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INTRODUCTION

EVANS'S EYE

It is striking that again and again Walker Evans remarks forcefully, even aggressively, that what makes him different from other photographers is that he has an eye. It might seem an obvious thing for a photographer to say, but indeed it has not been, and Evans knew it. Instead of the camera, it was the eye he spoke of as the major thing for him in photography.

I have made a brief list (in the manner of Evans, who was himself a maker of lists) of some of his remarks, annotated to give the context.

- Quoted in *Time* on the occasion of his Chicago exhibition (1947): “After 20-odd years of work I still have great difficulty maintaining enough calm to operate well, at moments when some sort of perfection is in sight.”

- In a *New Yorker* article, ending with his comment on what he teaches students at Yale University (1966): “what it is really is is a non-stop bull-session on the art of seeing. Photography isn’t a matter of taking pictures. It’s a matter of having an eye.”

- A proposed title for his essay on photography for Louis Kronenberger (1969): “*The Seeing-Eye Man*”

- Comments on making the photograph *Corrugated Tin Façade* (1971): “The photograph is an instinctive reaction to a visual object.”

- Speaking of teaching at Yale (1971): “I just used it to go off freely and do exactly what came before my eye.” And, “Yes, it’s the seeing that I am talking about. Oh yes.”

- Interviewed about his photography as compared with that of other

photographers who worked at the time (1930s) for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) (1977): “I knew at the time who I was in terms of the eye, and I had a real eye, and other people were *occasionally* phony about it, or they really did not see.”

- A Yale interview (1974): “A garbage can, occasionally, to me at least, can be beautiful. That’s because you’re seeing. Some people are able to see that—see it and feel it. I lean towards the enchantment, the visual power, of the esthetically rejected subject.”

- A lecture given at Radcliffe two days before his death (1975): “I have a theory that seems to work with me that some of the best things you ever do sort of come through you. You don’t know where you get the impetus and the response to what is before your eyes, but you are using your eyes all the time and teaching yourself really from morning to night.”

- A quote from Joseph Conrad’s preface to *Nigger of the Narcissus* that repeatedly reappears in Evans’s handwriting on pieces of paper in his archive at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: “My task . . . is before all to make you see.”

- People who knew Evans admired him particularly for his eye. James Agee wrote (1937): “[he] has the best eye I know . . . the strictest and clearest theory, meaning knowledge, of what the eye and a camera . . . can and can not do.”

- Evans is described as using his eye on a camera-less walk with Nora Sayre, a young friend with whom he kept company in New York and London in his later years:

When I met Evans I wasn’t skilled at using my eyes: almost all my training had been for the ear, language and music. The reticent observer was generous with his insights when one took a walk with him. The walks were lengthy and no one could hurry him: as the writer James Stern said, he was “slow as a hearse.” Wandering along Third Avenue or down the Chelsea Embankment, he would seize my shoulders—“Look!”—and wheel me around to focus on whatever he’d just seen: there was always a view or a detail I hadn’t noticed. A Victorian lamp-post or the texture of old stone, a batch of secondhand bathtubs for sale on a sidewalk, the juxtaposition of several buildings—each time Evans showed me where to stand, steering me into seeing from a fresh perspective. At such moments he seemed easily enraptured: how much

pleasure he derived from a bit of iron grillwork or a reflection in a window.

That is the evidence. But what is it evidence of? How does having an eye work in the process of making a photograph? Do Evans's photographs look a certain way because of it? The introductory pages that follow suggest preliminary answers to those questions.

Let's turn to a case in which we have part of an answer in Evans's own words. He is describing photographing *Corrugated Tin Façade* in Moundville, Alabama, in 1936. But let me look first: the image is formidably flat, the complex, almost shadowless surface of variegated greys, simple vertical strips of worked tin shimmering in the cross light and marked with lettered signs, constitutes the false front of a contractor's building, centered and viewed straight on, closed in at left and right by sheds and shrubbery, broken by the irregular outline of a mound of sand, underlined by a road.

