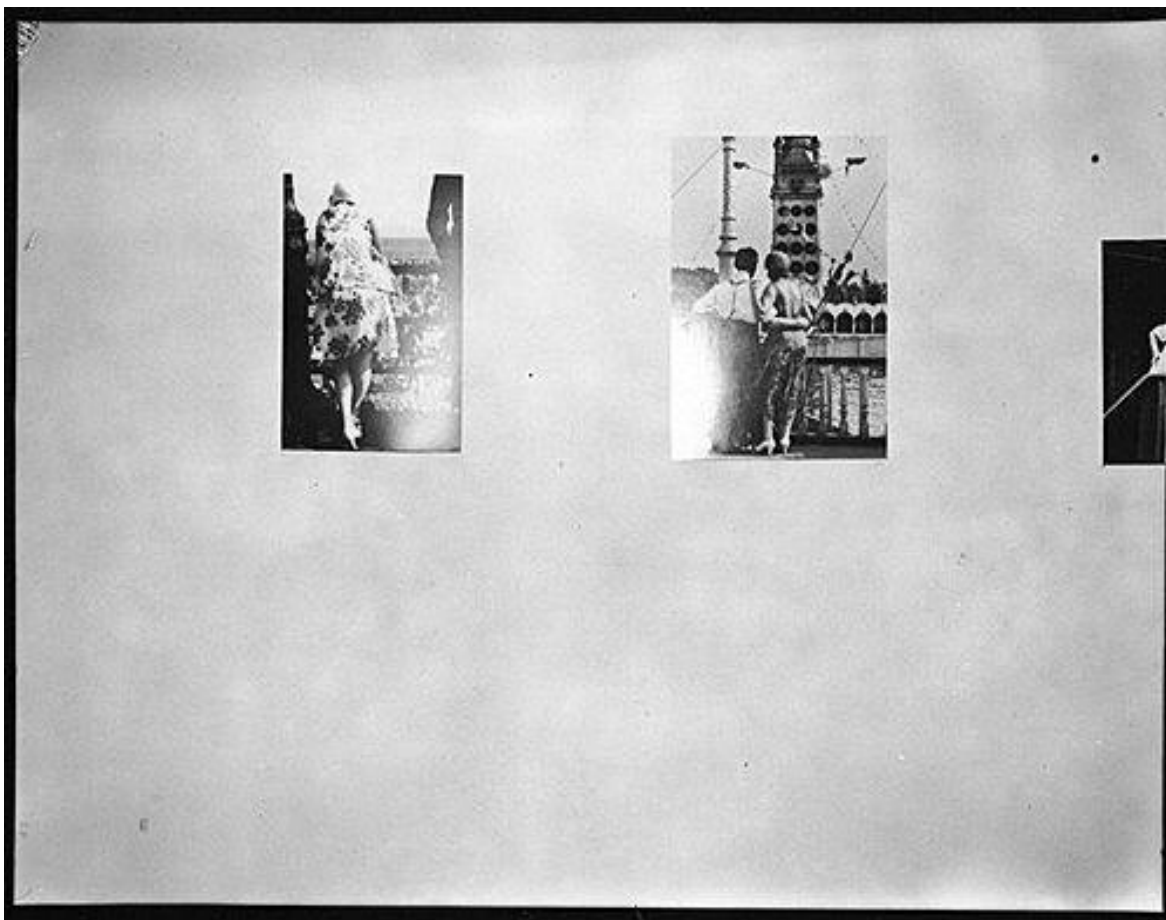
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.639

- 46. *A Bench in the Bronx on Sunday*, 1933 (AP I-12)
- 45. *Starving Cuban Family*, 1933



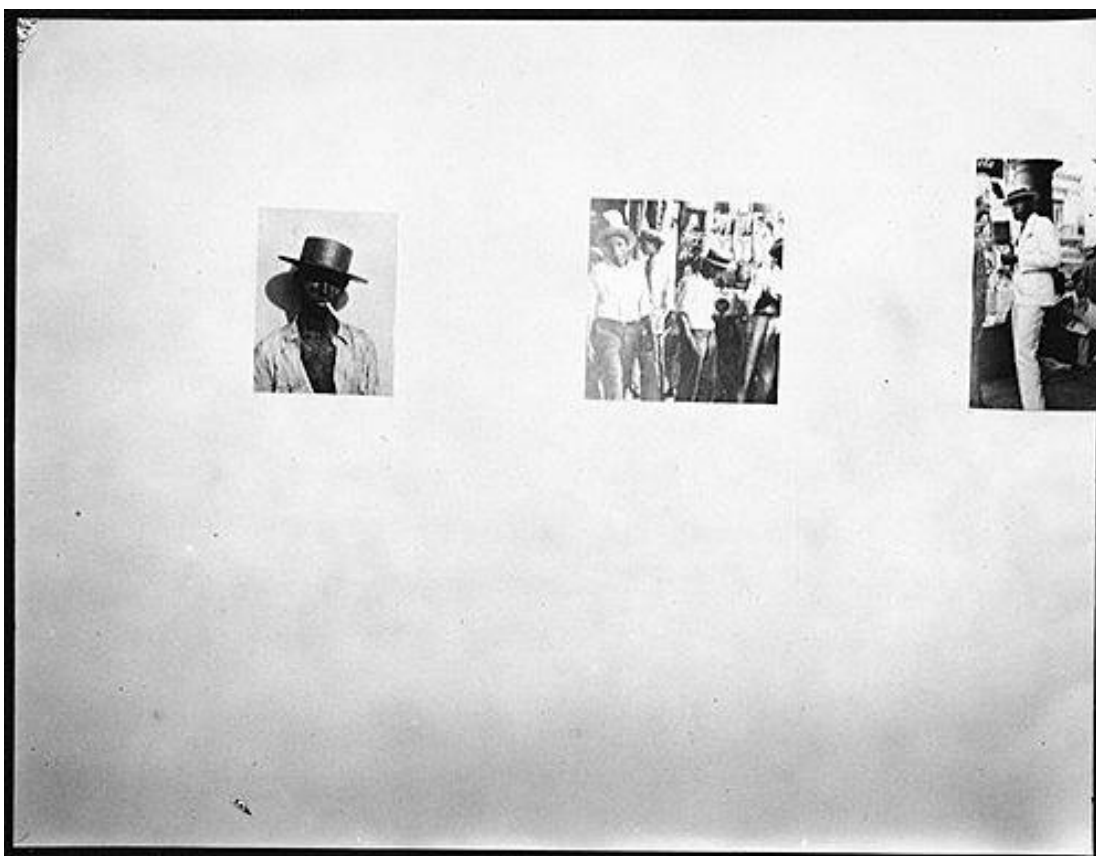
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.640

44. *Arkansas Flood Refugee*, 1937 (variant print cropping AP I-44)
43. *Flood Refugee*, 1937
42. *Alabama Tenant Farmer Family Singing Hymns*, 1936 (AP I-22)
41. *Girl behind Barred Window (Havana)*, 1933



