Now & Then

WALKER EVANS

ENGLISH

Of all the celebrated photographers of the last century, the one who remains the most relevant today, and the one with the widest influence, is Walker Evans (St. Louis, Missouri 1903 - New Haven, Connecticut, 1975). His images, made in what he called the "documentary style", are among the best known in the history of the medium. Direct and generous, analytical yet lyrical, carefully composed but unforced, his ways of photographing left the door open for countless others.

For a while, Evans' reputation rested on the photographs he had made in the southern parts of the USA in the 1930s, but his achievement was wider than that. He worked with every camera format and photographed many subjects in different ways, from surreptitious street shots, to meticulous and exacting studies of architecture. He embraced new artistic and technical developments, and at the end of his life he explored what could be done with a Polaroid camera. What united it all was a deep interest in, and affection for, the look and feel of everyday life. In a culture increasingly obsessed with the new, Evans cherished things that were standing the test of time, be it a face or the facade of a warehouse.

Evans was also concerned with the ways photographic meaning is related to context, text, and relations between images, whether on the gallery wall, or on the pages of books and magazines. To be in control of one's photographs means being in control how they are presented and circulated in the world. So, as well as being a remarkable image-maker, Evans was also an editor, writer and designer, shaping the way his work met its public.

In this exhibition we see the range of Evans' themes and approaches, and his understated resistance to the excesses and shallowness of so much American culture becomes clear.

A Young Modernist

Walker Evans spent most of 1926 in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne but struggling to become a writer. Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert were his models, while he paid attention to contemporaries such as James Joyce and Blaise Cendrars. He made a handful photographs with a pocket camera, notably a series of self-portraits.

Returning to New York, Evans began to take photography seriously. He knew the city photographs of Ralph Steiner, Charles Sheeler, and especially Paul Strand. Their bold compositions presented Manhattan as a quintessentially modern metropolis. Evans was also aware of the 'New Vision' in European photography, with its enthusiastic embrace of modernist form, especially in architecture. He published a portfolio in the journal *Architectural Record*, and supplied three photographs from around the Brooklyn Bridge for a deluxe publication of Hart Crane's epic poem *The Bridge* (1930).

The economic crash of October 1929 and the ensuing cultural turmoil sharpened the creative and political minds of all the ambitious artists of Evans' generation. He soon stepped back from the celebration of the city to look hard at the lives of those who inhabited it.

A Past Without Nostalgia: Nineteenth Century Architecture

In 1931 Evans was commissioned by Lincoln Kirstein, a wealthy friend and supporter of the arts, to photograph Victorian houses in and around Boston. Two years later, the pictures were presented in the architecture room of the recently established Museum of Modern Art, New York. While Evans was credited, the context and display clearly put the emphasis on the architecture rather than Evans' authorship. Nevertheless, in the press release for the exhibition, Kirstein noted:

> *Walker Evans' photographs are perfect. They have been taken during the last four years and form the beginning of a photographic history of American domestic building during its most fantastic, imaginative, and impermanent period. Many of the houses, neglected and despised, have disappeared in the short period since these photographs were made. Evans worked in bright sunlight, forcing the details into utmost clarity. The focus was so sharpened that some of the houses seem to exist in an airless atmosphere such as Edward Hopper suggests in his painting of similar subjects. These houses were photographed in New England and New York.*

Cultural artefacts endangered by contemporary tastes were already a key subject matter for Evans, one he would return to at various points.

Signs of Images, Images of Signs

Slick commercial signs, hand-made vernacular signs, street wayfinding signs, billboards, posters and shop fronts: if anything defines the time and place of an urban situation it is signage. While most photographers of Evans' generation avoided or limited its presence in their images (searching for some kind of 'purity'), he embraced it whole-heartedly. His fascination with signage, and his conviction that it has much to say about a society and its values, chimed with everything from the Pop Art that emerged at the end of the 1950s to the postmodern arts of quotation and appropriation that were emerging just as Evans was reaching the end of his life in 1975.

Evans' photographs of signs seem highly reflexive, bringing photography itself into question as a medium of representation, while blurring the distinction between word and image.

Photography may be a fine art, but it is also a means to make functional documents, and a vital tool of commerce. Whatever its aesthetic ambitions, Evans understood that serious photography would have to contend with its place in common culture.

MAGAZINE TEXT

Walker Evans, ‘Before They Disappear’, *Fortune*, March 1957

The familiar insignia of the freight cars are like old ditties beating in the back of our heads. Once we knew them all by heart, they were with us like the weather, like the backs of books we collected, and like the streets we walked in.

Brought into focus by selection, you almost expect these brave and naïve emblems to emit the very sound of railroading—the iron whines, the Steely screechers, and the attenuated nocturnal moans of steam transportation.

They don’t quite do that. But they are worth examining, not only for the commemorative thoughts they carry, but because they are going to disappear from the US landscape one day you have only to notice the new, exceedingly distinguished lettering of the New Haven’s car sides, or the redesigned Boston & Maine signature, to see that the fell hand of the contemporary commercial designer is lurking near, T-square poised.