Now look at that photograph while reading Evans's words. As a youth he was a disappointed author, his ambitions so high he felt unable to write. He turned to photography, he said later on, for want of subjects to write about.

So first, finding a subject:

When I came upon it I was principally taken in by the cross-light on silvery corrugated tin. This was just so beautiful I set my camera up, knocked over by that surface, moved by the barren look of the false front, and how the pile of dirt added to it.

Keep in mind his taste for tin. It was a humble American material and attracted Evans's eye. But its beauty here, as elsewhere, is a sign of loss—a tin false front to the building with its castaway pile of dirt.

He goes on about the impulse to take up his camera:

The photograph is an instinctive reaction to a visual object. I knew in a flash that I wanted that, and found out a lot more afterward, editing it. You are trying for something, and if it's wrong you know later on. But first you get it on the film, you garner it in.

A photographer makes a picture. But for Evans the initial interest is the thing seen. His eye is not on the beauty of the frame, but on an object, be

it a façade, a shack, a house, a sign, a person, a main street, a discarded tin-can top. That is distinctive. In looking at an Evans photograph the first question is “What is it that caught his eye?” Seeing the object and taking the photograph is only the first step. It was Evans’s practice to edit his negatives—using marking pen or scissors to zero in on, to literally cut down to what he wanted. It is the subject that he wants to take home (“garner in”). The eye is a collector, he said. In his later years he literally picked up his subjects—signs along a Connecticut road or bottle caps—and took them home. Similarly, throughout his life he saved every piece of paper on which he wrote something. They are now all in his archive at the Met.

He concludes with:

It’s transcendent, you feel it. It’s there, the vanished transcendence and insistence of chance, action and fortuity. It’s there and you can’t unfeel it.

How did Evans get from the visual object to its transcendent (to use his word) aspect?

Part of the answer lies in his chosen equipment. He photographed the corrugated tin façade with an 8 × 10 in. view camera. It is a cumbersome instrument to use, but one that gave him the details and allowed for the straight-on view of the subject he preferred. It allowed him also to view his subject while photographing (upside down and reversed) on a large ground-glass screen. Though he owned many different cameras and used them in inventive ways, he remarked that because of the viewing screen—“It’s quite an exciting thing to see”—his favorites were an 8 × 10 and a 4 × 5. We know he also loved his Rolleiflex which also has a viewing glass. Evans has been described (by of all people, Roy Stryker, whom he worked both for and against at the FSA) as having “an 8 × 10 camera perception . . . of the world about him.” That is a simplification. But it calls attention to the consistent look that goes right through his work. An 8 × 10 camera assumes that the photographer finds the position from which he wants to shoot his object, stands, and stays. Other photographers—Robert Frank and Gary Winogrand, for example—famously could shoot on the move. But finding the right place to stand, the right view, is the heart of the matter for Evans. Curiously, this held true even



Fig. 1 Peter Sekaer, *Walker Evans with View Camera*, ca. 1936

when his chosen set-up, as in the *Subway* series, made it impossible for him to see with his camera.

Another part of the answer lies in his stance. It is not only a matter of standing and staying, but of being fixed at a particular place at a chosen distance from your subject. In the world today, when performances, bodily

interventions, and light shows are everywhere and selfies are a means of communication, it is necessary to be reminded that the eye is inescapably at a distance from what it sees. A photograph taken of Evans by his friend and fellow photographer Peter Sekaer shows his head hidden beneath the focusing cloth of the 8×10 (fig. 1). The friend who made the photograph could see him, but Walker Evans must have felt safely hidden. Although the photographer must emerge to make the photograph, photographing with an 8×10 might be described as a dis-appearing act. Discreetness and withdrawal were basic to Evans's nature. There is much evidence that he was a remote and secretive man in life. But our interest here is that that is essential to his behavior as a photographer and to the look of his photographs.