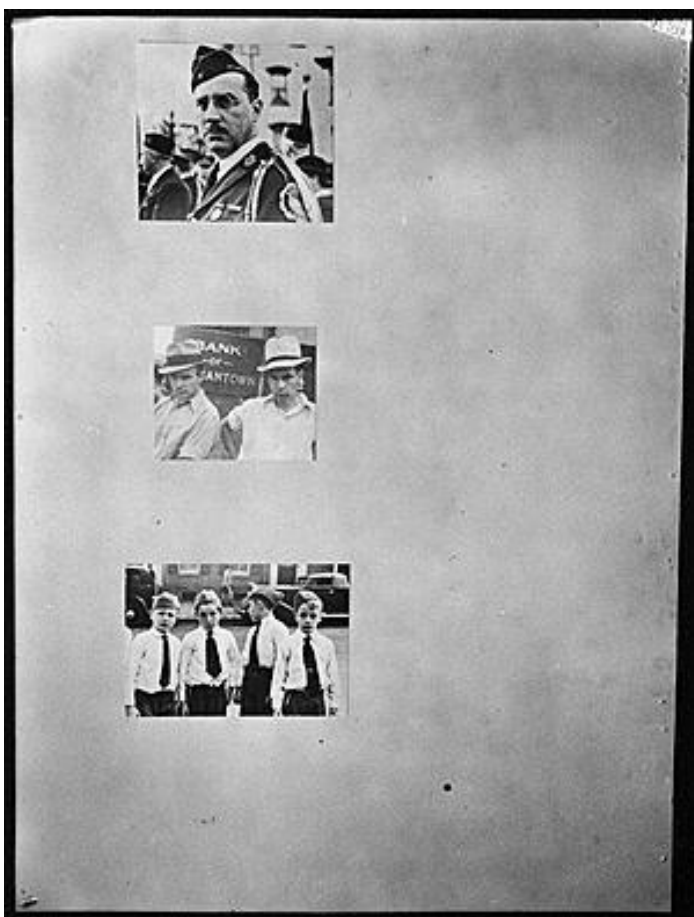
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.641

- 40. *Coney Island Boardwalk*, 1929 (AP I-11)
- 39. *Couple at Coney Island, New York*, 1928 (check date?; AP I-41)
- 38. *Posed Portraits, New York*, 1931 (AP I-40)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.642

- 37. *Cuban Ship Loader*, 1933 (related view in AP I-33)
- 36. *People in Downtown Havana*, 1933
- 35. *Citizen in Downtown Havana*, 1933 (AP I-20)



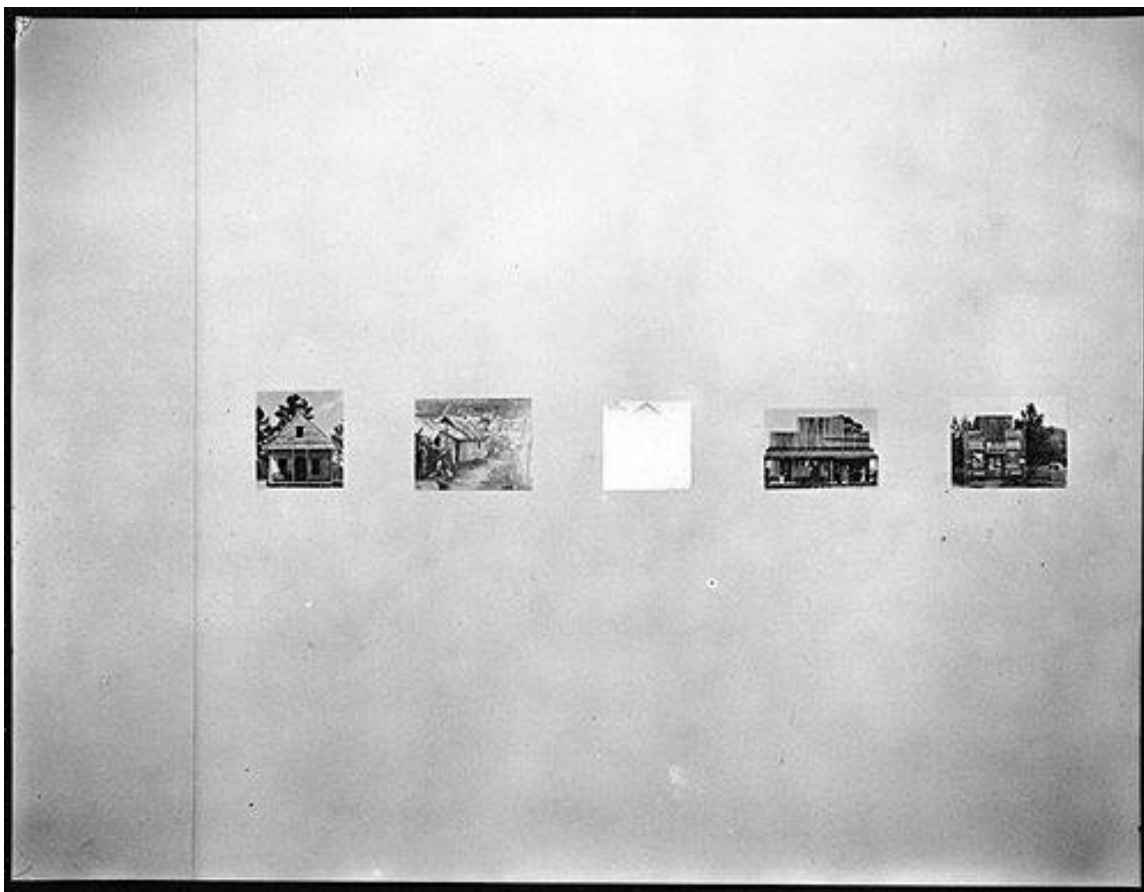
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.643

(These photographs are in reverse order of their numerical sequence below.)

- 34. *Sons of the American Legion*, 1935<sup>336</sup> (AP I-31)
- 33. *Main Street Faces*, 1935 (AP I-39)
- 32. *American Legionnaire*, 1935 (AP I-32)

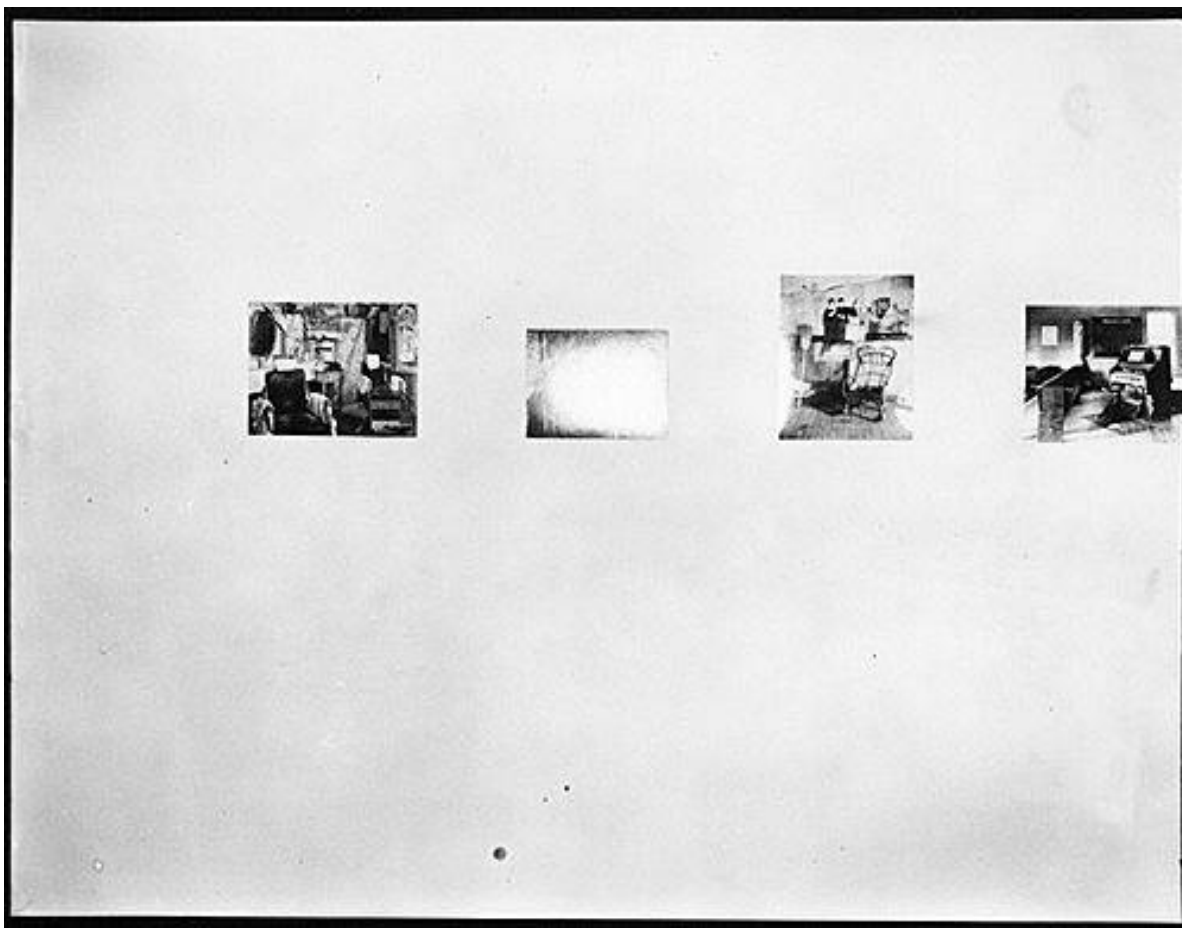
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<sup>336</sup> Re: nos. 34, 33, 32, see footnote 1.