When we can no longer catch sight of the great Chinese red and black double tadpole of the Northern Pacific, or the simple old cross of the Santa Fe, then will a whole world of cherished association have been destroyed. Impiety could go no further.

Cuba

In 1933 Evans was on commission to photograph Havana and its environs for Carleton Beals' book *The Crime of Cuba*. Beals was a journalist committed to exposing the corruption of Gerardo Machado's brutal rule and America's complicity with it. Cuba had gained independence back in 1902 but America reserved the right to interfere in its affairs, overseeing its finances and foreign relations.

Evans was not politically naïve. His street shots are a counterpoint to Beals' high rhetoric of abstract political force and faceless conspiracy. And yet, his wary self-consciousness makes his pictures of people difficult to assess. His Cuba work continues to challenge critics and historians. Should we read it as the snaps of a curious tourist with a great eye for composition and social detail? Or might they register the slight tremors, the "mood on the street" of a tense society watching its back? Evans rarely presented his Cuban pictures after their moment had passed.

Anonymous & Incognito

Evans came into photography just as anonymity was becoming a touchstone of the modern era. Laborers on production lines. Isolated figures in the street. The crowd through which a wanderer might move unnoticed, or subject to the suspicious gaze of others. His early street portraits had much in common with those made by Eugène Atget in France and August Sander in Germany in the 1920s. Lightweight cameras soon made more candid portraits possible and Evans began to experiment, making serial photographs of New York subway passengers, and people on streets in various cities.

Evans worked through a period marked by increasing surveillance, and increasing presence of photography and photographers in daily life. It made him wary of the idea that people could be judged quickly by their appearance. His texts for 'Labor Anonymous' (*Fortune*, October 1946), and 'The Unposed Portrait' (*Harper's Bazaar*, March 1962) push the reader to think again about the limits of photography.

Car Culture

In 1903 (the year Walker Evans was born) there were 4,000 cars in America. By 1930 there were 26.7 million: one for every 4.5 people. The transformation was breathless. Roadsides were redefined by billboards, gas stations, and motels. Towns and cities were designed or adapted for car use.

Evans enjoyed driving, and much of his photography beyond New York required a car. However, the rapid changes that cars were bringing to the appearance and the functioning of society left him feeling ambivalent. In the mass media at least, cars were the embodiment of optimism and mobility. Waste and despoilment were kept out of site, on the stage wings of progress. Evans' view of rusting cars in a field (*Joe's Auto Graveyard*, 1936) is a glimpse behind the scenes. This theme stayed with him for life. In 1962 he published a photo-essay in *Fortune* titled 'The Auto Junkyard,' and in the 1970s, he also made many Polaroid photographs of cars and trucks rusting in fields.

MAGAZINE TEXT

Walker Evans, ‘The Auto Junkyard’, *Fortune*, April 1962

The nadir of landscape scenery is the great American auto-junk scrap pile. With the effect of some evil prank, these obscene perversities leer out of the countryside almost anywhere, often in the middle of idyllic rural spots . . . Pictorially speaking, the result is chaos abstracted, and this has considerable curious interest in itself. There is a secret imp in almost every civilized man that bids him delight in the surprises and in the mockery in the forms of destruction. At times, nothing could be gayer than the complete collapse of our fanciest contrivances. Scenes like these are rich in tragicomic suggestions of the fall of man from his high ride.

Three Tenant Farmer Families

In the summer of 1936, the writer James Agee was commissioned to make a report on cotton farm tenancy in the American south. He chose Evans as his photographer. They committed to the project with great energy but while at work they barely overlapped. Evans recalled: "We lived with [the three families] for three weeks, as I remember it. We told them exactly what we were doing, and we worked intensely and separately. I didn't see Agee. He was working all day interviewing and taking notes, and I was photographing."

When Agee's text was ten times longer than planned, *Fortune* dropped the project leaving him and Evans to pursue it as a book. Evans assembled a discrete sequence of thirty-one photos that would be set apart from the text, with no captions. Such radical separation of word and image stood against the tide of more conventional documentary practices. The resulting book, *Let us now Praise Famous Men*, finally appeared in 1941. Evans' sequence shows him perfecting a way of seeing that was stoic and inscrutable, associative yet anti-narrative, with images that eventually became some of the most famous of the era, and of his career.

Chicago

In late 1946, Evans opened a major solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. In February 1947, *Fortune* published his ambitious photo-essay 'Chicago: a camera exploration'. Across ten pages he avoided the city's "prized and remarkable postcard colossi" to show "sights that meet a leisured and untethered eye," as he put it in his text for the piece. The layout looked celebratory but its tone was not: "Chicago decays as it does everything else — spectacularly and speedily." The fourth spread is the most remarkable, showing citizens at the corner of State and Randolph Streets. These are post-war consumers, Caucasian, Asian and African-American. Evans places himself directly in their path. Trapped anxiously in bright sunlight the faces hint at the unrest beneath middle-class decorum.