Evans had a way with words. In an essay remembering Evans (at Glyndebourne, England, about to roam about and photograph the opera crowd), he is quoted as saying, "Watch me, I'm going to disappear."

1 Look again at *Corrugated Tin Façade*: Evans is nowhere, yet what his eye saw is absolutely present.

2 I want to loop back now to Evans in France, specifically to April 1927 and a tiny photograph he made of his friend Georgette Maury near Grasse. In 1926–27 he was studying French composition, keeping his distance from the great writers in Paris, and, as he put it later, learning to look:

In America people do not look at each other publicly much . . . I remember my first experience as a café sitter in Europe. There is staring that startles the American . . . I stare and stare at people, shamelessly. I got my license at the Deux Magots (date 1926).

Made before Evans had any idea of being a photographer, this snapshot is telling in a modest way. It is characteristic of what is to come. He looks and sees a turbaned woman friend leaning against a fence post topped with a stone ball. What caught his eye one supposes was the woman's profile and the echoing shapes between turban and ball. He plays that off against the articulation of farmhouse and hill which appear not at a distance, but on the surface of the print, which is itself a display of surfaces—concrete, stone, cloth, plowed earth, house, hills. We do not look in to person or to place but rather on to it all. In an Evans photograph the world is a surface. He came to create the flattened effect he preferred

by using a triple convertible lens (great distance made close) with his 8 × 10 camera.

Back in New York two years later, Evans hit his stride. The Maury woman seen in Grasse is a distant relative of the marvelous 1929 photo of a woman in a cloche hat on Fulton Street. Once more, a woman with a prominent hat and a world of things around her. Echoes here are made not by shapes but rather by reflections in the glass of a store window. As a maker of pictures, at least in his early days, the doubling of the world within the seen world was an interest to Evans. It is a continuation and confirmation of his own photographic makings. In that, he follows the French photographer Eugène Atget, another master of mirrors, whose work he came to know in 1929. A year or so after *Girl in Fulton Street*, the discarded chest of drawers in *Moving Truck and Bureau Mirror, Brooklyn, New York* is a magnificent experiment in the Atget pleasures of mirroring. Atget, who died in the summer of 1927, was still alive when Evans was in France.

But it was the woman on Fulton Street who caught Evans's eye—a more firmly stationed version of the one in France, face three-quarter viewed, head defined by a fitted black cloche, coat marked by a large fur collar and muff. A strip of three negatives (unfortunately not numbered) leaves a trail of Evans's pursuit. Both she and he hold still (he here with a small camera), while men wearing fedora hats move by and in between. Evans was attracted to reflections in the window glass behind her, the rising diagonal of the crane near her head, the sign with the letter R, more bits of signs over the street and the lettering SPAGHETTI above her head. The reflecting band widens and wanes, faces and hats come in between, and finally he gets his shot. In the mid-sized reflection there is a building, the figure of a hatted man and things not quite possible to read. To capture it all he sacrificed the sign with letters spelling out SPAGHETTI, but he retained its lower frame above her head.

It is hard to put one's finger on what is so remarkable here, but it is worth trying because the elements occur again and again in Evans's work. First, there is the distant take he has on a woman seen. Her power is in her presence—the set look of the features and her costume. Given the formality of his address she seems not simply dressed, but in costume. He does not probe further. He likes what he sees and lets her be. There is a resistance to judge or to intervene in any way. That holding back,

that keeping of his distance, is a great skill. I could say (and I do believe) that that is basic to the nature of photography. But indeed it is Evans with the camera. She is still while around her swirls the world—Fulton Street, the city. The swirl is provisional, thrown together from pieces of steel, iron, glass, cloth, stone. And her still presence holds out, as it were, against the world. Surely when he saw the woman the periphery also caught his eye.

