Hill: Walker Evans at Work

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guide to turn-of-the-century photography be published.

Stieglitz can be credited with the founding of the Photo-Secession, though he did not create the conditions that made its founding possible. In the 1880s and 1890s, there was an amateur movement in Europe and America to raise the standards of photography. At first, exhibitions included any and all submissions—there could be thousands—and hardly a competent photographer left without a prize. This brand of exhibition gave way, in the late 1890s, to shows of fewer prints selected by a jury before hanging. Salons, as they were called after similar efforts in Europe, were annual events at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1898 to 1901. No prizes were given; selection was the sole honor.

Robert S. Redfield, president of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, invited Stieglitz to become a juror for the first of these, and Camera Notes, which Stieglitz edited, carried a glowing review. It was called "the most remarkable photographic display ever shown to an American public."

Only where Stieglitz is central to the evolution of modern photography should he be placed at center stage. Where he is not central to it, he should remain in the wings. Before 1902, when the Philadelphia Salons were defunct and the Photo-Secession and Camera Work were new and fresh, Stieglitz is a supporting actor. But there is no heroic figure for that earlier time. If we are ever to understand photography before modernism, we must shift from a search for heroes. The history of photography is neither simple nor straightforward, but it is rich.

"The concept of amateur photography," writes Homer, "was something entirely new in the mid-1880s, and it radically changed photographic history in a way that earlier practitioners could never have foretold." When the dryplate negative was first marketed in the early 1880s, amateurism permeated American life. But from the beginnings of photography, and especially during its nascent period, scientists, artists, tradespeople, and dilettantes defined the contours of the medium's potential. European societies—the Calotype Club of Edinburgh, founded in 1842, and the Royal Photographic Society of London and the Société Héliographique of Paris, both founded in 1852—were models for American versions. Members of the American Photographical Society (New York, 1859) and the Photographic Society of Philadelphia (1862) enjoyed the social nature of their organizations at dinner parties, through the exchange of prints and in publications. In the journals of the same period, many of which were organs of the societies, debates about lenses, printing papers, and exhibitions were carried on. And a few of the personalities of the early period, such as Charles Wagner Hull in New York and S. Fisher Corliss in Philadelphia, were active into the 1000s. Redfield learned photography from Constant Guilié, who was the first president of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia.

Amateurism persisted long before the Photo-Secession arrived on the scene. In fact, the organizational triangle of club, journal, and exhibition, which Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession so carefully abided by, was a form derived from traditions in amateurism. When Stieglitz is seen in this broader historical light, his heroic stature diminishes and his accomplishments seem more understandable. With such perspective, the turn-of-the-century photographic community can be seen independently of its own publicity hype.

The piles of journals filled with mundane discourses and the dusty boxes of old albums in attics are finally getting their due from several scholars. They will assemble widely dispersed collections, sift through materials already in libraries and museums, and tell the story of premodern photography. Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-Secession is a point of departure for historians to search out the unvarnished facts of this near-epic chapter in the history of photography.

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In one of the most famous passages in his voluminous correspondence, Flaubert wrote:

"An artist must be in his work like God in creation, invisible and all powerful. He should be everywhere felt, but nowhere seen. Furthermore, art must rise above personal emotions and nervous susceptibilities. It is time to enliven it with pitiless method, with the exactness of the physical sciences."

In the great French novelist's severe injunction, a would-be writer, now widely regarded as one of the central figures in twentieth-century American photography—Walker Evans—found his own artistic credo. The consequences for Evans's development as an artist, as well as for the evolution of photographic practice and criticism in the United States during the past half century, have been substantial, but at least until recently, insufficiently analyzed. In 1983, at least
two significant effects of Evans’s acceptance of Flaubertian principles on American photography and on writing about it can be confidently identified. His commitment to a self-effacing, rigorously photographic address to his subjects has been a crucial influence on many of the most interesting photographers who emerged during the last three decades. Without Evans’s insistence on an approach combining a documentarylike respect for the surface textures and colors of the world with an extraordinary compositional complexity and rigor, the work of Lee Friedlander, Ted Papageorge, or Stephen Shore, to name only three, would certainly not have developed in the same way. Second, owing to the efforts of John Szarkowski, director of the Photography Department at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and perhaps Evans’s most important critical champion, Evans’s working aesthetic has become the foundation for sophisticated contemporary discourse about the medium. New photographic pantheons as well as novel criteria of photographic connoisseurship have been based on these premises, and the resulting shifts in taste in turn have had an enormous impact on the way in which photography is collected and exhibited by museums and traded as an art commodity.