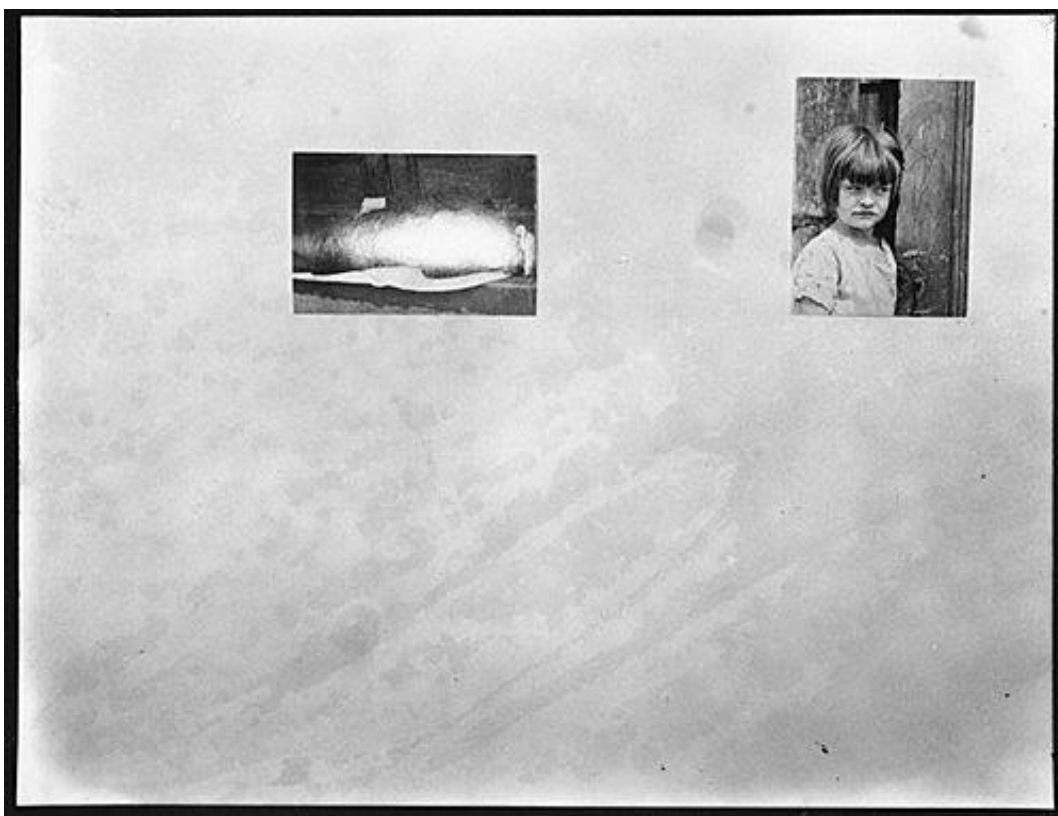
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.644

31. *Wooden Church, South Carolina*, 1936 (AP II-17)
30. *Squatter's Village, Cuba*, 1933
29. *Glean Hill School, Alabama*, 1936
28. *Country Store and Gas Station, Alabama*, 1936 (variant print cropping AP II-14)
27. *Country Store*, 1936



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.645

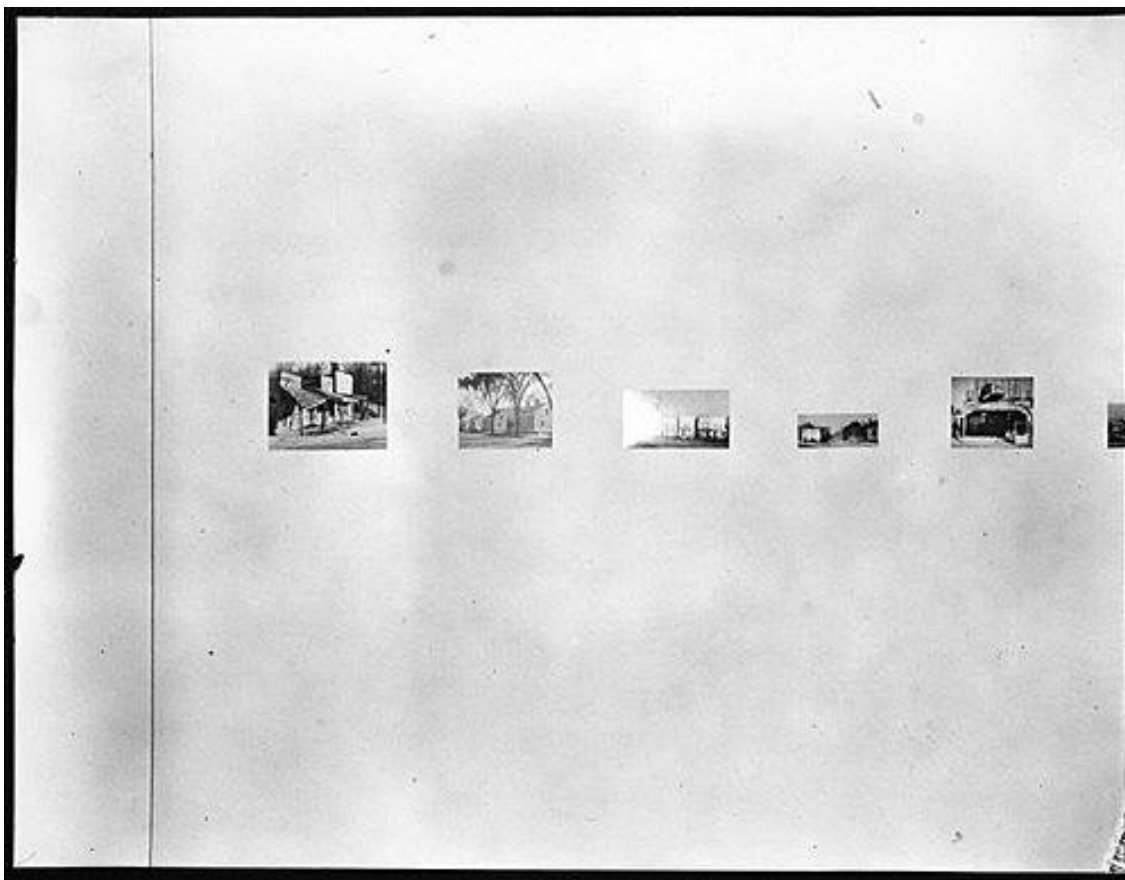
- 26. *Negro Barbershop Interior, Atlanta*, 1936 (AP I-6)
- 25. *New England Portuguese Bedroom*, 1930 (related interior view, *Interior of Portuguese House*, AP I-30)
- 24. *Interior, West Virginia Coal Miner's Home*, 1935 (variant print AP I-23)
- 23. *Church Organ and Pews*, 1936



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.646

22. *South Street, New York* (AP I-49; variant print AP I-48)

21. *Child in Backyard*, 1932 (AP I-16)