We have been looking at *Girl in Fulton Street* as Evans's chosen image. But several versions of it exist. Evans was at ease exhibiting and publishing different ones at different times. The *Girl in Fulton Street* he published in *American Photographs* is a slightly different image from the one he put up on wall for the original *American Photographs* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1938. (The Getty Museum, which lists all the images of every Evans photo in the collection, refers to them as variants.) I want to stress the oddity of this. We think of certain photographic images as iconic—Stieglitz's *Steerage*, for example, or *Blind Woman* by Strand (fig. 19), much admired by Evans. But Evans did not work that way. He was accepting of multiple versions of his images without, and this is important, entertaining the *subversive* notion of multiplicity (think of Sherrie Levine).

There are two points. First, I think Evans accepted the fact that photography is repetitive by nature. If you make a number of negatives and edit them, why not accept them? There is no need to pick out only one. The acceptance of multiplicity is akin to his acceptance of the distance of the observer, the straight-on camera view, and the flat surface of the print. Photographers have challenged them all, but not Evans. For him, the constraints of (shall we call it) straight photography matter. It is not only the look of his photographs that is classic, but also their making.

3 Second, this returns us to the question of seeing. Evans's focus on the object seen meant that the particular framing of it (looking at the different images of the *Girl in Fulton Street*) was not so important. His editing of a subject could zero in on and produce several different acceptable images of her. It was the pleasure in the original object seen (refined through his own editing) that interested him.

Evans was a reluctant portraitist at best. The rich and famous held no attraction for him. He engaged with friends and was particularly good with the men. But, as here, his most remarkable images were of people

he did not know—anonymous people he caught sight of, usually on the street. He reached out across differences of race, and of class. Evans does not mark distinctions. You must remind yourself that this person is black, another dark-skinned, another light. Is the woman of *Girl in Fulton Street* white? The 8 × 10 distance he kept from the person viewed functioned as an equalizer, and it is in place no matter which camera he chooses to use. It is a radical position. Perhaps that is part of the reason Agee described Evans's *American Photographs* as dangerous.

A word now about the letters of the *spaghetti* sign that were sacrificed. Evans's photographs are filled with letters and words of various sorts: handwritten names and prices of goods on shop windows; words and images making up signs of every kind; letters scribbled or scrawled on walls; letters on printed posters; words made of light bulbs shining in the night. His letters can be the subject of a photograph, or a part of an array, as *spaghetti* was here. Finding them clearly gave him huge joy. He reveled in their look and in the inherent wit of letters and phrases detached and out on their own.

As a photographer who remained a writer at heart, Evans liked to refer to photography as the most literary of the graphic arts. But it was the look more than the sense of words and letters that caught his eye. That is what, for example, informs his clever remark about Brassai's *Picasso's Studio* (1944): "Brassai habitually overlights, which is comparable to writing italics."

"You dwell on them as on a piece of writing." That was said in astonishment by Jim Dow (a young photographer employed to assist in preparing prints for his 1971 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art) on first seeing Evans's *American Photographs*. Two things strike one. First, there is the choice of the word *writing* rather than *text*. While a text is there for the reading, writing is something you can see. Dow was, of course, not commenting on the letters and words in the photographs, but they can be described as an embodiment of his observation. It is as if in formal terms (which is only part of the story) Evans's fascination with words for photographs has to do with his interest in seeing.

Second, looking takes time. The unexpected use of the word *dwell* gets at the pace Evans's photographs assume. It is true that he slowed looking down by designing sequences of photos in books and in magazine articles. But we linger on his individual photographs as well. The

letters that one stops to make out in his photographs are essential to that slow experience.

The people who did the lettering that attracted Evans are nowhere to be seen. Let us say that the words were left behind by people who are absent. Absence was a phenomenon he knew and liked. (“Watch me, I’m going to disappear.”) He was also devoted to photographing empty rooms, whose spaces and furnishings suggested absent inhabitants. In his own words, “I do like to suggest people sometimes by their absence. I like to make you feel that an interior is almost inhabited by someone.”

85 Look at *Negroes’ Barber Shop, Atlanta, Georgia* and *Breakfast Room at Belle*
68 *Grove Plantation* as examples of that.