Clearly, therefore, an intensive investigation of Evans’s achievement should be and, indeed, has been an urgent matter for photographic critics. Over the last decade or so, Evans’s classic American Photographs (1938) has been reissued, all his Farm Security Administration photographs have been collected in book form, and several splendid anthologies of his best known images have been published. A number of scholarly articles and monographs, moreover, have begun to explore the ways in which later generations of photographers responded to Evans’s path-breaking work. However, a detailed analysis of the “pitiless method” Evans used to realize his photographic ambitions has been conspicuously lacking in the growing critical literature about him. To fill this gap is the express purpose of Walker Evans at Work. John T. Hill, the executor of Evans’s estate, has assembled 745 of Evans’s photographs along with excerpts from his essays, correspondence, and interviews in a volume that successfully conveys many of the manifold intricacies of Evans’s working methods. Jerry Thompson, Evans’s former student and assistant, provides a concise account of the many different cameras and lenses Evans used over the course of his forty-five-year career. Evans’s developing and printing techniques are also discussed in some detail. Most impressively, Thompson’s observations are concretely anchored in the abundant illustrations taken from Evans’s negatives and contact prints, many published for the first time. Taken together, they provide graphic evidence about how Evans approached his subjects and gradually resolved them into the images that have become celebrated monuments in the American photographic heritage.

Never before have so many aspects of a major photographer’s working procedures been made so accessible to a nonspecialized audience. Indeed, Walker Evans at Work is to my knowledge unique in the literature about photography, and in many respects it could serve as a model for future work in the field. There are, however, a number of curious lapses in both the choice and layout of the images and written documents. These lapses, moreover, lead to a number of interpretive problems that are rendered more acute by the editor’s failure to state clearly the criteria used in selecting the materials. The questions raised by these lapses are crucially important and must be discussed, however briefly, because they help to define both the value and the limits of a study such as this one.

It is obvious that the written texts accompanying photographs can often have a decisive impact on the way in which we comprehend the images. Unfortunately, the texts included in Walker Evans at Work are too often little more than a couple of sentences taken from diverse contexts (letters, working notes, published and unpublished articles, or interviews spanning Evans’s entire creative life), and these documents are not always clearly paired with the illustrations. For example, Evans writes enthusiastically about Paul Strand’s famous “Blind Woman” (1916), which he saw in the Camera Work files of the New York Public Library, in a letter to his friend Hahn Skolle dated June 1929. A short excerpt from this letter is printed next to several of Evans’s studies of the casual poses of people idling on the Coney Island boardwalk taken in 1928–1929. The point of the juxtaposition, however, is not clear. Did Strand’s blunt, powerful image directly provoke Evans to make the images we are shown, and if so, how can the obvious differences of character between the “stimulus” and the “response” be explained? Or had Evans already taken his Coney Island photographs, and did the discovery of “Blind Woman” only encourage him to pursue a path he had already chosen? Other aspects of Strand’s oeuvre, moreover, were at least as important to Evans at the beginning of his career. The plunging angles and quasi Cubist grids of Strand’s Manhattan cityscapes from 1920–1921 are clearly reflected in Evans’s similar views taken in 1928–1929, but no text accompanies these images. It is odd that Evans, always very aware of his debts to earlier photographers, wrote nothing about these images. Of course, it is possible that he did not or that the document has been lost, but the editor should at least have noted the relationship. The important lesson to be learned from these examples is that careful editorial guidance can avoid unnecessary ambiguities. In these instances, the editor does not provide it.
A different but related editorial failure diminishes the value of the many unfamiliar photographs, variant cropings of familiar ones, and sequences of slightly different versions of the same motif presented in the book. So many photographs are used, in fact, that most are necessarily small in scale, and thus the clarity of detail so characteristic of Evans’s best work is often undiscernible. (Some of his late Polaroid SX 70 color prints are even reproduced in black and white!) Hill may have decided that the quality of reproductions could be sacrificed because superb copies of many images were readily available in Szarkowski’s Walker Evans: First and Last (1978). Hill’s overriding purpose, in any case, is to demonstrate aspects of Evans’s photographic and editing procedures, and this goal is unquestionably most effectively implemented by using as many illustrations as possible. The character of the illustrations also helps to realize this goal. The unedited strips of 35 mm. film do suggest how Evans—sometimes systematically, often spontaneously—pursued his subjects. Printing the full negatives of images originally published in extensively cropped form (Evans was never a purist in this regard) permits comparisons that clearly reveal how incisive an editor of his raw material Evans was.