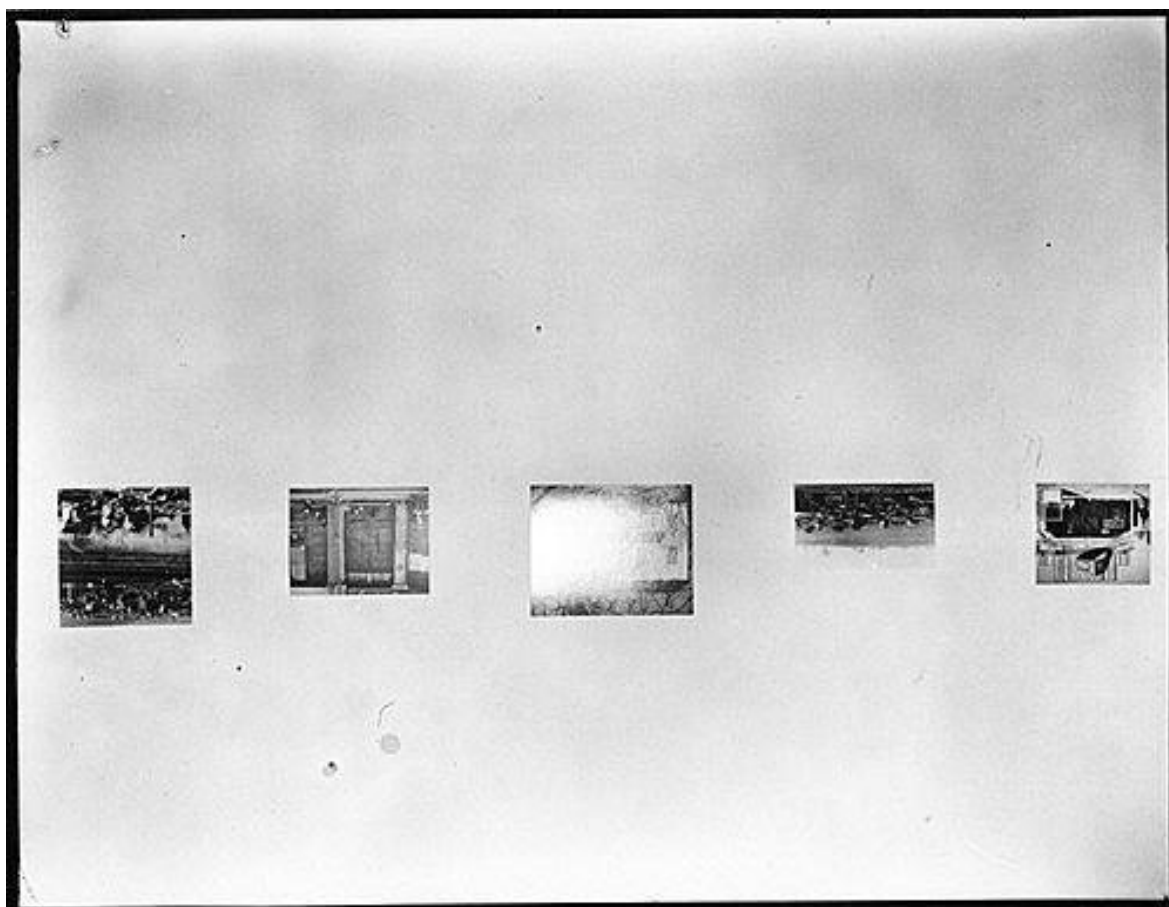


Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.647

- 20. *Wooden Stores in Natchez*, 1936
- 19. *Millworkers' Houses in Willimantec, Connecticut*, 1931 (AP II-21)
- 18. *Frame Houses in Virginia*, 1936 (AP II-23; related view AP II-22)
- 17. *Savannah Negro Quarter*, 1936 (AP I-36; related view, *Houses in Negro Quarter of Tupelo, Mississippi*, 1936 in AP I-21)
- 16. *Alabama Store*, 1936
- 15. *Joe's Auto Graveyard*, 1935<sup>337</sup> (AP I-7)

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<sup>337</sup> See footnote 1.



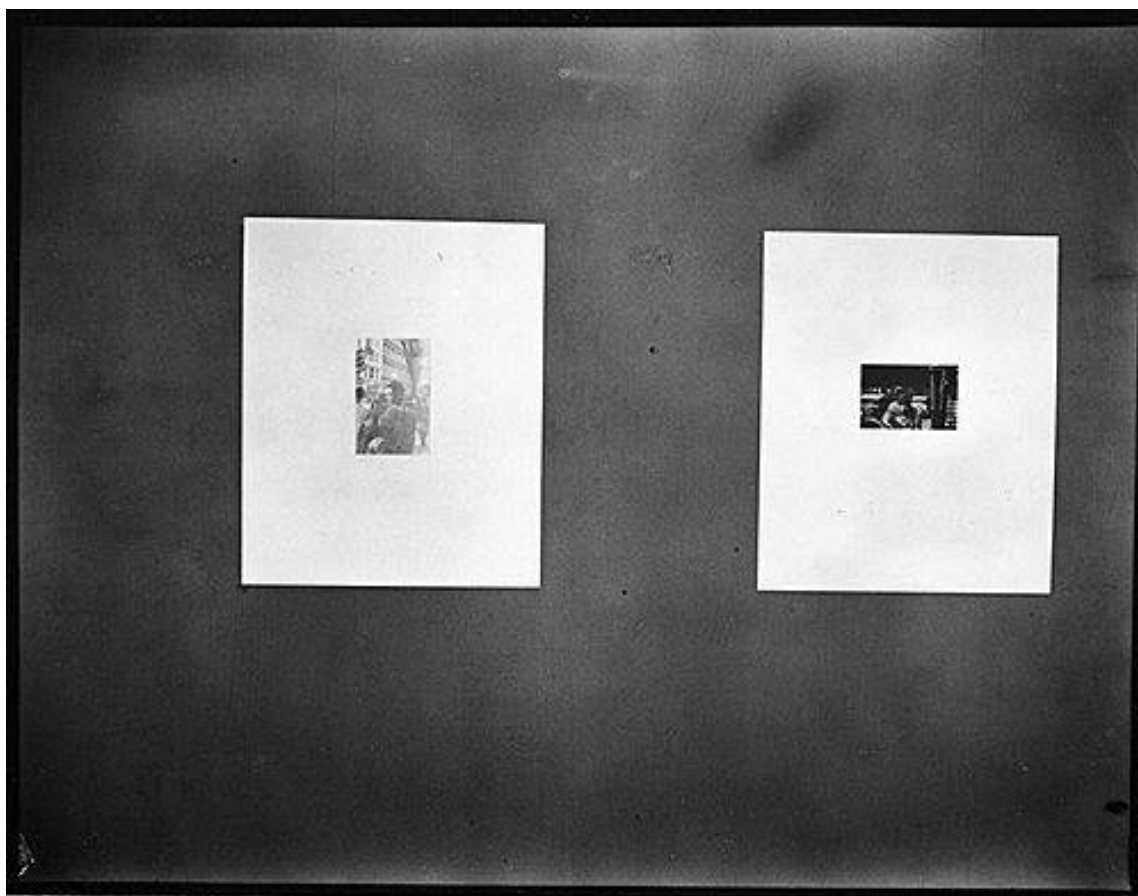
Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.648

- 16. *Alabama Store*, 1936
- 15. *Joe's Auto Graveyard*, 1935 <sup>338</sup> (AP I-7)
- 14. *Westchester, New York, Farmhouse*, 1931 (AP II-8)
- 13. *South Street, New York*, 1932 (AP I-48; variant print AP I-49)
- 12. *View of Easton, Pennsylvania*, 1935 <sup>339</sup> (AP II-2)

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<sup>338</sup> See footnote 1.