An empty room is like a box—most particularly if it is an image of a space closed in on itself, marked off by columns carved from wood, filling the image top to bottom and side to side of the room at Belle Grove. It is tempting to consider the relationship between Evans’s 8 × 10 camera, itself a piece of architecture or, more precisely, a room (*camera*), and the interior architecture Evans found and chose to photograph. Did he see a resonance between the two: camera and room? *Breakfast Room at Belle Grove Plantation* commemorates that.

Evans’s impulse to seek out a matching enclosure extended also to exterior spaces, such as his favored subject of the empty main streets of towns. On assignment for *Fortune* in 1946, he took several pictures of
5 a street in Paducah, Kentucky. In the image that made it into print, a tight web of criss-crossing wires forms a roof across the top of the vertical photograph, while a wide swatch of shadowed buildings, articulated by a signature reflecting window, forms a wall to the right. A game is in play between the particular features of the site (variegated low buildings across the street to the left, signs, awnings, a fancy street light, the row of telephone poles) and the room-like order Evans sees in it all. It makes for a strange image. An essential quality of a great photograph is that it makes the world strange.

By way of conclusion, I want to jump from Evans’s eye to the “period eye.” I am playing with Michael Baxandall’s well-known phrase to make the slightly different point that Evans had an eye for his period. True enough. It has often been said that his photographs show us the America of his time. The notion is that one by one, thing by thing, theme by theme he picked out things in the present that would be seen as the past

(that way of putting it his): signs, houses, cars, people, statues, and more. But there is another point to be made. Evans's photographic style matched the aesthetic style of his world. It is not individual vernacular objects, but the look they shared that mattered. In other words, it is the vernacular *aesthetic* of America that he attended to. We are not dealing with an inventory of things, but with an aesthetic kinship between the America he sees and the way he photographs. Let me address that with some examples.

The flatness and right-angled structure of buildings built from overlapping strips of wood painted white or left bare are the American county churches and houses of Evans's photographs. Not thick halls of marble, but thin walls of wood. Evans's level, centered, straight-on photographic view is at one with that aesthetic. "In America, the idea of structure envisages a broad assembly of slender parts, standing squarely, but with a quality of light attentiveness, independent but aware." That description of American buildings, inflected by a moral tone, confirms our sense of what Evans saw and captured. They are the words of Lawrence Gowing, an exceptional English art critic and painter, whose overlooked review of 1958 about American painting is a model for considering the relationship between the look of the vernacular in America and its art. His assumption is that the look of a built culture is itself an aesthetic construction. Unwittingly, his words—"standing squarely"; "light attentiveness, independent but aware"—speak to the match between an Evans's photograph and the American vernacular style.

Gowing goes on to point to the style of lettering and signs much as we see them in Evans: "The natural graphic consistency of America, the unity of free, disparate shapes—the consistency of the clustering proliferation of signs over any sidewalk—belongs to a county on which the natural consistency and unity is simply the new, unknown consistency of human behavior let loose in an immense and empty space." And from that he moves directly to Evans's other interests in the aesthetic look of the culture in which he lived—attention to tin, but also to the metal of automobiles. Here and there, Gowing's writing about the style seems to put Evans's photographs into words: "This style is cut, not as marble is but in the manner that sheet metal is cut, in the same sharp manner as the cluster of signs—the metal arrows pointing with internal fluorescent light to this or that, metal seafood, dry goods and

the curling metal signature of soft drinks are cut out against the continental sky.”

It is difficult to know, remarked John Szarkowski, whether Evans recorded or invented the America of his youth. Writing a few years later, he said almost the same thing about Evans’s great predecessor Eugène Atget—writing that it was perhaps irrelevant to ask how much of Atget’s Paris is Paris and how much Atget. The photographs of Atget and Evans are resonant with the native culture. But perhaps the question is wrongly put. Couldn’t one rather say that there was a fortuitous match between the photographer and his chosen world. Perhaps Evans was speaking for himself in 1931 when he wrote, “America is really the natural home of photography.”

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