Beyond street portraits, Evans made a comprehensive study of Chicago's remarkably mixed architecture, allowing him to resume his ongoing interest in buildings as a kind of indirect portrait of a society. The Chicago photo-essay for *Fortune* was by far his most significant magazine work to date, giving him the confidence to develop and refine what he wanted to do with the printed page in the coming years.

Small Towns & Neighbourhoods

Although Evans' photography began in New York and he made a substantial photographic portrait of Chicago, he remained convinced that it was the smaller towns that offered a more accurate sense of the nation. The major cities of the USA are always exceptional, and tend to think of themselves as such. Evans concerned himself with the typical, and with the pragmatic ways small towns work and grow. Away from intense modern progress, artefacts of the past persist until they no longer function, rather than being replaced for the sake of it. Some of Evans' most loved and complex photographs came out of this commitment to typical places.

MAGAZINE TEXT

“Walker Evans, ‘The U.S. Depot’, *Fortune*, February 1953”

He who travels by rail over the lesser lines of the USA clangs and shunts straight into his own childhood. Most of the smalltown railroad stations up and down the country are now about fifty years old. Looked at collectively they seem more and more toylike — as model railroad toys grow more and more like the real thing. With only a slight effort of the imagination, these encrusted little buildings turn into miniature stage sets, and the people in them correctly costumed dolls. You feel an old affection for the way a station agent throws the block-signal lever there in his coal-heated office. And what in that green-paper note handed up on its looped stick to the engineer as the 3:52 breaks to a stop? Does it say “Train five Engine eight four nine six delayed at Millerton hot journal box,” or does it say “Tell Jeanie I’ll get pork chops”?

Message from the Interior

Evans' deep interest in rooms was long-lasting, and it suited his slow and careful pace of observation. With no people present, an interior scene can become a portrait of an individual, a family, or a community. Moreover, the way a camera records will allow everything that is present to become significant, as in a still life composition. Details of décor. Treasured objects. Casual objects. Furniture. Fabrics. Even the atmosphere of a room can be communicated.

African Sculpture: an Art of Documentation

In 1935 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, commissioned Evans to document nearly five hundred sculptures gathered for an exhibition of African art. In the museum itself each object was shot separately (with a few objects documented in pairs) in long exposure, during which lights were sometimes moved around to produce an all-over, hyper-factual clarity. Prints were made for extensive teaching folios, and a traveling exhibition. The catalogue for MoMA's exhibition *African Negro Art* (in which Evans is not credited) was a serious attempt to look at the origin and complexity of these objects beyond the crude reductions and exoticism of the attitudes of European surrealists and modernist artists of the time.

Although it was a free-standing commission, we can view this work in the context of Evans' earlier commission from the Museum of Modern Art to photograph Victorian architecture, as well commissions to document folk art at New York's Downtown Gallery, and Diego Rivera's political murals for the Workers' School of New York.

Vernacular Designs, Common Objects

Evans took the forces of modernity and modernisation — economic, political, social, aesthetic — as a subject matter to be considered carefully. These forces could be sensed most acutely through objects that had somehow survived the onslaught of modernisation or were about to succumb to it. Even the titles of Evans' *Fortune* magazine photo-essays signalled his suspicion of the new: 'The Wreckers', 'These Dark Satanic Mills', 'Downtown: A Last Look Backward', 'Before they Disappear', 'The Last of Railroad Steam', 'The Auto-Junkyard'.

Nevertheless, it would be hasty to dismiss this as nostalgia, or a sentimental looking back in the knowledge that the juggernaut of progress could not be stopped. In 1956 Evans observed: "[N]ostalgia has become debased to mean a kind of syrup savored by self-pitying people conjuring better days, funny hats and an innocence nobody ever had." In a caption for a series of photographs of antique store window displays he declared: "Nostalgia I disdain: pray keep me forever separated from an atmosphere of moist elderly eyes just about to spill over at the sight of grandmother's tea set. Design just a little dated will interest any artist. Design current is always terrible. Anyone who has tried to find a good contemporary lamp or clock will know what I mean."

MAGAZINE TEXT

Walker Evans, 'Beauties of the Common Tool', *Fortune*, July 1955

Among the low-priced, factory-produced goods, none is so appealing to the senses as the ordinary hand tool. Hence, a hardware store is a kind of offbeat museum show for the man who responds to good, clear "undesigned" forms. The Swedish steel pliers pictured above, with their somehow swanlike flow, and the objects on the following pages, in all their tough simplicity, illustrate this. Aside from their functions — though they are exclusively wedded to function — each of these tools lures the eye to follow its curves and angles, and invites the hand to test its balance.

Who would sully the lines of the tin-cutting shears on page 105 with a single added bend or whorl? Or clothe in any way the fine naked impression of heft and bite in the crescent wrench on page 107? To be sure, some design-happy manufacturers have tampered with certain tool classics; the beautiful plumb bob, which used to come naively and solemnly shaped like a child's top, now looks suspiciously like a toy space ship, and is no longer brassy. But not much can be done to spoil a crate opener, that nobly ferocious statement in black steel as may be seen on page 104. In fact, almost all the basic small tools stand, aesthetically speaking, for elegance, candor and purity.