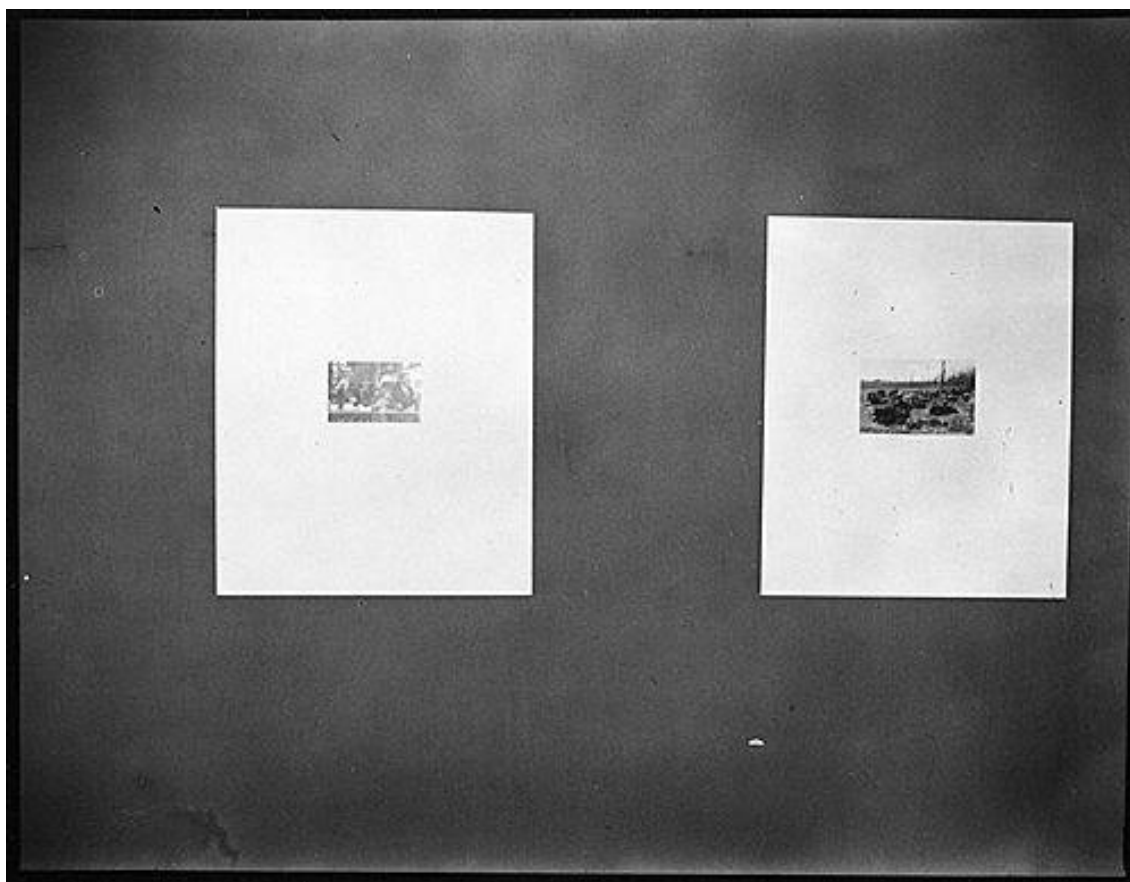
<sup>339</sup> See footnote 1.



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.253.649

11. *Girl in Fulton Street, New York*, 1929 (AP I-17)

10. *42<sup>nd</sup> St.*, 1929 (AP I-19)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.650

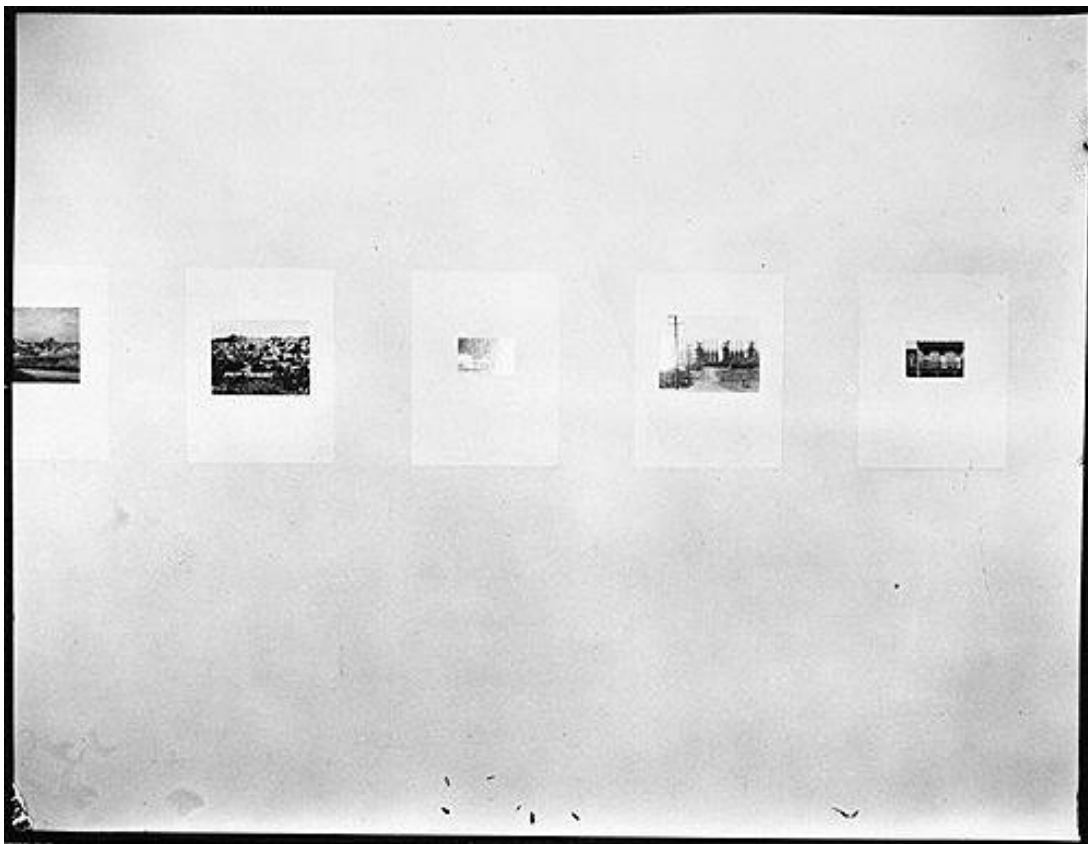
9. *City Lunch Counter*, 1929

8. *Junked Automobiles*, ca. 1935 (related view, *Joe's Auto Graveyard*, AP I-7)



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1995.254.651

7. *Factory Street in Amsterdam, New York*, 1930 (AP II-12)
6. *Part of Morgantown, West Virginia*, 1935
5. *Louisiana Factory and Houses*, 1936 (AP II-10)
4. *View of Morgantown, West Virginia*, 1935



Attributed to Walker Evans, Installation view of *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, digitized negative, MMA/WEA 1994.254.652

5. *Louisiana Factory and Houses*, 1936 (AP II-10)
4. *View of Morgantown, West Virginia*, 1935
3. *Mississippi Sternwheeler at Vicksburg*, 1936 (variant print cropping AP II-15)
2. *Birmingham Houses and Steel Mill*, 1936 (AP II-11)
1. *Houses in New Orleans*, 1935 (related view AP II-24)

Figures**Introduction****Figure 1**

*Untitled* [Barber Shops, Vicksburg, Mississippi], 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1999.237.1

**Figure 2**

*Vicksburg Negroes and Shopfront*, 1936, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, LC-USF342- 008063-A



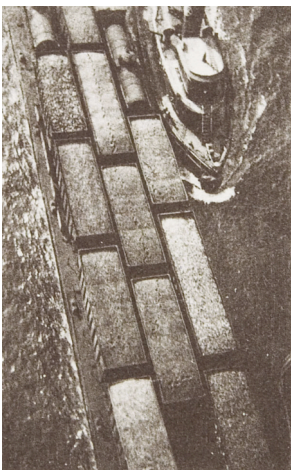
**Figure 3**

[Group of Men Seated and Standing on Sidewalk In Front of New Deal Savoy Barber Shops, Vicksburg, Mississippi], 1936, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.258.324)



**Figures 4-6**

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven children without food. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Nipomo, California* (also known as *Migrant Mother* series), 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC



**Figures 7-9**

All *Untitled* [Brooklyn Bridge], photogravures as reproduced in Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (Paris: Black Sun Press, 1930), n.p.