Finally, novel graphic layout, such as the superimposed position of pictures of the same subject taken from slightly different vantages, conveys the shifts in Evans’s stance quite vividly, helping to refine our understanding of what feature of the scene primarily interested him.

Too often, however, the status of the pictures is not clear, and this raises a number of questions. Do we see the entire set of images Evans took of a particular subject on a specific day, or have we been shown only an edited selection? If the latter is true (as I suspect), what criteria did the editor use to make the selection? Furthermore, are these variants—few, if any, were published in Evans’s lifetime—to be regarded as sketches, as failed experiments, or as new individual works of art? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how do these variants really contribute to our understanding of Evans’s art? Anyone familiar with the subtle but crucial organization of American Photographs or with the ordering of the images of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is aware how much each image’s significance depends on its placement. The meaning and ultimately the value of each image arguably derive far more from the context of the other, very different images in which it is placed than from the very similar images produced during the same shooting and editing sessions. Hill and Thompson do not even pose these questions. The import of the many fine illustrations would have been greatly clarified had they not evaded this important critical responsibility.

One large and essential question must finally be considered: does Walker Evans at Work articulate terms through which Evans’s artistic achievement can be significantly illuminated? Unfortunately, Hill’s preface and Thompson’s essay fail to do so because both focus on “the tools and habits of a complex man” rather than on the forms and themes animating his work. For example, we are told that Evans used a “long” (telephoto) lens to collapse perspective in his well-known view of the cemetery and steel mills of Bethlehem, Pa. (1936), and that this decision “purposely” relates objects lying on the near and distant planes in the photograph. This is an interesting fact, albeit one that could be rather easily deduced by anyone familiar with the basic optical properties of lenses. Knowing how the image was produced, however, only establishes that Evans was an astute photographic craftsman. Such information says practically nothing about what really matters, namely, how and why this image possesses artistic significance for us. Although the photograph’s meaning depends in a very limited and perhaps even trivial sense on the technical decisions the photographer makes, it cannot be reduced to an effect of the camera, lens, or filter chosen. Thompson’s brief remarks about a similar picture, “Joe’s Auto Graveyard, Pa.” (1936), indicate he is aware of this point, but he does not emphasize it enough. The book’s limited purpose does not permit consideration of the larger and ultimately more important questions about Evans’s work.

A genuinely critical discussion of Evans’s art must take place on an entirely different level of discourse, and it will be conducted using notions of working procedure and style very different from those offered in Walker Evans at Work. In the Bethlehem steel mill picture mentioned above, one might begin by observing how Evans exploits the capacity of his lens to juxtapose familiar social icons—here a cross and smokestacks—to create a palpable conceptual envelope around the lives of those who live in the modest working-class homes lying between them. The notion of restricted horizons, social as well as existential, is dramatically invoked. One might then proceed toward a more general observation about how often Evans deploys the signs (often in a literal sense: billboards, posters, etc.) and icons of popular culture to organize the picture space, to create ironies, or to formulate the characteristically understated social criticism present in his work at certain periods. These suggestions hardly exhaust this photograph’s significance, but they at least sketch some of the terms and directions that any critic would have to explore to come to grips with Evans’s oeuvre. However interesting, knowledge of the “tools and habits” of an artist of Evans’s stature can only be the first step toward what is urgently needed: an intensive, detailed, and wide-ranging assessment of his artistic achievement.