## Chapter One



**Figure 10**

[*Demonstration and Picketing Organized by Communists // NY Waterfront*], 1934, The Gary Davis Collection, Greenwich, Connecticut



**Figure 11**

[*Picket Line on Waterfront, New York City*], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.177.1)



**Figure 12**

[Picket Line on Waterfront, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.176.1)



**Figure 13**

[Picket Line on Waterfront, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.176.2)



**Figure 14**

[Picket Line on Waterfront, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.178.2)



**Figure 15**

[Picket Line on Waterfront, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.180.1)



**Figure 16**

[Bystanders at Strike Rally on Waterfront, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.182.1)



**Figure 17**

Alexander Rodchenko, *Assembling for a Demonstration*, 1928, silver gelatin print, Museum of Modern Art, New York, © VAGA New York



**Figure 18**

Lewis Hine, *Sadie Pfeiffer, Spinner in a Cotton Mill, North Carolina*, 1910, silver gelatin print, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.967.15



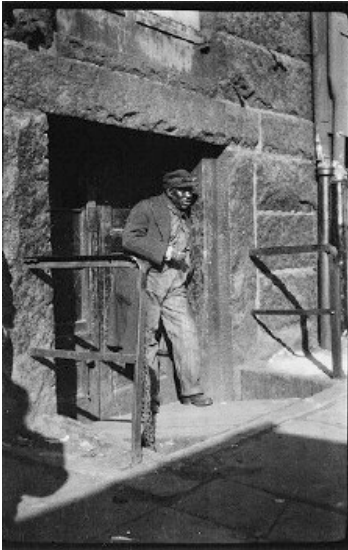
**Figure 19**

Lewis Hine, *Steamfitter*, 1921, silver gelatin print, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, P1981.80.3



**Figure 20**

*Untitled* [Havana: Country Family], 1933, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.239



**Figure 21**

*Untitled* [Longshoreman, South Street, New York City], 1928, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.52



**Figure 22**

[Woman Wearing Sandwich Board Advertisements, Fourteenth Street, New York City], 1933-34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.96.1)



**Figure 23**

[Household goods vendor and cart on Fourteenth Street, New York City], 1933-34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.98.2)



**Figure 24**

*Untitled* [Man on Strike Wearing Sandwich Boards, Union Square, New York City], 1934, The Gary Davis Collection, Greenwich, Connecticut.



**Figure 25**

[Men on Park Benches, Union Square, New York City], 1932–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.172.1)



**Figure 26**

[Men Lying Around Statue Base, Union Square Park, New York City], 1933–34, digitized negative. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.173.1)



**Figure 27**

[Men Seated Around Statue Base, Union Square Park, New York City], 1932–34, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.253.174.2



**Figure 28**

[Man Sleeping on Bench, Brooklyn Bridge, New York City], 1928–29, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.251.246)



**Figure 29**

*Untitled* [Lunchroom Window, New York], 1929, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arnold H. Crane, 1971, 1971.646.35



**Figure 30**

*Untitled* [Three Workmen Eating Lunch], ca. 1928–29, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.56



**Figure 31**

[Workers Eating Lunch on Stoop, New York City], 1934, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.110.2)



**Figure 32**

[Men on sidewalk, New York], 1934, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.109.2)



**Figure 33**

[Construction Worker Lying on Boxes During Lunch Hour, New York City], 1934, digitized negative. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.109.3)



**Figure 34**

Full-page illustration from Doug Eklund, *Exile's Return: The Early Work, 1928–34*, in Jeff L. Rosenbaum et al. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000) page 47.



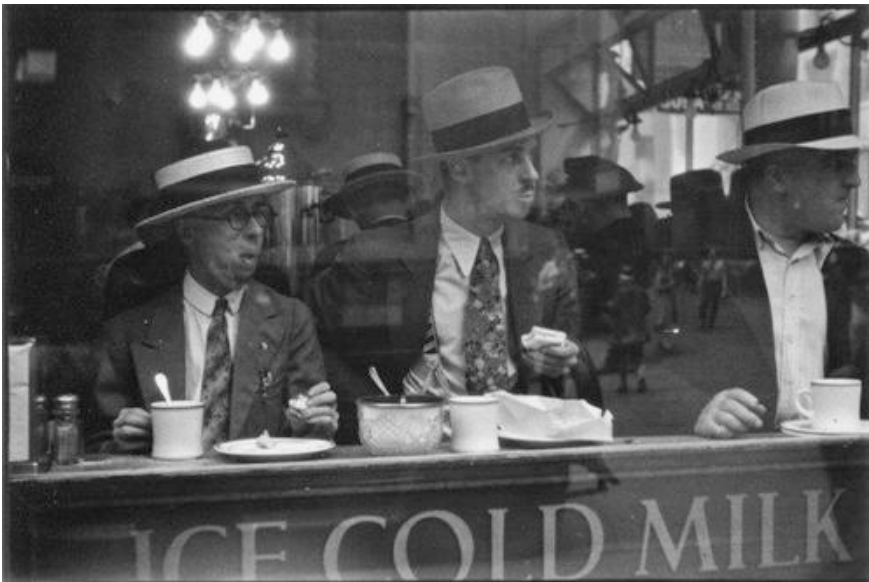
**Figure 35**

*59<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City, ca. 1929–30, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.50*



**Figure 36**

*Untitled [Fifty-ninth Street, New York City, Construction of Bloomingdale's], ca. 1929–30, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.50*



**Figures 37–38**

[Men Eating at Lunch Counter Window, Lexington Avenue, New York City], 1929–30, digitized negatives, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.34.1–2)



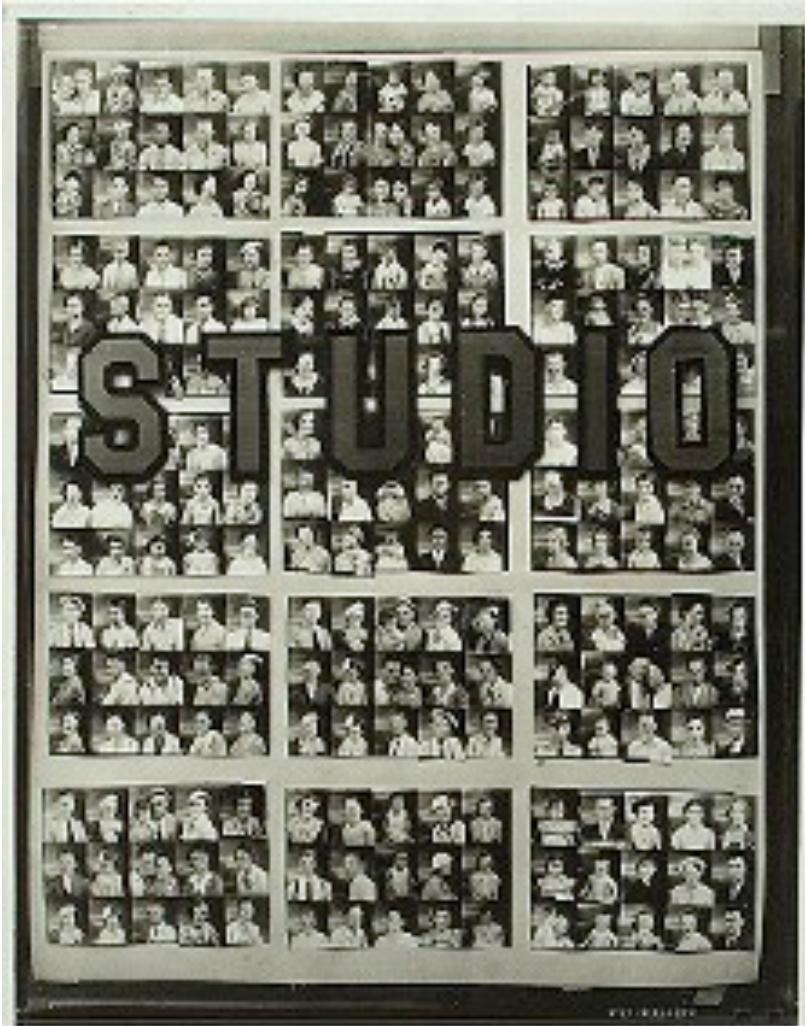
**Figures 39–40**

[Men Eating at Lunch Counter Window, Lexington Avenue, New York City], 1929–30, digitized negatives, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.253.35.1–2)



**Figure 41**

*Posed Portraits, New York, 1931, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.169*



**Figure 42**

*Penny Picture Display, Savannah, 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987*



**Figure 43**

*Photographer's Display Window, Birmingham, 1936, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*



**Figure 44**

*Untitled* [Coal Dock Workers, Havana], 1933, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, 1990 (1990.1143)



**Figure 45**

*Coal Loader, Havana*, 1933, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.474



**Figure 46**

*Untitled* [Coal Dockworkers, Havana], 1933, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.167



**Figure 47**

*Stevedore*, 1933, as printed in Carleton Beals, *Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1933). This reproduction is a digitized negative from Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1994.256.261)



**Figure 48**

*People in Downtown Havana, 1933, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lincoln Kirstein, 1952 (52.562.7)*



**Figure 49**

*"Labor Anonymous," Fortune (November 1946), pp. 152-153.*

## Chapter Two



**Figure 50**

*Untitled* [Guitar Player and Group of Men on Levee, Seen from Car Window, Vicinity New Orleans], 1935, printed 1990, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, Gift of the Estate of Walker Evans, 1990 (1990.1174.2)



**Figure 51**

*Untitled* [Street Scene, Selma, Alabama], 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Marlene Nathan Meyerson Family Foundation Gift, in memory of David Nathan Meyerson; and Pat and John Rosenwald and Lila Acheson Wallace Gifts, 1999 (1999.237.2)



**Figure 52**

[Detail of Boardinghouse, Birmingham, Alabama], 1936, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, LC-USF342- 008010-A



**Figure 53**

*Street Scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936, Bank of America collection*



**Figure 54**  
*Untitled* [Railroad Station, Edwards, Mississippi], 1936, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach  
Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and  
Tilden Foundations



**Figure 55**  
*Breakfast Room, Belle Grove Plantation, White Chapel, Louisiana*, 1935, Anonymous  
Gift, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1989.69.5./PH



**Figure 56**

*Untitled* [Mississippi Land], 1936, from *American Photographs* exhibition catalogue, J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.457



**Figure 57**

*Birmingham Steel Mill and Workers' Houses*, 1936, Museum of Modern Art, Anonymous Fund, 404.1938.7



**Figure 58**

Dorothea Lange, *Unemployment benefits aid begins*. Line of men inside a division office of the State Employment Service office at San Francisco, California, waiting to register for benefits on one of the first days the office was open. They will receive from six to fifteen dollars per week for up to sixteen weeks. Coincidental with the announcement that the federal unemployment census showed close to ten million persons out of work, twenty-two states begin paying unemployment compensation, 1938, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC, LC-USF34-018312-D



**Figure 59**

Dorothea Lange, *Former Texas Tenant Farmers Displaced by Power Farming*, 1937, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, LC-USF341-017265-C



**Figure 60**

*Dorothea Lange, Young Family, penniless, hitchhiking on US 99 in California. The father, twenty-four, and the mother, seventeen, came from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Early in 1935 their baby was born in the Imperial Valley, California, where they were working as field laborers, 1936, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, LC-USF34-016099-E*



**Figure 61**

*Marion Post Wolcott, Coal miners' card game on the porch, Chaplin, West Virginia, 1938, printed later, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. John H. and Jann Arrington Wolcott, 1998.120.23*



**Figure 62**

Marion Post Wolcott, *Haircutting in front of general store on Saturday afternoon, Marcella Plantation, Mileston, Mississippi, 1939*, printed later, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. John H. and Jann Arrington Wolcott, 1998.120.11



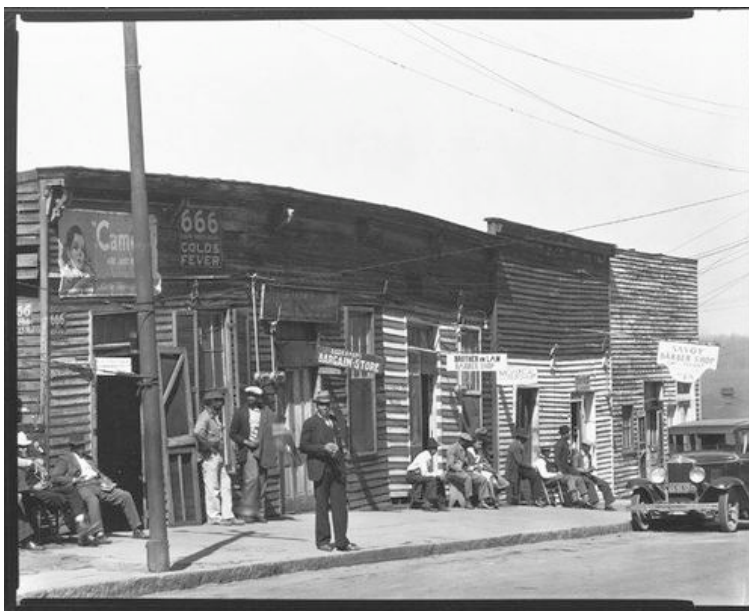
**Figure 63**

*Mississippi Town Negro Street, 1936*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM. 956.305



**Figure 64**

*Vicksburg Negroes and shop front. Mississippi, 1936, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC, LC-USF342-008076-A*



**Figure 65**

[Men Seated and Standing on Sidewalk in Front of Row of Barber Shops, Vicksburg, Mississippi], 1936, digitized negative, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994 (1994.258.319)



**Figure 66**

*Untitled* [Barbershop Façade, Vicksburg, Mississippi], 1936, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.306



**Figure 67**

*Untitled* [Savoy Barber Shop, Vicksburg, Mississippi], 1936, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.306



**Figure 68**

[Vicksburg Negroes and shop front. Mississippi], 1936, digitized negative, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, LC-USF342-008062-A



**Figure 69**

Peter Sekaer, *Street in Vicksburg*, 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.305.2



**Figure 70**

*Self-Portrait*, 1927, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.67)



**Figure 71**

*Tenant Farmer's Wife* (Allie Mae Burroughs), 1936, from *American Photographs* exhibition and catalog



**Figure 72**

*Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife [Allie Mae Burroughs]*, 1936, Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 968:001:003



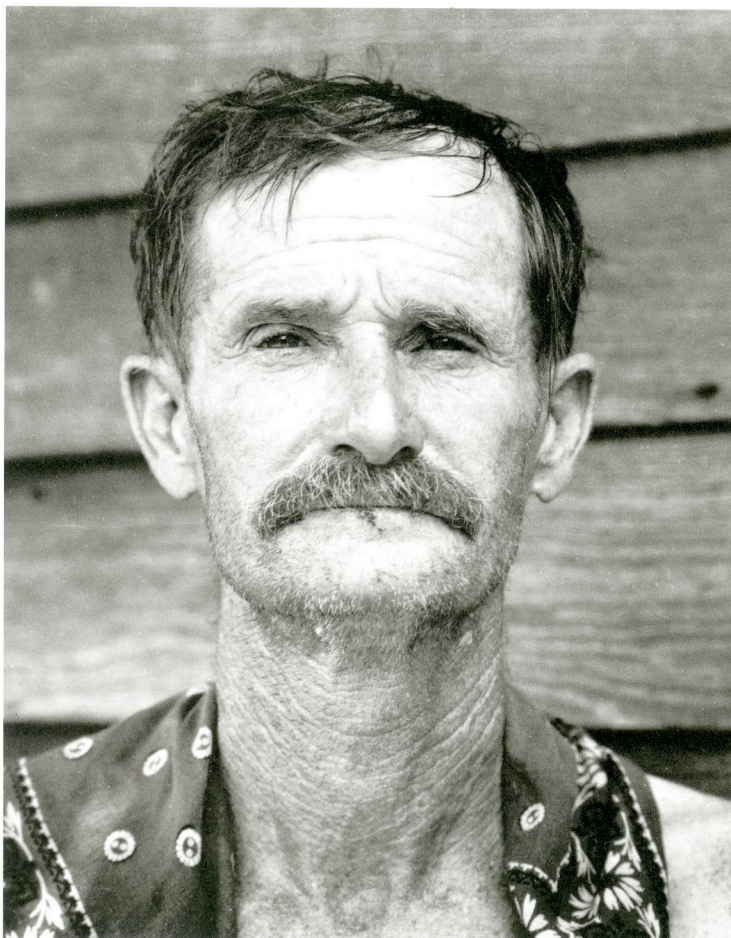


**Figure 73, Figure 74**

Two pages from "Three Tenant Farmers," 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, LOT 991 (OH)



**Figure 75, Figure 76**  
[Fields family], 1936. Prints made for *American Photographs* exhibition, 1938.





**Figures 77-80**

Fields family, four versions in LUNPFM (1941) as reprinted in Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Abrams, 1993)



**Figure 81, Figure 82**

[Lily Rogers Fields and children. Hale County, Alabama], 1936, digitized negatives, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, LC-USF33-031326-M4 and LC-USF33-031326-M5



**Figure 83**

*Vicksburg Battlefield Monument*, 1936, J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.468



**Figure 84**

*Untitled* [Battlefield Monument, Vicksburg, Mississippi] 1936, J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.XM.956.343

### Chapter Three



**Figure 85**

[Gothic Revival House with Three Gables, Nyack, New York], 1931, glass negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.256.195. This negative corresponds to Museum of Modern Art print by the same name, accession number 65.1933



**Figure 86**

[Jigsaw Canopy over Water Pump of “Wedding Cake” House in Kennebunk, Maine], 1931–1933, glass negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.256.135. This negative corresponds to Museum of Modern Art print with accession number 41.1933, *Gingerbread Pump House, Kennebunk, Maine*.



**Figure 87**

[Italianate Revival Building with Tree Shadows on Façade, Insurance Office, Dedham, Massachusetts], 1931, digitized negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.255.204. This negative corresponds to Museum of Modern Art print with accession number 97.1933, *Greek House, Dedham, Massachusetts*.



**Figure 88**

*Greek Houses, Somerville, Massachusetts*, 1932, Gelatin silver print, The Museum of Modern Art, 80.1933. Gift of Lincoln Kirstein. Corresponds to film negative 1994.255.168, [Greek Revival Building with Ionic Capitals, Public Library, Somerville, Massachusetts] at the Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



**Figure 89**

[Italianate Revival “Valentine” House with Garage and Iron Fence], 1930–31, digitized negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.255.175. This negative corresponds to Museum of Modern Art print with accession number 11.1933, *Valentine House (1851), Cambridge, Massachusetts*, 1932



**Figure 90**

[Detail of “Penny Picture Display, Savannah”], 1936, gelatin silver print on postcard stock, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 1996.



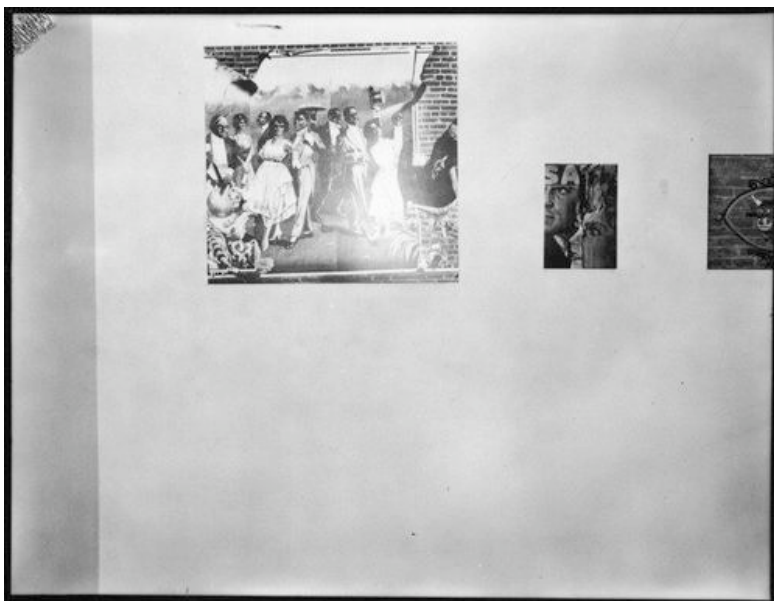
**Figure 91**

Berenice Abbott, *Rockefeller Center*, ca. 1932, Gelatin silver print, The Art Institute of Chicago, Julien Levy Collection, Gift of Jean and Julien Levy, 1978.1031. Photography by Greg Harris. Reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago © Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics, NYC



**Figure 92**

*Frame Houses in Virginia*, 1936, Gelatin silver print, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.172. Photograph by Greg Harris, Reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago.



**Figures 93**

Attributed to Walker Evans, [Installation views of Walker Evans: American Photographs], 1938, film negatives, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.254.626.



**Figure 94**

Attributed to Walker Evans, [Installation views of Walker Evans: American Photographs], 1938, film negatives, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.627.



**Figures 95**

Attributed to Walker Evans, [Installation views of Walker Evans: American Photographs], 1938, film negatives, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.629.



**Figure 96**

Attributed to Walker Evans, [Installation views of Walker Evans: American Photographs], 1938, film negatives, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1994.254.630.



**Figure 97**

*Minstrel Showbill*, 1935, Gelatin silver print, Amon Carter Museum, P1978.48.2. This print corresponds to *[Movie and Minstrel Show Posters on Brick Wall, Demopolis, Alabama]*, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.258.391. Please note that Evans severely cropped the negative in the print used for exhibition in *American Photographs* (see installation shot in Figure 14). I know of no extant print with the same cropping.



**Figure 98**

*Minstrel Showbill*, 1936, Gelatin silver print, Gift (Partial and Promised) of Mary and David Robinson, Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1995.35.1.



**Figure 99**

*Roadside Store Between Tuscaloosa and Greensboro, 1936, Film Negative, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF342- 008282-A.*



**Figure 100**

*[Interior of Coal Miner's Home with Rocking Chair and Advertisements on Wall, West Virginia], 1935, film negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.258.365.*



**Figure 101**

*West Virginia Living Room*, 1935, Gelatin silver print, High Museum of Art, Purchase with funds from the Atlanta Foundation, 75.45.



**Figure 102**

*Frame Houses in Virginia*, 1936, Gelatin silver print, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1962.173. Photograph by Greg Harris, Reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago

**Figures 103**

[Young Couple in Parked Open-air Car, Ossining, New York], 1932-34, digitized negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.253.213.1.

**Figure 104**

[Two Young Men at Parade, Johnston, Pennsylvania], 1935, digitized negative, Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.253.354.2.



**Figure 105**

Unknown photographer, installation photograph of Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York* exhibition, Museum of the City of New York, 1937. As reproduced in Bonnie Yochelson, *Changing New York* (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1997), p. 26 © Berenice Abbott / Commerce Graphics, New York City

A note about the figures listed here: I privileged photographs or scans of printed photographs when vintage prints are available. In other cases I have used scans of the digitized film negatives (which appear as positives but are not made from prints) at the Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, or at the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. In instances when I have used scans from negatives instead of published prints, I have indicated when I know of specific extant vintage prints.